U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Alexander Voloshin

Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation, 1999-2003

Interviewer:

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[**Begin Transcription**]

GREK: When George W. Bush became president in January 2001, what were you doing and how did you get to that position?

VOLOSHIN: At that time, I was the head of the Presidential Administration. I had the position for the last 10 months of Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin's presidency and then for about the first four years of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. This was my work before too—I was the deputy head of the Presidential Administration. And before that, I had been an aide to the head of the Presidential Administration for what was nevertheless a somewhat short time. Before that, I was in business.

GREK: Do you remember what expectations you had about Putin's foreign policy when it became clear he would become president? How did late Yeltsin and early Putin compare in their approach toward relations with the U.S.?

VOLOSHIN: You know, in response to these questions, I have one answer that is, on the one hand, rather general and, on the other, I suppose, utterly in line with reality. Every Russian president, every—well, we haven't had so many. The history of the Russian presidency isn't as long as in the United States. Nevertheless, every Russian president at the very beginning thinks that relations with the United States are bad and that they can be significantly improved. And that's the beginning of any Russian presidency. In the third, fourth, fifth year of his term—depending on how long someone is in office and depending on the intensity of relations—disappointment sets in. And what emerges, [00:02:00] unfortunately, is a conviction that relations are impossible

to improve because they don't consider us friends. They consider us neither friends nor equal partners, and a rather serious disappointment sets in. And that disappointment has a substantive basis, an emotional basis, a certain fatigue from all the wasted effort that basically went down the drain. Something like this.

So, it really doesn't matter what my expectations were about Russian-American relations when it came to Vladimir Putin being elected president. And honestly, the last thing I thought about in the context of the upcoming presidential election and Vladimir Putin being elected was Russian-American relations. Of course, like in any normal country, people think around that time more about domestic policy, more about what is happening in the country. And the situation we had in the country was more than difficult—the country was in a crisis, and the economic crisis that had followed the [19]98 default still had not passed, and we had a civil war in the Caucasus, in Chechnya. In short, we had more than enough on our plate.

Thus, like many others, when I thought, "And what will change when the new president arrives?" if I'm being honest, I thought less about Russian-American relations. I thought more about what would happen in Russia. And, of course, the emergence of Putin, a young, energetic new leader, not only I but also many other people—this was reflected in the election results. They expected him to solve many of the problems that had piled up. As far as Russian-American [00:04:00] relations go, I've told you. Every time there is an expectation of some kind of—as they later called it, "reset"—but it never

happens for whatever reason. I have a hypothesis that at some point, when the president in Russia will change, that new president will also try to improve Russian-American relations and in a few years will also be disappointed.

GREK: The first meeting between President Bush and President Putin took place in Slovenia in June 2001. Do you have any memories from that meeting? How important was it? Did it become an important milestone in relations?

VOLOSHIN: Honestly, I don't recall any particularly sharp impressions from that meeting. I wasn't present at the meeting. As the head of the administration, I certainly was actively involved in preparing for it back at home before it happened. I mean, it was the first such serious meeting of the new presidents. And naturally, as always, as I've already said, hopes had been pinned on it that steps toward an improvement in relations could be taken. But these were rather general thoughts. There weren't any major specific expectations about the meeting.

And in general, to be honest, interstate relations are a rather complex, inertial thing. Yes, meetings between leaders are important, but in general I never think that two people meet, shake hands, and now the world is different. That's a rather simplified journalistic, as a rule, interpretation of what happens. Usually, government policy in big countries is a rather inertial thing, and there's also such a thing as the countries' national interests, which also don't change overnight. Leaders try to defend these national interests. Therefore, for all [00:06:00] the fatefulness of these meetings, I, honestly, have never expected

some sort of major "wow" out of them. And that's entirely applicable to the meeting in Slovenia.

GREK: Had the White House sent any signals ahead of the meeting indicating that the Americans wanted good relations, anything that would indicate Bush would look into Putin's soul?

VOLOSHIN: Bush didn't let anyone know that he was going to look into Putin's soul. There were no signals. At least, I didn't sense any from where I stood. Interstate relations, they are so multi-layered, there are many lines of communication. Now, unfortunately, there are fewer; there's probably nothing good about that. But, generally speaking, there are quite a lot. On my line, there were no signals. It was clear that it's a new president. He has *carte blanche* to try new approaches. He isn't a hostage of previously made mistakes. I mean, these are the most general reflections. But I, at least, had not sensed specific signals.

GREK: One of the outcomes of the meeting was that Bush informed Putin about the intentions of the U.S. to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. What did they think in the Kremlin about this? Some interviewees have contended that it was the withdrawal of the U.S. from the agreement that became the motivation to develop a hypersonic weapon in Russia. Would you agree with this contention? How important was the issue of missile defense for the political component of U.S.-Russia relations?

VOLOSHIN: You know, absolutely, certainly, contractual agreements are a serious, legal basis for many things. It's also a certain system of guarantees, and a system that allows the sides to [00:08:00] understand the intentions of one

another, allows them to understand what limitations each is working within, what each has the right to do under the agreement, and what each doesn't have the right to do. All agreements are signed in specific conditions, but then the conditions around us shift. And the terms of the agreement might become more favorable or less favorable—in one area they become more favorable for one side, in another for the other side.

But in interstate relations, and in fact in our everyday lives, it isn't acceptable to withdraw from agreements so slap-dash. To compare it with something, maybe, closer to home, imagine today we closed a sales contract—someone is buying, someone is selling, and then tomorrow the price changes. But the actual deal has been closed. You have to follow it. And that's the logic. You closed it today based on today's prices with the information the sides had in their heads when the deal was closed. Yes, it might be unfavorable for you tomorrow, but it's considered dishonest to withdraw from the agreement lacking some force majeure events or some other circumstances.

So, of course, we never liked it when we saw how the Americans frivolously approached their international obligations, at least in this area, in terms of withdrawing from agreements. We always proceeded from the understanding that an agreement is actually an important thing. It truly has a strategic basis, you might like it today, not like it tomorrow, the situation could change another 10 times, but keeping to an agreement is a very important, fundamental thing. And when one of the sides behaves so frivolously—our American colleagues, unfortunately, following this also withdrew from many

other agreements—there's nothing good about this. It completely destroys trust in the world. What is the value of this agreement? Why sign the agreement if tomorrow you will run away from it so slap-dash? So, of course, this was something of a major [00:10:00] "disappointment" on our side, but from which we made some conclusions about the future too. There was nothing good about it. To say that this was some horrible nightmare—no, not a nightmare.

No doubt, to the second part of your question, whether this provided some impulse for considering new types of weapons: I think that, in a major country that worries about its security, the relevant people will always be thinking about that. Unfortunately, the world still works like this, and those people are right to do what they do. Was Bush so serious right there in 2001? Honestly, I don't remember. It didn't really register with me. I can't answer that question clearly.

