

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Alexei Venediktov

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[Begin Transcription]

GREK: Alexei Alekseevich, when George W. Bush became president in January 2001, what was your job, and how did you come to that position?

VENEDIKTOV: When George W. Bush became president, I was already the editor-in-chief [of *Echo of Moscow*]. I was elected in [19]98, earlier than Mr. Bush, after all. And at that very time, Vladimir Putin became the president, the young president. Actually, I was doing the same work that I am doing now. A few months before Bush came in, President Clinton, the incumbent, was here. I interviewed him right here. And then—it was June 2000—I asked him what he thinks about who will replace him. And he said that he cannot tell me this, but he is thinking about it. That was the answer—not on the air, but when we were by then drinking tea.

GREK: How did you feel about Vladimir Putin when he came to power, and what were your expectations about how he was going to shape Russia's foreign policy toward America?

VENEDIKTOV: I knew little of Mr. Putin before that time, well, as a major governmental actor. I knew him as a fairly minor official, first in St. Petersburg, and then in the presidential administration, so, naturally, I never thought about the fact that he could become president. But based on the conversations I had with the leadership of the administration then, it was clear to me that Vladimir Putin was imperial, and Vladimir Putin, at that time, imagined the need to conclude an alliance with Europe against America. He was an anti-Americanist, because we are all roughly the same

age—we were brought up during the Cold War. And based on the educational institutions in which he studied, it was obvious that America is his tribal enemy, a hereditary enemy. And this does not then change at the age of 48. Therefore, of course, I expected that there would be a cooling after the Yeltsin story, although the cooling had already begun after Yugoslavia, so there was nothing surprising in this.

GREK: In June 2001, Bush and Putin met for the first time in Slovenia. The media interpreted this in different ways: some believed that this was a positive defining moment, others said that the personal chemistry they had at the first meeting would not affect politics. How would you rate this meeting? How did your radio station cover this event, if you remember? And do you know about the reactions in the Putin administration to Bush?

VENEDIKTOV: So, we had a correspondent who flew to this meeting, naturally, in President Putin's [press] pool. Well, there was nothing unexpected, because this meeting was in the Balkans, or close to the Balkans, let's say, and the main thing was the question of Yugoslavia. So it was obvious that Putin, who, I repeat, is a hereditary anti-Americanist, nevertheless understood that the key is in the hands of the United States of America and the newly elected administration. Therefore, we covered, if I remember correctly, that Putin would try to agree on the settlement of this Balkan crisis, the Yugoslav crisis. Well, and, of course, ever since, the phrase, "I looked into his eyes," President Bush's phrase, in general is how the meme remains in the Russian political dictionary. And when we remember who looked into whose eyes,

everyone immediately remembers that it was President Bush who looked into the eyes, not Putin. And that means by that time Putin had a long-established peculiarity—I came across this with him directly just this year—he always took the form of an interlocutor, and it was quite obvious that he was trying to charm, recruit, convince President Bush that Russia will support America in its decisions, if, meaning, the conflict is ended and Russia gets its piece in the Balkans. Well, as a matter of fact, that's how it happened.

GREK: In the early days of the Bush administration, you said you expected his administration to be much more confrontational toward Russia. However, Putin and Bush soon met and, like Yeltsin and Clinton, seemed to have forged a close personal relationship. How would you compare the relationship between Yeltsin and Clinton with the interactions between Putin and Bush? How would you compare the impact of personal relations between the two presidents on the process of developing international relations?

VENEDIKTOV: Well, look, it's absolutely impossible to compare—they were obviously different pairs, different people. I just knew a few people from the Reagan administration, so I understood roughly how they relate to Russia (advisers who became ministers, secretaries of state). And in the end, as it turned out, it actually ended with the Munich speech, I would like to remind you. Yes, that's why I turned out to be right in the end. But I repeat, Putin is a man who can charm and take the form of an interlocutor, especially when it suits him, so it is obvious that for

President Bush—for him Yeltsin was nobody: “Who’s that?” He practically never communicated with him. And for him it was like a new Russian tsar. And it is clear that, for Bush, the interests of America were important, and not the interests of Russia or anything else there.

