

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Stanislav Belkovsky

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[Begin Transcription]

ГРЕК: My first question for you is: when George W Bush became US president in January 2001, what were you doing and how did you get there?

BELKOVSKY: I was already a political consultant—what in America is called a "spin doctor"—and I headed the corresponding private entity that belonged to me personally—though it was a nonprofit organization called the National Foundation for Political Technology. It was notable in that it was in the then well-known businessman and politician Boris Berezovsky's orbit of influence—he was already in the opposition by that time, but of course for a long time had been in the Kremlin and was involved in establishing the current Russian regime headed by Vladimir Putin.

I myself did not participate in establishing the regime, except perhaps for the fact that I helped develop the ideology behind a couple creative solutions for the Unity bloc on the eve of the 1999 parliamentary election.¹ Back then, parliamentary elections were still relatively free, so a political consultant could play a tangible role.

ГРЕК: And tell us what are you doing now?

Currently, I am a writer. I write books and articles, and I am in the media. I do all sorts of experiments in the media space, as I want to create some kind of crosscutting media that performs the functions of a psychotherapist. How can you replicate a psychotherapist? A psychotherapist can see, say, five people a day, but no more. But how do you diffuse the psychotherapeutic experience, certain skills, and even, I dare say, the abilities to millions

¹ Unity (*Edinstvo*) was a pro-Kremlin bloc of political parties established in 1999 that made a surprisingly strong showing in the Duma (parliamentary) elections that year. Winning the second-most seats in the Duma (behind the Communist Party), it gave then-Prime Minister and acting President Vladimir Putin a base of support, which helped him win the presidential election in March 2000. Unity was led by Sergei Shoigu, who became the Russian minister of defense in 2012. In 2001, Unity merged with the Fatherland-All Russia coalition into a new political party called United Russia.



of people, though not yet even hundreds of thousands—I am conducting such a media experiment. The experiment includes the Telegram channel “Belkovsky,” which by coincidence has my last name, though AI runs it, not I. It is the first Telegram channel in the Russian-language media space run entirely by AI.

GREK: Thank you for familiarizing us with your method. How did you feel about Vladimir Putin when he came to power? What were your expectations about how he was going to shape Russia's foreign policy toward the US?

BELKOVSKY: I felt that Vladimir Putin was, of course, the successor of Boris Yeltsin and the expression of the will of the Boris Yeltsin family, that is, specific individuals—Valentin Yumashev and Tatyana Dyachenko—who put him in the presidency, brought him to power. In that sense, on the one hand, his policy toward the U.S. would be non-confrontational—he would develop Russia as an integral part of the American-centric world, the way the country was born, in part thanks to the efforts of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

On the other hand, I understood that Vladimir Putin, one way or another, was an expression of the energy of popular resentment: he was needed to relieve the painful shock felt by a considerable number of Russians following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the difficult 1990s.

Thus, it was partially a schizophrenic image to begin with. You know, there is a Soviet anecdote, how Rabinovich goes to the reception at a clinic and says:

“Excuse me, could I please make an appointment for the ear-eye doctor?”

“For which doctor?”

“Ear-eye.”



“There is no such doctor. What is bothering you?”

“You see, I see one thing and hear another.”

So, Vladimir Putin, so to speak, was supposed to pursue Yeltsin's policy, but as if with patriotic, imperialist, isolationist slogans to sweeten the pill for the majority of the Russian people. It was like that for a long time, and over time the mask simply stuck. And here another circumstance is also important, that during the first term of his stay in power starting in 2000, i.e., from January 2000 to the spring of 2004, Vladimir Putin was not completely independent in shaping policy, both generally and foreign policy in particular, because the Yeltsin family, the already mentioned Mr Yumashev and Mrs Dyachenko, and their creatures—the head of the Administration President Alexander Voloshin, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov—had very significant influence.

But between the autumn of 2003 and the spring of 2004, Putin effectively pushed the Yeltsin family out of power, first removing Voloshin, then Kasyanov and Ivanov, and began to shape different policies—including foreign policy—completely independently, as a result of which Russia's global policy turned out largely hostage to his psychology, his complexes, problems, deep priorities, at the end of the day, his subconscious. Of course, it could not help but change according to the psychological issues of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, the depths of his soul—the very one that George W Bush peered into, as far as I remember, at the summit in Slovenia in 2001 at Brdo Castle, if my memory serves me right.²

² The first meeting between Putin and Bush occurred on 16 June 2001.



GREK: How do you view and assess that meeting? How important was it and did some kind of "chemistry" develop between them, as some say, or was it just a sham, as others claim? And overall, in your view, how did Putin come to see Bush based on this meeting, their first full-fledged faceoff?

