



U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Gleb Pavlovsky

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GREK: When George W. Bush became president in 2001, what kind of work did you do and how did you come to your position?

PAVLOVSKY: I had been an adviser to the head of the presidential administration for political planning. I was already doing so by that time for a long time, since 1996.

GREK: At the time of the beginning of relations between the Putin and Bush administrations, at the time of the transition, what schools of thought existed in the field of international politics? What did you think about Russian-American relations?

PAVLOVSKY: Well, it would be somewhat ambitious to talk about the schools of thought. It was a period of such—quite a long period, from the beginning of the 90s, a period of absence, in general, of a significant influence of different intellectual platforms on politics., they simply diverged.

In 1991, when the Union collapsed, various communications between the scientific community and the government also collapsed. At the same time, there were quite a few people who had [00:02:00] scientific experience, but one cannot speak, until about the middle of the 2000s, about the significant influence of some oppositions, platforms—the very concept of "opposition" was unpopular.

And we, as far as foreign policy is concerned—first, in the 90s there was such a decline in the development of foreign policy. It was largely subordinated—well, of course, it was subordinated to the president, but in general public interest in foreign policy was negligible. Newspapers closed their pages on international relations, cut



international correspondents—it was simply not read. Society was politicized, but in a completely different way, and some very noticeable international events—for example, the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was largely at the center of European politics, it generally passed us by. People, most people, just didn't notice what it was. Here, of course, the war in Chechnya supplanted it, although it was waged by approximately the same means.

Here, there was an American dogma, as I call it: the idea that all issues can be resolved with America. Strange, but it has been [00:04:00] quite a long time—I think its remains are still visible today. And by the beginning of Putin's presidency, some isolation of Russia had already begun. My dear friend Tom Graham already wrote his wonderful article "World Without Russia?" in 1999—if I am not mistaken, I think—thanks to which he became an adviser to Bush the younger. At that time, as there was no fixation on the Kremlin's geopolitics, the very word "geopolitics" was, I would say, a forbidden word, because, generally speaking, geopolitics is now a science, and in the Kremlin we thought so, too.

And it began—well, Bush came, there was a meeting somewhere in the Balkans, right?

GREK: In Slovenia.

PAVLOVSKY: In Slovenia, yes. Well, but nothing fundamental had happened yet. As far as I understand, there was a search for some kind of new relations with Russia in Putin's Russia, but it was not yet Putin's. And, so, the turning point was in 2001, as



you know, when a certain problem already existed, for example, the problem [00:06:00] of the Taliban: In the Kremlin, it existed, it was recognized; in [the rest of] the country—no, it was not recognized. And when then Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said that we were ready to bomb even the Taliban positions somewhere—I don't remember, apparently, in Afghanistan—this caused a mixture of ridicule and indignation in society. “What Afghanistan? What Taliban? What are you talking about? There is so such thing.” This was, by the way, back in the spring of 2001. The Taliban then turned to the Kremlin with rather strange proposals, such strange, in fact, proposals to fight together against America, but, naturally, they did not arouse any interest because Russia was moving in a completely different direction. And then our allies in Central Asia were afraid of the Taliban.

So when 9/11 came, there was a certain consensus in the Kremlin—there was a consensus that Putin should come out strongly in support of President Bush. It seemed to be [00:08:00] argued in different ways, but there was a consensus, there were no other points of view. And therefore no other platforms were influential. Of course, Sasha Dugin had a different position, but Dugin was nobody for the Kremlin. So what happened happened, and it was a strong move that spawned some kind of special relationship with Bush.

GREK: Do you mean the meeting in Slovenia?

PAVLOVSKY: No, what meeting in Slovenia? September 11th. And Slovenia was—well, it's nice that they looked into each other's eyes, but, to be honest, it wasn't in the



Kremlin either, it didn't really matter—well, they looked and looked. That is, the task was not to cause rejection, because in Europe there was already a bad attitude toward Russia. It had already taken root because of the war in Chechnya, which was going on at that time.

GREK: Do many people talk about the personal chemistry between Putin and Bush that developed then in Slovenia?

