U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Fyodor Lukyanov
Editor, *Russia in Global Affairs* (2002-present)

Interviewers:
Ivan Grek
The Bridge Research Network

Date of Interview:
April 7, 2021

Editorial Note and Disclaimer:

This transcription has undergone a verification process for accuracy, according to the strictest practices of the academic and transcription communities. It offers the CPH's best good-faith effort at reproducing in text the subject's spoken words. In all cases, however, the video of the interview represents the definitive version of the words spoken by interviewees.

Normal speech habits—false starts, incomplete words, and crutch words (e.g. "you know") have been removed for purposes of clarity. Final transcriptions will conform to standard oral history practices. Editors will conform all transcription quotations to the Center for Presidential History's final edition.

Please contact the editors at cphinfo@smu.edu with any corrections, suggestions, or questions.

Citation

Fyodor Lukyanov, interview by Ivan Grek, 7 April 2021. "U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

[Begin Transcription]

GREK: When George W. Bush became president in January 2001, what was your job? How did you come to that position? Tell us about your professional path?

LUKYANOV: In 2001, I worked for a newspaper called “Vremya Novostei,” a daily political newspaper. I was the deputy editor-in-chief, dealing mainly with international information. Hence the subject of the election campaign, the American elections and Bush in particular, this spectacular drama with the vote recount and the recognition and non-recognition of Gore's victory—it was all in my area of responsibility.

But it was very interesting, we were following America at the time with a sense as if it was really about us, too. There was a lot of interest from both the audience and, of course, from the professionals. Bush as a figure—at least in our creative and conditionally liberal circles, we were following in the footsteps of the American progressive perception that Gore was the symbol of some new kind of a politician—an environmentalist agenda and such a liberal, while Bush, on the contrary, was the creature of something more reactionary. Although there were different opinions, in particular, relations with the United States during the last period of Bill Clinton's presidency were generally at a standstill. And in America they were extremely disappointed in the development of Russia, and so were we [00:02:00]. Even Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin was extremely frustrated during the last months of his own presidency.

And so the arrival of the Republicans was interpreted by some as an opportunity for a new beginning. Moreover, there was a legend, though not anymore, that Soviet and Russian leaders found it easier to deal with Republicans, who were more concrete, more substantive, they liked iron—material things. Then there are Democrats, who are always coming up with some ideological superstructure.

And there were some breakthroughs and détente with the Republicans in Soviet times, I don't know—Nixon was remembered, Eisenhower was remembered, but with the Democrats just not so much. If you think of Kennedy, in the beginning, or Carter. In short, Bush's arrival was received with interest. I wouldn't say there were very high expectations, but at any rate, there was a sense that something would change, but then it did change, but certainly not quite the way some had predicted.

GREK: How did you feel about Vladimir Putin when he came to power, and what were your expectations of his foreign policy toward the United States?

LUKYANOV: Putin came to power under very unexpected circumstances, as we all remember. On the one hand, the Yeltsin era ended predictably, because Boris was in very vulnerable physical shape in his last years in power, to put it mildly. In general, it was clear that [00:04:00] he would not be able to hold out much longer, but an early departure was not expected. And all the more surprising was the emergence of Putin as the successor. When he (Yeltsin) first mentioned the name, it was in August of [19]99, a lot of individuals simply asked, "Who is it?"

I mean, well, yes, he was the director of the FSB, sort of a very high position, but, first of all, the FSB at that time was not yet playing as prominent a role as it did later on. And secondly, Putin was simply a very non-public person. And when this particular figure emerged, of course, it caused great surprise. And many people, well, as we now understand, very mistakenly believed that this is some kind of temporary plug, and then there will be the next round. Especially since Putin was the third or fourth in a series of hypothetical successors, which were announced by Yeltsin or his entourage, and then disappeared. But, lo and behold, everything turned out to be completely different.

So, as far as foreign policy is concerned, naturally, the first fear that many laid out was that Putin, with his special services experience and his Soviet inertia toward the West, would begin to turn in some isolationist or anti-Western direction. In fact, the exact opposite happened during Putin's first period in power. It was probably one of the most Western-oriented moments in Russian history in general. To a greater extent even than in the nineties, because, yes, in the nineties, there was [00:06:00] tremendous momentum. Both Yeltsin and his comrades-in-arms [said] that now we are going to join the West, but at that time this impulse was not supported by anything, because the condition of Russia was extremely fragile, and the policy could be implemented primarily on the basis of the idea, "What can we even afford?"

Putin, who began to stabilize the functioning of the state—he gained the ability to somehow formulate policy more holistically, including in relation to the West. And he has demonstrated a fairly high level of interest in finally, after ten years of various kinds of upheavals, getting onto some kind of a tortuous road—when Russia takes its rightful and proper place in some kind of Western-centric world. This was in relations with the United States, this was in relations with the European Union. It probably lasted for the first half of the 2000s, and then events began to take place which gradually, but very quickly, began to destroy this picture.

GREK: At the time of the arrival of Putin and Bush came to power, what schools of thought about Russian-American relations existed in Russia? Which ones were losing, [which ones] were winning, what internal conflicts were there between them?

LUKYANOV: Oh, well, I wouldn't say "schools of thought" in such a systematic way. In general, then there was a fairly fluid intellectual [00:08:00] and very diverse environment, I should say. In a sense, more diverse than in the West. Because here, the center of attention, including state policy, there were people who would be purely marginal in the Western context. From one side or the other. They would never have made it into the mainstream, while here they could have made it, but not for long, and then they would have fallen out. I don't know, it could have been some ultra-liberals, all of a sudden, who joined in and became companions, or on the contrary, hardcore conservatives like Dugin. In America or Britain I can hardly imagine such people being involved in decision-making, even if only for a short while. It has happened in our country.

Well, schools of thought were determined by the situation. On the whole, as I said, speaking of Putin of the first period: the dominant view was that we had to somehow integrate into this world that the West and the United States were sculpting. How do we fit in? There were different opinions: there were people who were more moderate in their views, who believed that we should not run ahead of the engine, and there were people, many of whom then changed their positions completely, who believed that we should become the United States' main partner. Let’s say, jumping ahead a little—there were very interesting discussions when in late 2002, early 2003, it became clear in the U.S. that the Americans were preparing for war against Iraq. And we had different opinions—we had opinions from [00:10:00], you know, traditional ones, that we should stand with Saddam Hussein to defend our sovereignty against American hegemony, and we had opinions to the contrary that, because the Americans are a force now and they would crush Saddam anyway, of course. In general, they would take over the Middle East—it is necessary to join them and get at least a share of the spoils that America would get.