GREK: Did you have an understanding why they decided to withdraw? Was there some explanation given at the time?

VOLOSHIN: No. Well, they explained to us and they explained to everyone that it was unfavorable for them. I mean, this is a rough explanation, but if you take a step back from the details—of course, there's a lot in the details—it was, "This has become unfavorable for us." Okay. Fine. This goes back to the idea that you concluded a contract—tomorrow it's better for someone, worse for someone, because the price in the market has changed, the circumstances have changed. If they withdraw from every agreement just because it becomes less favorable, this is very bad. The point about price is really about strategic cycles in the

world, and they are rather long. And you signed this agreement. Today it's more favorable for one side. Tomorrow the balance of power shifts, and it has become favorable for the other side, but the very preservation of the agreement as a pillar of international security is a very important thing.

On our side, we always took this very seriously. This is something of a tradition in Russian policy. We really approached this seriously and had a hard time imagining that we could come to the Americans and say, "Listen, we've kind of rethought things. The agreement became [00:12:00] kind of uninteresting for us, and we're withdrawing from it, and from that one too, and from that one we're also withdrawing." No. Of course, we had hoped that our partners would also take their signed agreements more seriously. We made some political conclusions for ourselves, no doubt.

GREK: Less than three months after the first meeting, September 11 happens. Do you remember how you found out about the attack? Did September 11 affect your policy line with regard to America, and did you draw parallels between the war in Chechnya and the beginning of the American war on terrorism?

VOLOSHIN: I remember it well because, of course, it was a terrible catastrophe. And those images from the States, they reached me when I was in Petersburg. I was there on a work trip. And I was just getting ready that evening to fly back to Moscow. And we were walking with my Petersburg colleagues, and we stopped at this news agency *Rosbalt*, which existed then and still does. It isn't the biggest but is relatively well-known. And walking by, we popped in. And there was a big wall panel, and the entire staff of the agency was standing around

with wide eyes, watching as they reported live from America. And my colleagues and I went up there, and at that moment, at first, we didn't even understand what was going on. It seemed like some disaster movie. And, of course, it was just horrible. Something like this could hardly have been imagined.

Still, I flew back to Moscow. In Moscow, we had all sorts of meetings, discussions. Of course, we were wildly sympathetic to the Americans. A huge number of absolutely innocent people had been killed. [00:14:00] What else could this have triggered besides sympathy and sorrow, I don't know, such kinds of normal human reactions? In the States, I read a lot that, for some reason, they were very surprised that Putin had been the first to phone Bush and express his regret. Here the time difference did its part, though for us it wasn't even any kind of political move. It was a completely human move in relation to a country with which we have, let's say, difficult but overall rather normal relations. A tragedy had happened, and we needed to express our sympathy, sorrow, with these people and say some normal human words, there was no politics in it at all. It was such a normal instinct, it was a normal human reaction to a misfortune that had happened to another.

From a political standpoint, when this all happened, it seemed to us—internally, we also discussed how the Americans would probably understand us better now, now that they had themselves encountered this virus. They had for a long time before not been able to understand what was happening in Russia, and here were the roots of the war in Chechnya, and international terrorism

took part in that war. But now they had experienced it firsthand. And it seemed to us at some point that the level of mutual understanding could increase, that they, having encountered the same evil as we had, would better understand us. We definitely had these thoughts. They hardly panned out at all.

GREK: Mikhail Zygar' writes that in 2001, despite promises from the U.S. that its base in Kyrgyzstan would be temporary, then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told you that [00:16:00] the Americans would need to keep this base forever. Is this interpretation right, and how did you interpret her statement?

VOLOSHIN: Honestly, overall, the situation you described is close to the truth. I don't remember a specific communication from Condoleezza Rice to me, but it's true that, during the active phase of the operation in Afghanistan, the Americans approached Kyrgyzstan with a request to place a forward support base there to more effectively carry out the operation. Of course, the Kyrgyz president phoned the Russian president, as we are close partners, and wanted to discuss how to respond to the request. He certainly received the reaction from Putin that of course we were not against this, as this was our joint battle against international terrorism, and that our American colleagues had in fact told us that this was necessary only during the active phase of operations in Afghanistan, nothing more. And thus we de facto supported the Americans in this sense, because without our decision I don't think that the Kyrgyz president would've made such a decision himself, given the rather close military, political, and other relations between our countries.

Later, in fact, with the passing of some months, our American colleagues somehow had become—we understood that there were no plans to close that base, and to our various questions they answered, "Well, we rethought it. We just thought things through, [00:18:00] and now we need it forever." Roughly speaking. I don't remember the details anymore. But the overall idea was such, no doubt. There was an unpleasant sense of having been deceived, of course, that they had taken advantage of you. They said one thing at first and then said another. The active phase of operations in Afghanistan concluded, but the appetite to stay there remained. In my recollection, I don't associate that with Condoleezza personally—I think that was a collective decision of our American colleagues. Maybe it was voiced by Condoleezza—honestly, I don't remember such details anymore. But in any case, this is in line with the reality, for sure.

GREK: In general, what kind of a relationship did you have with Condoleezza Rice? How often did you speak? How did your personal relationship develop, and did it affect the negotiating process?

VOLOSHIN: It was an entirely professional relationship. You know, at that time, despite—there was one big plus in our relationship, and that concerned not only my relationship with Condoleezza. It concerned the relationship between the two presidents, which naturally is more important. There was a certain sense of trust, even though we understood that we could have different points of view on different issues. We might fight with each other over some issues, we might come to terms on some, but we somehow trusted each other on certain

things. This probably wasn't the absolute trust that exists between close partners and allies, but there was an element of trust.

And there was a willingness to even demonstrate it somehow to each other. [00:20:00] To think: we learned about the beginning of the military operation in Afghanistan and Iraq ahead of time. Before, they phoned us, even Condoleezza could call, or President Bush would call Putin and say, "Roughly in 24 hours we'll launch the operation. We don't want you to learn about it from the newspapers. We're going to announce this and that. What will you say?" And we might've said, regarding Iraq, "We'll make a statement that it's a mistake, but let's stay in touch." That is to say, we had diametrically opposite positions, but still the Americans would phone us, and they could be absolutely confident in us that it wouldn't end up in the morning edition of *Pravda*, that we would not use it. That said, we are categorically against that war, but there are certain understandings about good-faith cooperation, about business communication. And the fact that we hold extremely different views on many events does not mean that we can't be honest in our professional relations. It was really like this, and this was valuable. I valued that in my relationship with Condi—the possibility to fight somewhat, and also the possibility to plainly say what you think. You might not necessarily agree with each other, but it's useful to know. We seemed to communicate quite openly, which is also important.