BELKOVSKY: I think that psychologically, George W Bush behaved absolutely correctly. I do not know if he guessed it himself or he was taught by the American "deep state," but he very correctly identified the problems of his opponent. First, Vladimir Putin did not have a brilliant relationship with the Democrat administration of Bill Clinton. This was due to the fact that in 1999, when Boris Yeltsin announced Vladimir Putin as his successor—and at that point there was no certainty that Putin would become president—back then in August 1999, no one knew how suddenly and rapidly the popularity of this hitherto little-known Yeltsin official would grow, and there was a possibility that Yevgeny Primakov would become president.³ And of course, the Clinton administration bet on Primakov and wanted him to become Russian president. Though Yevgeny Maximovich [Primakov] was not so young and a Soviet man, he was absolutely transparent and predictable for Washington.

It was clear what they would be dealing with, and it was completely clear that Primakov—who, after all, in many respects became a major political figure thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev (or he was Mikhail Gorbachev's fault)—should he move toward confrontation with the U.S., then it would be very limited. And he, so to speak, would not bury himself by doing that; he did not have inflated ambitions. He looked soberly and

³ In the Yeltsin administration, Primakov served as the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vneshnei razvedki*; SVR), foreign minister, and prime minister.



realistically at the situation in the world, no matter what ideological messages he sent out (Urbi et Orbi).

I remember very well how in 1996, while still a boy, I became an unexpected witness to a conversation between Yevgeny Primakov, then minister of foreign affairs, with one of his close friends, when he said that he was tired of the role of “Mr. Nyet,” like Andrei Gromyko, that he, so to speak, was not in the condition to do it; i.e., he understood perfectly well that Russia in its current condition could not compete with America in any way, and generally that it would be better for him to resign as minister and go be the ambassador to the US.

I mean that Primakov looked at things exactly like this: he never aspired to get high positions, and though he is now portrayed almost as an ideologue of confrontation with America, this, of course, is not so. But Putin, because he is a suspicious person and both kind and vindictive, remembered that Clinton supported Primakov and thus there was a certain chill, so to speak, between them. Still, I emphasize once again: the chill did not have such a significant, hyper importance then, because foreign policy was shaped by not just Putin personally, but by the people I have already listed, for whom it did not matter in the slightest, who of course aimed at keeping Russia in the orbit of American influence and at cooperating with America as a younger brother, since Russia, due to its limited resources, could not have any other role. And so he [Putin] placed hopes on the Republican administration.

In addition, Vladimir Putin himself is a businessman psychologically, a big businessman. If we talk about his religiosity, then he is a typical minister in the cult of mammon, a believer in mammonism (as Thomas Carlyle called it), rather than a Christian.



Therefore, George W Bush was convenient for him as a businessman too, as a man of the Texas oil lobby—he understood this. Putin was interested in the energy sector and so was Bush, which means it was easier for them to find a common language. And George Bush, in my view, at the summit in Slovenia played on this, as well as the fact that the issue of his father is very important for Vladimir Putin.

I do not know how the relationship developed with his biological father, Vladimir Spiridonovich, but it is obvious that he was always looking for a father, an informal father, in his personal political biography. Therefore, he treated with great trepidation his fathers as it were, his virtual fathers, both Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St Petersburg, and Boris Yeltsin, who made him his successor.

I must say that here Yeltsin's intuition did not fail him: he appointed as a successor a man who, by virtue of his filial feelings, would never betray the family that brought him to power. Sure, even though Putin significantly curtailed the political and bureaucratic influence of the Yeltsin family at the turn of 2003-04, he never encroached on their interests and always respected them; when some vital, systemically important requests were made to him by the Yeltsin family, he always fulfilled them. And even last year, when Tatyana Dyachenko turned 60, he personally congratulated her at her home, thereby showing that despite the unpopularity of the Yeltsin family and its partial obscurity, he has not at all forgotten his long-standing obligations to these people.

So, the fact that George Bush ensnarled Vladimir Putin indicated that trust had been established between them, an unprecedented level of sincerity. It was all good, though even then there were prickly issues that, of course, did not matter as much to



Putin as they did later: the ABM Treaty,⁴ the US withdrawal from the ABM (missile defense) Treaty of 1972 and NATO expansion. But back then, overall, Putin was quite loyal to his American partner and ready to be a younger brother.

This situation changed later, in 2003 and 2004, and, among other things, due to the fact that he partly lost confidence in George Bush and concluded that behind that effective psychological ensnarement was a lack of substantive policy, while the Republican administration's plans actually lay on a somewhat different plane.