Neither position was dominant, but it was there. And the dominant position was probably Putin's, he didn't articulate it explicitly in public, but it was essentially that, "Guys, you are doing a monstrous stupidity. Nothing good will come of it, but go ahead." So, to put it this way: as long as you have the strength, go ahead.

Then, under the influence of our comrades from Europe, this position was corrected a little bit. Because at that time, for their own reasons, Chancellor Schröder and President Chirac took an extremely sharp anti-American stance. Much sharper than Russia at the time. And they were extremely interested in dragging Putin along so that the three of them could present a united front.

Putin, I should say, was hesitant and not eager to do this, because he believed that this was generally not our main task at the moment, to quarrel with the United States. Especially since our personal relations with Bush were quite good.

But he did go, he was persuaded by Chirac, first of all, that it was necessary. He went for it, I think, expecting that in response to something like this, Europe would then go for a qualitative rapprochement [00:12:00] with Russia—an absolutely new model of relations, a pooling of resources, efforts, and all this, and nothing of the sort happened. When it was over, France and Germany were safely reconciled with the United States, but Russia was told, "Yes, of course let's integrate, but you know, we have the European Union, so please go to Brussels, unfortunately—we are all for it, but we can't do anything about it."

I think this was in fact a very serious moment for Putin when he understood that he could in general meet with Western countries, but he must understand that this meeting is only possible as long as they need it. As soon as their need disappears, they immediately lose interest in anything.

And in general, the dominant position was—yes, the Oriental school played an important role in shaping our views on the war in Iraq and, at that time, the relatively young and capable Igor Maksimovich Primakov, who was, of course, categorically against the war. But he was against the war not just because he personally knew Saddam Hussein and had spent many years in Iraq, but because he, his colleagues, and his like-minded people, they generally had an idea of what this would entail.

And in retrospect, the Russian analysis of the Middle East and what U.S. intervention would lead to was absolutely correct and accurate. Some of our American colleagues would later admit in conversations, "Well, yes, of course it turned out that you were right and we were wrong.” Because I remember very well our discussions with U.S. experts, when our colleagues would say to them [00:14:00], "Well, when you overthrow Hussein, this, this, and this will happen," they would say, "Oh, come on, we know, you Russians, everything will be fine.” But then—that was really, for all of us, a very [big] lesson in self-respect. Because the forecasts and analysis of our specialists, well, many of the best ones, turned out to be extremely accurate. And the American calculations, at least those that the administration was guided by, turned out to be completely wrong.

But on the whole, what is important in my view is that now, in retrospect, we can say that Iraq itself was probably not such a shock. That is, even when everything happened, and it took the forms it did, I think Putin drew his own conclusions about his interactions with America.

And I have this thought, back then many argued with it, that the coincidence of Putin's final decision to liquidate Yukos and deal with the personality of Khodorkovsky—at the time it was the largest Russian oil company on a global scale. And, in general, Khodorkovsky had intentions through interaction, through merger with American partners to reach the highest global level, but this was a private company. And it seems to me that among other reasons, of which there were many, what happened in Iraq, which was perceived as proof that if the United States wants something, it will do it. Nothing is going to stop them—not the objections of the allies [00:16:00], not international law, not the U.N. Security Council. They will simply ignore it all and do it as they see fit.

And this means, as it seems to me—I am reconstructing Putin's thoughts, I don't know what they were—everyone should prepare for the fact that anything can happen. And this means to consolidate resources, forces, and those, so to speak, competitive advantages that the country has, in case of force majeure. And what competitive advantage does Russia have? Raw materials. This is why it is simply impossible and strategically incorrect to allow the existence of a powerful, independent player on this stage, and it seems to me that this was an additional factor in our decision about Yukos.

GREK: And this is where moments of unpredictability come into play: trust and distrust, and when we talk about the period of the relationship between Putin and Bush, we tend to think of a great relationship all the time. What are the limits of their personal relationship and how might it have affected, again, trust or the development of relations between the countries?

So, here's the first highlight of the record—the meeting in Slovenia in 2001, when they had what some experts argue was a personal chemistry, which was expected a lot, when others at the same time said, "There's not going to be anything special about it." Do you think there was any chemistry? Was there any reaction from the presidential administration to the established relationship between Putin and Bush? And as a further analogy, could you compare the Yeltsin-Clinton and the Putin-Bush relationships?

LUKYANOV: As for the chemistry, it seems to me that there was chemistry. Well, what is chemistry— it's quite hard [00:18:00] to understand at all, it's such a beautiful word. In fact, there was, in my opinion, certain sympathy, a human sympathy. What it was connected to is a complicated question. I think that to really understand this you have to know well the personalities of both Bush and Putin.

But I remember that at the time some people argued that one of the reasons for their personal rapport—for different reasons, but both Putin and Bush at some point in their lives turned to religion, turned to faith, and as such, well in a sense, were neophytes, very sensitive to this subject, they found this point of rapport. But that's what was said at the time. It sounds plausible enough, though of course we don't know whether it's true or not.

Generally speaking, that period—not only Bush, but also Putin's relations with other Western leaders—became clear and convincing proof that chemistry by and large does not change anything. Whether it was chemistry or not chemistry with Bush, in general, it was some kind of a normal human relationship. Which, for example, we categorically never had with Obama. That is, with Obama they were not [makes hand gesture indicating they were not connected].

You know what Russia's relations with the United States were like at the end of Bush's term, that is the war, we remember. That is, no chemistry helped here.

Another example—the opposite, but leading to the same conclusion—is Putin's relations with a number of European leaders—Schröder, Chirac, Berlusconi [00:20:00], three, in fact, at the time, of Europe's leading major intellectual politicians. Sympathies, friendships with some of them to this day, and Berlusconi is just coming here on private visits. And Schroeder, so to speak, became a partner even. It did not make any difference. The logic of relations between Russia and the European Union has not changed at all because Putin had very friendly and warm relations with the three main European politicians. That’s all.