GREK: You've already mentioned Iraq. How did the Americans try to convince the Kremlin that Russia should support the invasion? Why did the Putin administration in the end find their arguments unconvincing? And mixed in is

your own big personal story—how you personally went to Washington to try to talk the Americans out of invading, when you met with everyone from Colin Powell to Rice and Cheney to Kissinger, [00:22:00] besides the fact that Bush reportedly sat in on your meetings with Rice in the White House. How would you characterize these meetings, the whole build-up to the Iraq campaign and the engagement of Russia? And is it true that Secretary of Commerce Don Evans offered financial incentives for Russia to support the invasion?

VOLOSHIN: That trip wasn't long before the actual beginning of hostilities. I had gone on assignment from the president, and we thought it a sin not to try another time to save our American partners from making a rather serious blunder. We absolutely sincerely believed that it was a mistake. We weren't the only ones who thought so. For example, our German and French partners held just about the same position.

We understood that the Americans were probably leaning toward launching an operation. We understood that, unfortunately, as often happens with American policy, this was a continuation of domestic policy. The trauma of September 11 was so strong, and the operation in Afghanistan so successful and so quick, that society demanded some sort of continuation. That is to say, something else needed to be done. Yet another answer to the wake-up call of September 11th needed to be found. There was some kind of public, domestic political demand for this in the States.

And the Americans, obviously, made a catastrophic blunder. They really had won in Afghanistan, where the Taliban themselves didn't believe they

could someday return [00:24:00] to power, and the people didn't believe either, and even normal life was beginning to emerge there, but they shifted their focus to Iraq, and in the end lost Afghanistan. Today we are seeing a continuation of events that have evolved within the logic of that blunder, when they let Afghanistan get away. On the whole, Iraq—unlike Afghanistan—had no particular connection to terrorism. Clearly, the dictator Saddam Hussein was there. Like many dictators, he was far from perfect on many parameters. No doubt, he violated human rights and was a tyrant, but the truth is that there were no weapons of mass destruction there. And that was later exposed, and it was a rather shameful page in the history of American foreign policy when the secretary of state of the United States waved this test tube from the podium [at the United Nations]. As it later turned out, this data had been falsified. And as a result of the subsequent invasion, it was proved that no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were uncovered. But nevertheless, they had thrown Iraq into confusion. On its ruins arose the Islamic State, which later metastasized to neighboring countries. Overall, that blunder had quite catastrophic consequences of global significance. And this is obviously serious.

And back then there was hope that, by trying one last time to exchange arguments, maybe we could convince the Americans that this was a mistake, and there was no sense in it. Moreover, that whole region [00:26:00] is rather close to us, after all, and far from the Americans, on the other side of the planet, but it's directly in our line of sight—in the figurative sense, for sure. At

the very least, there were refugees, besides everything else. It's all right if it's next to us.

How did the Americans try to reassure us? It was a little naïve. But they tried—first, our American colleagues' logic was to show that we had the same enemies. I remember, I flew into Washington in the morning. It was, I think, Sunday evening and I was with our ambassador at the time—Yuri Ushakov, now an aide to the president on foreign policy—and we went to grab something to eat and have a beer at some diner somewhere close to the embassy, and he says, "Something's up, you know, the Americans are trying to change our schedule at the last minute and are inviting us to meet with the CIA in the morning." There was to be [George] Tenet, then-head of the CIA, some of his deputies, and so on. We were to meet in the administrative building, in that big gray building located behind the White House, on the same site.[1] And Yuri says to me, "We shouldn't. What's all this about?" I say, "Come on, they're the hosts, I'm the guest. Maybe the CIA people want to tell us something interesting. What's so strange about it? So what, we'll have a sit-down with the CIA. Who don't you meet with in this life." So, we are going to meet with the CIA. He's trying to talk me out of it. I say, "Forget about it, come on. We'll meet and that'll be it. Then we'll stroll over to the White House." Then there was the meeting with Condoleezza and George Bush.

And there we were, sitting down on Monday morning to talk with the [00:28:00] CIA people. The main idea was, they showed us a presentation that

[1] The Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

some terrorist, who had gone to Chechnya a couple times—this had been documented—who was relatively well known, an infamous terrorist, had allegedly at some point spent time in Iraq after that, so we had common enemies. This was all not very convincing, a little underwhelming—millions of people go between countries and what? You could probably find some terrorist who had sometime been in Iraq. From that, it doesn't follow that Saddam Hussein supported this specific terrorist against Russia. It was a bit naïve, very oversimplified. But they had wanted to convince us that we have something like a common enemy.

Of course, they had no convincing arguments, unfortunately. Had there been convincing arguments, had they not lied from the UN podium with these test tubes with weapons of mass destruction—. So, this is how it went down. Our conversations were frank, returning to—they wanted to buy us off, there were some hints at that. It was rather funny how it looked, but we were definitely not in a bargaining position, trading the war in Iraq for three tons of bananas or something like that, I don't know. It was a kind of odd presentation like that. But some notes sounded like, "If you support us, or as long as you won't oppose us very vehemently, then there's a big potential for trade and economic relations between us. Why would we risk all that?" Some hints like that. Well, we weren't going to encourage this conversation, and it went away. It wasn't some major [00:30:00] part of the negotiations. No, we skimmed over it, so to speak.

GREK: After this, the UN Volcker Committee[2] alleged that you had taken bribes in the form of oil from Saddam Hussein. Later it came out that your signature had been forged. Who do you think tried to set you up? Why? And did you have to take additional steps to prove your innocence? Did this have consequences for [U.S.-Russian] relations?

VOLOSHIN: It was rather unpleasant. Out of the blue, I discovered my name there. It was either the published or it was the preliminary version of the Volcker investigation, when Volcker was still working at the UN. And there I am in a strange way—someone either phoned me, or sent it to me, I don't remember anymore. Out of the blue I hear my name is connected with this oil trading, Iraq and so on.

What's interesting is that I've never met with one person from Iraq in my life, ever. Somehow my life worked out in such a way that I've never been acquainted with a single Iraqi. Obviously, we have mutual relations with Iraq, through diplomatic agencies and other lines, of course, there was probably some interaction under various cooperation frameworks. Personally, I was never involved in this. Of course, for me it was some complete "poltergeist"—I don't even know what. Plus, I had never been involved with trading any oil. You know, I was at the time the head of the Presidential Administration. I thought it was some rubbish, it had no relation to the truth, naturally I—from an image standpoint, it was a rather unpleasant thing, when you are basically accused of

[2] The UN Independent Inquiry Committee, headed by former U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, established in 2004 to investigate corruption in the Oil-for-Food Programme in Iraq.

some sort of corruption, moreover with an odious regime as it were, and indeed [00:32:00] corruption. In sum, it was not pleasant.