So, the Yeltsin-Clinton relationship—I watched them closely because I was in the President Yeltsin’s pool, and because Clinton was here. They were the same—they were people of the last century, they were just betting on the fact that personal relationships, and not interests, can influence something. For Putin, personal relationships are very important, but not in the Yeltsin-Clinton-type sense. In this sense, it is very important for Putin to be treated as an equal—for Yeltsin it was not necessary.

And the way Bush behaved in Slovenia, in particular—Putin was satisfied, and he maintained about Bush—even after the departure of President Bush from office—he maintained such very, I would say, good memories about him. And after he left, once, at a meeting with the editors-in-chief where I participated, at a closed meeting, Putin said that “Bush never deceived me. If he said ‘no’, then it was ‘no’. If he said, ‘I’ll think’, then it was ‘I’ll think’, not ‘no’. If he said ‘Yes’, it meant ‘yes’, even if his administration objected.”

So we asked him, just at the changeover, the departure of Bush—it was 2008. So, Putin also resigned from the presidency—I’ll just remind you, he became prime minister. There was a meeting—it was probably somewhere in April 2008. He said,

“Bush never deceived me.” No, it was April 2009. Bush had already left, so, keep in mind, when we spoke to him, the Georgian War had already passed, and he said, “Bush never deceived me!” So, that is, they had developed a kind of chemistry, but this is not political chemistry—Putin does not translate personal chemistry into political chemistry, he divides this and knows well: a good relationship, yes, but interests can be directly opposite. Yes, but at the same time, I repeat, he treated him—I cannot say with respect, with attention, that’s for sure. And he kept good memories. And by the way, when he called Bush on September 11 with an offer of help, it was not just an expression of condolence, it was an offer of help, a real offer of help: “What do you need?” He said—I do not know whether this conversation has been declassified or not already—in any case, he explained it to us in this way—“I will help you, what do you need?” This means that it was, of course, a political calculation, but it was also an impulse. I suppose that he would not have called Obama with this. He would have called, but not with this! [laughter]

GREK: In the early 2000s, your radio represented a liberal audience. Could you assess how your audience and journalists reacted to the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001? How was this news perceived by the liberal part of the population against the background of the advancement of democracy, the expansion of NATO and other reference points that were perceived sharply by the centrists?

VENEDIKTOV: Look, here I am, and many of my journalists, from that time and until now we continue to communicate with President Gorbachev, so we very carefully and attentively looked at the entire complex of the disarmament treaty, at the entire architecture. Well, we understood it because Gorbachev came here—he sat down in this chair and talked for a very long time about how the security system was built during the Reagan and [George H.W.] Bush period. And there were even cases when we were on air, afterwards he called me and said, "Lyosha, you do not understand anything about medium and short-range missiles, I will come and explain everything to you."

And we gathered a small group of our journalists here who were involved in defense and security, and he explained how the negotiations were going and what this means. That is, we had an expert who knew what he was talking about. Therefore, any violation of the balance—first, we, of course, in this sense could not oppose Gorbachev with any other perspective, yes. He believed and still believes that this is the beginning of the destruction of the general security architecture in the world. He was very proud and is —besides the fact that he gave freedom to the Soviet Union and so on, he was very proud of this architecture.

He very painfully perceived the withdrawal of the American administration from some of the treaties, and the withdrawal of Russia from the treaty on flank restrictions,¹ and the withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty. He was very worried

¹ Part of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.

and, since we communicate with him and had been communicating, and communicated very closely with him, we also understood what this means—we, of course, criticized it. It is from the point of view of destruction, a blow to the general security system—not a specific treaty, but the general security system of the structure that Gorbachev, Reagan and Bush built.

GREK: Did it somehow merge with the NATO agendas?

VENEDIKTOV: Of course, of course. In general, it should be recalled that *Echo of Moscow* came into being after Gorbachev's decree. And, in this case, we are Gorbachev's grandchildren and Yeltsin's children, well, in the sense of a free press. And there are not so many of us left in Russia. And so we understood that we were growing up at the moment when the world kind of—the Cold War ended, we appeared at that moment. And it seemed that cooperation was becoming possible, including in the field of security, including in the field of weapons.

And the destruction of this story, well, this is how it was: We perceived it as against the course of history, the reverse course of history. Well, yes, we talked about it carefully, discussed it, I naturally met with the defense ministers. As it was at the beginning of the destruction, of course, we also criticized our own government, it goes without saying, in terms of the destruction of the security system, as well as the U.S. government and any other government that destroyed the system. This is how journalists worked.