With Blair, with whom he ended up in simply an acute conflict, everything started with very friendly relations. I think Blair was the first one to come, even before Putin was inaugurated in 2000. Putin had been elected but had not yet been sworn in. They went drinking beer together in a beer house in Moscow. In general, everything was very—.

This leads me, as someone involved in international relations, to what we teach students: that there are actually iron laws, theories of international relations, which still manifest themselves in one way or another in any situation. And everything else is extraneous.

Specifically with Bush. Well, Putin is a man who is quite impressive in communication, that is, with his erudition, his memory, his knowledge of the material. And able to hold a conversation, able not only to talk, but also to listen when he wants to. I think he made quite an impression. He still does, I guess. Quite strong [00:22:00] especially then, after Yeltsin. Well, with Yeltsin, the conversations were extremely peculiar, when they occurred, because in the last years he was not very much in a position, so to speak, to do much foreign policy and to meet in person. And Putin gave the impression of a man who was extremely businesslike, concrete, capable of solving problems. Which was much less the case with Yeltsin.

And Bush, for his part, I think—again, this is my pure speculation—he was in many ways the antipode, because he did not have all of this, but he had something so human. I mean there was something about him, maybe connected to his rambunctious youth, but he wasn't a schema, a robot.

Because in many ways Obama was perceived, then already perceived here, as such a schema man. Very cold, very calculating, not particularly receptive to anything, to any arguments. And, as it were, perceiving only what fits into his scheme. A very rational, reasonable person. Contrary to the image, which was the opposite, all so warm—but that's what a lot of American colleagues who worked with Obama told me, that he has a very big contrast between his public image and his character.

Well, Bush was just the kind of guy—well, a normal guy, as we used to be. With all the pros and cons, flaws. I think this could have played a part.

In his own type—here's the prehistory of the genesis—Bush was the antithesis of what Putin was basically attracted to. Because if you look at the leaders with whom Putin enjoyed [00:24:00] a particularly close relationship, they were people who, like himself, made it to the very top, through their own efforts and strengths, from the very bottom up. Schröder is also the same—an orphan from a poor family who, so to speak, made it to the top. Berlusconi is a man who made himself out of nothing. I was told that Putin had a very warm relationship with the president of Finland, Tarja Halonen. Same thing: from the very bottom of Finnish proletarian society reached the top—.

And so Putin, as if understanding what this means, he himself had gone through roughly the same path, he felt sympathy—well Bush, of course, didn't fall into that category at all. This, then, is the boy with the golden spoon in his mouth, the aristocrat, the rich man, but he was like [waves hand].

Again, looking back and analyzing already, so to speak, from the perspective of what we know today—it didn't do anything, it didn't do anything. So, it's interesting, but no more than that.

GREK: Would you agree with the statement that for some time Putin looked at Bush as an example, a role model of some kind?

LUKYANOV: No, I don't think he looked at Bush as a role model. There's something else to be said: Russia has always—and by the way still does, not surprisingly, though to a lesser extent—looked at the United States as the main country in the world. The model is not in the sense that you have to do as they do, but that they decide everything, that everything depends on them. There is less of this now, for obvious reasons, and it will probably go away gradually, but at that time, of course [00:26:00], the American-centricity of Russian policy was highly pronounced, and the conviction that all issues had to be resolved there in the end, and somehow we had to find forms, agreements—it was, and it is, a very, very powerful tradition—it probably goes back to the Cold War, when two countries were actually in charge of the world. So it concerns the United States as a subject of international relations.

As for Bush: no, honestly, I can't think of anything that would prove that Putin wanted to act like him. And here is something else: that under Bush began—not because of him, but because this was the phase—a policy of very hard and sharp expansionism without looking at anything—the promotion of democracy and so on. And it's just that Putin has come to the conclusion that this is the way it is now. Not that we have to behave like America, but now this is how they behave, and this has to be taken into account, and we have to prepare for this.

GREK: If we move to the level of events and their impact on relations, then the first question, and probably one of the first hot-button issues, was the withdrawal of the U.S. from the 2001 ABM Treaty, which took place against the backdrop of its NATO expansion agenda. How did Russia react? How much has this changed the attitude toward the U.S.?

LUKYANOV: You know, this is a very interesting point. Why is it interesting now, looking back from 2021 to 20 years ago? At that time many people were surprised at Russia's calm [00:28:00] and seemingly indifferent attitude. All the statements were made—"This destroys the foundations of strategic stability," "This is very bad," "The United States is destabilizing the international situation,"—but they were made and made. There was no, in fact, no retaliation, as it seemed at the time. Russia simply took note. Then there began a long, multiyear debate, or squabbling, I would say, over the U.S. missile defense system, which was at the center of the discussions for quite a long time. Now, by the way, it's interesting that no one remembers much now—apparently because it didn't work out very well with the missile defense system, and in general the agenda went in entirely different directions—but it was an important element of the discussion that "You are creating a missile defense, you want to achieve invulnerability, then excuse me, we will proceed from that."

Putin, by the way—by the way, this was with Bush, then it somehow went away—was making all sorts of suggestions to Bush, "If you say that missile defense is directed at"—who was mentioned there—"Iran, North Korea—all right, that worries us too. Let's go together." There were proposals to include some of our radar stations in this system, but nothing came of it in the end, though there was a discussion.

So now looking back and seeing what we have now, and remembering Putin's brilliant speech, when was that? In [20]19? In [20]18? [00:30:00] When he showed pictures of rockets that fly, and these new weapons—hypersonic and so on. Anyway, it turns out, of course, that the reaction wasn't really like that at all. So we can assume that at that point the Russian leadership, without making this public, came to the conclusion that the whole system of maintaining strategic stability, as it was set up during the Cold War, was going to be dismantled. The ABM treaty, indeed, was an essential, fundamental cornerstone, as they say. Well, as long as we remove that, then everything else will also disappear after a while.