I knew that I had to somehow sort it out in any case because my kids were growing up. I don't want my kids to—I want my kids to understand that their father is an honest person, and I really am an honest person. I never took bribes and never traded oil, and didn't receive any quotas from Saddam Hussein. I had to seriously take this on. It was a rather unpleasant exercise. I got in touch with my friends at the American law firm Akin Gump. We had a talk about what could be done, and I signed a contract with them, and they started looking at this investigation. Then they hired all sorts of specialized organizations that themselves handle "investigations," as far as I know. I wasn't involved myself and worked through them—it was [the investigative firm] Kroll, I think. That's the first thing that happened.

The second thing that happened is that I wrote a letter to the Volcker Committee: "Hello, I am so-and-so, let's talk. Some rubbish has been written about me. I would like to set things straight." They more or less normally and quickly responded, "Fine, okay, but we must do it secretly, somewhere on neutral territory." I told them, "Nothing in secret at all, absolutely everything should be open. I'm ready to meet." They say, "Well then, we can fly to Moscow." "Okay." And they came to Moscow.

At the time when all this was being spun up, I wasn't working in the administration anymore. I was then the chairman of the board at RAO UES.[3] It

[3] Unified Energy System of Russia (in Russian, *Edinaya Energeticheskaya Systema Rossii*)

was our big power company, which at that time was state-owned, before it was reorganized and divided up into parts under the [00:34:00] big de-monopolization of the power sector. And I had a real modest office there at the power company, and it was there in that office that I met with those guys from the UN committee that had conducted the investigation.

I told them what I thought. It was hard for me. At that time, I still didn't have the results of the investigation that Akin Gump and Kroll were conducting. But in a couple months—I don't remember now, I think it was two or three months—the results came in, in fact. These guys—the war in Iraq was still going on, and they had flown there, and in some half-destroyed Iraqi archives had found a couple absolutely wild documents. There were two letters that I, as the head of the administration, had allegedly written two letters on some fake forms from the Presidential Administration to some Iraqi boss, one in Arabic and one in English. But, in general, there isn't even such a procedure. Letters are always written in Russian, and, if the letter is going somewhere abroad, a translation is attached. But here it was willy-nilly. The signature didn't even remotely resemble mine. Obviously, some scammers just came up with these papers and they somehow washed up there. Maybe someone there helped them. I can only guess at that. It doesn't seem to me that there was some big politics at play. It seems like, in fact, as I later figured out, there was a rather large, rather dirty business around trading those oil quotas. Besides, a ton of all sorts of unscrupulous people of various calibers, major and minor

criminals, had made a living on this. [00:36:00] I think that some of these criminals did it.

I went to the States to settle the matter. The Americans were surprised: "You're not afraid to come here?" I said, "I'm definitely not afraid. I'm not afraid of anything to begin with, but in this situation I 100 percent know that I didn't do anything even close to it and didn't have any intention to do it." So they conducted all sorts of handwriting analysis. A million times I signed bottom to top, top to bottom, right to left, left to right, this way and that, answered a thousand questions, gave a thousand interviews, internal legal ones. And at the end of the day Akin Gump concluded that the documents were falsified, and to this day I still have a nice thick folder with all sorts of collected fingerprints, handwriting samples, testimony of various people, documents from every possible agency, in short, to leave for my kids, so that my kids—if all of a sudden it flares up again—so that they know their dad isn't a crook.

The only thing that remains unsettled is, when the preliminary report came out, there were hearings in the U.S. Senate, and some senators without reason mentioned my name in the context of the matter. Through Akin Gump I tried to pin down these senators so they would apologize or take their words back, but Akin Gump tried and said that the senators have immunity and that they aren't obliged to refute the foolish things they say. And even if it's a lie, they aren't obliged—then it depends on their personal qualities, but that wasn't my case. I had some acquaintances [00:38:00] among U.S. senators, but not these ones.

The Volcker Committee removed my case from the final report as well. When it came out, I wasn't in there. A rather unpleasant story, it ate up a year of my life—not entirely, but a good chunk. In general, it's unpleasant defending yourself for something you didn't do. Here was such a story. I don't think that it was some kind of politics. It seems to me that it was some minor criminals that thereby either received or didn't receive some oil quotas, I don't know, but they tried to get them at least.

GREK: You already mentioned that by that time you had left the administration, and this was related to the arrest in 2003—the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky and its impact on U.S.-Russia relations, economic and trade policy, and domestic policy. Your view on this event?

VOLOSHIN: Honestly, I don't think this was directly, seriously "damaging" to Russian-American relations. It definitely wasn't positive, but I remember that the Americans still tried to—it was all done in public, they tried to stick up for Khodorkovsky. But I can't say that this was issue Number 1 in Russian-American relations and that it caused real damage. So, definitely not positive, probably caused some damage, but minor, incommensurate with some other serious things that we have already discussed or will discuss.

Overall, you know, I'm the type of person—I want Russia to be a strong country, and for it to be a strong country, [00:40:00] it should have a strong economy, and a strong economy means strong business. I don't believe in a state-controlled economy. I believe in entrepreneurial initiative, I believe in private business. While I worked in the Kremlin, I thought that it was part of

my mission to always support business, defend it, be a sort of business ombudsman. It seemed like a part of my job. And I also viewed the Khodorkovsky case in this context. It was clear that they had thrown a bunch of different claims at the company. Some might have been fair, some unfair. But overall, if we are talking about our national interests and about our economy, then of course from the standpoint of the business climate in the country, this case was a big fat negative. And that's how I view it. And that's exactly how I feel, and I'm sure about it. This case was absolutely toxic for the country's economy, for the professional climate, for the business climate. In the context of Russian-American relations, I wouldn't say that it was such a "big deal," no.

GREK: You were also deeply involved in managing relations between Russia and Ukraine during the Kuchma administration. How did the Kremlin see the transition after Kuchma? How did the Kremlin read the color revolutions that were already beginning, especially in the context of Ukraine? Also, to clarify, can we say that relations with Ukraine were handled in an internal department of the Presidential Administration and not at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, as some correspondents claim?

VOLOSHIN: You've dumped a lot of questions on me.

GREK: Let's take them one at a time. [00:42:00]

VOLOSHIN: As for the transition, I wouldn't say that we were thinking in terms of a successor. You know, personally I had very friendly relations with President Kuchma. And I hope that they are still that way. We haven't seen each other now in a long time, but I don't think that we were thinking in terms of a

successor, like Kuchma goes and then someone else would come in. Obviously, for us Ukraine is a very close country, with which we are connected not only politically and economically, but also by the tens of millions of threads of human relationships. Every other person has relatives and friends in Ukraine, for sure. It's not just another foreign country for us. My childhood is also in part connected with Ukraine. My relatives there were from Kiev, Sumy, Ivano-Frankivsk, Odessa, from everywhere.[4] I know Kiev as a city no worse than Moscow, on the whole. And it's one of my favorite cities. So for us, everything, this issue, obviously, is complicated. Of course, it's important to us what is happening in Ukraine. But we were not thinking in terms of a successor then. I would say, now that we're speaking about Ukraine, that Ukraine is a very complex country. It's complex. Russia is also more than complicated.

