

“Russia was not all that opposed NATO expansion” Interview with Toby Gati



March 22, 2011

Тоби Гати: Россия не так уж противилась расширению НАТО



Twenty years after the collapse of the USSR, Russian-American relations have, on the one hand, changed greatly, but, on the other, a very powerful inertia, defined by the Cold War, remains to this day. According to many commentators, the chance to build a qualitatively different relationship was missed in the early post-Soviet phase – the first half of the 1990's. In 1993 Toby Gati, a renowned expert on Russia, held the position of Adviser to the President and Senior Director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia at the National Security Council. She was tasked with preparing the first aid package to Moscow by the Clinton Administration and the creation of the US - Russian Commission on Economic Cooperation.

Svetlana Babaeva, RIA Novosti correspondent in Washington, spoke with her.

- You began working in the administration in 1993, when Bill Clinton came to the White House after winning the election against George H. W. Bush. Bush, incidentally, was president for only one term, which is quite unusual and likely speaks of serious errors. Were mistakes made towards Russia that needed to be urgently corrected?

- There have been other presidents who only served one term. The loss of the second term is, as a rule, because of domestic economic difficulties. As for Russia, at the beginning of the Clinton administration, much had already been done and we were not starting from scratch.

During the Bush presidency the USSR ceased to exist, which the American establishment never expected to happen. How could this be – no USSR anymore? The Soviet Union was for us not

just a country, it was an idea. All of U.S. foreign policy was built around the Soviet Union – its military programs, propaganda, relations with other countries. And then, just like that, it's gone!

In essence, what disappeared were the principles on which a huge part of our foreign policy was based. It was necessary to forge new ties, but there was no new understanding or guidance to follow. I remember there was a proposal to organize a meeting with Boris Yeltsin, when he was President of the RSFSR and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. The previous administration said: why? We have Gorbachev. He is the main person and our reliable partner. What we did not realize was that he remained the reliable partner only as long as the Soviet Union existed. But when this country ceased to exist there was instantly a question: who should be the main partner now?

When I see the changes happening now in the Middle East, I am overcome by the same feelings: solid governments, which can suddenly disappear... and then what? We see what events motivate the people there – this is a new chance for them. But for policymakers, a new chance is most often viewed as risky.

- And a big headache.

- Sure. You need to start virtually from scratch, figure out whom to work with, which problems to work on. For 40 years of the Cold War, we thought about the Soviet Union, we knew that the rulers oppressed their own people, but we also knew what was going on with their nuclear weapons. And now? If someone decided to sell chemical or nuclear weapons, would Moscow even know about it? Would we be able to work together to prevent the weapons falling into, say, the hands of criminals? And, I should remind you, at first there were nuclear weapons not only in Russia, but also in several other former republics, now independent countries.

Remember Bush's famous speech in Kyiv in August of 1991, where he urged Ukrainians not to rush into "suicidal nationalism"? Everything was already decided, the Head Councils of the Republics were adopting declarations of sovereignty, while we... We had dreamed of a world without the Soviet Union for so long and when it happened, we said: Oh God, what do we do now?

- But you said that by the time of the Clinton presidency much had already been done.

- There were two main policies: to offer assistance in areas that are critical in the U.S. and the world, for example, in the control of nuclear weapons, and to prevent a post-Yugoslavia scenario in the post-Soviet space. That is to say, that there not be a civil war in Russia.

The Bush administration was also concerned with one more issue – having Russia assume the Soviet debt, believing that if financial arrangements crashed, there would be more chaos. I think it was one of their biggest mistakes. Debt became an enormous burden for the new Russian state; already scarce resources should have been used to help the people. This, as later became clear, was the main problem: we were thinking about the state and about the balance of forces and interests. But for the average Russian, things just got worse. How to explain to people that as a result of a hugely positive event, their life only got worse?

Perhaps we in the U.S. had a very narrow view of Soviet society and we overestimated the Russians' desire to live by our rules. Not even by our rules - because we considered them to be shared rules. But it turns out that even today, according to polls, only a fifth of Russians supports Western values ...