GREK: You mentioned withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001—how was that taken as a gesture in Moscow? Many of our interviewees say that it was then that the very supersonic weapon that has now whistled over Ukraine two or three times began to be developed.

BELKOVSY: Yes, I think that is true, and it gets to the heart of the matter because Vladimir Putin was traumatized by the fact that the U.S. did not perceive him as a partner, even a junior one, and that they act at their own discretion, not in accordance with the wishes or, as it later became customary to say, the "concerns" of their Russian partner. We understand that the logic of the ABM Treaty is that if the treaty countries are not protected from nuclear weapons, this reduces the likelihood of those weapons being used. So, Vladimir Putin did not want to somehow exit the American-centric world—that came to him much, much later, namely at the beginning of 2014.

He [instead] wanted to take a respectable place in the American-centric world, albeit far from insignificant, and get his own sphere of influence, like his own room in this communal apartment—a cozy, warm room, so that no one would come in, because only

⁴ The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

that would guarantee his full security, and security issues were always a priority for him – in personal, business, and government affairs. The further he went, the more [his] security was identified with Russia, and Russia with himself—meaning that his personal security is the security of Russia and vice versa.

And back then he also proposed, including at the meeting at the Brdo Castle in Slovenia, to create a joint missile defense system. Even then, military experts said that that could never happen, because the technology and data transmission systems were incompatible, and because the US and Russia would have to reveal huge, intriguing military secrets to each other, and because if they were to create a joint missile defense system, then the next step would only be the creation of a single state.

Nevertheless, Putin wanted this, and sincerely wanted it, and the fact that someone put a stone in his outstretched hand was the first blow to his trust in the Republican administration. He did not like it. The next step was the expansion of NATO. The failure to find a settlement to the Transnistrian conflict in 2003 played a key role in the deterioration of relations, followed, of course, by the worst thing for him, which was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004.

GREK: Yes, before moving on to the Orange Revolution, I wanted to ask one more thing. How did the September 11 attacks and the U.S. operation in Afghanistan affect Moscow's policy toward Washington?

BELKOVSKY: At that stage, Putin still fully supported the U.S. and George Bush. He supported the operation in Afghanistan, he provided his territory, as we remember, to accommodate a NATO center in the Volga region, meaning the transit of goods to Afghanistan was done through Russian territory at that time. Putin publicly spoke and behind the scenes acted



in the spirit of the fact that it was terrorism emanating from the territory of Afghanistan and neighboring lands – rather than cooperation with the US – that presented a danger to him, that is, a common enemy. At that time, the idea of a common enemy was supported by the invasion of Afghanistan. When the Northern Alliance hurriedly took Kabul, and George Bush at a press conference—it seems that it was later, after the September 11 attacks, already at the next meeting—could not provide an immediate answer to the question of why it was necessary to enter Kabul so quickly, Putin actually saved him. He told reporters that there had been no haste in taking Kabul, that Kabul had simply been abandoned, that there was no government left there, that it was simply necessary to bring it under control, but there had been no haste. Everything was still fine at this point. And on September 11, as we know, Putin was the first to express condolences to George Bush and make a public statement in which he left no doubt that Russia was the most reliable and friendly partner of the U.S. The disagreements started later.

GREK: Yes, and moving on to the main disagreements, which, it seems, completely changed Russia in the end; that is, moving on to the topic of Ukraine, I would first like to ask you to talk a little about your experience and background working in Ukraine and your personal relationship with the country.

BELKOVSKY: The relationship is deep, diverse, echeloned. I first visited Ukraine as a child and as a youth. Back then, it was still under Soviet rule. It was all different; I was not a professional. In a professional capacity, I went there in June 2004 at the request of several prominent Russian businessmen, led by Boris Berezovsky, who were exploring the possibility of investing in Ukrainian politics.

As an analyst, I was supposed to answer the question whether it was possible that Viktor Yushchenko could win the presidential election in October-November of the same year. I quickly came to a two-part conclusion: First, an initial Viktor Yushchenko victory is possible only through a revolution, as everything was trending in such a way that Viktor Yanukovich would be officially proclaimed president in any case—both the Ukrainian authorities and their Russian partners, in the person of Vladimir Putin and his team, were all in on this.

And, on the other hand, a revolution was possible; it was not an unrealistic scenario. By and large, this was my main contribution to the revolutionary events of that year, as I cannot say that I played any significant role in organizing the revolutionary processes, no. But as an analyst and psychologist there—secondary, tertiary roles—I showed myself, in my view, quite constructively. I am not ashamed of what I did then. I must say that everyone was just falling in love with Ukraine. I did not identify myself with the country in any way, I proceeded from the interests of Russia, my country. I believed that Viktor Yushchenko's victory in Ukraine, the victory of the national democratic forces broadly, would contribute both to the democratization of Russia and to the fact that the national democratic forces in Russia would also raise their heads, with whom I sympathized and empathized in every way possible.

