

The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
MIDDLEBURY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
MAY 10, 2021

Introduction

At a time when dialogue between American and Russian diplomats is reduced to a bare minimum and when empathy and civility fall short of diplomacy between major powers, we are pleased to introduce the Ambassadorial Series. It is a compilation of conversations with eight outstanding American diplomats who served at various points of time as U.S. ambassadors to the Soviet Union and, after its dissolution, to the Russian Federation.

The Series provides nuanced analyses of crucial aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, such as the transition from the Soviet Union to contemporary Russia and the evolution of Putin's presidency. It does so through the personal reflections of the ambassadors. As Ambassador Alexander Vershbow observes, "[t]he Ambassadorial Series is a reminder that U.S. relations with Putin's Russia began on a hopeful note, before falling victim to the values gap." At its heart, this project is conceived as a service to scholars and students of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia. The interviews, collected here as transcripts, form a unique resource for those who want to better understand the evolving relationship between the two countries.

We would like to express gratitude to our colleagues who collaborated on this project and to the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies staff members who supported it. Jill Dougherty is the face and voice of this project – bringing expertise, professionalism, and experience to the Series. Floyd Yarmuth at Rockhouse is a tireless partner – guiding the ambassadors through laptop adjustments and lighting tweaks – all over a Zoom call. Robert Legvold endowed our project with deep knowledge and provided the framework for the interview questions. Jarlath McGuckin provided expert support and good humor throughout the enterprise and kept us all on track while sourcing photographs and providing the voiceover for the podcast credits. We would like to thank Alina Kazakovtceva for her help with the project's implementation. Mollie Messick edited the transcripts for accuracy and punctuation and formatted them into this e-book. David Gibson and our colleagues at Middlebury College provided guidance and support on design and branding, as well as promotional assistance for the launch. Thank you to our new friends at Bluecadet (Kelly, Alyssa, Siji, and Andy) for their creativity and professionalism. Most of all, we would like to thank the former U.S. ambassadors to Russia and the Soviet Union who took part in this project for their time and their service to the United States: Jack F. Matlock, Thomas R. Pickering, James F. Collins, Alexander Vershbow, John Beyrle, Michael McFaul, John F. Tefft, and Jon Huntsman, Jr.

Special thanks to our colleagues at Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose support throughout the evolution of the project was crucial.

The Ambassadorial Series is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Vartan Gregorian – our lodestar in bringing this project to fruition.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
AMBASSADOR JACK F. MATLOCK (1987-1991)	1
AMBASSADOR THOMAS R. PICKERING (1993-1996)	11
AMBASSADOR JAMES F. COLLINS (1997-2001)	26
AMBASSADOR ALEXANDER VERSHBOW (2001-2005)	44
AMBASSADOR JOHN BEYRLER (2008-2012)	57
AMBASSADOR MICHAEL MCFAUL (2012-2014)	72
AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT (2014-2017)	88
AMBASSADOR JON HUNTSMAN, JR. (2017-2019)	101

This series was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

Ambassador Alexander Vershbow (2001-2005)

We really saw opportunities, in the horrible tragedy, we saw opportunities to cement the kind of strategic partnership with Russia that we had been trying to build during the 1990s with Yeltsin. And of course we had, I think, tremendous public support for doing just that. I remember, I'll never forget, the outpouring of sympathy and solidarity by the people of Moscow. The whole country came converging on the old embassy building on Ulitsa Chaikovskovo with flowers, with candles, children leaving their precious teddy bears, all out of sympathy for our loss of so many Americans and other nationalities in the 9/11 attacks.

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, thank you very much for being with us. Just looking at your history, 1997 to 2001, you were the ambassador to NATO and then, 2001 to 2005, ambassador to Russia. And I was very lucky to have worked that very same time in Moscow. I always appreciated your openness, and I learned a lot from what you said in our conversations. So, it's a pleasure to welcome you. Thank you very much for being here.

Ambassador Vershbow

It's my pleasure. I welcome this opportunity to reminisce and interpret what happened that we didn't see fully at the time.