Ukraine, like Russia, by the way, can be seen as, I would call it, a "composite" country, in which there are pieces that are related to various civilizations, to various religions, to various cultures, languages, et cetera. [00:44:00] And in Ukraine, I really felt it even in childhood when I went there to see my relatives—I felt the border between civilizations. Here there is something like our civilization, sort of resembling ours, and here there is truly a different one. When we arrive in some village around Ivano-Frankivsk, there was a grandpa, for instance, sitting on a bench on a Sunday in a hat, sipping coffee. In our village, no one ever drank coffee in the morning, much less in a

[4] Here and throughout, Mr. Voloshin uses the Russian pronunciation for Ukrainian cities such as Kiev, Odesa, and Lviv.

hat. This is a superficial difference, but behind it there are all sorts of fundamental differences. And I suppose—of course, I understand that Ukrainian identity at various times was repressed, the Ukrainian language was repressed, but I have always considered it a mistake attempts to revive this attire and Ukrainian culture, the Ukrainian language, by way of repressing Russian culture, which is native for Ukraine as well. Roughly speaking, Ukraine is also such a "composite" country.

Part of the country is truly Russian culturally and part is Ukrainian, which internally is also very diversely Ukrainian. The Ukrainian language in Kiev and Lvov is two different languages. Take how they would say "pretty girl"—in Kiev, it's "vidna divchina," but in Lvov it's "faina pani." The latter is almost Polish, but still the former and the latter are the Ukrainian language, in fact. And in a dictionary you'll find all these words. And where the "real" Ukrainian language is—linguists are still looking for it.

Still, I for one have thought that independent Ukraine emerged in the borders that it had inside the Soviet Union, truly. There were regions that had been, entirely because of political considerations, shifted there to balance out [00:46:00] the class composition. The Bolsheviks were fanatics on the issue of class composition—the share of peasants, the share of workers. They thought that peasants were class enemies and industrial workers their class allies. And so they decided to attach industrial Donbas to agrarian Ukraine to balance out the class composition. This was the argument. But culturally these, of course, were entirely Russian regions. And I for one, believed that from the very

beginning of independent Ukraine they should have somehow proclaimed this [diversity] would all be part of their national richness. Here you have a mixture of cultures—Russian and Ukrainian, but also Hungarian, Romanian. There's a lot there. Take all that and make it your own, make it your national heritage, but for some reason they managed to turn it into a national headache, where the Russian language isn't a regional one because there's another country where it's the dominant language. Strange logic. It would be like saying to Americans: "We will not support the Spanish language in the U.S. because there are countries where Spanish is the main language, so we'll take Hungarian and are prepared to support it and something else too, but Spanish we will not." It's a very strange story.

For example, recently I've taken up genealogy, searching for various relatives, for which I went on the website of the State Archive of Odessa. The site is part of the State Archive of Ukraine. There's a menu with various languages. It's done in Ukrainian, which makes sense. But then you click, and this menu folds out. You can choose English, [00:48:00] French, German, Hebrew… but, naturally, Russian isn't there. Among 10 or 12 languages Russian is just not there. And if you write to them, you must write in Ukrainian. Well, all right, I can do that. I can write in Ukrainian as well. I know a little. I can even ask my friend to look for mistakes afterward. I actually love how Ukrainian sounds. I really get pleasure from hearing it. But you must redo names in the Ukrainian style. Our alphabets are almost identical, the difference being in three to four letters, like the difference between the German and

French alphabets. But, in Ukraine, you must redo names in the Ukrainian style. Imagine—if a Frenchman goes to the U.S., no one is going to force him to stop being Jean and become John. That is, it's optional. If you'd like to sound more English, go ahead, but you can just as well keep the name Jean. However, in Ukraine, they will change your name in official documents. If you are Nikolai, they will write Mykola for you. No matter that half the country speaks Russian. This is mandatory. You don't have the right to keep your name. And even in your passport, the transcription will also be done based off the Ukrainian version, not the Russian. So, when you are sending a request to the Odessa Archive, you need to redo everything, names included, in the Ukrainian style. And a response quickly comes back that so-and-so wasn't found in the archive. You want to know why? Because the archive is in Russian. Because in the archive itself all the names are in Russian. It's a rather senseless, pointless exercise, but they are principled because this is independent Ukraine. [00:50:00] It all seems like such nonsense to me.

By the way, the West and America always supported this "Ukrainization" of Ukraine with their soft power and always found some politically correct explanations for it. I suppose it's for one simple reason—because the Russian language is a tool of influence. Of course, this is true. Of course, the Russian language is a tool of influence. In the understanding of Americans, it's an instrument of malign influence, so it's not so bad that, such being the case, the rights of Russian speakers are violated; that tool of influence must be quietly combatted.

This is one of the elements that just popped up in our conversation. But when you are sitting in the Kremlin, strictly speaking, on the throne—now returning to Russian-American relations—you constantly account for these sorts of things. I said it already that every Russian president begins by wishing to improve Russian-American relations and ends with serious disappointment, like with Yeltsin. His relations with America at the beginning of the nineties at the OSCE summit in Istanbul or his last meeting with Clinton in '99—these are completely different relations. Or the Yugoslavia events before that. But when you're in the Kremlin, they're seemingly saying all the politically correct things to you—"Yes, we're friends, we're partners"—but, at the same time, they're doing nasty things to you. There's some huge machine, and it's so fixed against you and it has such massive inertia internally that it just makes messes of every variety for you. [00:52:00]

Take September 11. At the height of the war in Chechnya a couple times we—it was still during the Bush administration—we were trying to improve relations, and seemingly everything was going nicely. Bush had looked into Putin's eyes and had seen something, things seemed to be moving already—there was a chance for an improvement. We had the war in Chechnya still being extinguished. There were some setbacks. And we learned [from] our special forces that the U.S. embassies in the Caucasus, in Tbilisi and Baku, were in contact with these [Chechen] fighters—that they were resurfacing from there, they were running to the U.S. embassies and then returning refreshed.

Somewhere they were helping them to make fake passports. Somewhere they were providing them with money. That was an extremely unpleasant incident.

Since we were in the stage of attempting to improve Russian-American relations, we didn't even raise any public scandal about it. We sorted things out through the relevant agencies. The Americans really didn't even especially argue with the facts because they had been documented in "high definition," these visits. And they tell us, "Oops, you know, that's not the policy of the U.S. That's specific mistakes of specific people, and we will remove them." They probably ended up removing them. I don't know, I didn't follow up. I think they removed them and promoted them somewhere in the corresponding, relevant agencies.