We started with the assumption that the transformation would be quick and that the chaos, which, incidentally, was seen not as chaos but as a transitional period, would soon be replaced by normal life. When, for example, factories started closing, the situation was not seen as a dead end for two reasons related to our own American experience. In the U.S., people are very mobile, they move from state to state in search of work and, also, it is a fact of our history that each generation lives better than the last. Economic turmoil was seen as a temporary phenomenon; we knew that our children will still be better off. Today, Americans are not so sure about this, but back then the belief in ourselves and in our institutions was much stronger. This view was transferred onto Russia.

- But the Clinton team had more than a year between the collapse of the Soviet Union and when they entered the White House to watch and discuss.

- Russia was a priority for President Clinton. Top policymakers talked about it for hours. I remember the following conversation: how do we help Russian old people who were not receiving their pensions? We spent so much on weapons to defend ourselves against the Soviet Union and the pensioners only needed a few tens of millions. (At that time I recall that pensions in Russia were only 15-20 dollars a month.) Receiving their pensions, people could begin to live more calmly... And suddenly someone pipes in: How can we guarantee pensions in Russian, when our seniors have no such guarantee? We have no right to promise more to Russians than to our own people. I can't help but think of the Russian saying "Those with a full stomach can't understand those who are hungry?" And in Russia, there was literally a shortage of food back then...

- Did these objections come from misunderstandings, greed, from the fact that there was something more important, or from problems with Congress?

- There was no question that we needed to help. But there were three main problems. The first was that the United States economy at the start of the Clinton Administration was by no means in great condition. There was not enough money to do everything. Don't forget, we were helping not only Russia but all the post-Soviet republics, and problems were popping up virtually in every sphere.

Problem two was our approach. One must remember that this was the end of the Reagan era and the prevailing thought was: Don't let the government interfere too much. Give them freedom, business will flourish, and the situation will improve much faster - this was the dominant idea. We all know how that worked out later on for America... But back then, this strongly influenced policy. We helped Russia create a banking system and a stock exchange, but creating a regulatory body was optional. The Soviet Union, it was agreed, had so many regulators that it was better to free the Russians from the state.

The third problem was, I think, that we started with completely different assumptions. For example, we are discussing how to build a system of mortgage lending in Russia, we thought that people would take out a mortgage for 20 years and buy a house, then a middle class would develop, which would, in turn, maintain order and democracy. Only we did not take into account that a mortgage system is based on low inflation and a predictable financial and political system.

- But were there not economists who understood the conditions under which financial instruments work?

- You should look at the failures of our economy and draw your own conclusions about economists. When I hear that "in fact the U.S. conspired to weaken Russia," my response is -- nonsense! Our biggest nightmare was the image of a weak Russia turning into Yugoslavia, with a war in the Caucasus and uncontrolled nuclear arms. We had strong fears of such a scenario.

- You are talking about institutions, the banking system. But Republicans believe the biggest mistake of the Clinton administration was that it "favored individuals at the expense of principles."

- Bill and Boris... Compared with the future relationship between Bush and Putin, you could say Yeltsin and Clinton were just acquaintances... Of course, personal trust is very important. It was there. But Clinton was a pragmatist and he loved to solve problems. In Russia, there were a lot of problems where it was possible to do something. He, incidentally, approached domestic problems in the US in the same way. But it is unlikely that immediately after a revolution you can begin to address all global problems right away. You just have to try to make things a little bit better, while a final resolution may take decades.

- Thomas Jefferson said: right after a revolution is the best time to secure the rights of citizens. Afterwards, the need to address the people will disappear. And the people will "forget about their needs and themselves in a singular desire to make money and not think to unite to ensure due respect for their rights." This is exactly what I think happened in Russia. So in some ways, Clinton was right...

- In the United States after the American Revolution, there was a period of weak institutions, but at least there were institutions. And the people, even though they were formally inhabitants of colonies, knew what freedom was. The Soviet Union had no institutions and no freedom, so it seems to me that these periods cannot be compared. To this day we argue about what the founding fathers wanted for America, but on a number of things in the U.S. there is a consensus, in particular, about the Constitution: we do not change ours as quickly as you do and we do not let our system get to a situation like you had in 1993. In the U.S. at the time, there were heated debates: some said that President Yeltsin was right to use force against the Parliament, while others said that this cannot be allowed because it created a precedent for the future. But we were terribly afraid of the Communists...

