



U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Andrey Kortunov

Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council, 2011 – present

Interviewer:

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[Begin Transcription]

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

KORTUNOV: In January 2001, I headed the Moscow Public Science Foundation, mainly dealing with issues of social development, support for the education of civil society. Before that, I worked as deputy director of the Institute for the USA and Canada at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

GREK: When Vladimir Putin came to power, what were your expectations from this president, and what were your assumptions? How was Russia's foreign policy supposed to change?

KORTUNOV: I, as I think also many people in Moscow, and in Russia as a whole, had very active, so to speak, hopes that Russian foreign policy would become more energetic and more offensive. Of course, everyone was waiting for the new president, given that his predecessor had health problems. In general, it was clear that an update was needed: renewal not only at the level of the country's leader, but also at the level of the bureaucracy, at the level of many ministries and departments. Therefore, I had the most optimistic expectations from the new president: young, energetic, teetotaler, etc.

GREK: In June 2001, Putin and Bush met in Slovenia, [00:02:00] after which talk began that chemistry had arisen between them. Do you think that some kind of personal



relationship emerged between them? If it appeared, did it influence the development of international relations and influence the course of history?

KORTUNOV: In a sense, yes, it seems to me that the meeting in Slovenia was important both for establishing personal relations and for clarifying the positions of the two countries on key international issues. But, as far as I remember the situation, the summer of 2001: the Bush administration initially did not include Russia as one of the main foreign policy priorities of the United States, that is, yes, Russia was recognized as an important international player, but nothing more. Bush had other plans related to other regions, so although this meeting was important, I think that subsequent events played a greater role in the development of relations than this first meeting.

GREK: Could you assess how the Kremlin reacted to the U.S. withdrawal from the treaty on the limitation of missile defense systems? And did this decision of the United States radically affect the development of relations?

KORTUNOV: I think yes. In general, I must say that throughout the nineties, I even had a little part in this work. Very energetic and consistent efforts were made [00:04:00] to prevent the U.S. from withdrawing from this treaty.

And there were a variety of meetings, at different levels: official, unofficial, expert, military, civil. Various options were proposed to save this treaty, including, perhaps, preparing a new version of the treaty or agreeing on some protocols to this treaty, where the United States would receive the right to do some work in the



field of missile defense. And this activity continued throughout practically the entire term of President Clinton. I think that there were hopes in Russia that President Bush would not go ahead in withdrawing from the treaty, especially since, if we recall the situation 20 years ago, some technical developments that would have made it necessary to withdraw from the treaty and begin direct deployment of some missile defense systems did not exist then. Therefore, withdrawal from the treaty was rather a symbolic gesture—a declaration of intent.

And this was, perhaps, the first very serious blow to mutual trust, to Russia's perception of the reliability of the United States as a partner. And it is no coincidence that Putin then invariably referred to the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in each of his nasty speeches. [00:06:00] And, probably, until the withdrawal of the United States from the INF Treaty, there was not such an episode when Russia would have reacted so painfully to a unilateral American decision.

Just how many complaints were brought here to President Bush himself, it is difficult for me to say. I think that many in Russia believed that this decision was the result of the activities of the so-called deep state, that is, those officials in the Pentagon, perhaps, and in other departments, who lobbied for this decision throughout the 90s. But the withdrawal of the United States from this treaty, as far as I remember, the decision was made at the very end of 2001, and the United



States exited in mid-2002—this, of course, was a serious blow to trust between Moscow and Washington.

GREK: Some colleagues say that withdrawal from this treaty launched the process of creating supersonic missiles in Russia. How would you evaluate such statements?

KORTUNOV: Well, now it's hard to say what triggered this process. Of course, any strategic missile modernization cycle has its own logic—these are, in general, long-term cycles. But I admit that the withdrawal of the United States from this treaty, the fears that this withdrawal gave rise to that the United States, under certain conditions, might try to reduce the effectiveness of Russian [00:08:00] deterrence and get at least a theoretical opportunity for a first disarming strike—I think that this is entailed many decisions, including accelerating the cycle of modernization of Russian nuclear systems, perhaps the decision to develop a new generation of missiles was also to some extent related to the withdrawal of the United States.

GREK: What was the attitude toward NATO in the early 2000s? How did Russia feel about the North Atlantic bloc?