Imagine what we were supposed to think about this, when our [00:54:00] supposed American partners, their diplomatic agencies or special services, are carrying out such activities. And we had a real war going on, we had people dying every day, we had bombings in our cities. How could this be? So this would [now] be understandable for Americans. Recalling September 11, there were those monsters who piloted, who guided the planes into the different buildings. Those pilots were terrorists. Can you imagine if it suddenly emerged that those pilots, before doing the deed, on the eve of it had been in the Russian embassy in Ottawa or somewhere in Mexico or somewhere else and had received fake passports there? Can you imagine something like that? America did this to us. How should we view this? Friends, comrades?

Or another example, also in the context of September 11. There were a number of big Islamic funds. Islamic funds can be different, they can be totally positive. In this case there were a couple funds that actually financed the war in Chechnya, and periodically we would identify some cash flows that were enabling the war. We went to our American colleagues at various levels and told them, "Look, here is such-and-such fund. Get to the bottom of this please. The funds, which exist on the territory of the United States, they are sponsoring a civil war in the Caucasus." Every time they would respond to us, "We looked into it. It's completely humanitarian—aide for children, the sick, et cetera, et cetera. These funds aren't doing anything wrong." [00:56:00] Now, within two to three months after September 11 all these funds disappeared. They were all closed down. I mean, what does that tell you? Our blood—it's our blood. Your blood—it's your blood. I don't think that it was because these funds were engaged in purely humanitarian aid that they got whacked, were shut down—because they were helping children and the dispossessed. This means that they actually saw some links with international terrorism. It's just that when that international terrorism was directed against us, it was all right. It's hard to explain, but when you're in the Kremlin and witness all this day after day, hour after hour, big and small, here and there—well, after some time you—what kind of relations should there be between our countries? Of course, after some time, Putin too experienced a serious disappointment and came to completely rethink our relations with the United States, with their other Western allies.

Something at some point must have nudged him to tell it how it is and deliver in Munich that very speech that you probably wanted to ask me about.

GREK: Yes. The Americans were surprised by such a turn in Russia's rhetoric, in the framework of the speech in which the United States was out for flouting the core principles of international law and destabilizing the world. The Bush administration had recognized the Kremlin's disagreement over the withdrawal from the ABM treaty, the invasion of Iraq, and the expansion of NATO, but American officials are still thinking that Putin doesn't understand the real rationale behind U.S. actions and think that their differences were either indirectly settled or could have been the subject of negotiations. [00:58:00] In other words, Putin "overreacted." What was your reaction to the Munich speech? In your view, what was Putin trying to put forward in that speech? Did you take part in developing, writing, or approving it?

VOLOSHIN: No. By that time, I wasn't working in the Kremlin anymore. I didn't have any part in preparing it, but I understand the logic very well. We really did argue with the Americans a lot over various issues, but we always tried to maintain a certain external political correctness. I mean, in Western civilization, political correctness is sometimes more important than the truth, I suppose. Perhaps I may offend someone with these words. But it happens rather frequently. I remember, at the time, being shocked. I was watching a debate between the Democrats, I think, Obama and Hillary before that election. It was the primaries, of course, and it was a fiery debate. And Obama tells Clinton, "Madame, you are up to your elbows in blood. You voted for this

resolution for war. The blood of dead children is basically dripping from your nails," and so on. A half hour passes. The debate is coming to an end. They are making their concluding remarks, and Obama says, "It was a magnificent honor to take part in a debate with such a distinguished figure of American politics [01:00:00] like Hillary Clinton."[5] What did I just hear? Hold on a second, she's either a murderer whose hands are covered in blood, or she's an outstanding statesman. Or this is all right, just like in *House of Cards*.[6] Could someone explain this to me? It's not really *House of Cards*. It's such realpolitik. It should be different somehow.

Obviously, it's very hard for us in Russia with our mentality to get used to this. For us, after all, the truth is the truth. If you call someone a murderer, then he will remember that until the end of his life. It's a serious accusation. It must be closer for Americans to some sport or competition, and they can forgive each other a lot. It's a different culture. It's not mine, I respect other cultures, it's just I'm trying to explain this cultural "gap." It's just understood differently.

[5] In a CNN debate on 31 January 2008, Obama criticized Clinton for her vote to authorize the invasion of Iraq, but he did not refer to Clinton's "elbows in blood," or blood "dripping from your nails." He said, "The question is: Can we make an argument that this was a conceptually flawed mission, from the start? And we need better judgment when we decide to send our young men and women into war, that we are making absolutely certain that it is because there is an imminent threat, that American interests are going to be protected, that we have a plan to succeed and to exit, that we are going to train our troops properly and equip them properly and put them on proper rotations and treat them properly when they come home. And that is an argument that I think we are going to have an easer time making if they can't turn around and say: But hold on a second; you supported this." At the end of the debate he also praised Clinton's "extraordinary" record of service.
https://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/31/dem.debate.transcript/

[6] Referring to the 2013–2018 Netflix political thriller *House of Cards*.

At some point, Putin decided that it was necessary to put aside this political correctness and tell it how it is. If they hadn't understood, then it was necessary to call a spade a spade. Then, maybe, they'll at least understand, and he said everything that he was thinking. He wasn't rude. He didn't disparage anyone. He just said everything he was thinking. And, generally speaking, if you read his address, the truth was spelled out. It was no big deal—it's just that the truth was spoken in a way that violated Western perceptions about political correctness. It was gruff, a little rough, yes, and that's not acceptable. If you call someone a murderer, call him an outstanding statesman right afterward, and it'll be okay. He didn't call anyone an outstanding statesman, but he did say what he thought, and it was probably a certain delayed reaction that had been building up. It formalized the disappointment from our attempts to establish relations [01:02:00] with the Americans and many other Western partners. It was that kind of speech—disappointment, but at the same time a warning: "Guys, we think that this is unacceptable. This is dishonest, unfair," and so on. That's how I view it.

GREK: Is it correct that he wrote the speech himself?

VOLOSHIN: As far as I know, his "personal touch" was considerable, that's certain. Most likely, of course, special people—there are qualified "speechwriters" in the administration who are really very good. They wrote some drafts for him. But judging by the text, the style, and everything, it's clear that he very much took part himself. That's true.

GREK: The Munich speech was probably the critical point after which the hot phase of relations began, and here is another somewhat compound question. How did the Kremlin at first perceive the string of color revolutions in post-Soviet countries? Did it overlap for you with the issue of NATO expansion to the east? And Georgia 2008—are these events one and the same, ending in the Georgian war, or are these different things?

VOLOSHIN: Both yes and no. In this world, everything is connected, in fact, but every one of those events or phenomena still has its own backstory and story. What is a revolution in the first place? Is my understanding correct that we call an illegal takeover of power a revolution, or what?

