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Putin-Bush jr. talks



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Index

1.	INTRODUCTION	3
2.	PUTIN AND UKRAINE.....	5
2.1	Warned consequences.....	5
3.	PUTIN AND NATO EXPANSION.....	6
4.	BUSH AND PUTIN AND THE EU.....	8
5.	ABOUT THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES.....	10
6.	CONCLUSIONS.....	11

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Security Archive has recently got some transcripts of conversations and meetings held between Putin and George W. Bush which reveal how these top-level relationships work, how they talk to each other and how those relationships mutate in time. The conversations reflected expand from 2001-2008:

date	participants	brief summary (topics touched)
June 16, 2001	The President (George W. Bush), Condoleezza Rice, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter); President Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Rushaylo, Interpreter	Discussion on strategic stability, the ABM Treaty, NATO enlargement, the situation in Chechnya, Iran, North Korea, and the Russian economy/WTO membership.
July 6, 2001	The President (George W. Bush); President Vladimir Putin, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter)	Telephone conversation regarding the President's birthday, strategic stability arrangements, Iraq sanctions, and the situation in the Balkans/Macedonia.
September 12, 2001	The President (George W. Bush); President Vladimir Putin, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter)	Telephone conversation following the 9/11 attacks; discussion on cooperation against terrorism and Russia's show of solidarity.
October 21, 2001	The President (George W. Bush), Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter); Vladimir Putin, Igor Ivanov, Vladimir Rushaylo	Meeting in Shanghai touching on global terrorism, the Taliban, offensive and defensive weapons (ABM Treaty), Jackson-Vanik Amendment, and the situation in Georgia.
November 8, 2001	The President (George W. Bush); President Vladimir	Telephone conversation preparing for the Washington/Texas summit;

	Putin, Afanasenko (Interpreter)	Peter	discussion on missile defense, the ABM Treaty, and counter-terrorism cooperation in Afghanistan.
November 13, 2001	The President (George W. Bush), Donald Rumsfeld, Andrew Card, Condoleezza Rice; Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Rushaylo, Igor Ivanov, Dmitriy Medvedev	Expanded meeting discussing a new alliance, NATO-Russia relations, nonproliferation (Iran/Pakistan), biological/chemical weapons, and the war in Afghanistan.	
April 2, 2002	The President (George W. Bush); President Vladimir Putin	Telephone conversation regarding U.S. poultry exports (chickens), Russia-NATO relations (at-20 mechanism), strategic offensive reductions, and the Middle East conflict.	
June 27, 2002	The President (George W. Bush), Condoleezza Rice; President Vladimir Putin, Vladimir Rushaylo, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter)	Meeting in Canada regarding Iran's nuclear cycle, biological weapons, and the presence of Al-Qaida killers in Georgia (Pankisi Gorge).	
March 18, 2003	The President (George W. Bush); President Vladimir Putin, Peter Afanasenko (Interpreter)	Telephone conversation regarding the impending war in Iraq, disagreements over military force, regime change, and the Treaty on the reduction of strategic potentials.	
September 16, 2005	The President (George W. Bush), Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Steve Hadley; Vladimir Putin,	Discussion on Iran's nuclear program, the WTO, relations with Cuba and China, and the development of small nuclear weapons.	

	Sergey Lavrov, Sergey Kislyak	
April 6, 2008	The President (George W. Bush), Bill Burns, Condoleezza Rice, Stephen Hadley; Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, Yuri Ushakov	Final meeting in Sochi regarding missile defense sites in Poland/Czech Republic, START, NATO enlargement (Ukraine and Georgia), and Iran.

What takes can we pick up? Here some of them.

2. PUTIN AND UKRAINE.

Putin speaks about the possibilities and implications of Ukraine joining NATO. The red line regarding NATO and confrontation. The most explicit and direct warning occurs at a meeting in April 2008. Putin states clearly that Ukraine's entry into NATO would create a "field of conflict" and a "long-term confrontation" between Russia and the United States. Putin questions the logic of such accession, arguing that the only motive would be to cement Ukraine's status in the Western world, but that this would bring benefits to neither NATO nor the United States.

Putin presents Ukraine not as a natural nation, but as an "artificial country created in Soviet times." His arguments include:

- **"Gifted" territory:** As early as 2001, Putin expressed frustration, saying that Ukraine—having been "part of Russia for centuries"—was voluntarily "given away" by the Soviets, something he called "unprecedented." In 2008, he reiterates that Ukraine acquired territories from Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Russia (including Crimea in 1954), forming a complex state.
- **Cultural and demographic division:** Putin highlights that 17 million Russians live in Ukraine (one third of the population). He describes a deep cultural divide between the west (where Hungarian is spoken and customs are different) and the east (closer to Russia), asserting that a large part of the population views NATO as a "hostile organization."