Jill Dougherty

I'm glad you're saying that because that's exactly what I was thinking as I put together questions, and I was thinking how we could approach this. It really is, with the benefit of time, an opportunity to look back from this vantage point to see if there's something, as you said, that we missed or something that we could do differently or something that we could learn from. And I really appreciate this opportunity.

So, you know, that period, of course, was early Vladimir Putin. He comes in the year 2000. He had been around as prime minister previously, but all of a sudden, now he is president. And I was thinking back to that period, it was very promising. He was doing some economic reform. He looked like a man who had it together after a pretty chaotic period with Boris Yeltsin.

You yourself, I think, talked about an alliance with Russia. There was hope that there might be some type of alliance, but then by the time your tour was over, relations had really changed. I mean, we didn't have elections, obviously, difficulty with the United States view of those elections. We had the attack in Beslan and the way the Russian government handled that. We

had the war in Chechnya. There were many different factors but, looking back at that, why did it change and how much?

Ambassador Vershbow

Well, it was indeed an interesting time, and it did start on a relatively hopeful note. I arrived in Moscow in the summer of 2001 after having been at NATO and having launched the NATO-Russia cooperative relationship, which already had its ups and downs, including differences over Kosovo, but still, arriving in Moscow even before the events of 9/11, which were early in my tenure, we still had hopes that we were going to pick up where we left off, and even, maybe, do even better, because Putin was a much more stable character. He did seem to get it when it came to economic reform, he introduced a flat tax and generally began the process of nurturing a middle class in Russia. And he certainly did seem to be very pragmatic. Clearly, his background as a KGB officer was grounds for some wariness.

It was clear that he was a bit more nostalgic for the Soviet past than Yeltsin. He changed the National Anthem back to the Soviet Anthem soon after he became the acting president when Yeltsin resigned. So, we had our hopes of some continuing questions, but then 9/11 happened. And we really saw opportunities, in the horrible tragedy, we saw opportunities to cement the kind of strategic partnership with Russia that we had been trying to build during the 1990s with Yeltsin.

And of course we had, I think, tremendous public support for doing just that. I remember, I'll never forget, the outpouring of sympathy and solidarity by the people of Moscow. The whole country came converging on the old embassy building on *Ulitsa Chaikovskovo* with flowers, with candles, children leaving their precious teddy bears, all out of sympathy for our loss of so many Americans and other nationalities in the 9/11 attacks.

And of course, Putin was quick to seize on this, the first foreign leader to try to reach President Bush by phone, offering to help us and retaliating against what we're seeing as the perpetrators, Al-Qaeda, and, I think, at the popular level, I felt right from the beginning of my time there a feeling that the Russian people wanted a closer partnership with the West. They wanted to continue on the path of reform that had been started by Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and that part of my mission was to talk up the idea of a closer partnership, even an alliance, with a small 'a', we weren't ready to make it a treaty, but an alliance with the United States, an alliance with NATO, as the basis for the kind of strategic partnership that could make the changes at the end of the Cold War truly irreversible.

So, I gave lots of speeches. I was sought out everywhere I went by the media, invited all over the country to give speeches, and I was always accentuating the common interest, and even the common values, that could form the basis for this strategic partnership. But it was not too long after I started my tour of duty in 2001 that President Putin made clear that moving westward was not necessarily the direction he wanted to take Russia. I mean, right when I arrived in the summer of 2001, Russia was already in the throes of a battle over the independent TV media, and Putin was clearly moving to control and effectively muzzle the

more independent TV stations, including NTV. I gave lots of speeches on the importance of independent media, which I think caught the Kremlin's eye, that I was maybe a bit more of a campaigner for our values than previous ambassadors.

But the attacks on the media were just the first of a series of steps by Putin to begin to roll back a lot of the changes that had taken place in the '90s, to begin to put some pressure on the assistance and democratization programs that the U.S. government was running through our embassy. And it wasn't too long before I started to warn of a growing values gap between the United States and Russia, between the West and Russia, and that this could undermine the basis for the strategic partnership that both of our countries really needed and, I thought, both of our peoples really wanted.