GREK: Some colleagues have suggested that it was exactly the withdrawal from this treaty that launched the process of building supersonic missiles, which were revealed in the form of animations in 2018.

VENEDIKTOV: Of course not. You need to understand the psychology of President Putin, his team. Yes, when I say President Putin, this is his team, these are people of the Cold War, these are people, I repeat, who are, "You are the Yumba-Zumba tribe, and we are the Zumba-Yumba tribe—we are hereditary enemies, yes, natural opponents, rivals, enemies," whatever. And so the arms race began, yes, under Putin, because his team sees it that way. And the Americans were engaged in supersonic systems, of course, even then. And our intelligence reported about this. And we were studying. Now it has accelerated, because the security system's process of disintegration has accelerated in general. See Afghanistan. Therefore, this is a natural history—it is natural for Russia, it is natural. The process of restoring the influence of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union is perceived by the current team of President Putin primarily as military parity. Since there can be no direct military parity, based on the budget—sorry. So, naturally, our military is looking for, so to speak, an asymmetrical answer.

Just recently, Mr. [Dmitry] Rogozin, the head of Roscosmos, visited me here last week, and he explained to me, "Look, NASA is not engaged in the militarization of space, and we are Roscosmos, a military department." Here is your answer. One phrase which solves many things. And it started, well, yes, in 2000, 2001.

GREK: Less than three months after the first meeting in Slovenia, September 11 took place.

What was the reaction of the Russians? How did 9/11 change attitudes in your opinion?

VENEDIKTOV: Well, look, if we are talking about the audience of *Echo of Moscow*—my audience is an educated urban audience, after all—yes, these are people who make decisions. As you can see, there is half a kilometer to the White House, and half a kilometer to the Kremlin. And that's not completely pointless.

Here, of course, there was great sympathy at first. It's different in the provinces: I'll remind you that [there], America is a hereditary enemy, got what it deserved. This was also the case, but then the elite—it was still the Yeltsin elite; it was still the elite that went through cooperation with the United States of America, and then Putin offered help. I'll remind you once again that he offered to help. Let me remind you that, when the coalition entered Afghanistan, in Russia, despite the resistance of the military, Putin created a jump base in Ulyanovsk, a transshipment base for American troops, for American cargo, although the Russian Security Council objected, but Putin, yes, created this base, then, by his own decision. And he advised all the Central Asian republics, the former republics of the Soviet Union, to provide all kinds of assistance. Yes, that is, this legacy—cooperation—it continued. But it all ended with the Munich speech in [20]07. And this was expected.

GREK: The next important event was the color revolutions—Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan.

What do you think of these revolutions? How and why did they happen? And how, in your opinion, did the Kremlin take it?

VENEDIKTOV: Well, you put it like this—what I think, and what the Kremlin thinks. I'm not Putin's press secretary. Well, we really talked about it a few times. As far as I understand, Putin is absolutely sure that color revolutions are the work of our “Western colleagues,” as he says—in fact, the American administration, any, Republican or Democratic, no matter which, any. And he says this with full confidence, cites figures, intelligence reports that, yes, the American embassies there fed the opposition.

And when I told him that, at the time of the Egyptian revolution, Obama had conflicts with his own circle, because his own circle, the military, wanted to support [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak, especially the military, like a pillar. Obama said: “The will of the people is higher than our current interests. We will support the people,” and the military was dissatisfied. Putin was very surprised, in fact. Yes, he was very surprised at this. Now this is already in Obama's books, thank God—I didn't come up with it—it's there in the memoirs.

So, that is why his [Putin's] view and the Kremlin's view is that this does not happen by itself, that it is generated, supported, pushed, sponsored, organized, primarily by the American administration, around the world. And since this is happening in the zones that Russia and the current Putin team have always

considered their zone of influence—these are the former republics of the Soviet Union, first of all—not only Arabian, but Georgia, Ukraine, first of all, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia. Here, then, these are hostile actions. Accordingly, he transfers this to domestic politics, to prevent this color revolution here. And based on all the conversations, it is clear that all of the embassies work with everyone. He says, “No, no, without the support of the American embassy, these revolutions would not have happened,” that's all, period, and it's pointless to talk about it, he is sure of it. He cannot be persuaded. It is impossible to convince him.