PAVLOVSKY: Well, it did not develop in Slovenia, it did so on September 11th, after Putin's statement. It was in Slovenia, after all—there was a passing moment, and September 11th was direct support for Bush in his, generally speaking, improvisation, which then could end badly, which could not be accepted at all. [00:10:00] That's why "a spoon is dear when lunchtime is near." Putin was the first to come out with such reckless support for Bush that it made it impossible to put Russia on the other side.

We considered at that time—well, before September 11th—the possibility that—we were looking for some kind of position for Russia. In particular, one of the positions, perhaps the second most important, that was considered was this one: as the leader of non-Western countries, the leader of the outcasts, the leader of countries that feel forgotten and, so to speak, do not see a place for themselves in a multipolar world. Yes, such a thing was considered, but it faded into the background almost immediately.



GREK: Shortly before September 11, there was another important event—the US withdrawal from the treaty on limiting missile defense systems. Did this somehow affect the course of the Kremlin?

PAVLOVSKY: This, of course, did not mean anything good for Moscow. We reacted negatively to this, but it was not some kind of marker of hostility, possible confrontation, because a new government arrived in Moscow [00:12:00]—we perceived ourselves as a new government, as a new order. And the old treaties—yes, their value was not clear to us. We were newcomers, and we, in fact, did not care about the old treaties.

GREK: Some colleagues say that it was this situation with the withdrawal of the States from the treaty that gave rise to the development of Russian supersonic missiles and so on. Did you have any harsh reactions to this?

PAVLOVSKY: Yeah, nonsense. What rockets? What developments at that time? There was no money. And they, in fact, were not foreseen yet, they appeared later. So what kind of missile developments are there? That is new people strutting, striving to get into the new mainstream.

GREK: Understood. 9/11—we have already touched on this a little—you said that the reaction of the Kremlin was rather monolithic as an organization, and the next important stage was the Iraq War. How did the Kremlin view the position of the Bush administration?



PAVLOVSKY: Well, you know, between September 11 and the Iraq War, the attitude toward America completely changed, precisely during this period. Before the Iraq War, this is the zenith of Putin's pro-American policy and the zenith of pro-Western policies in general. This is the period when NATO membership was really discussed. After 2003 it, as it were, was not [00:14:00] completely rejected, but it became somehow unimportant, it began to move to the periphery.

So 2001-2002 is a certain state of Putin-Bush romantic love, from which the parties expected completely different things, so they did not understand. Russia, for example, was sure that America, after what Russia did—after support—which was opposed in particular by Sergei Ivanov—support for the creation of anti-terrorist bases in Central Asia—that America, at least, would stop supporting the Chechen separatists, but it did not. It did not do this—it continued to conduct operations in this—including in the Georgian—I forgot, on Georgian territory, what this valley is called—this is where the Chechens lived, where they had camps, there were hospitals, there were actual bases, which had already pushed out of the Chechen—that is, in fact, the US intelligence services continued their activities there. It was an unpleasant surprise for the Kremlin. So, what about “we looked [00:16:00] into the eyes”? Yes, we are allies, practically, but how? What are you? And Bush considered himself above that. And also, he assigned—pulled the development of relations with Russia to a lower level. He was not interested in it, since he was engaged in the war. Since Russia did not want to engage in the war—although this was considered, of



course—then, accordingly, everything—all this chemistry—disappeared, was, in general, forgotten, although the relationship was very close and continued.

Well, there are also bureaucratic problems, because, as it was, the structure of the presidential departments was very different between Russia and Washington, and it was not clear who should interact with whom, so there was some kind of difficulty, even of a bureaucratic nature. So, at that time we were intensively discussing, considering, and developing the idea of a military alliance with America and some kind of, what seemed generally, a trifling favor—the recognition of Russia as, as it is called, America’s closest ally outside the military bloc. There is such a format, a concept [00:18:00], in my opinion. Israel and a few other countries belong to it. Well, but even that didn't happen, we didn't even get that, so, of course, interest in the war with Iraq began to fall. And it turned out that we were invited to participate in this war without any legal basis, without the support of the United Nations and at our own expense. As Sergei Shoigu told me then: "It's like this: I'm both paying and getting fucked." In short, this is, as it were, already the moment of the deployment of troops, against which we had objected several times. We had informed Bush several times that we do not support this war and will not participate in it. The head of the administration did it, and Putin did it too.