Let's take [01:04:00] two steps back. Let's take why America is a great country. It was founded by talented people who came from all over the world to that land—the most entrepreneurial, somewhat daring, talented, hard-working, those who didn't fear the unknown—and they created this fantastically developed economy—powerful, diversified, with a rather high average standard of living. This is beyond doubt a huge accomplishment of the Americans which they did themselves. In my understanding—generally, I believe in competition always. It seems to me that these accomplishments of the Americans represent the fruit of tough competition. You go to America, and, for every centimeter of economic space, there is the fiercest competition. You think that you've thought of something new, really great, and here you find out that a thousand other people also thought of the same thing that same second. And for every centimeter of political space there is also the fiercest competition, and within

the political parties too, as we see in those not always so pleasant primaries. That is to say, America is a country of internal competition. And I connect America's success with the fact that there's a cult around entrepreneurship, around independence, around competition.

Paradoxically, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this very country became a monopolist in the world—it set the laws which it has attempted to make global and which it has forced everyone else to follow. It's responsible for law enforcement in this sense. It's at once the prosecutor, the judge, the lawmaker, the investigator, everything rolled into one. A global monopoly. This is the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Up until then, the world was bipolar. [01:06:00] No monopolist ever voluntarily gives up his monopoly. And he always has very convincing arguments why the monopoly should be preserved. Of course, in this sense, the United States is no exception. They give everyone their arguments. It's just that they don't say "monopoly," but rather "leadership." But, in fact, when you decide everything for everyone and everyone must support you, and someone doesn't support you, then that someone is wrong and you can punish him, introduce sanctions, since you are economically and militarily big and strong—this is the madness of the monopolist. Paradoxically, this has blended together in America. This wonderful country that achieved fantastic success internally—thanks to competition—is externally a big, tough, self-obsessed monopolist that sees only its own truth. And in this sense, Democrats or Republicans—on the whole, it doesn't make a difference globally. Obviously, it has significance for American

domestic policy. I respect that. But for the world overall, there isn't a big difference. It's the behavior of a monopolist.

And this monopolist decides in what case—returning to your question—it's a coup, in what case it's a revolution. It's he who decides. If it's advantageous for him, he'll call it a revolution, a revolution of roses, oranges, bananas, whatever fits; or he'll label it a coup, as he decides. When, for instance, power changed hands in Kiev in an unconstitutional manner, clearly—[Ukrainian President Viktor] Yanukovych had been absent in Kiev for a day and a half. After he signed an agreement with the opposition with guarantees from our [01:08:00] European colleagues, he was deposed.[7] This occurred wholly in violation of the constitution. For any decent lawyer, it's clear that this was a coup. Yet when Russia called it a coup, no one supported us. Why? Because in the American understanding, if the Americans like the outcome, they call it a revolution, and if they don't like it, then it can be called a coup, and sanctions can be announced against the people who carried it out. If you like the outcome, you call it a revolution, and you introduce sanctions against those who stood in the way of the revolution, just the opposite. This all fits together fine in the American mind. So, when we speak about color revolutions, it was of course a series of coups, certainly.

For sure, you need to look closely at the circumstances in which they took place. Often, these coups were supported by a significant part of the population which was tired of corruption, tired of the ineptitude of their

[7] Here Mr. Voloshin is referring to the events leading to Yanukovych's abdication in 2014.

previous leaders. For sure, all of this deserves to be heard, but does it represent a sufficient rationale to support a coup? After all, a lot happens in America, they also have crises, but still, when a mob breaks into the Capitol, society sees that something is wrong, that this isn't how things are done. Some people even claim they went there for a tour, but no one believes them. But in other countries, if people go for a tour in the local parliament or wherever there, then they are revolutionaries if, as a result of this revolution, whoever takes power [01:10:00] is liked by the United States. Plain and simple.

So, in this sense, everything has become absolutely black and white, since the United States decides where it's a revolution and where it's a coup. Plain and simple. The situation in Russia is that, since for the most part we are talking about countries close to us culturally, ethnically, religiously, historically—yes, however you look at it, it cannot not but affect us. It's just that we all are really that intermixed here, wherever you look. I have relatives from practically everywhere, everywhere across the post-Soviet space, and even elsewhere, but across the post-Soviet space almost everywhere. And it's like that for everyone. So, I'm not saying there is no reason to acknowledge the sovereignty of other countries. I'm saying that this affects us as humans—if a coup takes place here or there and someone labels it a revolution, we don't like this. This is basically the color revolutions.

The Georgian-Ossetian conflict seems to me like a big, long story, and Georgian-Abkhazian relations and Georgian-Ossetian—I've had to deal with this a lot, but every time it's really a big, long story, and I'm not sure our

American colleagues will be that interested. It's a complicated story. In the case of Ossetia, here again the Bolsheviks decided to split up the Ossetian people into North Ossetia and South Ossetia. The former went to Russia, the latter to Georgia, though it's absolutely—families were split—one and the same people. The communists drew [01:12:00] a line with a ruler along a ridge and, just like that, divided it, laying down the roots of these conflicts. Plus, these interreligious—not even interreligious, pardon me, the wrong word—interethnic issues, they were suppressed in Soviet times. This happens in a totalitarian regime. Everything was suppressed. Everyone marched in a straight line. There was one party. There was the KGB and no dissent—it was harshly suppressed. What interethnic conflict could there be? If there was an interethnic conflict, they would throw everyone on a train and ship you off to the edge of the world somewhere, and you'll live in a swamp.

A totalitarian regime can maintain order on its own territory by such means. When the totalitarian regime disappears, all these conflicts once again come to the surface. One of them was the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, and sparks have been flying for a long time, a long time. It doesn't have any simple solution, really nothing fair or simple, but at some point that crazy Saakashvili decided to solve it militarily. It seemed to him that somehow the stars had aligned at that given moment. Of course, it was a fantastic blunder, a crime, but the West was so aligned against Russia by that time that I even, you know, remember turning on the TV, either CNN or some American channel, and they were showing images that earlier our TV had shown when Saakashvili had

started shelling Ossetia and Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. It was a nighttime rocket attack. They had shown it on our TV the entire night, and everyone had watched in horror. They showed destroyed Tskhinvali, and then the next day [01:14:00] all those images ran on the American channels with the headline "Russians attack Georgia." Simply under the same image there was the caption "Russians attack Georgia"—the images were the exact same. They didn't have their own footage yet, and moreover there were no journalists on site, so they took it, copy-pasted it, and just changed the headline.

But that was a fantastic blunder by Saakashvili—not a blunder, but a real crime. And he paid a high price for it with his popularity. He had been a rather popular president in Georgia. In Russia, it's not popular to praise him for anything, but I would say that a couple of his reforms fully succeeded and to this day their police aren't corrupt, he totally managed an immediate "success," a story like this. He had some successes, but as a person he seemed rather, how to say it politically correctly?