GREK: Does your audience have different views or the same views?

VENEDIKTOV: Our audience is very diverse, I repeat, it is urban educated, and the people making the decisions, the decision makers. President Putin is among our audience as far as I know, and his team, so they adhere to different views. But nevertheless, since our audience is always skeptical about any government—Gorbachev, Yeltsin, Medvedev, Putin—they always look for weak points in the argumentation of authorities, so if Putin says "A," our audience says "B." And vice versa.

GREK: In May 2005, during a trip to mark Victory Day in Moscow, President Bush met with representatives of NGOs and human rights activists. How did the majority of Russians perceive this meeting—that is, what was the general opinion about it? And from your point of view, was such a gesture constructive for U.S.-Russian relations?

VENEDIKTOV: Well, the majority of Russians did not notice it. And they do not know these NGOs with whom President Bush met—it is not very interesting for them, except for Putin, yes, except for the president.

No, it was a destructive meeting from the Kremlin's point of view, because who is the NGO? What's this? There is a president elected by the people, there is a parliament elected by the people, there are students at MGU [Moscow State University] or at MGIMO [Moscow State Institute of International Relations], there are cadets there—this is understandable. And who is this? These are people who, as a rule, criticize the authorities and struggle with the authorities. This is not even a parliamentary position, it is just criticism from the Putin's point of view—often with foreign money, as we can see from the latest laws. Therefore, at that time it was not yet perceived very painfully. Now it is perceived more painfully, but nevertheless, I know for sure that when the visit was planned, Russian negotiators, advisers spoke with advisers to President Bush that this was not an essential point of his visit to Moscow. Well, accordingly, President Bush insisted on this, or his advisers. But this, of course, did not warm the relationship further.

GREK: Finally, the Munich speech! President Putin delivered the famous Munich Security Speech in 2007, in which he criticized the United States as a destabilizing power that defies the basic principles of international law. The American colleagues whom we interviewed were, among other things, surprised by this turn of Russian rhetoric—the Bush administration acknowledged the Kremlin's disagreement with

the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, the invasion of Iraq, the expansion of NATO, but at the same time, American officials still believe that President Putin does not understand the true reason for these steps and believe that the differences could either be indirectly resolved or could be negotiated. How did you react to the performance in Munich? What do you think Putin was trying to do at this moment? Do you agree with your colleagues' assertion that the differences were not significant enough to react to them? And in principle, how would you rate the popularity of this performance in Russia?

VENEDIKTOV: Many questions. Let's start from the beginning—what was it? I was in Munich for the meeting, I was accredited for the Munich meeting. Then I had dinner with the Russian delegation, with the exception of Putin, yes, with all those who composed [it]. And we came to the conclusion, saying what it was, but few even from the delegation knew that it would be such a speech with such rhetoric. That is, they knew that there would be a confrontational speech, but the members of the delegation did not really know about the level of rhetoric. And we came to the conclusion that it was the honest, real Putin. Now I will explain what's the matter: When Putin came to power, behind him there was such a trail of relationships with the United States, with Clinton and so on, the Yeltsin trace, and his entire first term, until 2004. Well, it was multiplied by the Yukos affair and the resignation of the [Prime Minister Mikhail] Kasyanov government. Nevertheless, his entire term was such a skid mark of Yeltsin's policy, a brake. That is, this is something that was not

peculiar to him, his team. It was uncomfortable for him, it did not reflect his views, he believed that Yeltsin had conceded to the Americans step by step: Europe, the republics of the Soviet Union, the "southern underbelly" and so on.

Here is Putin in Munich in 2007—this is, in fact, the real Putin of 2007. This is how he was thinking without the Yeltsin legacy, as he was already seeing it. This is not my conclusion—these are just those people who, the ministers who were in the delegation, who were with Putin all three, four, five years—when [did] we have [Foreign Minister Sergey] Lavrov? Since 2004? Since 2004, yes. This means [Defense Minister Sergey] Ivanov, Lavrov, yes. This is the real Putin. This is how he thinks and as his team thinks.