So, started good; Bush and Putin, I think, had a reasonably good relationship when they first had their initial meetings. At the end of 2001, there was even this very warm and friendly meeting at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, as well as an equally warm meeting on the margins of the APEC Summit and in Shanghai. But it was becoming clear that Putin was much more in a transactional mode. The idea of shared interests, shared values, he took as largely rhetoric, and he was looking for quid pro quos rather than thinking in a more lofty fashion about a strategic partnership with the United States and the West.

Jill Dougherty

It's hard, I think, to put your finger on exactly when things changed, and as you pointed out, there were a lot of different factors, but when you mentioned 2001 and 9/11, I was there at the time and I remember exactly what you're talking about, Russians coming up to the embassy, leaving little gifts, and there was real grief and I think solidarity with the United States.

But then, and this is before you came to Moscow, you were at that point the ambassador to NATO, but the ... NATO's bombing of Belgrade happened in, what was that, '99, and I remember the front of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in a very different situation. People were protesting. There was a lot of anger, and I even remember that period where there were a lot of Russian friends who, up to that point, had been, I'd say, maybe not pro-Western, but they were certainly open to the West and cooperation, and a curtain went down. It changed almost overnight.

So, I guess, what do you remember from your perspective at that time of the bombing of Belgrade and the Kosovo war, as you mentioned? And do you understand why Russia reacted so vehemently to what happened?

Ambassador Vershbow

I do remember that very well, though I was in Brussels. But working with the Russians was a part of my portfolio and how the U.S. and the other partners tried to work this Kosovo crisis. There was, remember, the Contact Group, with the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States and Russia trying to lead diplomatic efforts to solve the problem of the ethnic cleansing and the mushrooming humanitarian crisis with hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding

into Macedonia and other countries. So, I definitely was engaged on the Russian front, and we saw lots of visits by Madeleine Albright and Strobe Talbott to NATO, and looking back, it clearly was an important milestone in the downward evolution of the relationship, which kind of reached its nadir with Putin's speech in 2007 to the Munich Security Conference, where he basically made clear he was writing off cooperation with the West and moving to a much more confrontational stance. And we had the invasion of Georgia the year after and then the Orange Revolution, the Maidan in Ukraine and the invasion of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea.

But, at the time, I think we thought we'd kind of managed the Kosovo issue, maybe more than is seen with the benefit of hindsight now. The Russians clearly wanted to be part of the team as the crisis began to unfold in 1998. As part of the Contact Group, they were pretty much in full agreement with the diplomatic strategy, which was to put the pressure on Milosevic to end the ethnic cleansing, agree to a political solution, grant autonomy to Kosovo, and – here was the less agreed point – agree to an international peacekeeping force on the ground in Kosovo to enforce the deal.

So, the diplomacy went on for many months. It culminated in a final showdown at the French city of Rambouillet, and at that event, the Russians made clear they were not going to insist that Milosevic accept the peacekeeping force, and we, to our regret, parted ways. U.S. and the NATO allies went through with the threat to use force to compel Milosevic to accept the peacekeeping force, and Russia and we agreed to disagree.

And what was irritating for the Russians was the fact that NATO decided that it had no choice, given the humanitarian disaster that was taking place, to act even without the explicit authorization of the United Nations Security Council, which, of course, meant working around, circumventing Russia's veto in the Security Council. And they were clearly upset. Foreign Minister Primakov famously turned his plane around when he heard that the bombing had begun, and there was the protest outside the embassy in Moscow, as you said. But as I said, we thought we had it handled pretty well within a few weeks.

We assured the Russians that this was kind of an exception. We didn't disrespect their status as a Security Council member with a veto. This was extreme circumstances when hundreds of thousands of people could've died. And we pointed out to the Russians that they had voted on five or six other resolutions which did accept that this was a threat to international peace and security, which is the UN buzzword for justifying the use of force.