And I think that at that time a decision was made as a matter of principle to qualitatively modernize the nuclear potential and, we got the results: the public learned about it as early as the second half of the 2010s. Well, the process was long—investments were large, investments were probably partly open, maybe discreet, secret—but now it is clear that it was really a very important milestone, such a turning point. Then, probably, for reasons I do not know, they preferred to talk about it at all, as it were, to reduce the significance, but apparently it was the first step in principle. And since yes, indeed, it coincided with NATO expansion—well, NATO expansion had been decided before, but then it was just physically already started. The Iraq War [00:32:00], which also added to this conviction that the United States will do whatever they want—that's it, whatever they decide, that's how they will do it, they don't care how anyone reacts. So all this, of course, layered on top of each other. And then, when American and Western efforts to support the democratization of Russia's neighbors began, these so-called color revolutions, I think that all of this already formed such a promising picture that we are gradually but steadily and inevitably moving toward a new confrontation.

GREK: Shortly after the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty, 9/11 happened. And how did Russia react in general, as a society? How did the Russian government react to this event, to the 9/11 attacks? And did those terrorist attacks affect the definition of Russian policy toward the United States, particularly as associated with, in connection with Iraq, that is, were there any—maybe 9/11 was perceived as a legitimizing factor to the war? And if you can give an answer from the point of view of both government and society would be—that's probably the bigger picture.

LUKYANOV: Well, as far as Iraq is concerned, with very rare exceptions of some fiercely pro-Western figures, it seems to me that the picture here was quite clear that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11. Saddam Hussein—it could be anyone, but he's not a supporter of Osama bin Laden, and it's a purely drawn-out excuse to [00:34:00] take out an old enemy, to avenge the dad, as they said back then that, “Here he wanted to kill the dad, I'll kill him.” And accordingly, let's say: a fairly widespread version—primitive, but what can you do?—was that it was exclusively a war for oil, that the Americans wanted to grab all the oil in the Middle East under this sauce. Perhaps there was such a motive, but certainly it went deeper than that. So Iraq was not perceived, either by the government or by the public, as a—so it is just a case of using a false pretext to implement one's policy.

And 9/11 itself, of course, it was a shock, like everywhere else. Of course, these pictures that we were all watching, almost live—well, it was hard to believe that this was even possible. I remember that evening very well. It was 9:00 in New York, and in Moscow it was 5:00, and I was working at the newspaper, and we were in the final stretch of publishing the next day. Everything had more or less been done, and then there was still the editorial work, the proofreading, and so on. I was working at the newspaper on the last stage of the next day's issue. Everything had been assembled, more or less, and editorial work was left to be done—the layout, and so on. And then there was yelling and screaming, "Look what's going on, they're showing these planes crashing on TV.”

Frankly speaking, even though I was involved in international politics then, in the first moments, even in the first period, I underestimated the scale of the consequences. I mean, yes—"Nightmare, nightmare, how could this happen?" and everything, “But somehow it will get sorted out.” But after a while, it was already clear that it would be resolved in a completely different way.

And on the whole it is probably [00:36:00] correct to say that the reaction was rather sympathetic—well, the reaction of the authorities is known: Putin was the first foreign leader to call Bush and offer his support. He was very vocal in his solidarity and willingness to fight this new evil. Of course there was a feeling—not gloating, but a feeling of, "Well, we told you," because at the same time there was a second Chechen campaign going on that was strongly criticized by the United States—there was pressure and condemnation, and even some kind of, in my opinion—sanctions were not imposed—but in general the moral and political pressure was very strong. The Russian argument was always, "You don't understand who we are fighting with, these are not freedom fighters, this is an international terrorist group, and here, please, look who these people are, you told us, these are the same people".

But even then, of course, there was the notion that this set the stage for a qualitatively different rapprochement: here's the enemy, here's everything, the new enemy. And this was reinforced by what was coming out of Washington, when they said, “So this is a world war on terrorism,” and so on. But that rhetoric was enough for maybe a year. It was not empty, and a lot of people thought that this created a field for cooperation that would not be competitive [00:38:00]—that we had a common enemy and a common interest. But then, especially Iraq, and the rather demonstrative use of the terrorist theme against Iraq and the resolution of some other issues, of course, already began to dilute things greatly. And, as a matter of fact, in the United States too, the topic of the struggle, the war on terror—it started to give way to other things after a while.

To summarize: at the moment when this happened, it was perceived as a chance for, at last, a new kind of interaction, but it was not enough for long.

GREK: The next chronologically important point is the beginning of the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space—the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan. What do you think about the genesis of these revolutions? How did the Kremlin and the international community perceive these revolutions—that is, the people who professionally deal with this topic?

LUKYANOV: Well, the Kremlin perceived these revolutions unequivocally, meaning that it had already started to realize that the expansion of the West—expansion in different senses, whether it is military or political, but the main thing is that the spread of the sphere of influence outside of the former Soviet bloc and on the territory of the USSR will continue and one must proceed from this. That is, there are no limits to the appetites [00:40:00] of Euro-Atlantic institutions. And since in Russia at this time a kind of new philosophy was beginning to take shape, something that had to do with the failure of attempts to integrate into this Western world, this was perceived as a threat, of course, especially Ukraine, this Orange Revolution of

2004, and as a necessity to work seriously—not primarily in the international arena, but domestically.

Let's say, here's Georgia, well, Georgia is a small country, a very problematic country at that time—poor, corrupt. Shevardnadze was not a Russian friend or a close partner. When he was ousted the first reaction was that there was a lot of tension here, the way all this was going on, but as you remember there were not particularly sharp movements—moreover, Russia had made some efforts to calm down the matter. Especially when the new authorities tried to take under their control Adjara, where there was this independent prince, [Aslan] Abashidze. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Sergeevich Ivanov "brought him out of sin" on his plane. This was in 2003.

Ukraine, of course, was already perceived differently. Firstly, because Ukraine is Ukraine, it is a completely different scale and a different relationship, and secondly, because at that moment [00:42:00], not on the official, but on the expert and public level, there was a discussion in the West that Ukraine should join NATO. It goes without saying: NATO is the next step. This was perceived as an extreme threat.

And when what happened with this so-called Orange Revolution, which was full of very strange circumstances, of course, and it's still not clear what was behind the scenes—the Russian leadership, at the will and the initiative of then-President Kuchma of Ukraine, committed such an embarrassment, it turned out, when Putin personally participated in the election campaign of Yanukovych—went there, stood with him at the parade. Moscow was covered with these billboards with Yanukovych—also a strange idea, perhaps for the local Ukrainians to vote. Putin congratulated him twice, if you remember. When he sort of won, Putin congratulated him once, then congratulated him once more. So it was a rare embarrassment for [Putin]. Personally, I think that since then he has had very different feelings toward both Yanukovych and Ukraine.