2.1 Warned consequences.

Putin warns of specific consequences if Ukraine's entry into NATO is forced:

- **Breakup of the country:** Because of divergent views among the population about NATO, Putin warns that "the country could simply split."
- **Military threat:** Russia sees NATO's expansion as a direct threat that would entail the deployment of bases and new military systems in close proximity.
- **Russian reaction:** Putin suggests that Russia would work actively to prevent such enlargement by relying on anti-NATO forces within Ukraine, creating constant problems.

In sum, Putin maintained that Ukraine's accession to NATO was unacceptable for Russia due to historical ties, the presence of a Russian population, and the security threat posed by having the alliance's military infrastructure on its border-warning that such a step could lead to the fragmentation of the Ukrainian state.

3. PUTIN AND NATO EXPANSION.

In the declassified conversations between Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush, Putin's stance on NATO's eastward expansion evolves from questioning its necessity—at times even suggesting Russia's integration—into severe warnings about the security consequences along Russia's borders.

Below is a summary of what Putin told President Bush about the alliance's enlargement:

1) Questioning the need and a sense of exclusion (2001)

In the early meetings, Putin was not openly hostile, but rather sceptical about the logic of expansion if Russia was no longer an enemy.

- **Why is it necessary?** Putin asked directly why NATO enlargement was needed if Russia, as a "European" country and "not an enemy," was being left out.
- **The 1954 Soviet attempt:** He reminded Bush that the Soviet Union had applied to join NATO in 1954 and was rejected for specific reasons (lack of agreement on Austria and Germany, a totalitarian regime, lack of cooperation on disarmament). Putin argued that by 2001 "all these conditions have been met," suggesting that "perhaps Russia could be an ally."
- **Isolation:** He expressed frustration that when NATO expands without Russia, his country "feels excluded," and that the real problem is how to associate Russia

with the “civilized world” when the alliance grows and Moscow has “nothing to say about it.”

2) Cooperation as an alternative mechanism (2001–2002)

For a time, Putin appeared to seek ways to mitigate expansion through direct cooperation.

- **Optimism about the NATO–Russia Council:** In 2001 and 2002, Putin showed optimism about building a new relationship (“NATO–Russia at 20”), viewing it as a positive step and a “mechanism” to resolve tensions ahead of key NATO summits, such as Prague.
- **Interest in stability:** He believed that launching these cooperation mechanisms (the Rome summit) would help reduce internal political pressure in Russia regarding NATO.

3) The final warning: Ukraine and Georgia as existential threats (2008)

By 2008, Putin’s tone had changed sharply, warning that expansion to Russia’s immediate borders—specifically Ukraine and Georgia—would bring military and political conflict.

- **Long-term confrontation:** Putin stressed that bringing a country like Ukraine into NATO would create a “field of conflict” and a “long-term confrontation” between Russia and the United States.
- **Direct military threat:** He argued that enlargement creates the threat of military bases and new weapons systems deployed close to Russia, which would compel Moscow to react.
- **Georgia and a military “solution”:** On Georgia, Putin warned that the “NATO shield” would tempt Georgian leaders to try to restore territorial integrity (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) through military force rather than peaceful means, leading to guerrilla warfare.
- **Internal division:** He reiterated that forcing Ukraine’s entry, given its complex demographic and cultural makeup, could cause the country to “simply split.”

Conclusion: Putin moved from asking Bush, “why not us?” to telling him, in effect, “if you go in there, there will be war,” arguing that enlargement into Ukraine and Georgia would not increase security, but would instead guarantee instability in the region.

4. BUSH AND PUTIN AND THE EU.

Based on the documents provided, explicit mentions of the "European Union" as an institution are limited but revealing in terms of its diplomatic utility. Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush discuss Europe mainly through three lenses: cooperation in the Middle East, management of the Iranian nuclear crisis (the EU-3), and bilateral relations with key nations such as France, Germany, and Italy.