KORTUNOV: Well, the attitude was ambiguous, because, on the one hand, there was a desire to expand cooperation with NATO. As you remember, there was a Russia-NATO summit in Rome, where it was possible to agree on the creation of a Russia-NATO Council, documents were signed suggesting a strategic partnership that Russia and NATO—.



On the other hand, even then there was the experience of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia, which, of course, could not be welcomed by Moscow, since NATO's actions in Yugoslavia were viewed as a violation of international law, as aggression, since it is clear that, whatever one thinks about the Milosevic government, in general, this government could not and did not create any threat to NATO members. One can argue about the scale of the genocide in [00:10:00] Kosovo—was this genocide at all—but the fact that this decision was made bypassing the United Nations, that this issue was not considered even in the OSCE, and that in general it was about unilateral actions, of course, even then aroused rejection and irritation, at least among a significant part of the Russian political establishment.

But at the same time, there were hopes that Russia would be able in some sense to influence NATO if the NATO-Russian Council and other forms of cooperation were developed, and, as you know, at the very beginning of his administration, President Putin even, in general, said that it does not exclude, under certain conditions, Russia's entry into NATO, well, on the condition, mainly, if NATO is transformed into some kind of other more inclusive system of collective security.

Then, of course, the question was raised, first of all, about Russia's joining the political institutions of the bloc. Some even believed that Russia could become like France, that is, not enter, then France left, as you know, under Sarkozy France



was not part of the military structures of the North Atlantic alliance, at least completely, but was an active participant in political institutions. Well, in general, it was believed that under certain conditions, under certain circumstances, Russia could become like France. Well, this period was not very long, but nevertheless, such points of view were in circulation at the beginning of the century. [00:12:00]

GREK: Soon after the meeting in Slovenia, the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place. Do you remember how you learned about this terrorist attack? What reactions were there in the Kremlin, and how did it influence the development of policy?

KORTUNOV: Well, speaking about me personally, I can say that I watched this terrorist attack with my own eyes, since I was not only in New York, but was downtown. In general, I saw how it all happened, of course. It made strong impressions. And the subsequent events, when Manhattan was isolated and when airports were closed; I remember vividly. And there were a lot of false alarms, when some sort of bombs were found in buildings, people ran out.

But in principle, I should note that I really appreciated the self-control of the New Yorkers, who did not succumb to panic, there was no such thing as looting. In general, the city reacted from my point of view very honorably to this unpleasant event, and New Yorkers showed commendable restraint. I even wanted to donate blood, but as a foreigner I was not allowed to.

But if we talk about the Russian reaction, then, of course, there was a wave of sympathy for the United States, both in society and in the political elite: Putin



was one of the first who called President Bush and offered support and help. And then, I want to remind you, now there is a lot of talk about the failure of the American mission in Afghanistan, but, in general, the mission began with the full support [00:14:00] of all members of the international community, including Russia, a UN Security Council resolution was quickly adopted, which substantiated this mission. Russia did not object to the deployment of US military infrastructure in Central Asia. Moreover, this northern transport corridor passed through Russian territory: NATO goods were transported by Russian railways. So, then, of course, sympathy for the United States was very high, and in general, so to speak, public opinion polls showed that the attitude toward the Americans in the overwhelming majority of Russian society was very favorable.

GREK: Soon the Iraq campaigns would begin. How did the Kremlin and Russia react to the introduction of troops into Iraq? What sides were there in Russia, debates about the country's participation/non-participation in the American campaign in Iraq?

KORTUNOV: Well, of course, there is a fundamental difference between Afghanistan and Iraq, because, yes, the Afghan operation was legitimate. The Iraq operation took place apart from the UN Security Council and even apart from NATO. And it is clear why yes, because there was no unity even within the North Atlantic bloc: France, [00:16:00] Germany, Belgium, several other countries came out against the armed intervention in Iraq, and the basis for this the intervention was far less



convincing than in the case of Afghanistan. In general, Russia until the last moment tried to prevent this intervention, and in this endeavor Russia generally supported the OPCW, then Blix headed the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and additional time was needed in order to check the possible presence of chemical weapons in Iraq.