But the most important thing is that the people who have been following this closely, we are talking about the security services and the expert community, they have seen that there is indeed, I would not call it a technology, but a certain order of actions of support from Western [00:44:00] governments, Western NGOs, which have a strong influence on the political situation in the country.

And then, just as in [20]14, as also then, meaning, we had arguments boiling over here. Some were saying, "What does the West have to do with this? This is like a rotten regime, a popular uprising, this and that," while others were saying, "What people's uprising? Look what Soros did there, so-and-so." Naturally, in reality it was both: there was weariness from a very dead-end way of development and ardent desire of certain forces in the West to stimulate it. Well, here is the same thing, only we saw a much harsher and more horrible form in [20]14.

So, as far as I remember, the period somewhere—the Orange Revolution and Yushchenko's accession took place at the end of [200]4—up until the fall of 2005 the

Russian government system was in a kind of shock, a stupor, first of all, because then what was afterwards always cited as a motivation for Russia's actions—but then it was not true, at that time it was true—there was a fear that this was a rehearsal, that Ukraine is a country close to us, and people are similar to us, that now they tested everything, and the next goal is Russia. The goal is not military, but precisely of this kind.

And during this whole period, for the next six months or more, all kinds of measures were taken to study how this was possible there, to plug [00:46:00] the holes that could allow the same thing to happen again in Russia. And then, in particular, mass youth organizations appeared, so that, "If they hold a Maidan, we will hold our own," and so on. And this went on for, in my view, six months or more. Then, in Ukraine, everything went on as usual, i.e. the fears that Ukraine would become such a showcase for the beautiful democracy that flourished before our doorstep—as we know, none of this came to pass—it was relieved. At the same time, measures were taken that, by and large, at least took into account what worked there.

As for relations with the West, that was of course the most important moment—probably the second-most important moment after missile defense—when it was generally understood that the topic of regime change in one form or another, from the Iraqi example to the Moldovan one, would take place all the time, that this is a sort of imperative of the West, and therefore we must be prepared for this, both in our neighboring countries and, most importantly, at home. And in general, since then, this line has only solidified.

GREK: This brings us gradually to the issue of domestic non-profit organizations and U.S. support for them. In 2005, during a trip to celebrate Victory Day, Bush met with a representative of NGOs and the dissidents of that time. How did the Russians and Russian authorities [00:48:00] perceive these meetings, and do you think this was constructive in terms of developing relations between the two countries? And should the Bush administration have continued to support freedom of speech, or should it not have gotten involved in internal political processes in Russia at that time?

LUKYANOV: So, you know, this brings us to the main topic of today's politics, which of course has its roots there. In 2005 the Russian leadership was not in any way happy about these meetings that were held by Bush or other Americans, and this was considered an obligatory element of any visit by the Secretary of State or any other Western official—you need a meeting with civil society. This provoked a nervous reaction, but in general, this was not prevented—if this is how it's done in your country, then it's done. Then gradually it became more and more conflictual against the background of what was happening in the world, in the minds of Russian leaders, and not only them—simple observers, too. Of course the support of internal opponents of the government became directly associated with a possible regime change.

Again, in the United States, it seems to me, when they analyze this period [00:50:00], they don't connect everything that was going on then enough—meaning, as it were, Iraq is Iraq, so there's this kind of framework in Iraq, the Arab Spring is something else, Palestine, and so on. Here are the different elements and that's it. And in fact everything that happened from the early 2000s to Maidan, this second Maidan, to [20]14, here—and I wouldn't say that this is some kind of paranoia, it's just a kind of holistic assessment—was perceived as a course for the maximally broad, by any means: from military to non-military, from the hardest force to the softest force, the spread of Western institutions and spheres of influence wherever possible.

That is, this is "democracy promotion," this is also Iraq—"democracy promotion," with the assistance of these tools. Kyrgyzstan is also—well, it's clear that there are other specifics, other instruments, but in general this is one process. And consequently, if the West proceeds from the idea that this is the main task for the transformation of the world, which generally followed from the whole philosophy of the end—the political concept of the end of the 20th century—the end of history is here when the entire history arrives—the history of the whole world arrives here. Where it doesn't arrive, we'll help it, because it has to arrive there anyway.

The picture is simplified, but in general, if you take politicians—they don't think in subtle philosophical categories, but they see what's going on and compare it to everything. And accordingly [00:52:00], in this context, the imperative of American or European politicians—that we must talk to civil society—it was perceived as something malicious, if not now, then for the future. It was tolerated for quite a long time, but then it was fought in the sense that it was somehow thrown out into the open. Every time there was some kind of internal aggravation, as, for example, in 2011-2012, they started to actively emphasize that, “Look, there was a U.S. embassy representative at this rally,” and, “Look at this newsreel, there is”—I don’t know—“an opposition figure is meeting with a representative of the Swedish embassy,” and so on.

Now here we come to a situation where this is the fundamental point, especially when the Biden administration came in and went back to these slogans. Trump had little interest in this, but Biden is sort of recreating this value-based approach, and so are the Europeans—they always do this. And before that, Russia—Putin or Lavrov or some other politicians, they used to argue that, “No, you shouldn't do that, and here you criticize us for that, and that's not like that. Chechnya—no, look; Yukos—no, this is it," and so on and so forth, all of this. Meaning some of those narratives, for which Russia was criticized: this criticism was rejected, but as if, "Look here, in reality, you don't want to listen to us."

Now we have reached a fundamental point where, let's [00:54:00] say, the Navalny story, or some other story of this kind, the Americans or Europeans say, "But you have this," and they say, "This is none of your business, get out of here!

This is our domestic business, that’s it." This is actually a very important point, because the whole previous history of these explanations and rants proceeded from the fact that we think that we have to answer to you or explain something, and now we are getting to the point of,

"But you have—,"

"Get out of here.”

And this is actually a problem of relations between Russia and the West, but it is a much deeper problem. It is a problem of on what foundations the world is built, up to a certain point. Yes, and the Chinese are doing the same thing, by the way. We see it now—earlier, the Chinese rejected everything even more harshly, but they now put forward the true picture in response: about the Uighurs, this kind of thing, and now it means that they are told, "This and that," and they say, "And who are you to teach us? Get up and get out of here." And this is a new period, not in Russian-American or Chinese-American relations—this is a new situation in the world, when here the universalism of certain principles ceases to be recognized.