In the end, this turned out not to be the case: Russia is still following a completely different path, but I developed my own relationship with Ukraine. And though I have not become a citizen of Ukraine and do not intend to, of course for me it is love, pain, a complex of anxieties, especially now, when I remain a citizen of Russia, and the country of



which I am a citizen is systematically destroying Ukraine in the most straightforward and full sense of the word.

GREK: One clarification: you said political investments in Ukraine by Berezovsky. What should have been the outcome of these investments? Why were they made?

BELKOVSKY: Well, it was not only Berezovsky, but several of his partners as well, whom I don't want to name so as not to screw them, because now it would definitely be beyond the pale. True, some of them are no longer alive, but some are, and, so to speak, I do not want to stir the bones of the dead, nor create problems for the living. Berezovsky and his partners immediately invested about \$40 million in the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko's election campaign—indirectly, mostly. This does not mean that Yushchenko or Yulia Tymoshenko received this money directly—no, it paid for certain expenses. The goal was the victory of Viktor Yushchenko and establishing cooperation with him both in a business sense and in a political sense to gain influence over, first and foremost, the situation in Russia.

This is how the desired outcome of the Orange Revolution was defined. It did not work out; the cooperation did not pan out, primarily because the victors in the Orange Revolution were quick to forget about their obligations toward this pool of sponsors. Again, we can talk about this for a very long time, but that would be a conversation not about George Bush but about Ukrainian politics, and now we have a different topic.

GREK: How did the Kremlin react to the "color revolutions" in general—in Georgia, in Ukraine, in Kyrgyzstan? As a phenomenon, what was it for the Kremlin?

BELKOVSKY: It was a system of American conspiracies to establish direct influence in the post-Soviet space, to exclude Russia as a player. I am now giving the interpretation of Vladimir Putin, not my own. In my interpretation, Putin is categorically incapable of soft power and projecting it, so in this sense, Putin was beneficial in one way or another to America, since America was and remains capable of soft power. Putin does not understand that influence is, first and foremost, the export of models—political, intellectual, technological, social, whatever. He believes that influence is either military power or corruption. Corruption in the post-Soviet countries always worked well—meaning it was bad, but Putin applied military force firmly twice, in 2014 and 2022, having been, so to speak, completely disillusioned with the idea of influencing Ukraine through soft power. Or rather, throughout that whole period, as, in my view, since the spring of 2014 it has been one big war, and this year we are only witnessing its culmination, though nothing qualitatively new has happened. And so, also with Georgia, Putin reacted to this.

At the same time, there was also the failure of the Transnistrian settlement, which many people forget about, but which played a significant role in why Putin began to trust the U.S. and the Republican administration much less, as Putin had prepared a plan for the Transnistrian settlement, the so-called "Kozak plan," named after Dmitri Kozak, then the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration, who developed it. It was a plan to create an asymmetric federation while preserving Russia's key centers of influence on a single Moldovan state and maintaining a military base on the territory of a united Moldova.

Up to a certain point, the plan had the support of both Vladimir Voronin, then the head of the Moldovan Communist Party, and the leader of the unrecognized Transnistria,



Igor Smirnov. However, in Putin's mind, at the last moment the plan was thwarted due to intrigues on the part of the U.S., and also those of the EU, though the EU intrigued rather at the instigation of the Americans, since even then Putin believed that Europe was not completely independent but a puppet of the U.S. Every year, in his mind, the situation only gets worse, especially now. That is why he harbored, as Mikhail Zoshchenko said, "in his soul he harbored a certain rudeness." He didn't like it, even more, as it was done in a way that was actually humiliating for him, as the date for signing the given agreement in Kishinev [Chişinău] had already been set, the advance aircraft, the "front line," as it's called, with security, the honor guard, and journalists on board had already taken off for Kishinev. But Putin's plane did not take off, because in the last minutes, literally hours before the signing, the ceremony was canceled.

Then there was the rather suspicious revolution in Georgia, while the categorical discrepancy between the psychological typologies and temperaments of Putin and [then Georgian President] Mikheil Saakashvili also had an effect in many respects. Mikheil Saakashvili is a colorful "person on steroids," a talented, public politician who always wants to be in the thick of things, the center of attention, and to draw this attention to himself. Putin is a typical epileptoid: withdrawn, reserved, introverted, afraid of publicity, inclined to resolve all issues behind closed doors and without leaking information. Therefore, they didn't like each other from the very beginning, and this also played a role even in Vladimir Putin's retrospective assessment of the revolution in Georgia: with every month and year, he became more convinced that, of course, it was American elements of an American conspiracy against him.



