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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev speaks freely

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President Medvedev revealed in a frank and close to public discussion with the members of the Valdai Discussion club how news of war in South Ossetia came to him, why Russia will not deal with drug-addicted Georgian president Saakashvili, what George W. Bush said in his latest phone call, and why he won't see Russia turn into a state behind an iron curtain.

Russia Today, September 13, 2008

'I'll never forget that night'

"I was on vacation. They say, Russia was preparing for war - that's a lie! The Defence Minister called me at 1 a.m. and said, the Georgians have told the Ossetians that they were starting a war. And while all those troops were moving towards South Ossetia, I took no decision and hoped those dimwits would have enough brains to stop. They didn't! We held ourselves until they started firing rockets, shelling residential blocks, and shooting at peacekeepers. And only after that real attack I had to give an order to respond."

"I'll never forget that night. It was very hard to order the use of force, while knowing the consequences. We did everything right. And I'm proud of it. Our response was symmetrical and proportional."

"There were many illusions in the early 1990's and, as the country developed, many of them just got blown away. Unfortunately the latest events mean those illusions are no more. Illusions that the world is just; that a security system based on current political resource distribution is optimal and keeps the world in balance."

"For me, as well as for a big part of Russian society, it was the loss of the last illusion - that the current world security system is reliable. We must create a different security system."

"The world has changed almost in an instant after those events. It came to my mind that for Russia, August 8 is almost like 9/11 for America."

"The war took the whole last month of my life, and there were more productive ways to spend it. We didn't want it, didn't want it at all! For 17 years we've being mending what had broken apart a long time ago. And they didn't thank us for that - rather they started shooting at us."

"Russia was not expected to react like that. Georgia got the idea: do whatever you want, Russians won't meddle. That's a diplomatic mistake that belongs to textbooks for diplomats. It's a mistake, from the US side, from georgia's side - but for Georgia it's also a crime."

George Bush would do the same

"I have spent so much time speaking to world leaders on the phone over the last month, my ear wouldn't work. You know - after an hour's conversation..."

"When I talked to Bush on the phone last time I told him: you'd have done the same in a situation like this, just in a

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more harsh way. He didn't argue."

"Bush asked me: 'Why do you need it? You're a young president with liberal background!' I don't need it at all. But there are situations where image is nothing and real actions are everything."

'I don't want to live behind an iron curtain'

"We discussed the rearmament of the Russian armed forces yesterday. We'll have to change some priorities, but all the rest remains the same. We don't need a closed, militarised country behind an iron curtain. I don't want to live in a country like that. I used to. It was boring and dull."

"They should have invited Russia into NATO a long time ago. Were they afraid? Now we'd certainly have fewer problems. That was a serious mistake. And the second mistake is that any country prepared to be rude to Russia gets the right to be in NATO."

"If Georgia had a NATO membership action plan by August 8, I would have done the same without a second thought. And what would the consequences have been? They would have been way more complicated."

"The situation was humiliating for Russia some time ago, and we can't take it any more. It's a difficult choice for us, but we can't take it."

"I don't think the confrontation phase will last long. From our side, we're definitely not interested in this. On the contrary, we're ready to go as far as our partners will. If you look at the five principles [of Russia's foreign policy] I have named, one of them says we would like to develop friendly relations with the U.S. and other states, with Europe. We don't want to create new alliances just to frustrate Europe and America. What's the point? There isn't any. Foreign policy should be pragmatic".

"The concept that the U.S. State Department embraced is pure ideology. We all need to take effort and drive ideology away from foreign policy. The current U.S. administration's problem is that they have too many sovietologists."

"If you think that Russia has decided to change its vector of development, that's not true."

Saakashvili is a drug abuser

"When I first met Saakashvili as a president I told him our policy regarding the territorial integrity of Georgia remained the same".

"He was fussing around like a pooch, saying: let's meet and discuss, I will come to Sochi. I said: OK, let's do it. I would be glad, maybe we'll sign an agreement on non-use of force".

"Then our close partner Condoleezza Rice arrived, and the boy became like a changeling. He stopped calling, and declared 'We don't need to meet in Sochi, maybe we'll do it at the end of the year'. Well - that's your choice. He started getting ready for war".

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"It won't come as a surprise if I say that the decision on recognition [of the two breakaway republics] was of course made after the military action began, when we realised that there is no other way to protect the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, that once he has tasted blood, he won't stop unless he's dealt a good heavy blow."

"The Georgian head of state is not just a man we won't do business with. He's an unpredictable pathological and mentally unstable drug abuser. Western journalists, that interviewed him not so long ago, know it! A two-hour-long interview on the high - that's over the edge for a head of state. If NATO needs such a leader - go ahead."

Asian ties bring stability to West

"We will do everything we can to diversify our energy routes to Asia, but with no harm done to our European partners. On the contrary, it will ensure greater stability. This is about oil deliveries, gas deliveries, and the development of nuclear energy.

"I laugh when I read from time to time that Russia doesn't have enough gas to provide even European needs. We know it's not true. Russia is a big gas nation. If we see that there's a market in the East, we'll develop new fields. Be sure about that. Naturally, it must be balanced and must not cause economic disasters."

'To fight legal nihilism, we need to fight habits'

"My strong conviction is that unfortunately, there is no understanding of the value of law in Russia. I have devoted much time to studying this area both in theory and in practice. This problem can be found everywhere: in everyday matters, in business, on the level of state employees and even on the level of the state itself. That's why during the election campaign one of my key points was fighting legal nihilism. We do have certain advantages here. Ours is a country with a developed law system, with good law schools; a country that has been developing within the European law system for three hundred years. So the foundation is not bad. The issue is really the habits that have been acquired - this is the most difficult thing".

"We understand that it is possible to create motives for non-corrupt behaviour, it is possible to put corrupt people in prison, that's not the most difficult thing, though sometimes it isn't that easy either. It's much more difficult to make people observe the law on an everyday basis".

"Let's imagine two scenarios. A Russian businessman and a businessman from the West are offered to pay for their contract in cash. The first question that most civilised and well-prepared businessmen would ask is, what does it all mean. "Will the tax people find out? Will I be filmed by a hidden camera? Will it all end in prison for me?" The motives of a large part of our own businessmen, unfortunately, would probably be different. I can speak about such things with confidence, because unlike my predecessors I was in business for ten years. This is not because they are criminals by nature, but because they don't think that by breaking this law they are doing anything bad. "So what if no tax is paid on this money? The state isn't perfect. Why should I share with this state? It doesn't defend me, it's trying to get something out of me". And this is where the main difference lies.

"I don't want to idealise anything. Many Western businessmen would take the cash. But their number is considerably less. And this will also depend on the traditions and habits in this or that country. I won't name any countries, we all know who has what habits. The problem is that we have lots of such habits. That's why I think legal nihilism is one of our most serious problems".

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