We, again, were on our way to—well, actually, since the nineties, even under Clinton, this was also the case. Another thing is that, at that time, Russia was in a state where it could only, so to speak, fend off. But since it depended, especially in some periods, simply on material support, you can fend it off there as much as you like, but when money is needed, another tranche—stand-by credit from the IMF—then you have to, and [00:56:00] then gradually from this on. By the way, the first thing Putin did when he became president, he demanded that everyone, the Finance Ministry and others, pay all debts at an accelerated pace. Just as oil prices went up, there was an opportunity. The financiers said to him, "But it's not necessary, we can pay in the normal manner." [Putin:] "No, we [pay] as quickly as we can." It was a political decision, of course, in order not to depend on anything. "That's it, we've paid it off, now."

And, especially under Bush, it caused a lot of irritation, because it means on the one hand they come here, they explain how you should build a democracy. But on the other hand, Iraq, on the other hand, Guantanamo. And they say, "You look at yourselves." And this didn't happen overnight, but it changed the attitude, including in society, toward the American narrative. Now what I can judge from my students, for example, the kids who were born in the early 2000s—that is, they were born under Bush and Putin, and later—I would not say that they are super loyal, and they have many questions for our government, but they have absolutely no expectations or illusions about the West. Which is what, for example, when I was a student: we looked at the West as the light in the window—it's there, the mid-to-late eighties, and all our changes, they were to go there somewhere. Now it's nowhere near there. "Well, the West—." Well, that is, the West is recognized as a place where many would even like to live, but it is in no way a benchmark, especially morally and politically. And this is probably one of the powerful changes [00:58:00] in particular explaining why Russia now so sharply rejects any attempts to prescribe and teach it something.

GREK: President Putin gave a famous speech at the Munich Security Conference, which is in 2007, in which he criticized the United States as a destabilizing power that disregards the basic principles of international law. Americans were surprised by this turn of Russian rhetoric, and the Bush administration has acknowledged the Kremlin's opposition to withdrawal from the ABM treaty, with the invasion in Iraq, with NATO expansion. American officials still do not believe Putin understood the real reason behind these U.S. moves, believing that the disagreement could be and even was indirectly resolved, and if not, then could have been a topic of negotiations. Moreover, there was an understanding in the Bush administration that such gestures, when Bush abruptly stopped criticizing Russia's domestic policy personally—that is, once again, returning to the subject of NGOs—this was such a signal of readiness to negotiate that Putin did not perceive. How did you react to the Munich speech? In your opinion, what was Putin trying to do at that point? And do you agree with the statement that the disagreements were not that weighty and Putin overreacted to them in his speech?

LUKYANOV: Again, I probably had a delayed reaction personally—when this speech was made, it didn't seem to me at the time that it was so directly pivotal. I was honestly a bit surprised at the reaction in the West, because—here’s an interesting exercise for understanding the processes of the time. Here is Putin making two [01:00:00] historic speeches in Germany: One he gave in the German Bundestag in the fall of 2001 in the German language, which was particularly emphasized at the time, causing simply ovations, applause from everybody. It was after 9/11, he talked about how, “Now we see who the real enemy and what the real threat is,” and, "Come on already, yes, we have disagreements, but they are absolutely not insurmountable, we can agree and deal with real problems," and it was received simply to cheers. If you compare the text of this speech and its content with the Munich speech in 2007—in terms of the set of topics, and even assessments, they are identical. It is the same—the same problems, the same statements that we have common threats which need to be dealt with, but we are occupied with something else instead, the same list of Russian dissatisfactions—there’s missile defense, NATO, and so on—the tone is different.

So in 2001 this was an invitation that, "Now we get it, let’s go," whereas in 2007 it was, "Well, what’s this, do you see what’s going on? " And this was taken as a challenge, although it was still, to my mind—because back in the 2000s Putin was looking for ways to find a form of more or less acceptable coexistence and mutual benefit [01:02:00], and it was the latest cry that, in fact—well, before Georgia, at least—it was, in fact, a cry that: “No, guys, well, look here, what’s going on, nothing is happening, everything is only worse, let’s go already.” It was perceived as a challenge and an ultimatum, although I repeat: in content, it is exactly the same thing that he said many times before, and in particular in that speech, which was then perceived as a simple outstretched hand. There, I remember, the head of the Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee after that speech said, "Well, that's it, we can accept Russia into NATO".

Of course, again, in hindsight, looking back we understand that perhaps Putin wanted it or didn't want it, but the speech was indeed a turning point, because yes, it was probably the last outcry, but it was not perceived. It was perceived that Russia is getting cocky, so all the more reason to contain it, meanwhile he wanted it to be perceived that, "Russia, yes, apparently the Russians aren't happy at all, let's think about why. Maybe we can do something." Those reactions that were in the West—there was a different perception there, that, "We are Russians and this and that and the fifth and the tenth." And it was nothing to them: "They are dissatisfied with everything and nag all the time." It is understandable, but it proceeded from the premise, which was formed, in fact, at the end of the Cold War: that negotiations could not be about a convergence of interests, not about a convergence of positions, but about how Russia would accept the forms of interaction and political postulates that the West offered because they were right. "Here they are right, the Russians don't understand in some ways, in some ways maybe they are not comfortable with it, but let us [01:04:00] here make them either understand, or make them a little more comfortable with it."

It was not a question of the principles of how things should be arranged. If we go back in time, the notion of a new world order, which was introduced by

Gorbachev and later adopted by George Bush the elder, was the following template and axiom: the Cold War is over, we will now have a new world order. Gorbachev had a utopian picture of this order, but it was a convergence of the two systems—we stop competing, but we see who has what is better and somehow bring it together, connect it, so that we get good there and good here. It was pure utopia, but in any case, he described it somehow. But the new world order in the American way was never described anywhere, as if it went without saying. But it is clear that now, as one would say, "The end of history has arrived, our model is correct, and now everyone else has to understand what is right and let them get closer, while we will help them in this."