Ukraine was a big blow, because Putin was completely convinced—I don't know what he and George Bush discussed about this issue, but Putin apparently believed—that the U.S. would not interfere and prevent Viktor Yanukovich from becoming president of Ukraine. He had some reason to think so. But then again, the U.S. didn't interfere. I saw it with my own eyes: first the revolution broke out, and only when the victory of the revolution became more than obvious did the U.S. support it, not in the reverse order. But Putin believes exactly the opposite: that the U.S. organized a revolution to deprive him, Putin, of influence in Ukraine. And, of course, this was the decisive moment for the Russian president's view of both George Bush and U.S.-Russia relations in general.

GREK: If we take a scale and start weighing the factors on it—take internal factors that led to the revolution, interests, for example, of the group you represented, American interests—,how would you construct the chain of events to get a picture of the involvement of Russia and America and, of course, the Ukrainians?

BELKOVSKY: If we look at the contribution of certain factors and their weight in the victory of the Orange Revolution and Viktor Yushchenko in the presidential election, then internal factors account for 70 percent, the U.S. 25 percent, and everything else 5 percent.

GREK: Our interviewees often mention that relations with Ukraine were managed by the Internal Affairs Department of the Presidential Administration, not the Foreign Affairs Department.

BELKOVSKY: That is not entirely true. They were managed by the entire Administration, and there were two managers directly in charge of Ukraine policy: One close, trusted manager of Vladimir Putin was the head of his Administration, Alexander Voloshin—he dealt with Ukraine. You can't say that he was responsible for internal policy, as he was responsible



for all policy and was, in a certain way, vice president under Putin, and, like Dick Cheney under George Bush, a powerful vice president. In some respects, he was a more important figure than the president himself. Naturally, the internal affairs bloc headed by Vladislav Surkov was also involved with Ukraine, as was the Ambassador to Ukraine and the Presidential Special Representative for Ukraine Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former prime minister. That man was not a trusted confidant of Vladimir Putin; rather, Putin appreciated his status, his experience, and the opportunity [through him] to maintain confidential communications with the then Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma.

GREK: To continue the argument of our previous interviewees about this, when the U.S. appeared on the field of Ukrainian politics, did the Kremlin perceive it, even just technically, as interference in [Russian] internal affairs?

BELKOVSKY: The Kremlin believed that Ukraine belongs to him by right—not the Kremlin, but Vladimir Putin personally. A close friend of Vladimir Putin and his ally Viktor Medvedchuk, who in 2002 became the head of Leonid Kuchma’s administration, played a significant role in this. At first, Medvedchuk carried out a political reform that was supposed to transform Ukraine into a parliamentary republic in which Leonid Kuchma would be the prime minister. The reform failed, largely due to the odiousness of Medvedchuk himself, who was not supported by a considerable part of the pro-Kuchma Ukrainian elite. In other words, if it had not been Medvedchuk, but someone else who had pushed through the political reform, perhaps it would have succeeded.

At that time, a bet was made on Viktor Yanukovych, since Medvedchuk convinced Putin that, firstly, this was the only way to forge an alliance with the Donetsk clan, personified by Rinat Akhmetov, and to prevent the Donetsk clan’s alliance with Viktor



Yushchenko, which was planned at that time—such an alliance was really being planned and was broken up in the end. Later, Rinat Akhmetov became friends with Yushchenko, but Akhmetov was friends with all the acting presidents of Ukraine—you can't take that talent away from him. And Viktor Yanukovych, according to Medvedchuk, as a man twice convicted and definitely unacceptable to the West, would, by virtue of that circumstance and a whole system of circumstances, be dependent on Moscow. It was a mistake because it underestimated, again, the cynicism in international politics, and at the end of the day, it is not so important who has how many convictions or who smells better when it comes to significant—"substantial," as Putin likes to say—interests. Yanukovych also maneuvered for a long time. He wanted to be the one guy for the West, the one for Russia, but all that maneuvering ultimately ended with the Revolution of Dignity and his fleeing Ukraine.

That is why Medvedchuk played an even bigger role here. De facto he was also Putin's representative in Ukraine, though nominally he was a Ukrainian politician and administrator. After the crisis and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the discourse regarding freedom of speech and commercial organizations in Russia and other things intensified—everything that has come to be considered a "fifth column" by the Kremlin.