So, we said, you agreed implicitly that force was allowed, so let's look forward and try to find a solution together, and they did. Yeltsin, I think, still trusted Bill Clinton and agreed that Russia would actually help to try to persuade Milosevic to give in with the help of Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Ahtisaari we were able to bring the air campaign to a successful end in less than three months. And Russians helped with the diplomacy. They also then agreed to put their own troops under NATO command on the ground in Kosovo. So, it was a rough patch, but we thought we'd limited the damage and kind of were able to keep cooperation with Russia on track.

What I think happened in subsequent years, however, maybe magnified the negative view of these events in Russia, and certainly among the security elite that formed Putin's power base, because when we attacked Iraq in 2003, we did it again without a UN Security Council authorization and so it wasn't a one-off, as we had assured the Russian leadership. It was, in fact, becoming a habit to circumvent the Russians' Security Council veto, and so that, plus other issues that began to undermine trust, such as missile defense.

Of course, for me, the biggest watershed event was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which is at the end of 2004, when I think Putin began to feel that all the West's talk of partnership was a smokescreen for a cynical plot to undermine Russia, to deprive it of its rightful domination over its neighbors, and even to bring about color revolutions all over the former Soviet space, including in Russia itself and ultimately topple the Putin regime.

So, Kosovo became part of this very hostile narrative, sort of the narrative of Western betrayal of Russia, and does, now, loom much larger in Russian rhetoric, right up to the present day. But I don't recall hearing all that much about it when I was ambassador, which was just two years after the bombing of Belgrade, so I think the passage of time has made them hate what we did even more than they did at the time.

Jill Dougherty

I don't think we can *not* talk about NATO expansion. That is something that has bedeviled the relationship almost since it happened. If anything, it's worse right now. Russia is furious, has been and still is, and there's division, even in the United States, among experts and Russia-watchers and others as to whether it was a good idea and you're the perfect person to ask about this because you were the ambassador to NATO. So where do you come down on this, really? And I know it's always a balancing act, but what do you say?

Ambassador Vershbow

Well, I'm a great believer that NATO enlargement was the right thing to do, particularly in the context of the events immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I was very much involved in it before I went as ambassador to NATO, when I was working at the National Security Council in the mid-'90s, during the Clinton administration. And I was part of what was called the "Troika" with Daniel Fried, Nick Burns, who later was succeeded by Steve Pifer, a lot of familiar names who basically, at the direction of President Clinton and Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor, kind of developed a roadmap for NATO enlargement, which was a two-track strategy. It was about enlarging NATO to kind of rectify the wrongs of Yalta and bring the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe into the Western family, into the institutions of the liberal order. "Europe, whole and free," all these wonderful slogans that have real historical meaning. But it was a two-track strategy which involved, together with NATO enlargement, a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia.

And the policy was worked out with our NATO allies and pursued quite deliberately to ensure that there was a place for Russia that would recognize its strategic importance. That was the

NATO-Russia Founding Act, signed in 1997. The creation of a permanent council, now called the NATO-Russia Council. And it was actually Putin who pushed for upgrading the NATO-Russia partnership during my time as ambassador when there was a NATO-Russia summit meeting in Rome, which issued a sequel to the NATO-Russia Founding Act and agreed that this permanent council would become not a bilateral, NATO-against-Russia, but a council of twenty sovereign states, equal states, trying to work together to address European security together.

So, I think the beginning of NATO enlargement, including the first round in the late '90s with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and the second round when the three Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia came in, was handled very well, and while the Russians didn't like NATO, they didn't like NATO enlargement, I think they recognized we had gone the extra mile, even including assurances that we're not going to put nuclear weapons in the territory of new members, that we are going to limit the size of conventional deployments, and rely more on reinforcement and interoperability. So, I think we worked it out well.

Where I think we made mistakes was later on. And here, I think the Bush administration pushed the issue, not of actual membership but of just putting Ukraine and Georgia into the on-deck circle for membership in a thing called the Membership Action Plan. But pushing for that in 2008, so just a few years after the Orange Revolution, and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and failing to get the rest of the allies to support what we were trying to do, just arriving at the summit saying we want this, and finding that the allies were just as opposed as Putin, who was in attendance at the summit meeting in Bucharest, I think that was very counterproductive, and it may have fueled Russian skepticism of, not just of NATO but of partnership with the West.