That is, it was a sincere and honest speech—this is the first thing to understand. And if your American interlocutors say that Putin does not understand the depth of the disagreements—no, he understands in his own way. It is wrong [to say that] he does not understand correctly—he understands in his own way, he understands in a different way. And if you treat this speech as an honest speech, then you understand what kind of picture of the world he has before his eyes, and then everything that happened later, has happened 14 years afterward, everything becomes clear. Take and re-read the Munich speech now, it's all there for you. Nothing new. Since 2007, this is the foundation of Putin's foreign policy toward the United States of America, which has remained unchanged to this day, regardless of

which administrations are in power. I am not talking about trifles there. This is his look: honest, unclouded, transparent, crystal, whatever you like. This is Munich.

In Russia, this was greeted with enthusiasm, because most of the population, I repeat, is used to living in a cold war confrontation, and in general it is necessary to assert oneself not at the expense of some small country, but at the expense of a great country, yes. Who is your opponent? You measure yourself against the enemy. And, finally, we have a real enemy! Not some kind of Estonia, excuse me, or Georgia, yes, or Poland—now that's what I understand!

And continuing this thought, when the Ukrainian events began, I talked about it with the president, and he said. "You don't understand! We are at war there with the [United] States, we are not at war with Ukraine. We are actually at war there with the Americans, with their influence," and so on, that is where the enemy is. And for the first time this was announced, although he thought about it before. I repeat, yes, he was a hostage of Yeltsin's policy, a hostage in his understanding; after two terms he got rid of it. And here he is, the real Putin, who also continues to exist today. Therefore, the mistake of the American colleagues whom you are interviewing is that he misunderstands something there—no, he understands differently.

GREK: Did the transition of the presidency from Putin to Medvedev have any significant impact on Russian-American relations?

VENEDIKTOV: Look, Medvedev simply has a different view. Here is a definition that I worked out in a conversation with colleagues around Putin—Putin is a Brezhnev officer, and Medvedev is a Gorbachev lawyer. Do you understand? This is a different vision of the world, it's just a different generation, a different education, a different experience, right?

And, of course, Medvedev saw it differently. And this is one of the reasons that he was only one term. Because, for example—and this has already become public, in my opinion, even if it has not become public, there is nothing secret: the story about Libya, about the fact that Russia did not veto the resolution on Libya at the Security Council, which was chaired by Medvedev.

Putin objected to him and said that, “We must not let this resolution on Libya pass,” to which Medvedev said, “Obama called me and promised that it will not pass.”

“You will be deceived,” said Putin.

And when the decision was made on Putin’s return, this was one of the arguments: “The Americans deceived you [Medvedev], you turned out to be naive, you ended up in Yeltsin’s policy, you began to cede my legacy that I left you, which cost eight years to build, and you began to give-give-give, so I must return. No offense, yes, I must return and readjust this wall, which was broken because you did not attach any importance to this.”

Of course, Medvedev had a different story, and so far Medvedev—when did we last talk? A year ago, probably—he is very proud of New START—the last treaty—he believes that this is his legacy, well, it’s a good treaty, and Putin also insisted that it be extended. By the way, about all sorts of hypersonic, hypersonic, hypersonic [weapons]—he [Putin] wanted New START, which he also criticized. And he was extremely happy when [U.S. National Security Advisor Jake] Sullivan called our ambassador, [Anatoly] Antonov, right on the third day after the [2021] inauguration and said. "So, we are extending it, exchanging notes, good?" "Good, good, good."

You see, it was like that. That is, Medvedev is proud of this, yes, and, of course, he was more inclined toward cooperation—he saw the modern world differently. We will not say who is more right, because everyone has their own truth. For Russia, in any case, the fact that he built it is true, and that this was one of the reasons why he could not go for a second term, because this policy was unacceptable for Putin’s policy and the majority of his team, the Putin-Medvedev team—this is a fact.

Therefore, yes, Medvedev is a different story. Medvedev found contacts with the Obama administration, and I will remind you that this is after Georgia—this is a difficult story, yes. Who is Obama? Everyone was betting on [Senator John] McCain. In fact, I remember that even during the war with Georgia, I was literally told directly, “The next president is McCain,” and so on, and so on. Obama—Where

is he? Who is this? And Medvedev managed to establish some kind of contact and find common points. The New START treaty showed it. I won't talk about anything else, but the New START treaty showed it. Of course, this was a different policy—precisely because it was a different policy toward America, he lost his seat as president. He lost his candidacy, I would even say, for the presidency and was sent back to prime minister, and then in general—.