Just a few months into Clinton's term as President we began hearing the question: Who lost Russia? There is no doubt that if a communist revanche had happened, the Republicans would have said: Bush gave the Russians freedom, and Clinton returned Russia to the Communists. The

issue of support for Russia was thus not just a foreign policy issue, but also a factor in our domestic politics.

And remember, the threat of revanche looked different back then. Not the way it is perceived now after almost 20 years. Generally, during the 1990's there was a fear that the Soviet Union could reappear.

And if we're talking about mistakes, a serious omission on Russia's part was not to reform the judicial system and the law enforcement agencies. And our mistake was that we did not insist on you doing so...

- And why did you not insist on it?

- Because we did not think that in such a short amount of time people would forget what role these structures played ... However, some people in Russia told me: if we fire so many people with weapons, what will they do? Defend democracy? We had to choose what to reform. From our point of view, the main thing was the economy. We thought: if you change the foundation, the political system will change as well. Just like the Marxists... But maybe, on the contrary, we should have thought more about the political system. Of course, we wanted Russia to hold elections. But we did not always realize that the most important election is not the first one, but the second and the third ones. Only then can you create a model for the peaceful transfer of power, and of an opposition that is not perceived as the enemy. For Americans, this is so natural that we no longer think about it. Nor do we question the belief that it only a developed civil society can protect its citizens' rights and constantly provide a check on the power of the authorities.

I believe that up until the end of the USSR we did not realize that the devastation in the Soviet Union was so total. We were helping Russia to build a new system, but did not really question on what basis it was being built on. We did not realize that our consciousness, our mentality, too, demanded changes. But that's how psychology works: people, and countries, only change when things are bad. And if our side "won," why change? But in reality, it is not that Russia lost, or that the U.S. won. We were like a boxer who finds himself alone in the ring. It is easy to be the sole superpower when you have no opponents...

- This is one of the main accusations against Clinton: the U.S. viewed Russia not as an equal, but as the losing party.

- That is not so. All of us in the administration thought that Russia had also won. It was the Russians who themselves said: we do not want to live in the Soviet Union any longer. The day after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian population was the same as before, but the country's ability to influence the world was very different... Although in Russia's own neighborhood it, and not America, remained the dominant force.

- Speaking of "spheres of influence:" one of the main themes still poisoning relations is NATO and the expansion of the alliance. At the time, was there a chance or any plans to make Russia a member?

- Within the Clinton Administration, there was a lively debate on this, and at first there was no lack of opponents to NATO expansion, including Strobe Talbott. Many believed that NATO should not be expanded at all, but the question of whether Russia would be a member of the alliance was only hypothetical. We thought it was really possible to work together on many issues in these circumstances.

- Why, then, did the view on further expansion change?

- There are several explanations. The countries aspiring to join NATO wanted to become EU members. But it turned out that to join the EU is much more difficult than to join NATO – to join the EU you must change all the laws, reform whole spheres of the economy. To join NATO seemed much easier. Plus, these countries wanted to be in NATO, seeing the alliance as a guarantor of security. The Soviet Union was gone, but its memory lived on. Finally, it was thought that the influence of NATO membership on these countries would be positive and that would lead to a change in their political and economic systems. And with some that really happened.

- But Russia has been strongly against their accession. It is unlikely that the Clinton administration failed to understand that relations with Moscow would strongly deteriorate.

- First, you couldn't say that Russia was so strongly opposed. I remember very well that we expected major problems if these countries joined NATO without Russia's consent. But then, President Yeltsin said he had no objection. So should we have been opposed, if the Russian president was for it?

The problem is that Russia did not know what it wanted. And to this day it does not know ... What is Russia – Western, Eastern, an embodiment of the Third Way? But certainly what a lot of people are sick of is Russia blaming the West for its mistakes and miscalculations. I wonder, when will we be accused of the fact that there is still no good highway between Moscow and St. Petersburg? It is easy to pass mistakes off onto your enemy or opponent, but I think it is time for the people of Russia to say to themselves: if we want something, we should be doing something. Since we are doing nothing, it means we do not actually want to change.

Some things you can bring from the outside, but the main things people need to learn for themselves. When we Americans look at recent events in the Middle East, and see how people are trying to change their political systems we are hopeful, but Russians think only of the potential dangers. It's true, clearly, that revolutions are built not just on hope, but they do provide for new opportunities. Not a guarantee, but an opportunity nonetheless.