But I think that during this period a bad thing happened, namely: Putin fell in love not so much with Bush as with his style, with his style of presidency. And [00:20:00] I think that he received a bad lesson, consequently, from this gentleman.



GREK: Can you clarify a little bit?

PAVLOVSKY: Well, so to speak, the Bushist concept of world politics, as a policy from a position of strength, as policies, as it were—refusing to create a coalition where it is possible to act by force, a unilateral policy, in principle. And the fact that Bush actually—Putin was very impressed that Bush actually conducted a coup d'état inside America. He changed the position of the intelligence services in America and so on, taking advantage of the moment. This interested Putin very much, he liked it very much in this sense. He had also previously treated the States positively, namely, as a united society. Bush brought this to an extreme point, and Putin continued, I think, to learn all this for two presidential terms, he changed his position only when his second presidential term began to end.

GREK: The second part of the terms [00:22:00] began and developed initially around such events as color revolutions, that is, by the middle—the first part of the 2000s. How did the Kremlin see the series of color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan? What were the reactions, answers, assumptions, and strategies?

PAVLOVSKY: Well, what does “series” mean? Series is a construction. There was no series. The series was designed by the American department, the series was designed by the Bush Doctrine, which in general we considered as a senseless attack, unjustified. That is, we offered allied relations in every possible way and got punched in the face.

Of course, the first Kievan so-called Orange Revolution was mainly an undertaking of the Ukrainian establishment, of course, and therefore the American



role was great here, so to speak—the establishment ran to the American embassy, I remember that well, because I was there then. And Kuchma still played on these contradictions, so to speak—I remember how he invited me at the same time as the American ambassador, which means, so to speak, keeping us in the waiting room at the same time—this is such a banal game, but effective.

Putin, of course, already believed by this time that this was an American game. [00:24:00] That is, there were many formal signs of this—but I don't think this was an American game—but the American game, of course, was in the development of this then-anti-Kuchma, in fact, action.

Well, Putin was traumatized by this case. Already in Russia, the situation was changing. After all, there was a terrorist attack in Beslan—this is, as it were, the highest success of Shamil Basayev. They had already tried, as it were, to Chechenize the Caucasian war, not unsuccessfully with the help of the elder Kadyrov.

But what Bush did in the spring of 2005, when he, as it were, generalized completely different events in different countries—in Lebanon, Ukraine, then still more foolishly, in Uzbekistan—he announced all this as color revolutions. That is, he connected it with the doctrine of supporting democracy—well, it was a tough move. And we began to look for how to answer it. Because he was dangerous—a man who broke into [00:26:00] Iraq for nothing and now declares that he will support color revolutions in the post-Soviet space—he was dangerous. Then we overestimated the strength of Bush's political positions. He, so to speak, with the



help of Karl Rove, created for a short time, but nevertheless created, the impression of total control over the power of America—both chambers became his and so on. All this did not last long, if I am not mistaken until the flood in Louisiana, but nonetheless. This also in general launched the work on finding a political response.

So this was already different, the situation began to change. That is, after all that had happened, the decline of the liberal parties began. They failed—the 2003 elections were getting ready to fail, the next elections—because they were tempted by the Ukrainian revolution and decided that politics can be done in the street. This mistake cost them dearly. And all of us, as I now see.

So, here already, somewhere between the Iraq War and the Munich speech, Putin's attitude toward America was changing in principle [00:28:00]—it, as became clear, was not an ally, this was an insidious country, and the missile defense problem, of course, polished off this matter. Well, Putin began to prepare for some kind of contraction.

GREK: Here, just the same, at this tie between domestic politics and history with revolutions and so on—in May 2005, Bush came to Victory Day and before that met with representatives of Russian NGOs, dissidents, and so on. What was the Kremlin's reaction to this? And was there a public reaction to this?

PAVLOVSKY: Yes, yes, I was there. Well, this was not the first time he came. And they perceived it as a little dirty trick, nothing more. At that time, NGOs were not considered particularly important players in the domestic political field. Well, much



more important was his trip to Georgia, where at the same time, in my opinion, somewhere in May 2005, where he just announced that he would support the color revolutions, and this almost coincided, almost overlapped to the day with this story in Uzbekistan, which was going on then. I didn't like it very much, because it was, as it were, this declaration of geopolitical war from the Kremlin's point of view.