GREK: Just the same, Medvedev has largely been remembered in the States during the Georgian campaign, when Russia appeared in the media space and so on. How, in your opinion, and why did the conflict in Georgia take place? And how would you rate the way U.S. and Russian officials handled the crisis—well, relatively handled it?

VENEDIKTOV: Well, the crisis continues. Look, look, there is one very important story—Putin's idea was and is, and consists of—quite recently, in March or April of this year, we said: he still believes that it is necessary to come to an agreement with the Americans, with the Chinese, with the European Union and return to the Yalta-Potsdam peace.

What does his idea consist of now, if I understand correctly? It is clear that this is not a territorial division, yes: “Let us all take part of the world under responsibility,” he said to Obama, back in Syria. He said to Obama. “Responsibility: I am responsible for all the former republics of the Soviet Union, except for the Baltic states—well, God bless them, a long cut-off morsel. There will be no drugs or

terrorism from there—that is, there will be no threats from there. I'm responsible for this. Give it to me, don't go there. I am responsible for this. Let China take Southeast Africa, Asia, you take whatever you want with Europe.” Well, that was his idea.

I just told him then that Reagan said that “Yalta—never again.” He [Putin] said, “Where? I haven’t read that,” but [that’s how] it was. And his idea, as before, is not that it is necessary to seize part of the world, but that there should be areas of responsibility—this is what he told Obama, I know this—it was in New York during a session where they met. I was there too and met [Putin] right away, then I was at his press conference and then met with members of our delegation, that is, I briefed on what the point was. And the essence is exactly this—let's also be responsible for Syria together.

Then there was a question for Russia, and then he said the famous phrase, “Remember that we were able to make an anti-Hitler coalition then and later divide the areas of responsibility, let's repeat it”—that's what he said to Obama. And this is what he said more politely from the rostrum of the United Nations. Find this speech—he dictated this speech in the car. Why was he late? He was driving in the car. Why wasn't the speech on the teleprompter? Because he dictated it right in the car, he entered the hall and read from the sheet, he didn't give it to the teleprompter, it was all in these same handwritten stories, and there he introduced this story with

the anti-Hitler coalition. It was not laid down, it was handwritten, meaning his vision, it is the vision right now.

Now, let's get back to Georgia. If we proceed from what I said, it's true: Georgia is part of the legacy of the Soviet Union, so there, like Ukraine later, others got in there, from his point of view (see the color revolutions), Americans, Europeans got in there—it doesn't matter who, but at least the Chinese, yes, "This is mine, this is my area of responsibility, you stepped on my foot." So they climbed, climbed, climbed, and then, as you know, there are territories, conflict territories, frozen conflicts—in Ossetia, people with Russian passports, which were handed out in Putin's first term, that is, 2002-03. There Russian citizens [said] "Where did you climb, where did you push?"

He is still convinced that [U.S. Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice pushed [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili to attack—well, didn't stop him. He [Saakashvili] said so, clarifying, "We asked, we asked." And, of course, when there was already an armed conflict, and he [Putin] was in China with President Bush. We do not know—that is, we know in different ways what they talked about there, but, of course, the decision was made with his participation, [his] shadow over Tbilisi. It was not his decision—it was a joint decision, including Medvedev's, but this was with his participation, of course.

This is simply, mentally, our territory, this is the Russian Empire, this is what he says all the time—the Russian Empire, but not as a state, it is like a zone of

responsibility. Whoever got in, we defend everything—this is ours, we defend our border like this. Try to get in now if the Taliban go to Uzbekistan—this is our territory, in the sense of our mental territory, this is his vision. His vision, in contrast to, perhaps, the Reagan administration—I don't know about Bush—it's territorial. There were borders—here there were pillars, and here is a step, like in a long jump, the step does not count, and there—it counts. This is what happened in Georgia—you entered our territory.