But I still think that if you're looking for the causes of the breakdown in relations, which are, indeed, at their lowest point since the height of the Cold War, no doubt about that, I point to other factors, including Kosovo, including Iraq, including our abrogation of the ABM Treaty and pursuit of missile defense, which we were able to show technically was not really directed against Russia, but we didn't do a very good job of handling the Russians, and it's still an irritant to this day.

I think NATO enlargement, particularly the early part of it, has become a central part of this revisionist narrative, but as I said, I think we handled it pretty well, and it was, in any case, strategically the right thing to do for countries that we had abandoned in 1945. It was important to bring them into the Western family, but to do it in a way that didn't alienate Russia. And I think for a time we succeeded in that regard.

Jill Dougherty

There is this theory, I think it's basically a Russian idea, which is, at the end of the Cold War, instead of expanding NATO or anything like that, that there should have been a complete rethinking of the relationship between Russia and the West and that there should have been some sort of an overarching security structure brought in. That there was no need for NATO

anymore because Russia was no longer a threat. You know, of course, this angle very well. What do you think of that?

Ambassador Vershbow

Well, I was involved in the decision and I think still it was the right one, that we had an organization that was very effective, which had shown in earlier periods that it was able to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances and that, given the fragility of the situation at the end of the Cold War and the potential for the Yugoslavias, where the opening up could become violent, including the breakup of the Soviet Union itself, that it was better to build on and adapt the institutions we had in a way that would be inclusive, would bring Russia into a common security architecture, as we like to say. And of course, it wasn't only about NATO. There were efforts in those days, in the early '90s, to adapt the Helsinki process, the CSCE, which was renamed the OSCE, to give it more of an operational character.

And this was the one organization where Russia and all countries in Europe all the way out to Central Asia were full members. And there was an effort to kind of energize the OSCE. Got off to a rocky start at the Budapest Summit in '94 when Yeltsin gave the infamous "Cold Peace" speech. But, I think, over the years, we did equip the OSCE to be much more effective in overseeing elections and doing post-conflict diplomacy and implementation of peace agreements and, of course, defending human rights and promoting open economies, since the Helsinki accords had three baskets. So, that became a useful adjunct, but I think the reformed and adapted NATO was essential. And we did everything to kind of turn the original mantra of NATO inside out.

Remember, people used to say that NATO was about keeping the Americans in, keeping the Russians out, and keeping the Germans down. Well, it suddenly became an instrument for bringing the Russians in and building a lasting security partnership. I still think that's a goal we should pursue, even though our relationships are so bad now; it's sort of just a vision beyond the horizon, but things could change. And I think ultimately trying again, maybe doing a little bit better with this NATO-Russia partnership could be part of a restoration of normal relations, even now with Putin still in power, or when he departs the scene.

Jill Dougherty

You mentioned human rights. And I know the Bush administration criticized the Clinton administration for too much attention to that issue, but how do you square that? How do you balance the respect for human rights, protection of human rights, and raw U.S. national security interests?

Ambassador Vershbow

It's a very difficult issue. And I've been involved in different times kind of trying to find the right balance because I started my career in the late '70s, I worked on the Soviet Desk, was involved in the defense of the rights of Soviet Jews to emigrate as things began to open up under Gorbachev. I was part of the human rights working group with former Assistant

Secretary of State Richard Schifter, trying to build a more cooperative approach to human rights, but it's always been difficult.

The Bush administration, when I was ambassador, did deliberately tread fairly lightly on human rights, more so than the Clinton administration; the Bush Freedom Agenda was several years into the future. I think the judgment was that with Russia also a victim of terrorism, homegrown terrorism in particular, although there were links to international terrorist networks, to the Chechen terrorists, that we should highlight the solidarity and the shared threats and challenges, and not harp too much on the brutality that they were applying in trying to end the Chechen conflict.