GREK: I think this is the straightest approach to the Munich speech: [00:30:00] in 2007, Putin made the famous Munich speech, and the Americans, the colleagues with whom we interviewed, in particular, were surprised by this turn of rhetoric and said that the Bush administration recognized the Kremlin's disagreement on the missile defense treaty, the invasion of Iraq, and the expansion of NATO. That is, they understood what was going on here, but also American officials still believe that Putin did not understand the real reason for these steps and that all differences could either be indirectly resolved or could become the subject of negotiations. In other words, Putin overreacted from this point of view. How did you react to this speech? Did you take part in the writing and preparation of this speech? And what was the programmatic meaning of the Munich speech in principle for Russian policy?

PAVLOVSKY: In writing—no. I took part in the preparation. There were a number of texts, and it was not yet known where Putin was—there was still no selection, location, or occasion. But it was understood that Bush was falling, and [the idea was to] give him a push as he's falling—that's one.



Second, it was clear that we didn't get anything from this alliance, which, as it were, we also wouldn't get—Bush is leaving, no NATO. There would be no entry into NATO. The problem was not that others joined NATO, the problem was that we were not invited—[00:32:00] but we—from the Kremlin's point of view—we were the first in line, and not at all some kind of Georgia or someone else out there. This point of view was exactly this. Well, so what? Let me remind you, more than five years had already passed after these all sorts of “looking the eyes.” Well, so what? And where is the result? What is there to show for it? How does it feel, as they say, with one's hands? Nothing. Therefore, the meetings continued, but they became ceremonial and interest in them, of course, disappeared. It was necessary to prepare for the moment of transition. Putin was going to leave the Kremlin, and he really was going to leave and he had no idea to stay there: and so what? And then what? It turns out that the American problem was not resolved. In general. No way. Only, as they say, we made a series of gifts: in Central Asia, in Cuba, in Vietnam. So what? And where is the response?

GREK: What do you mean by gifts?

PAVLOVSKY: Well, Cam Ranh, the base in Cam Ranh, that's the biggest; in Cuba, this center [inaudible]. Well, these were incredibly generous gifts from Moscow's point of view. Because nothing like that, of course—[00:34:00] just the whole bureaucracy was howling about it—well, why? And they said, everyone said, "You will not get anything." And we really got nothing. Bush, in my opinion, simply was not even able



to understand this. His team—well, Graham probably understood, but others did not understand this at all, what it was about. That is, the interest in friendship disappeared, so it was necessary to try something else.

This was a very gentle speech. It, in general, could be called velvet. Munich—it was generally full of compliments to America. It's just that the abnormal state of the then-public scene suggests that it was perceived as rudeness. Look, read it—it is very politely said that a one-sided policy is not good. Even that was then, as it were, unacceptable to say—now Europeans—European leaders express themselves more harshly.

So it was a speech delivered at the right time in the right way. Another thing is that Putin did not have an alternative, he had not yet seen an alternative, and still believed that the United States as a whole was on the right course. When, [00:36:00] once in 2007, I think, in the summer, I ask him, “It is clear that we are trying somehow carefully to restrain the United States, but what about NATO?” He says, “And where else to join? Of course we will join NATO. Well, not now—later, on some other terms, under a different administration.” Well, at that time he still held this—that is, before the crisis, the financial crisis, which, of course, from the Kremlin's point of view, showed that, so to speak—as Buffett said then, “The tide has come, and we will now see who swam without swimming trunks.” Here, America was without swimming trunks. And here already, a lot began to change within the country, and after the Georgian war, of course, and so on.



That is, of course, I think that Putin understood that Bush is actually a weak president. He acts boldly, but does not control his actions and cannot be responsible for them, and he somehow lost interest in him. And then there was the Georgian war, some American cruiser or destroyer appeared under the windows [00:38:00] of the presidential dacha.

GREK: Let's move smoothly to the following events: did the technical transition from Putin to Medvedev mean changes in Russian-American relations? That is, this transition, did it mean a change in foreign policy—that is, that Medvedev has *carte blanche* and will act as an independent president?