And they called and told me several times: Condoleezza Rice, it was her. This was all told to me by the French surrounding [President Nicolas] Sarkozy, who flew here and tried to do something there and shuttled, like [Henry] Kissinger in his time—he imagined himself to be Kissinger. They told me that this is territory, this border, this step, as they say in sports—you can't! That's it, no attempt! This is the story, this is his vision, this reflects his vision. And Ukraine is just a repetition of the mold from Georgia, this is the step: "Where did you get in?" That's the story. That is, if we take the color revolutions plus the former borders of the Russian Empire plus the former borders of the Soviet Union—"Guys, no, we won't let you in. The Baltics? Fuck you! Everything else—Belarus, Ukraine, Karabakh, Central Asia—"Sorry, no offense." This is his vision, he declares it everywhere. He declared it at a meeting with Obama, when Obama came here—he was prime minister, and it was Putin's 45-minute exposition, Obama sat for 45 minutes and listened. You could talk to [National Security Council Senior Director for Russian and Eurasian Affairs

Michael] McFaul—he was there, and who else was there? [U.S. Ambassador Bill] Burns was there—the current director of the CIA. He [Putin] expounded on this for 45 minutes. Actually, I know this from Lavrov and from McFaul, so it's true. Two opposing sources—it's true!

GREK: Well, to stay somewhat chronological in this period and return to the previous statement about McCain: What do you think, would the Republicans would have been more comfortable for the Kremlin?

VENEDIKTOV: Look, he respected McCain very much. I had several—well, at least two—conversations with Putin about McCain. I also knew and met McCain, so I told him, and he told me how McCain behaved in captivity, and I learned from him—from Putin—that when McCain was tortured—can you imagine, he called the pilots of his squadron there, and, it turns out, there were members of the baseball team, his school team, family. And [Putin] says, "How would you and I behave if the Vietnamese tortured us?" You see to what extent Putin—well, he rarely spoke so respectfully about people, yes.

And I think that, of course, with McCain—I cannot say with the Republicans, I don't see the whole picture—but with McCain he would have been comfortable. He understood him, he understood that a person with such views—here it is so, and here it is not. I think he would have behaved with him as with Bush—"He never lied to me." This could have been the story here. I think he wanted McCain. True,

when Obama won—“Who is this?” A weak one has arrived, well, it’s not clear. Of course, he is weak, so we will force him! And they did...

GREK: And what do you think, cumulatively, if we take the entire period of relations between the two administrations: Did the Bush administration manage to read Putin as a person, as a political leader? Do you think the Kremlin understood or read Bush?

VENEDIKTOV: The Kremlin understood and read Bush exactly and manipulated this administration, because, if you take the Bush period of 2001-2008, yes, we see how Russia became stronger, we see how Russia took risks—the Georgian campaign, see for yourself, it was risky. We did not know what obligations the Bush administration had in relation to the Saakashvili administration, but also maybe we did, and vice versa, yes.

But the fact that Putin has not been read so far—wait, once again, I’ll explain that this is his vision. Yes, this is not because he misunderstood something—it is wrong to think so, he just had a different vision: you are from Mars, we are from Venus. We have a lot of water, you have no water, we have gills, but you have lungs. That’s all, it’s just a different way of talking. You just have to talk differently. It is impossible to convince in fundamental matters. Here are the fundamental matters—it is impossible to convince him. It will be possible to agree on [hyper]sonic missiles, it will be possible to agree on strategic offensive arms, and I have no doubt that it is possible to agree on the specific flow of tactical nuclear

missiles and non-nuclear missiles in Europe, and in fact it is impossible, but in terms of design it is possible. Well, as he sees it, it is simply impossible, it is pointless to blow hot air. It was possible with Brezhnev, yes, and it was possible with Clinton, but not with Putin.

And that's why I say that they did not read it. But because many people think, including in the administration—when I was last in the States, in 2016, it was still the Obama administration. I spoke with many there, I spoke with [then Deputy Secretary of State Anthony] Blinken then, yes—so everyone is sure that it is Putin who is so cunning. Yes, he is so cunning, but at the same time he has a basis from which he will never set foot. It is a) his own understanding and b) understanding that his people share basic things because they are hereditary enemies. Here is the story of hereditary enmity—you can put up with enemies, conclude a truce, even divide the spoils, do something together, but these are still enemies—originally enemies. Now, if you do not understand that he relies on his own views and on the opinion of the majority of the people, then, well, you don't understand anything. And to understand that here tactically it is possible to build a security system, to limit armaments—everything is possible, but on Central Asia, on the Caucasus, on Ukraine, there will be nothing, no concessions will be made. Because I [Putin] see it that way. And not only does your administration not understand this, neither [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel nor [French President Emmanuel] Macron

understands this, well, Normandy Format²—I mean, nor [former French President Francois] Hollande—they simply do not understand.