GREK: In May 2005, at one of the last Victory Day celebrations where Russia could bring both East and West together, President Bush met with dissidents and representatives of Russian nonprofit organizations, where he voiced his support for them and criticized [Russia on] the issue of freedom of speech and other things, which even back then Putin had begun to tighten. What do you think that was and how did the Kremlin react to it? Was it an important event?



BELKOVSKY: It was taken negatively by the Kremlin, but it was not an important event, as the Kremlin perceived it as a ritual and nothing more. It did not believe that the U.S. could seriously influence things in this way. But after the Ukrainian Revolution, after the Orange Revolution, naturally, pictures were already being drawn in Vladimir Putin's vivid imagination, that by pouring several billion dollars into opposition circles and entities, the U.S. could seize power in Russia. This ghost haunted him—it didn't yet haunt him after the Georgian revolution, but after 2004 that ghost haunted him a lot, reaching a climax during the Arab Spring, when, in fact, Putin decided to remove Medvedev, Dmitri Anatolyevich Medvedev,⁵ and return to the Kremlin and rule long and unhappily.

GREK: Why did the US fail to convince Putin to support the invasion of Iraq in 2006? Although it would seem like a tough sell, some place in the Western coalition, the war, in the end, would seem fit the imagination of Russia's foreign policy.

BELKOVSKY: Well, it was not 2006 but in 2003, after all, that the invasion of Iraq took place. Vladimir Putin sized it up for himself in much the same way as Oliver Stone did in the film *W*, if you saw it, that there was no need to invade Iraq, but George Bush just wanted to surpass his father in something and was suffering from the fact that his father valued Jeb Bush⁶ more than George. George needed to show that he was worthy of his father, and his father after all did not finish off Saddam Hussein—though, in my view, it was the absolutely correct decision not to—but he would finish him off.

⁵ Dmitry Medvedev was prime minister at the end of Putin's first term. In 2008, Putin announced that Medvedev would run for the presidency as his successor, while Putin would become prime minister. In 2012, Putin decided to run again for president and Medvedev returned as prime minister, where he remained until 2020.

⁶ Jeb Bush is George W. Bush's younger brother who was governor of Florida from 1999 to 2007.

This is how Putin thought. In addition, he saw that Germany and France were against the operation in Iraq, and he wanted to drive a wedge between Europe and America and, so to speak, play on that. And he gravitated toward such a deeper alliance with Germany and France, with old Europe. This was the second motive.

GREK: One of the critical moments in the relationship of Putin and Russia broadly and the Western world was the Munich speech of February 2007, in which Putin criticized the U.S. for its “disdain for the basic principles of international law.” Our interviewees in the U.S. said that he “overreacted” and that there were ways out, there were avenues to negotiate the major issues such as missile defense, Iraq, and NATO expansion, at that time. Meanwhile, our interviewees from Russia say that there had been a complete institutional impasse, which was resolved by that personal appeal to the West by Putin. How did you react to that speech and what do you think Putin was trying to do and what was the reason for it – an institutional impasse or Putin's personal approach to things?

BELKOVSKY: Putin's personal approach to things. Putin had suffered a lot of grievances by that point from the U.S.; we have already listed them all: the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, the expansion of NATO. Although Putin then, in those years, at the beginning of the 2000s, did not look at it as sensitively as later. Later, I think, he wound himself up and his response hypertrophied to that—well, whatever, no one consults with Russia anyway. Then a series of color revolutions, which were preceded by the blowup of the Transnistrian settlement, and so on.

And it seemed to Putin that direct support for anti-Russian regimes in the post-Soviet space did not correspond with Putin's intention to be friends with the U.S. and to become, if not a key, then an important power within the American-centric world. Thus,



the general pathos of the Munich speech boiled down to the fact that you do not want to be friends with us, but we do. But, you know, such a state of affairs cannot last forever, and if you still don't want to be friends with us, then that's fine, we won't be friends with you, and we will find our own isolationist, separatist solutions, which ultimately is what happened seven years later.

For all those seven years, Putin sought, carried out a special operation to force the US to be friends, and when it finally failed—and in his mind it failed definitively with the Revolution of Dignity of 2013-14 in Ukraine—then that was it. The special operation to force friendship was called off, World War IV began, a hybrid war. Why World War IV? Because I consider World War III to have been the Cold War, which was purely a global conflict and included a military dimension, just not in Europe. But since our consciousness is Eurocentric, we do not consider anything a big war unless it directly affects Europe. Throughout the entire Cold War, hostilities between the US and the USSR were extremely hot in different regions of the world.

Therefore, it was not yet a declaration of war, it was a warning, and not Putin's last. This is exactly how I saw it, and back then I published articles in which I said that Putin is seeking the love of the West, but he is reminding everyone that it cannot be love on any terms and that, as they say, love should be mutual.