PAVLOVSKY: He did. This was the last attempt to return, so to speak, to the possibilities or fantasies, I don't know, of 2001. In fact, immediately after his inauguration, Medvedev came up with the idea of a Euro-Atlantic security space. Let me remind you that the very concept of "Euro-Atlantic" in Russia was taboo, it was absolutely unusual. But he didn't even get an answer.

Now, this was the last attempt, yes, and from Putin's side too. Of course, they made this, at least, attempt together. Well, after the financial crisis, other things had already begun there: the Georgian war showed the need for urgent military reform—and it was launched by Medvedev and Serdyukov. The financial crisis showed the need to adjust the structure of the economy, and Putin was already doing this, with Kudrin, [00:40:00] it seems.

GREK: Why did the Georgian war take place from the Kremlin's point of view?



PAVLOVSKY: Well, what is the Kremlin's point of view? We knew that Saakashvili was preparing a strike on Ossetia—he was preparing a strike either on Abkhazia, or on Ossetia—it was clear since spring. And he hesitated there. At first they expected a strike in Abkhazia in May, if I am not mistaken, 2007. For obvious political reasons, he needed a small victory. And then we did not need a war at all, it was outside the plans, both for Medvedev and for Putin.

So here, well, especially—well, since it was approaching, we underestimated, so to speak, I think, the likelihood of such an external war, because for a very long time there was nothing like that. It was really unexpected. And both Medvedev and Putin spent a whole day hesitating about this. And I think that if Putin had been president, then most likely he would have left Ossetia, almost certainly. But Medvedev could not, because he was a newcomer president—he had to be tough. We were simply horrified. Moscow was buzzing with indignation that we were not moving. [00:42:00] So, while Putin, as always in such cases, remained ambiguous—"You are the president, my friend, decide"—he was at that time, I think, somewhere in Beijing, I think it was easier for him [Medvedev] to just do it..

GREK: Why would Putin have left Ossetia?

PAVLOVSKY: Because look at the previous wars—he did not fight. He did not fight outside Russia. He even—there was even an offer from him, I think, in 2000, an offer to the Chechens: if they conclude a verifiable agreement that there will be no attacks on



Russia and allies from the territory of Chechnya, then the war can be stopped. That was his announcement—it was in the fall, I think, 2000, 2001, I don't remember.

No, he, I think, was not yet psychologically ready to fight. He is a cautious person. And, well, the war was Medvedev's initiative. After that it became, as it were, I don't know—it became toxic to the West. [00:44:00]

GREK: One of our interviewees said that the Kremlin was confident that McCain would win and was expecting McCain. Do you agree with this statement?

PAVLOVSKY: No, there was no such bet, of course. There was no such bet, but indeed, Obama's victory seemed less likely, and this was also discussed among serious experts who were there. There was an idea similar, by the way, to what happened in '16: that, when a voter is left alone against the machine, he will not still vote for the half-breed Obama. There were American experts who also told us this. Yes, McCain's victory seemed more likely—that's a fact. Well, I was already gone. But in general it seemed, indeed, more probable. To me, it didn't—because the financial crisis had already lurched forward so much that it seemed to me that the Republicans could no longer live in the White House.

GREK: And was there some tendency for the Kremlin, for example, to be always more comfortable with Republicans?

PAVLOVSKY: And this is such a phantom, it's hard to understand. I heard these conversations back in Soviet times, but—[00:46:00] because the Democrats, so to speak, were inertial internationalists. And the Kremlin did not like internationalists.



We ourselves are internationalists, we do not need others. And later, this is more likely a kind of impression of remembering the rosy years of detente with Nixon and Ford, as of a piece.

Now, one cannot say that Reagan was such a favorite of the Kremlin. That is, it did not play any important role. Yes, in the Kremlin in general, within the framework of American dogma, there were some symptoms, so traumatic, that yes, it's probably better to come to an agreement with one person—the president. They generally have high expectations from a private understanding, a personal understanding. Usually, the Republicans played such a role—the Republicans had strong presidents, but that's it. It's unclear what it's all about, to be honest, based on some kind of—these are more expert tales.