It's just about something else—for him it is not a tactic, for him it is the basis. I could not explain this to a single American ambassador, except for [Alexander] Vershbow. Because when Vershbow asked me, “How do I explain the relationship between Putin and Medvedev to my President Bush? He does not understand.” “Alexey, can you somehow explain? I don’t know how you can explain something to Texans.” I said, “Well, here, you can say Putin is Batman, and Medvedev is Robin.” And Vershbow wrote it in a telegram, which got leaked on WikiLeaks, and although my name was crossed out, redacted, nevertheless, this telegram was read here. First, I was informed that Medvedev was dissatisfied with me because of this, and second, at a meeting with Putin, the prime minister, he said, “Listen, I know that you wrote this, I had to watch three movies to understand what you meant.” Batman [and] Robin! Well, how to explain the relationship to an American—Batman and Robin! I still think so, you know? This story is exactly about that. Because how do you explain to President Bush who it is? Here! This is the actual story! That’s why I still don’t like [Wikileaks founder Julian] Assange. [crosstalk]

But here it was obvious, quite obvious that I got to the point, because both presidents, Putin and Medvedev, reacted enough to this: one, cheerfully (Putin); and the other, nervously (Medvedev). So I got it. But this is the essence. I am very grateful

² France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine created the so-called Normandy Format on the sidelines of the 70th anniversary of D-Day celebration in 2014 to try to resolve the crisis in Donbas and Crimea.

to Ambassador Vershbow because this is what he conveyed, and I realized that President Bush, he does not understand. How can it be understood? And everything was clear here. Everything was clear here—the heir, the son, everything was clear, no one had any doubts, yes, that this was normal, he handed over the throne to Medvedev.

GREK: Speaking of different languages—one of the most fundamental problems in bilateral relations—you covered it very well. Perhaps there are still fundamental principles or interests that did not allow the achievement of friendly relations even under the influence of some personal contact by the leaders?

VENEDIKTOV: Look, the president has it. I am not ready to talk about Bush, or, accordingly, I don't know Biden, I don't know Trump either, but Putin considers everything not from the plus, but from the minus, in international relations. That is, he considers threats, he does not consider acquisitions, but the response to threats. This has been going on since the 90s, yes, when surrounded by threats, threats grow, threats change, alliances must be sought.

Actually, his proposal on Syria—yes, Putin grew up on the threat of Islamic terrorism, and he perfectly understood that, being scattered, defeated, by civil wars, first of all, by the American intervention, the Middle East is giving rise to a huge number of people who are trying to punish or return by terror, and so on. He understood that. And now, when he is offered to do something by means of some kind of acquisitions, this is secondary for him.

Here, this is also true—there is the story with this base in Ulyanovsk. I knew it very well, followed it, because then I closely communicated with the Minister of Defense, with Mr. [Anatoly] Serdyukov, he also briefed me and told me that, well, I really need to understand the essence, and not just write some notes somewhere or speak on the radio. And he explained to me as a military man—though Serdyukov did not come up as a military man—yes, they were against letting the Americans into this base—even within Putin's party, within Putin's team, in the Security Council, [Nikolai] Patrushev and so on were against it. But Putin told them all, “Look, the Taliban are a threat to us. Where are these Americans? Across the ocean, well, terrorists will fly in, they will blow up St. Patrick's Cathedral, yes, they still have many cathedrals, and we have them here, the Volga region. Here it is, they are building here. These same Wahhabis, they are building churches, mosques, so they are allowed to open the base because they will do our dirty work for us, this is our common threat, that is the point. And when he and Bush started talking, the Balkans were a common threat, it's understandable why, yes, a drug transshipment point through Albania and so on. Therefore, they partially mitigated the problem in Yugoslavia, having closed their eyes they recognized there that someone recognized Kosovo, and someone did not—it did not matter anymore, this was history. Therefore, ignoring the fact that Putin is considering [things] from the negative, from threats, and not from the positive, from warnings—this, it seems to me, is another area with which he cannot come to an agreement with the American

administration. The administration, any American administration, thinks that it will be *given* this, and Putin thinks from what it will *protect* Russia. It seems to me that this is a very important thing.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]