The nineties, actually, went under this flag, including here—Russia did not argue with this, a) because it couldn't; b) because there were still political forces that thought so too. And then as problems with this model grew—not only between us and America, but in general, meaning there were questions, but these questions were not answered by the West, in the sense that the West would not give up this basic premise. As a result, we have come to the point where now when no one in the West thinks that the Western model will be extended to the whole world, and now there is a [01:06:00] real confrontation, because Trump, strictly speaking, proclaimed this, but Biden has not reversed it—great power competition. Biden simply put another, precious hat on it, as before, but in essence nothing has changed.

And, in short, going back to Putin's speech, it means that he tried to shout through a megaphone that, as it were, "Guys, wake up, the way you want it is no longer going to happen, and if you want it to be good, let us discuss it together," to which the answer came: "No, we're not going to discuss all that, especially in that tone, so excuse me. Russia, if it does not like something, well, alas." Then, in fact, what followed next—this was the next stage, beginning with Georgia and such further steps, when the Russian side accepted as an axiom that the West would not agree on anything until it encountered an insurmountable obstacle to the one concept it carries. Well, then these insurmountable obstacles will arise.

GREK: Yes, that is, if we go back to the question of some American politicians interpreting the situations that triggered the Munich speech as the object of possible negotiations, is it correct to say that there was a clear understanding in Russia that this was impossible and the signaling was not perceived, if it was?

LUKYANOV: No, the point is, what kind of negotiations are possible? That's what we already noted in the conversation—were there any negotiations on missile defense? There weren't. No one offered any negotiations. The United States announced its unilateral withdrawal—that's it. Were there any [01:08:00] talks on NATO expansion? There were no talks. Russia resisted for a while, but then Russia stopped—that is a separate discussion. Here was the correct position back then in the 90s, that, "All right, to hell with it, we can't do anything anyway, then." Or maybe it was wrong, maybe then we had to find the right moment, and then things became a little bit different, although I don't know, I am not sure. But the subject of the negotiations, again, as it seems to me—from the Western side the idea of the negotiations was this, as I described it, that, "We do what needs to be done, and let's talk to you about how you will adapt to it, if you want to, and if not, we'll do it anyway." Well, this kind of negotiation ceased to be perceived as a negotiation at some point by Russia.

GREK: Did Putin's transition to Medvedev have any significant impact on the format of U.S.-Russian relations?

LUKYANOV: Well, it certainly did, because the Putin and Obama relationship was—actually, there was no relationship. And when they did happen sporadically, they were obviously, visibly hostile. Medvedev's relationship with Obama, just speaking of chemistry, was obviously so positive. It seems to me that Medvedev, who was always comparing himself to Putin and probably thought that he had to assert his status as the most important Russian on the world stage—he was very interested in maintaining good relations with Obama because he thought that this would raise his status [01:10:00] as well.

But given that Obama came at a very low point in Russia's relations with the United States, after the war in the Caucasus, plus there was the financial crisis, which of course overshadowed everything else for the West—but still being a generally pragmatic man, Obama thought it necessary to resolve some issues with Russia and, well, to reduce the importance of Russia as a problem for America.

Medvedev was a suitable interlocutor in this sense. Perhaps another important point, by the way, in U.S.-Russian relations was Libya. This was the strange decision, which is still not very clear, personally, by President Medvedev not to veto the resolution on military intervention in order to—this was his decision, and everyone was against it, the Foreign Ministry was against it, and Putin was. But many think that he didn't want to spoil relations with Obama and the United States over what he probably thought was not a very important issue. Well, what happened, happened, and in some ways it was even worse than Iraq. Well, just even the pictures themselves—well, sort of the visualization of the consequences of the Russian decision, the fate of Colonel Gaddafi and Libya in general—which of course Russia is largely responsible for, because if Russia had vetoed it, I don't know whether or not there would have been this type of intervention. It could have been all the same, but it might not have been. Well, in general, it was such a shock [01:12:00], strong enough that is now recognized as a mistake.

But in terms of relations it was—well, it can be interpreted this way, that it was yet another attempt: maybe naive, maybe due to Medvedev's inexperience, but nevertheless. But all the same: “They sort of ask us, they need us, and then we will meet them and then the overall climate will improve.” And what turned out to be so nauseating and revolting for everyone, that, "No, that's it, now that's it, that's it, never again, that's it, we've already made sure, and again we tried it, and again it’s all crap." And hence, by the way, the roots of the extremely tough, absolutely intransigent position on Syria, are that, "No, that's it, we're done with you, you got us involved, never again." Well, actually, we can see that the situation in Syria has developed quite differently than in other Arab Spring countries.

In short, under Obama, thanks to the fact that it was Medvedev and not Putin—Medvedev was just the face—it was possible to do this reset, which solved problems in a sense. So what was the reset? The reset was a package deal: several topics were put on the table, some of them were important to the Americans, some of them were important to the Russians, and of these, in the center of it all was the Iranian problem and the problem of the START treaty. And through all kinds of swaps and formal or not-quite-formal arrangements, this kind of compact package was reached, which included [01:14:00] Russia's accession to the WTO, Russia's agreement to sanctions against Iran, an informal reduction of U.S. activity in the post-Soviet space. It was not written down anywhere, but in general it was understood that this was part of some kind of agreement.

So, yes, the START treaty also worked, but it worked as, I don't know, an episode for some kind of a brake on the slide down. Then what happened was what happened. As it turned out, the START treaty itself, unlike what it was during the Cold War, is no longer the core of the relationship. The relationship used to be strung on this. And now: "Well, yes, it's a good deal, and that's great, yes, it's good," but in general it has changed nothing. Just like the five-year extension of START, which everyone wanted, and thanks to Trump's departure it happened and what?

Nothing. It didn't change the atmosphere of the relationship in any way, it didn't change the agenda, it didn't create new opportunities, that's why—.

And for the rest, and then—well, we can argue about Obama for a long time, what he was right about, what he was wrong about. For Obama, by the way, the last moment occurred when Putin played a very elegant role—when was it, in [20]13?—when it was the destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons. Well, it really turned out that there was going to be a war, no one wanted war, no one knew what to do, and then Putin comes out and says, "But you can do this, shall we?" And suddenly everyone said, "Ah, yes." It was beautiful, and I must say that, in [01:16:00] a sense, Putin won the Nobel Prize that year because, if you remember, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was awarded it exclusively because this thing had been done. Well, later, in fact, this has already died, too.