GREK: Eccentric?

VOLOSHIN: Yes. Eccentric, there's a good word. Eccentric, yes, and he, of course, got really carried away, made a lot of mistakes, some of which were rather bloody ones, some of which could probably be qualified as crimes rather than mistakes. That's what I have to say about that conflict. What else?

GREK: A question about the interests of America in Georgia, and how did Russian and American interests collide there? What major conclusions were made, in our view, following the Georgian conflict?

VOLOSHIN: Unfortunately, those relations became from a certain time—and it wasn't our choice, not Russia's—they became rather black and white. Black and white in what [01:16:00] sense? In the sense that America supports everything anti-Russian across the post-Soviet space, absolutely everything big or small, and literally everywhere. It's just that a crisis situation had emerged in Georgia, unfortunately one that manifested itself bloodily and tragically. In that sense, there is no on switch. I'm surprised, like a machine, it really—I know that there are major issues of global security, but it's running, it doesn't stop, including weekends, and it's engaged in all sorts of stuff.

I'll give an example. Some years ago in Russia—we have our own financial industry and a "central [01:18:00] depository," a place where a record of who owns securities is kept. In many countries, this is a centralized function—there is the central bank or the Fed in the U.S., and there are second-tier banks. The same thing with securities. There is a central depository where the rights of ownership of securities is recorded. For some time, we didn't have a centralized depository, which a lot of foreign investors, and ours too, didn't like. And at some point—it was a long time ago already, some years ago—we created a central depository.

My acquaintance—you could say friend—Misha Zurabov, who was our health minister, headed the pension fund and, at that time, was the ambassador to Ukraine, phones me, "Hey, some local guys came to see me from the Kiev central depository. They're also establishing a central depository. I mean, it's a really small operation, three people total, but they want to share best practices,

sign something. Basically, they want to sign a framework agreement with the Moscow central depository. Could you help them somehow?" I say, "Of course. It's a good cause. Do they want something specific?" "Not really, a framework agreement, just to share best practices, information, and so forth." I phoned our newly established central depository and say, "Guys, there are some fellows from Kiev. They're named such-and-such. They want to talk, something about best practices. They are still super small, but you're not the biggest operation either. Help however you can. Let's work together, it's a good cause. It's not business, just like humanitarian infrastructure cooperation."

I made the call and forgot about it. Two or three months pass, and it happens I'm talking with Zurabov. I ask, "Hey, what ended up happening with the central depository? Did they sign that agreement or not? I haven't really been following." He says, "You won't believe the story. One of those guys from Kiev will be in Moscow soon. If you're interested, he can tell you himself. You'll be interested to hear. No, there was no agreement, and there probably won't ever be." "Well, what happened?" He says, "Better to let him tell you." After some time, this young man, about 35 years old, comes to see me, the head of that depository. "Is everything all right?" I ask. "Yeah, we got in touch with the guys from your central depository—thanks for the help. We were thwarted, something tripped us up. We sort of started talking about it. In some interview somewhere, it was mentioned that we were planning such an agreement." Basically, it was a phone call from the American embassy. The minister counselor, the second person in the embassy of the United States, a great

power, invites [01:20:00] this guy from a no-name company with three employees for a meeting and spends an hour of his time to convince him that he shouldn't sign an agreement with Moscow. "You need European integration. You need to work with Europeans and Americans. We'll help you. We'll give you money. What do you need Moscow for?" Of course, they also told him: "Of course, you're free people, do what you want, but there will be negative consequences for you. Keep that in mind." And he didn't sign the agreement. The U.S. embassy didn't pass that up.

That machine works like that. It is without breaks, without weekends, around the clock it runs, and you have this feeling that its job is to make messes for you. The Russian language is bad to support because it's a tool of influence, a central depository, some general agreement—it's also a tool of influence. The further Ukraine from Russia, the better, the U.S. thinks for some reason. The general logic of the U.S. across the post-Soviet space is basically such, returning to your topic. The further all our neighbors from Russia, the better. And if they draw closer to us or have any kind of relations with us, then that's bad. How should we in Russia view this? Is this the behavior of partners and friends? That machine runs nonstop, across cycles—a thawing in relations or a chilling—the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, it doesn't matter—it's a machine. Republicans and Democrats change, but it keeps running. [01:22:00] And when you sit in the Kremlin, after a while it's hard not to become anti-American because you see that the U.S. and that huge, powerful machine are for some reason against you—that's how it works. Why? I have no explanation. It seems

like the foolishness of a monopolist to me. I believe in competition, I repeat. Competition forces us to be smart and efficient, helps to avoid mistakes, but it's always nice to be a monopolist.

What did America accomplish in Iraq? About as many Americans died there as on September 11. Young men died for absolutely nothing. They razed that country to the ground. ISIS emerged. Now the Kurds are on their own, the others are on their own, everyone is fighting with each other. Did the Americans win anything? They didn't. They buried 5,000 of their own young men who would otherwise be alive today, their families would be happy—if not for the global monopoly of the U.S. If only, before the Iraq War, someone else had [said something] besides Russia, Germany, and France—take the UK or Japan, maybe another three to four such serious countries—maybe the war wouldn't have happened. Is it not true?

Would this have been bad for the U.S.? This is my question. No. Of course, this would've been good for the U.S. There wouldn't have been ISIS. 5,000 young Americans would be alive and their families happy. What would've been bad in this? I'm trying to explain how toxic monopoly is because you make mistakes, you don't listen to anyone, there's only your bloody opinion—any other opinion doesn't matter. [01:24:00] Everyone who argues with you is your enemy. You'll make messes for them, sanction them, you don't even want to hear what is important for them and what national interests they have. There are only your interests. And everyone who sings along—they are your allies,

and everyone who goes against you are your enemies. This is a rather miserable and unstable world.

I spent a long time in politics. We too have made some mistakes. We're a complicated country, which is to this day going through a transition from being Soviet to becoming a developed country in various senses. This is, of course, a hard road, a painstaking one. We make mistakes, we're also far from perfect. Of course, we need friendly relations around us like no one else. We're more interested [in that] than others are. America is more or less doing fine on its own—a wealthy country with a high level of security, with a highly developed economy. Obviously, like in any big country, there are a bunch of problems. Americans know them better than I do, but overall, if you compare it with the rest of the world, everything isn't so bad. We have far more problems. And for us, friendly relations with the United States, as well as with the Europeans, are far more important. It would help us out a lot, it would support our development toward a free, democratic, independent, successful Russia with a high standard of living for people. That's what we want. It's very hard to build such relations in the modern world when there's one monopolist who bullies everyone and with whom it's easier to agree than to argue. It's like a black hole that sucks everything into itself.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]