Below is a breakdown of what is stated and where they converge or diverge:

1) The European Union as a framework for cooperation (the "Quartet")

Putin explicitly mentions the EU in the context of the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

- **Putin's position:** He says Russia shares the U.S. approach and believes they should continue working "within the framework of the four: Russia, the U.S., the UN, and the EU."
- **Bush's position:** He thanks Putin for his interest and concern in finding a peaceful solution, though he expresses frustration about the criticism he receives and about the situation with Arafat. Bush implicitly accepts this multilateral framework, even if his approach is more sceptical toward certain actors.

2) Assessing the "EU-3" and Iran

There is a significant exchange about the role of the European powers (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, known as the EU-3) in nuclear negotiations with Iran.

- **Disagreement about Germany:** Bush offers a critical view of European cohesion on Iran. He tells Putin that "Germany seems to be the weakest link in the EU-3," suggesting that the Iranians exploit that weakness and then turn toward Russia.
- **Putin's observation:** Putin notes that the Iranians have expressed a desire to continue negotiations with the EU-3, which he considers "positive." However, he had previously pointed out that Germany had opened a line of credit for Iran, complicating international pressure.

3) Tensions over France and European public opinion

Bush and Putin have notable exchanges about anti-American sentiment in Europe, especially in the run-up to the Iraq war.

- **Bush's complaint:** Bush is frustrated with Paris. He says that "in Paris there is an anti-American sentiment" and notes it has been difficult for him to manage the "anti-French reaction" in the United States. Bush criticizes leaders who inflame these passions with slogans and attacks.
- **Putin's response:** Putin thanks him for the call and avoids criticizing Bush directly, prioritizing the bilateral relationship ("personal relations are more important to me") over any political divergences Russia might share with France or Germany on Iraq.

4) Russia as a European entity

- **Identity:** Putin reminds Bush that "Russia is European and multiethnic, like the United States," using this as an argument for possible integration or a closer alliance.
- **Differentiation:** At the same time, Putin draws a clear line when it suits him. On the ABM Treaty, he tells Bush bluntly: "As for Germany, I am the President of Russia, not of Germany, nor of France," indicating that Russia's position was fundamentally different from that of its European partners.

5) The political use of Italy

Putin leverages his relationship with European leaders for tactical purposes.

- He proposes holding a Russia–NATO summit in Rome specifically to help Prime Minister Berlusconi, who was "in a difficult political situation" and under "heavy pressure from his left." Putin suggests this to showcase Italy's importance on the international stage, seeking Bush's support for the political manoeuvre.

Conclusion and analogy

In summary, Bush tends to view Europeans with some suspicion (as "nervous" about his presidency or as sources of anti-American sentiment), whereas Putin views them instrumentally: useful for multilateral legitimacy (the Quartet) or political manoeuvring (Italy), but ultimately disposable when it comes to Russia's strategic security (ABM).

One could say that for Bush and Putin, Europe functioned at that moment like a billiard table: they were not playing against the table (the EU); they were using it to bank shots—using Italy to improve NATO's image, or striking Germany as Iran's weak link—and to position their own balls (national interests) where they wanted them.

5. ABOUT THE INTELLIGENCE SERVICES.

Mentions of intelligence services in the Bush–Putin conversations revolve around three main axes: intense counterterrorism cooperation after 9/11, frictions over reciprocity in intelligence sharing, and personal references to Putin's past in the KGB.

Below is a detailed summary of what is said about intelligence services:

1) Intensive cooperation after 9/11

In the weeks following the 2001 attacks, the conversations highlight an unprecedented level of collaboration.

- **Active involvement:** In October 2001, Putin explicitly stated that "the intelligence services of our countries have been very involved together," and that Russia had provided the United States with "a lot of information."
- **New mechanisms:** Putin mentioned the arrival of "new people" and special services for "intelligence exchange," specifically to coordinate weapons and operations with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.
- **Tracking threats:** In 2001, Bush assured Putin that the FBI was tracking al-Qaeda cells in the United States and promised: "I can assure you that if we have intelligence about a threat in Russia, we will immediately tell you specific information."

2) Complaints about lack of reciprocity and legal barriers

Despite cooperation, there were significant tensions over the flow of information from Washington to Moscow.

- **Putin's complaint:** Putin complained that after he had given instructions to "give them everything we have," U.S. experts withheld information, citing U.S. laws that prohibited sharing it. Putin argued that "Russian intelligence could do a much better job" if it had access to that information.
- **Bush's response:** Bush called the legal excuse unacceptable ("That is an excuse. We must stop this") and assured Putin that if Russia provided information and did not receive it back, he needed to know—adding: "My intention is not to play a game."