GREK: The Medvedev-Obama relationship essentially began with the conflict in Georgia, by and large it was a culmination of this relationship between the two previous administrations and the transition to a new relationship between Russia and the United States. Why did the conflict in Georgia happen? How do you think the U.S. and Russia handled that conflict, and, basically, how was that conflict handled in Russia in a broader sense—socially and governmentally?

LUKYANOV: Well, the Medvedev and Obama relationship, actually, started a little bit later. The conflict was in the last months of Bush—Medvedev was already there, Obama wasn't there yet. So, when Obama took office, the acuteness of the summer of 2008 subsided a little bit, first of all; and secondly the global financial crisis was blazing, and Obama was clearly—Georgia was not very high on his list of priorities.

The Georgian conflict itself was, in general, the quintessence of everything that had happened before. By the way, it seems to me that the last meeting between Bush and Putin in Sochi in the spring of 2008, when they adopted a declaration, cleverly titled, something about “a framework of relations”—in fact, that was also the future reset. That is, there was already a package in place, but it was just implemented under Obama. It seemed like this was the end [01:18:00] of U.S.-Russian relations under Bush, or Putin and Bush, more or less in a calm way: "Yes, we had a lot of things, but we came to the conclusion that let's try not to escalate things any further," and then Georgia happened.

Georgia is, to my mind, a product of what we talked about before, that is, the persistent striving of the United States to strengthen the forces and systems that are loyal to them on the territory further to the east of the former Warsaw block. And the very figure of President Saakashvili, who had positioned himself as the biggest friend of America in the world and had been demonstratively anti-Russian and had the support of the United States—this figure certainly became a catalyst.

Many people had ascertained that tensions were building up in the months before the war itself. You have to remember that, in 2008, there were two events that stimulated this war—the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and its recognition by most Western countries, and the Bucharest NATO summit, where there was an acute discussion between the United States and European countries—Germany, France—about the advisability of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO. And a decision was made, which was then [01:20:00] interpreted as, well, so to speak, a victory for Russia, although in fact it was not—on the contrary, it created an even worse situation for war, when an action plan for NATO membership was not given to Georgia and Ukraine. Germany, France stood firm, said "No," but in the final declaration, the memorandum was written that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO, someday.

And they presented it, especially the Europeans, as a concession to Russia. On the other hand, if you look at it more objectively, what is the concession? The Membership Action Plan—it's clear that it's a formality, but it's still a set of criteria that you have to fulfill in order to join. You could theoretically get stuck at some point—theoretically. And here they didn't give you a plan, but they wrote, "They will be members of NATO.” And I think this played a role also in the actions of Saakashvili who thought that, since it was written, if anything, of course they will not leave, but it was his naivety and stupidity—but nevertheless he proceeded from the fact that, since it was written, since they say that America is with Georgia and everybody is with Georgia, then—.

Now it is remembered, literally, a lot these days in connection with Ukraine, because of another aggravation in Donbass, and there, the calls of General Austin, or Blinken, or Biden, who all say, and it is interesting that everything is exactly the same here, that here it is “unwavering support.” Saakashvili also thought he had unwavering support, then it turned out that he did, but only…

[01:22:00] So it has all been deepening—and, again, the West somehow, for some reason, tends to divide it all and, yes, “Here is aggressive Russia, which has been waiting, waiting for a pretext, and finally that fool Saakashvili gave that pretext, and that's when they got involved.” But it was actually going toward this logically, step by step, when they recognized Kosovo's independence. In general, from our side—I don't remember on what levels, on expert levels for sure, but I think there were hints on official levels as well—that, "Guys, well, I'm sorry, if you've opened the box, well, then here you go.” And, in general, many said that now, in general, Abkhazia, South Ossetia are the next places for discussions, at least.

The same thing with this NATO membership—if in all previous years the automatic expansion of NATO to the east was going on and when we got to the point that now Ukraine and Georgia were next in line, well, I guess if you think more deeply you would understand that it is not going to end that easily. But it is interesting that it is not over as well, because, in 2008, yes, the Georgian war was a bit of a shock, but, to come back to your question, but by and large we managed to get out of it. Well, Russia didn't go all the way, which was what everybody feared, that now they will take Tbilisi and Saakashvili will be hanged like Mussolini—it didn't happen. A couple of months passed there, and—yes, plus it was recognized in the West that he had instigated all the same—he had thrown the match, he was a fool, he was crazy and so on. And somehow it all calmed down again. Sarkozy at first arranged [01:24:00] a ceasefire agreement, then a kind of establishment of a new status quo and, apparently, nobody drew the final lessons, because if they did, then Ukraine of 2014 as it was would not have happened, but it did happen.

And unfortunately, this period, from 2008 to 2014—this time after some relaxation, here is the reset, somewhere in 2009-2011, maybe the beginning of 2012—no, 2011, before our Bolotnaya Square, there was a kind of détente. Then everything began to come to a head—Putin's new term, a new wave of talks about the need to develop Atlantic institutions further and so on, and then Ukraine.

Ukraine, of course, became a turning point because, when it became clear that this automatic expansion to the east is fraught with serious risks, serious ones—because Georgia never brought any serious risks to the West, but Ukraine brought risks, especially to Europe—some kind of new stage began.

But getting back to our topic, this Bush-the-younger period was a time when the problems of the worldwide situation began to escalate quite rapidly, and the decision of the world's leading countries, primarily the United States, was, "We have to reinforce what we did before" [01:26:00]—not to think about whether something was wrong, but on the contrary: “We didn't do it right before, but now we will do it, including even coercive measures.”

And here's Bush, that's just it—especially Bush's first term was the peak of this situation. Naturally, it was perceived in other countries, especially in Russia, with growing anxiety—anxiety, which in the beginning thrust rather toward, "Somehow like this, just so we don't get hurt." And then, when it became clear that the United States was starting to fail with this, it didn't work, that is, the problems keep growing, and the prescriptions don't work here, of course: "Oh, so, that is, you won't leave, you don't want to change anything, well, then I'm sorry, we will also react as we see fit." So, probably, actually Bush's time was an extremely important period for the world in general, as well as for U.S.-Russian relations. In a sense it was more important than what happened after that.

GREK: Great, I didn't even have to ask the last question. That's it, we're done.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]