GREK: Now it is very important for us to understand the role of Russian elites in processes, and so I'm asking this question regarding the Munich speech: What do you think was the reaction of Russian elites? Did they already support it then, or were they scared?

BELKOVSKY: No, there was no major reaction. Russian elites still believed that there would be no major clash between Russia and the U.S. That all this is Putin's psychological problems



and complexes, but Putin himself is intimidating the West more than he thinks. That “business as usual” would continue, so the Russian elites thought, for an indefinite period. And until 2014 that was true, while since 2014 it has been contrary to the course of events.

GREK: Putin and Bush often exchanged personal visits. In particular, Putin traveled to the Bush family residence in [Texas] in 2001, and in 2007 he also visited Bush [in Maine].⁷ You wrote that Bush’s personal invitations were some kind of hook with which he was catching Putin.

BELKVOISKY: Oh sure. Because George Bush, starting from the meeting at the Brdo Castle in Slovenia, in every possible way exploited the theme of the father, that he was the senior comrade by age, though not by much, of course—seven years older than Vladimir Putin—but nonetheless. But he is senior in terms of political weight and position in the world, and thus he continued the policy of “ensnarling” entirely effectively. This goes for their meeting at the Crawford ranch in Texas, and at the oceanside residence of Bush in Maine, which is said to have been a branch of the West Wing of the White House during the presidency of Bush’s father [George H. W. Bush]. And there, in fact—as far as I understand—Vladimir Putin told George Bush that he was going to leave power in 2008 and named his potential successor, which pleased his American counterpart, since it is clear that Dmitry Medvedev was perceived as an olive branch to the West. Really, the very idea of appointing Medvedev as successor already indicated that the Munich speech was not an irreversible declaration of war on the West—no, of course not.

⁷ Putin visited Bush’s home in Crawford, Texas in 2001 and the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine in 2007.



GREK: But nevertheless, Medvedev comes to power, and probably one of the biggest military escalations in U.S.-Russian relations since 1991 begins. I mean the war with Georgia. How would you describe the transition process and the beginning of the escalation?

BELKOVSKY: No matter what anyone says, it was obvious to the whole world that Mikheil Saakashvili started the war, not Russia. Later it was all obscured, so to speak, turned into all sorts of versions that Russia provoked the war on purpose to crush Saakashvili. In my view, that's not so.

Mikheil Saakashvili, somewhat intoxicated by one success after another—really big accomplishments, first in integrating Adzharia into Georgia, and then reforms, which really were effective—he managed to create a very bright and shiny showcase of Georgian democracy, without doubt, especially by suppressing corruption, which seemed ineradicable in Georgia at the time Mikheil Saakashvili came to power. Later it came back in many ways, but then, during Saakashvili's rule, it really was minimized to a very large extent.

Sure, he sinned, including trying by blitzkrieg to seize South Ossetia, which was his canonical territory—roughly speaking, to do the same thing that Azerbaijan did with Karabakh in the fall of 2020. Azerbaijan succeeded, Saakashvili did not. At that time, regular Russian troops proved effective, and the 58th Army basically drove out the Georgians. Meanwhile, the West reacted to things with great restraint. There was a visit by [French President] Nicolas Sarkozy to Moscow, where he and Dmitry Medvedev agreed that everything would be fine, that there would be no sanctions or strong condemnation of Moscow's actions, so it seems that both Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin took this



as a solid step toward a demarcating of interests but also a conceptual rapprochement with the West.

It was Mikheil Saakashvili who emerged the loser, which, in the final analysis, cost him the presidency. Still, as far as I understand, even then the Republican administration was not very supportive of the Georgian leader, whom it considered too eccentric and difficult to predict, although he of course followed in the wake of American interests but also of broad democratic ones; he was too independent in this sense, too perpendicular to the system. He was in many respects a non-systemic player, for which he paid the price from the point of view not only of Russia but also of Western elites.

GREK: The war in Georgia was closely connected with the NATO summit in Bucharest, and I want to ask you a complex question. George Bush visited Russia seven times—more than any other president—and from your explanation, we already understand roughly why. In addition to the visits we have already discussed, in 2008 he visited Kyiv, then the NATO summit in Bucharest, and then came to see Putin and Medvedev in Sochi. We know about the NATO summit that the discussion there centered around the inclusion or non-inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in NATO, which very painfully played on the emotions and perceptions of both Putin and the Kremlin as a whole. Can you explain this process that took place in 2008, weaving together America's policy toward Ukraine and Georgia and the personal relationship between Bush and Putin?