But Bush the younger really wanted this war. And we all remember how Colin Powell spoke. Later this footage, in general, was often reproduced by the Russian media, as an example of American hypocrisy and as an example, in general, of American unwillingness to reckon with the norms of international law. Well, there was, of course, some kind of group of people in Russia who were similarly hostile toward Saddam Hussein, given the many actions of this government. There was a group that believed that the Americans were doing the right thing anyway, because something had to be done with this regime, even if the pretext was far-fetched, but in general, all the same, the regime must be changed. But this was a very insignificant group of radical liberals, and most of the people in Russia involved in foreign policy decision-making, it seems to me, were opposed and predicted the saddest consequences for this intervention.

Then there were generally hopes that, perhaps, it would be possible to preserve such a coalition of Russia, Germany, and France in order to resist the unilateral actions of the United States. Well, it didn't work out in the end, but nevertheless, at that moment, in 2003, there were such hopes.



GREK: The next important stage in international relations was the color revolutions that took place in the post-Soviet space. How did Russia react to these events?

KORTUNOV: Well, talking about Russia as a whole would probably not be entirely correct. Different people perceived it differently: some with apprehension, some with hope. But if we talk about the Russian leadership, then it seems to me that, of course, there was much more fear than hope. And it seems to me that even then the prevailing point of view was that these color revolutions were somehow inspired by the West, [00:20:00] that the West, the United States, first of all, of course, was pursuing a policy of destabilizing the political situation on the territory of the post-Soviet space, that the goal of Western policy was to weaken Russian influence, and the West was ready to sow chaos if this chaos contributed to the weakening of Russia's influence. Therefore, of course, even then these color revolutions were perceived by the Russian leadership as a challenge, as a challenge to Moscow, as a challenge to Russian policy.

Moreover, then, in general, plans for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space around Moscow were popular. Naturally, these color revolutions also made it difficult to implement such plans. Most of those countries where such revolutions succeeded, they began to orient themselves more—. [phone rings] That is, of course, even in those cases when these color revolutions were not directed directly against Russia, they very often changed the foreign policy priorities of the countries where they took place, that is, these countries began to



orient themselves more and more toward Western structures, toward the European Union, toward NATO. And, of course, I think that this caused some irritation in the Russian leadership, [00:22:00] since it was seen as an obstacle to a new consolidation of the post-Soviet space.

GREK: During these revolutions, the issue of the “third sector”¹ became more active, and soon, in 2005, Bush came to Moscow to celebrate Victory Day and before that met with representatives of NGOs, dissidents and so on. How do you think the Kremlin and the administration took this signal? What was it?

KORTUNOV: Well, I think it was a wakeup call, if you want, that the administration, the Russian leadership pays too little attention to the “third sector,” and therefore this vacuum is filled by foreign organizations and, of course, at that time the Russian “third sector” was heavily influenced by Western partners who had their own agenda and who, in a sense, formed this “third sector.”

At the same time, there were no public chambers or presidential councils that were supposed to build civil society. And what was happening, including President Bush’s speech, forced the Russian leadership to pay more attention to the problems of the “third sector” and to the formation of its own concept of interaction between the third sector and the authorities. [00:24:00]

And here it is very important, that if in the United States very often the “third sector” is perceived as this constructive opponent of the government, that is,

¹ This term in Russian is used to refer to non-governmental and nonprofit organizations.



as a force that is able to draw attention to problems, to some unsolved problems, to errors of the government, then in Russia, naturally, a course was taken toward the formation of the third sector as a partner and assistant to the government, that is, as a force that could take on some part of the functions that the government, for various reasons, did not reach. That is, at that time such a divergence had already begun in the understanding of what the “third sector” actually is in modern conditions, and how it should work. Well, in those years, such a divergence of ideas was not yet acute, but then those problems were laid that became more obvious in the subsequent period.

GREK: Colleagues from the states said that working with the “third sector” was used in many ways as a sending of signals, that is, not paying attention to NGOs is a positive signal, paying attention to NGOs is a negative signal toward Russia. Did you see this signaling? Did it exist in your opinion?

KORTUNOV: From the U.S. side?

GREK: Yes.