3) References to Putin's past as a spy

Putin's Soviet intelligence background is a recurring theme, sometimes treated humorously and sometimes as a credential of competence.

- **Kissinger's remark:** Putin recounted that Henry Kissinger, upon meeting him in St. Petersburg, asked about his background and remarked that "all decent people started in intelligence."
- **Jokes about inspections:** During a discussion about biological weapons and transparency in 2002, Putin joked about inspections, saying: "I was a spy; you won't find anything."

4) Operational risks and leaks

They also discuss the dangers and practical difficulties of intelligence work in the field.

- **Loss of agents:** Putin told Bush that he had "lost agents" because of a leak about the "Afghan Working Group" the previous year, which initially made him suspect forces opposed to U.S.-Russian cooperation.
- **Real-time surveillance:** In the context of Georgia and terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge, Bush asked directly whether Putin had "eyes on them" (visual surveillance/intelligence), and Putin replied that he did.
- **Access to defence sites:** In 2008, regarding missile defence in Eastern Europe, Putin insisted that his "experts" (intelligence/military) needed full access to the sites, not merely to be stationed at the embassy requesting permission to visit—emphasizing the need for continuous monitoring.

In sum, both leaders treat intelligence services as a critical tool of their "new alliance," though Putin expresses frustration when he feels Russian intelligence openness is not matched by the same level of access from the U.S. bureaucracy.

6. CONCLUSIONS.

1 Ukraine.

Putin despise Ukraine and Ukrainians. As a fabricated nation, according to him, it doesn't deserve its very existence. Moreover, it is part of Russia and that's its natural status.

Putin was ready to use pro-Russian groups in Ukraine to instil unrest and divide. And he did.

All this was said seven years Putin entered Abkhazia and Ossetia, thirteen years before he invaded Crimea and 21 years before he tried to topple Kyiv.

Putin is not going to quit. He is determined to continue war in Ukraine until he gets what he wants. No matter the cost.

2 NATO.

Putin thought Russia should be part of NATO. It would be a natural consequence of the end of the cold war. However, he was aware that Russia was not perceived as a partner. The evidence was provided by the way his cooperation with the U.S. regarding the war on terrorism after the attack against the Twin Towers in 2001 was not being paid back in equal terms.

Putin warned Bush about it and complained. It must have been very difficult for FBI and CIA operatives to share intelligence with Russians in such an open way. The culture in Langley and the Department of Justice was far from that after so many years of cold war.

3 European Union.

It is very clear that the EU is seen by both as a cracked union which can be manipulated in their own respective interests.

The lack of a united voice from the EU works in favour of other powers, weakens the EU and hampers its efforts to effectively carry out the influence of its political and financial power.

Seventeen years after these conversations, nothing has changed. The only solution is more political union, less nationalism, unified armed forces, increased intelligence cooperation, the creation of a truly European federal state. If not, member states (including Germany or France) will only be pawns in a chessboard dominated by queens who can move in every direction and as far as they please.

The European Union lacks strength and is sluggish when it comes to finalising trade deals, such as the MERCOSUR agreement, which has taken an astonishing 26 years of negotiations. Disagreement is the norm and there are no procedures to unblock blockades. In a way, it also exposes the weaknesses of democracy, well, the weakness of those exerting democracy and their lack of leadership.

The creation of a shared armed forces is needed but unexpected. Let alone the cooperation among intelligence services.

The EU Intelligence and Situation Centre (IntCen) is part of the European External Action Service (EEAS). It analyses open-source (OSINT) and classified data, operating under an intergovernmental model with voluntary exchange. IntCen

delivers nothing meaningful to the leaders of the EU. National services do not pay any attention to the demands of the IntCen. National services send redacted documents which are nothing more than what a think tank could deliver.

It also weakens the EU greatly. **It will possibly be the very last step in the unification of the EU.** No government is ready to give in its exclusive resources, share or expose them. The EU is not there yet.

There is also the military intelligence component (**there are no armed forces to benefit from it**), working with IntCen within the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity (SIAC) for all-source assessments (EUMS Intelligence Directorate).

The structure is there but it is useless as of today.

4 Importance of personal relationships.

Direct conversations among leaders are key to unravel problems, clarify positions and overcome misunderstandings. Putin and Bush show a high degree of candour and openness in conversations.

These honest conversations are likely to be happening between Putin and Trump, given their personalities and mutual sympathy, which might serve as an indication that **worse consequences in case of misunderstandings could be avoided.**

But this is also a bad sign for the EU leaders, because both might play against the EU interests as a team.