But, of course, it was not just what we said but what we were doing, and I think the Bush administration continued a lot of the programs – all the programs until the Russians turned them off – that had been launched in the 1990s, some by the Bush '41 administration, but mainly under Clinton, to promote democratization, rule of law, judicial reform, to help fledgling NGOs kind of learn how to organize and fundraise and, you know, promote their agenda, whether it was environmental protection or labor rights or women's rights.

And I think it was a very receptive audience when we started for those programs, even during the Putin years, and that's, I think, one reason why I felt it was my duty to continue to talk about democracy and human rights in my public statements and interviews because we had courageous Russians fighting for the Western values that we held dear.

I think it was the programs that ultimately began to get under the skin of Mr. Putin and Mr. Patrushev, who was the head of the FSB in those days. I think they began to view these assistance programs as an effort to undermine the Putin system, to promote opposition to Putin's leadership, and so, we saw, one by one, these programs shut down, in some cases, or the Peace Corps was told to leave Russia. It was a very sad moment because they were very popular, mainly teaching English or small business development in the hinterland, but the Russians said they weren't wanted anymore, not by the locals, but by Putin.

I think it's now clear that in today's relationship with this hostile view of the West as trying to undermine Russia, we have very little ability to influence events. We don't have these tools that we had in the '90s and the early part of the century, and we have to be realistic about how much we can accomplish. I think we have to be careful not to apply a strict linkage between negotiations on arms control, or trade and human rights, because we may end up tying our own hands much more tightly than is in our own interest.

But to the extent that we can still reach out through media, through social media, through what academic exchanges still do continue, sort of at a low level, even without the big U.S.-funded programs running any longer, we can hopefully get through to this younger generation, try to convince them that the West isn't Russia's enemy, that we're not trying to weaken Russia or deprive Russia of its status in the world, and that we have a lot more in common than divides us, whether it's dealing with pandemics or climate change.

There's plenty of things that Russians and Americans should be doing together, and maybe a younger generation, which may be showing a little bit of signs of restiveness, if you look at the protests in Khabarovsk or the support for Navalny, there may be a market for closer exchanges a few years down the road. So, we should try to keep the door open but be realistic about how much we can influence internal change in Russia.

Jill Dougherty

Let's talk about Putin a little bit because I think there are so many people, at least in the United States, who have this image of President Putin as running everything, he is the man in charge, and sometimes I think he wants to give that impression, but you've seen him, you've met him, you've observed him. You were there at the beginning of his presidency. How would you explain the power dynamic in Russia? How much does Putin actually control? If he doesn't control everything, who does? And you mentioned, early on in our discussion, his KGB background, security services, etc. Can you explain some of this dynamic?

Ambassador Vershbow

Sure. I'll give my version. There's a lot of theories. It's not a totally transparent system. But first, my impressions of Putin the man in those early years was when I would see him mainly during high-level visits. Ambassadors historically don't have real direct relations with the president, or with the general secretary, in earlier years, so I mainly saw him during high-level visits, but I saw him in public engagements and talked to people who did see him in different contexts, and I think he was impressive right from the early days with just how smart and self-confident he was in talking about the issues; he could kind of dominate the conversation, put his interlocutor on the defensive. He flaunted his knowledge, his superior knowledge, of the issues, but also, I think, it was clear that he relied too heavily on his intelligence services for information, a lot of which was fairly slanted.

But it was clear that he believed that Russia could only be ruled, could only be kept stable, with a strong centralized state, with a strong hand, that democracy wasn't suitable for a multiethnic, sprawling country like Russia. And he certainly viewed the West, I think, in zero-sum terms. There was a pragmatic streak to him. And he wasn't reckless. He knew his strengths and weaknesses. But as I was saying before, he did, I think, become convinced, certainly by the time I left Russia in 2005, that the West was trying to weaken and marginalize Russia, and that Russia had the right to strike back with any means available.

So, the system that he's put together is sometimes called a "kleptocracy" because, I think, having purged a lot of the oligarchs, the big business tycoons who exploited the chaos and the sell-off of the clapped-out Soviet economy in the '90s, having purged most of them, or tamed them, by setting the example of incarcerating Mikhail Khodorkovsky, he's basically assembled a new inner circle of new oligarchs who are all veterans of the intelligence services, old colleagues, who really form a kind of a directorate.