GREK: Yes, and about the role of the personality of a strong president, we come to the last question. [00:48:00] Are there fundamental principles, institutions, or counterinterests in U.S.-Russian relations that prevent the emergence of friendship, even with personal contact between leaders?

PAVLOVSKY: I think that the basis of these difficulties is the absence of real relations at the same time on the economic, on the human and on the political level. We are too far away. We have nothing to share except stolen secrets. Therefore, I am ready to assert that there is not one person in Russia, not one—not only the leaders of the Kremlin—not a single person has ever understood American politics, even at the state level. Even at the state level. They understood Chinese policy to a greater



extent than American policy. American policy is a dark forest—it is too complicated for us to understand.

Well, there are reciprocal structures of misunderstanding on the part of the United States. There is a well-known statement to everyone—however, I don't remember which American [00:50:00], it was not the president, of course—it was the American ambassador to Tsar Nicholas I, the most reactionary, one might say. And after shaking [Nicholas I's] hand, he said, "That was a strong democratic handshake." Now, this is very similar to Bush's eye contact—a strong democratic handshake.

America is not understood in Russia, and I think there is even no school of study—the study of local American politics, for example. That is what American populism is, not modern, but everlasting, so to speak. We also have—Tocqueville, I think, was only translated in the 1990s. That's why there have always been—all support for politics was built around relationships with the American president. Previously, there has almost never been anyone below him. Even these spies are Soviet—they were not asked for information about the structure of, so to speak, American political departments. From the British it was requested, we were interested in the British, but in the Americans—no. It seemed that there was an idea that here there is this elected monarch, and with him everything could be agreed upon. I think that, of course, the ambiguous Nixon-Kissinger policy [00:52:00]



played a role here, which also turned out to be disadvantageous for the Union in the end.

And so you can endlessly enumerate, endlessly. The Soviet Union really had an international policy, had international interests, and they, of course, clashed with the American ones. But Russia, in fact, has no international policy and no international interests, which he [Putin] does not want to admit. Therefore, when you have phantom goals, phantom interests, then they will constantly clash with something, and you will ascribe some significance to this. But, as I said, there is a profound difference between the structures of administration—Russia is not a government, it must be understood, in Russia a government has not been built, in Russia a rational bureaucracy, even an authoritarian one, has not been built, and therefore you will not find a connection.

GREK: Do you mean that Russia is ruled by one person?

PAVLOVSKY: No, Russia is not ruled by a person. The person is a frontman. He is, as it were, used as a blind, if you like, in order to deflect the questions: “Who did this?” “Well, Putin did it.” Well, Stalin also complained about this, saying that “They make facsimiles of me,” and Putin, definitely, is a facsimile.

Therefore, there is a huge problem here, because the new order arrived as a team of winners in the elections of 2000. And, in fact, [00:54:00] the first—the entire first presidential term, the Kremlin was just the same electoral headquarters, and this added to Putin's inability to build a management system—he can't stand any



ordered systems, this annoys him, in particular because he himself, of course, is an anarcho-nihilist. He values his freedom so much that any strict management scheme for him looks like an encroachment on his freedom. Why do you think he always complains about the policy of restraint? Is it how much I tried to wean him off it? No, because he sees in it an encroachment on internal freedom. He is an unusual person, no doubt, but that doesn't make it any easier.

Therefore, in the end, it turns out that here, on the one hand, there is such a strange, so to speak loose—in fact, a certain organization of power without institutions, which all the time—there is hence some flexibility, it can—it does not feel blows often, including the blows of a crisis. It does not care about crises, because it turns a crisis into just another reason for radical action, for escalation, for example. But, on the other hand, it cannot offer anything organized. Now Putin was on his way to a meeting with Biden, and, it would seem, this is a reason to formulate a [00:56:00] list of policy interests—no, this is not, it's some rather random wishes.

This is a big problem. So, well, and, of course, there are problems in America itself. Not being an expert on America, I will not describe them, but, of course, America has also for a long time been in a crisis of some kind of transformation, which must somehow be resolved but hasn't been resolved yet. And, of course, in such a situation, this is a bad time to build a lasting relationship.

GREK: Thank you very much.