KORTUNOV: Well, you know, I worked quite a lot in the “third sector”, including working closely with many American foundations. And, of course, the picture is very diverse. That is, yes, there is a state [00:26:00] policy, in Russia at that time USAID and other organizations associated with the American government were actively working, of course, their activities—it somehow was correlated with the general policy of the United States toward Russia: they could send such a signal. That is, say, the USAID



could build its priorities in favor of supporting, say, education and local self-government, or it could place more emphasis on human rights activities—and this could be a signal for Russian partners as well.

But in the United States, of course, private foundations, private charities, and private nonprofits have always played and continue to play a large role, and unlike what many here believe, they do not receive instructions from the Department of State. Well, for example, take even that textbook example of George Soros, I know very well that he regarded George Bush extremely negatively and even participated in some campaigns and financial campaigns designed to prevent Bush's reelection in '04. Therefore, of course, to expect that the George Soros Institute for Open Society would run to the State Department for instructions and guidance, well, from my point of view, it would be a little naive.

Other foundations, I don't know, the Ford Foundation, for example, which was represented here, the MacArthur Foundation—they, too, in their ideology were very different from the Republican Party, from my point of view, they were much closer [00:28:00] to Democrats, and even to quite left Democrats, so, of course, to force these funds to send signals on behalf of the American government to the Kremlin, well, it seems to me that this task was impossible, so I would not make such generalizations here, if not talking specifically about the programs that went through the American governmental aid organizations.

GREK: President Putin made a famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, in which he criticized the United States; colleagues we interviewed in the United States said they were surprised by this turn in Russian rhetoric, as the Bush administration acknowledged the Kremlin's opposition to withdrawing from the ABM treaty, the invasion of Iraq, and NATO expansion, but American officials still believed that President Putin did not understand the reason for these steps and believed that the differences could either be indirectly resolved or could be negotiated. How did you personally react to the Munich speech? Do you agree with the statement that it was an overreaction? And how would you rate, in principle, the popularity and significance of this performance in Russia?

KORTUNOV: Well, this speech also surprised me, that is, I did not expect such a tough position on the part of the Russian president, but I want to remind you that it was after all a speech at the Munich conference. And Putin himself then said, since these are unofficial negotiations, that this is not his policy statement, he could afford to say what he thinks. And in this sense, yes, it was very straightforward, very frank and it was very unambiguous [00:30:00] and, indeed, it reflected, it seems to me, real concern on the part of the Russian leadership about the formation of this notorious unipolar world.

Could all this have been mitigated somehow? I think that, probably, yes. And if you remember, by the end of Bush the younger's tenure in power, there was a meeting between Putin and Bush in Sochi, where they tried to come somehow to a



satisfactory agreement, including on issues that aroused concern on the Russian side. That is, there was certainly such an attempt, but, as it seems to me, in the end, Moscow came to the conclusion that Bush himself was a good man, and it was possible to agree on something with him, but this Washington establishment, this bureaucracy, this deep state—they anyway would not allow good guy George W. Bush take the correct position, they would still insist on the right of the United States to make unilateral decisions, they would still take anti-Russian positions on the key issues of world politics, or at least positions without taking into account the interests of Russia.

And that is why the last six months of President Bush—they passed on such a minor note. Of course, one must also take into account the events in the South Caucasus, which blurred the end of this administration [00:32:00] and drove Russian-American relations into a serious crisis, which President Obama then tried to overcome with his reset.

GREK: Why didn't the personal relationship between Putin and Bush lead to stronger cooperation? Are there fundamental principles or interests in Russian-American relations that do not allow achieving friendly relations even under the direct influence of top officials?

KORTUNOV: I think that the problem of Russian-American relations, including during the years of the Bush administration, was that the parties did not find a positive basis for such interaction. That is, in fact, our relations remained within the framework



of the Cold War model. Yes, arms control is undoubtedly an important aspect, yes, there are some issues related to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, regional crises, but this is not enough to stabilize relations.

Unfortunately, now and then in the United States, no strong lobbying groups have formed that would promote the idea of a more constructive dialogue with Moscow, but even here, in Russia, there have been no sufficiently powerful representative business groups that could significantly influence Russia's policy in the American direction.

That is, this task was not solved during the Bush administration; it was not solved later either. Therefore, the relationship, unfortunately, has always remained hostage to the political environment. Right now the situation is such that, in general, it is hardly [00:34:00] possible to hope for serious improvements.

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