But Putin is clearly the decider. He's the first among equals. He plays, sometimes, rival power lords off against one another. He definitely doesn't trust his own people. He doesn't want to

have any real elections or real opposition. He believes, you know, "father knows best," that the strong leader and strong state basically decide what's in the interest of the people, will do enough to keep them economically content, and anybody who challenges the system will be dealt with quite severely, even with extreme prejudice as was the case with Boris Nemtsov.

So, it's not quite a single personalist dictatorship, but he's definitely the first among equals and calls the shot and uses the wealth of the nation, which is divvied up among these different cronies and clans, beneath each of these cronies as a way of kind of keeping everybody in check, playing them off against one another and holding the Sword of Damocles over them; if they misbehave, he'll do to them what he's done to Khodorkovsky and other enemies.

Jill Dougherty

I saw a quote from President Putin recently, where he said he believes essentially that the relationship will be bad for the foreseeable future. And as we know, he can be president legally until 2036.

Ambassador Vershbow

Mm-hmm (affirmative). At least.

Jill Dougherty

That's true. But when you talk with people in Moscow, many people say they have concluded that it's going to be sanctions, followed by more sanctions, followed by more sanctions, without any particular policy, but they're in it for the long run. And Putin, obviously, it appears, has concluded that he can get through that period. So, what is he thinking? Does he have a strategy, a long-term strategy?

Ambassador Vershbow

I'm not sure he has a strategy for getting out of this impasse. First of all, I think he's convinced himself, and a lot of the Russian elite have convinced themselves, that the West is to blame. They kind of don't do a very good job in looking themselves in the mirror when sort of looking at seminal events like the invasion of Georgia, even more so the annexation of Crimea, flagrantly breaking all the rules, changing borders by force and then lying about it, pretending that they don't have troops in Eastern Ukraine when there's thousands there, and the commanders are all Russian officers with their insignias peeled off.

So, they believe their own propaganda, but I think it goes deeper than that because I think given Putin's view that the West is really out to get them, the West is out to deny Russia its seat at the top table, that we're using democracy and color revolutions to undermine regimes in the former Soviet Union and in Russia itself, that we reject Russia's rightful claim to a sphere of influence in which it can dictate to its neighbors, that therefore, the West is to blame and the current deadlock is not going to be easily broken.

I think he actually uses this narrative that the Russians call the "Besieged Fortress" narrative as also a tool for maintaining his tight political control, for justifying the stagnant economy by

blaming the West for that and, of course, blaming the West for everything that has happened to Russia for the last 30 years, or going back even farther, with this whole revisionist history about World War II.

So, I think for reasons more on the Russian side than on our side, the current deadlock looks like it will go on for some time, and it might even be convenient to Putin. But I think there may be pressures from within, even in the next couple of years, to at least deescalate a little bit. As I said, the economy is stagnant; the sanctions haven't crippled Russia, but they've definitely hurt. There's very little foreign investment. It's all been compounded by the low oil price, but still, the Russian economy is in the doldrums and standards of living are definitely falling.

Also, his efforts to dominate his neighbors aren't going quite as well these days as they may have seemed to be going. Ukraine is still in a kind of stalemate in terms of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine continues to, more and more, orient itself towards the West, and I think psychologically, Russia has lost Ukraine; it's lost the Ukrainian people by its brutal treatment and propaganda and disinformation on top of that. Belarus is now an unexpected headache.

Russia doesn't want to legitimize another people's revolution, but it doesn't know quite how to steer events in a way that would keep Belarus under control or at least manageable. And now in the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, Turkey has staked out a strong strategic position. And while Russia got what it wanted in the short term with troops on the ground to separate the parties, it's perceived as having basically abandoned Armenia and let the Turks establish a strategic foothold in the former Soviet space, which is going to encourage other of Russia's neighbors to begin to look elsewhere for support than to Moscow.