BELKOVSKY: Their relations remained quite warm until the very end for all the reasons already mentioned. For example, Putin's relationship with Barack Obama did not develop immediately, they were always very cool, but not with George Bush—they generally remained relatively normal and constructive until the very end. But at the same time,



Putin no longer believed in America in general and Bush in particular, and of course he took the attempt to integrate Ukraine and Georgia into NATO very hard; he was categorically against it—in fact, he remains so to this day. Then Germany and France blocked this process, so Putin was not too worried, though he emotionally tore into George Bush and said that Ukraine is a fake state and what is there to talk about. And then, for the first time, threats were made to change the map of Ukraine if the U.S. were to pull it into NATO.

GREK: Do you think the Bush administration was able to read Putin as a person and a political leader? At the same time, how accurately do you think the Kremlin assessed Bush?

BELKOVSKY: I believe that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States in general—not only the Bush administration, but also America as a whole—misjudged its victory in the Cold War, because it was wrong to constantly impose the role of the loser on Russia. Russia itself is partly to blame, as it declared itself the legal successor of the Soviet Union, *de jure* and *de facto*. If Russia had repented for communism and renounced the Soviet legacy, then it would not have to consider itself the heir to the defeat in the Cold War and constantly, with tenacity better applied elsewhere, deny the defeat in the Cold War. It would have been better to admit that yes, the Soviet Union lost, but we are not the Soviet Union, we are Russia, which is starting from scratch, so this does not concern us. But America also did not meet Russia halfway on this issue; it did not press Russia to its loving breast.

That is why, in fact, the energies of resentment have accumulated in Russia. Ultimately, they brought Vladimir Putin to power, not necessarily him as an individual, but a politician of his type and filling such a niche. It was such a person who was bound to



have become Boris Yeltsin's successor in a situation where a significant part of the Russian people was filled with a thirst for revenge for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the hard times of the 1990s. Therefore, today we are reaping the fruits of all these joint, mutual mistakes.

GREK: Before I ask you a final conceptual question, would you like to perhaps focus on some other aspect of Russian-U.S. relations that we may have missed in the questions and that could be useful for our understanding of the process?

BELKOVSKY: My job, in this case, is to answer questions, not to raise them, so I propose to move on to the final conceptual question.

GREK: Are there fundamental principles and interests in Russo-American relations that prevent them from achieving friendly relations, even when there is chemistry between presidents and individuals? And how would you assess whether we can analyze—I think you will say yes, so I would rather ask you to explain how—how can we analyze relations between the countries by looking at individuals, for example, and not at institutions and processes, as international relations theories tell us?

BELKOVSKY: American politics is institutional, Russian politics is not, which is why we cannot rely too much on an institutional approach here. Every year, the Russian regime has become an increasingly personalistic regime of Putin, and the program of self-destruction and destruction of the Russian Federation as part of the American-centric world, which he launched in 2014 and which I lay out in detail in a series of articles titled “Putin is also quite nervous [*Putin i dovolno nervno*],” published in early 2016—I will take this opportunity to refer you and our audience to this series—that program reflected the personal priorities and psychological attitudes of the Russian leader. Its realization was



impossible to stop. Naturally, Russia and the U.S. have many common interests. I believe that with time, when the special operation is over—it will end undoubtedly with Russia being defeated—when Russia will be renewed and shift from resentment to repentance—which will also take place in the coming years, though not too quickly, we do not have so long to wait for this moment—the foundation for completely new relations can be laid.

I am not a supporter of the point of view that Russians will always be imperialists, ghouls, and bastards – no, nothing of the sort. The same could be said about the Germans in 1945 or about the Japanese, but we know that it was not so. That in the life of a nation there are critical periods that must be experienced for there to be a rebirth, which many nations have gone through, having been forced to taste the bitter fruits of their defeats and mistakes. Russians are not cursed. Generally, Russians have always wanted to be European while remaining Russian—that is their main and unconscious desire. If you open the gates and doors to this, extend the same embraces that turned out to be too tight and uncomfortable for Russia back in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War, if you move from the architecture of the Yalta-Potsdam peace and its outdated institutions, which include NATO and the UN, and replace them with some, as I see it, concept of Abrahamic unity, the unity of countries with Abrahamic monotheistic religions as the dominant ones (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism), then you can build a configuration that integrates Russia as a constructive partner and contributor to a common security system. This will not happen under Putin, but after him, though it can happen. But it requires America to rethink its approaches and desire to finally crush Russia and surround it with an iron fence, to nevertheless understand that [even if it succeeds] in a few years it will have to

deal with Russia again—in what form and in what format it does not matter, but it will have to be done and it is better to work out a concept for this now.