So, a lot of reasons why he may be looking for a way to deescalate. He knows Biden isn't going to give him a free pass the way Trump did on interfering in our democracy. Biden will reunite NATO and probably forge a tougher policy on Russia, I think, if I read his statements correctly. So, Putin may be looking for a way out and that this could give a little bit more cover for the forces that are still there within Russia, kind of keeping their heads down, to start advocating a more constructive relationship with the West. So, it may not happen until 2036 - as you said, Putin could be president and he could be stubborn and not want to take any chances - but I think somehow, something's got to give a little sooner than that, and we should be ready for that. We should be showing Russia that sanctions *will* be lifted if the conditions that we set are met.

In the case of Ukraine, it's getting out of the Donbas, reintegrating that region into Ukraine, and agreeing to disagree for some years on Crimea. We're not going to solve everything at once, but I always say Donbas is the litmus test. But if he does that, we should be very quick, with our European allies, to lift the sanctions and show that virtue is rewarded, and over time, maybe we could start a virtuous cycle that would get us back to the good old days of the 1990s and the NATO-Russia partnership.

Jill Dougherty

I'm going to ask you about diplomacy in general, because your portfolio has been very heavy. I mean, these are the biggest issues, NATO, security, etc., and yet, I have an image of you at Spaso House, the Ambassador's residence in Moscow, and I think you were playing the drums, as I remember, at an event. And there were always ... the outreach to Russians always had to deal with culture, and so, I'm just wondering in your time in Moscow, how do you see the role of an ambassador balancing these very heavy and serious issues with the outreach to the people, the cultural understanding, which is so big and major between Russia and the United States. How did you personally balance that?

Ambassador Vershbow

Well, that kind of outreach is what makes the job a lot of fun, and I think it also makes an ambassador more effective, that makes an embassy as a whole, because it's not just one person; it's the whole team that can create a more positive impression of America, of America's role in the world. And just kind of find so many ways where our two peoples have points of contact that we might not even have been aware of.

So, I really enjoyed, first of all, traveling around the country, seeing the diversity of Russian culture and the splendors of Siberia and all these sorts of things. But meeting with the people, particularly with students, people who had traveled abroad, had been, perhaps, on one of our exchange programs, and loved to explain how it changed their perspective. Some people said it changed their lives. They decided to start a small business when they saw how mom-and-pop stores are the kind of engine of development in small-town America.

But also, the cultural opportunities were marvelous and having a resource like Spaso House through the ambassador's residence was too great to pass up. So, we had monthly concerts, mostly with Russian musicians, sometimes traveling American jazz artists would play there, even got my mother-in-law involved. She had a musical troupe in Boston that did cabaret and show tunes, and they came over, and they were a big hit.

But mostly it was Russian musicians, both jazz and classical, which created an opportunity to bring people from all different parts of Russian society together with all the different agencies represented in our embassy and in the wider American ex-pat community to get to know each other, to enjoy the same music, and then discover that somebody working at the Ministry of Justice and somebody from the American Chamber of Commerce had a shared love of opera, and then they became good friends, and this was a time when anything was really possible in this domain.

As I mentioned, I got invitations all over the country. I gave long speeches to universities. I visited small business ventures. I visited the secret nuclear sites that we were helping to clean up and prevent loose nukes. We took American artists and musicians on the road for tours in the Urals, and lots of things, and the whole embassy was very much involved in this.

And of course, for me as a wannabe-drummer to even play with the great Igor Butman Big Band at his club or at Spaso House was sort of gravy. And I think it puts a human face on the American ambassador. He's not just there telling them to shape up on the rule of law, but he likes to let his hair down and play some old Charles Mingus tunes with the Igor Butman Big Band.

Jill Dougherty

Well, let's hope that there will be more of that in the relationship. And I want to thank you very much, sincerely, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, it was really a pleasure, and as usual, I learned a lot and appreciate it very much.

Ambassador Vershbow

No, it was my pleasure. It's jogging my memory. We'll have to do this again sometime.

Jill Dougherty

Would love to. Thank you.