

The President's News Conference With President Vladimir Putin of Russia in Bratislava

February 24, 2005

President Bush. Thank you all. I've just had a very important and constructive dialog with my friend. It's great to see—I know Laura was pleased to see Lyudmila Putin as well. We have had, over the past 4 years, very constructive relations, and that's the way I'm going to keep it for the next 4 years as well.

We've had an open and candid exchange of views and positions. In our meeting earlier, I said, "Vladimir, when we get in here, I think people are going to be very interested in this press conference for some reason; I'm not sure why." Perhaps it's because you're a leader of a great nation, and I'm fortunate enough to be one too. But you can see we've drawn quite a crowd here. So I'm looking forward to answering their questions.

We produced a lot of positive results at this meeting. We agreed to accelerate our work to protect nuclear weapons and material, both in our two nations and around the world, and I want to thank you for that. And I want to thank our Defense Ministers for working on that issue as well. Minister Ivanov is here. He and Secretary Rumsfeld have had a very constructive relationship. Our mil-to-mil exchanges are very positive, and I appreciate that. You and I talked about that a couple of years ago. I think they're coming to fruition, which is a very important way to make sure we understand each other better.

We agreed upon new efforts to fight the war on terror, to combat MANPADS and improvised explosive devices, and I want to thank you for that. Vladimir has been a—ever since the—September the 11th, he has clearly understood the stakes that we face. And every time we meet, he is—we have an interesting and constructive strategy session about how to continue to protect our peoples from attack. He is—he

has confronted some serious attacks in his country. I know what that means as a fellow leader. I know the strain; I know the agony; I know the sadness; I know the emotion that comes with seeing innocent people lose their lives, and we have shared that. I hope we never have to share it again, that common situation.

We agreed that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon. And I appreciate Vladimir's understanding on that issue. We had a very constructive dialog about how to achieve that common goal. We agreed that North Korea should not have a nuclear weapon. And again, this is an area where we're working closely together as two nations of the five nations that are involved with North Korea.

We agreed to accelerate negotiations for Russia's entry into the WTO. I stated that the other day in Brussels. We talked about ways to make—to move this process forward. We agreed to cooperate in the field of energy. I told Vladimir that Secretary Bodman would be our main representative on this issue, and I look forward to constructive dialog—hearing about constructive dialog on energy.

We agreed to work together to find peace in the Middle East. Russia's a part of the Quartet, and they played a constructive role in establishing the roadmap. And now we look forward to working together to achieve peace.

This meeting also gave me an opportunity to share my belief that it's in my country's interest that Russia be a strong and viable partner with the United States. It's very important that we establish not only a working relationship but that we understand that in the 21st century, strong countries are built by developing strong democracies. And so we talked about democracy. Democracies always reflect a country's

customs and culture, and I know that. Yet democracies have certain things in common: They have a rule of law and protection of minorities, a free press and a viable political opposition.

Russia has made tremendous progress over the last 15 years. It's an amazing transformation of the nation. And I applaud President Putin for dealing with a country that is in transformation. And it's been hard work. I was able to share my concerns about Russia's commitment in fulfilling these universal principles. I did so in a constructive and friendly way. I reaffirmed my belief that if—that it is democracy and freedom that bring true security and prosperity in every land.

We may not always agree with each other, and we haven't over the last 4 years, that's for certain. But we have found a lot of agreement—a lot of common ground, and the world is better for it. Even though we didn't agree on certain issues, if you really think about what we have done the last 4 years, and what we want to do during the next 4 years, the common ground is a lot more than those areas where we disagree. And by working together, this world will be a safer, freer, and more prosperous place.

Mr. President, it's great to see you again. Thank you.

President Putin. First of all, I would like to say that my meeting with the President of the United States has been a friendly one, has taken place in a very trustful atmosphere. This has been a dialog of interested partners, which became clear right away.

In the course of our meeting, starting from the first minutes of our dialog, we had a substantive discussion of the entire international agenda. The President has mentioned the key items in our dialog. We share a position on the status of the Russia-U.S. relationship. It is true that over the past few years, through joint efforts, we have been able to accumulate a unique—*[inaudible]*—cooperation. We are engaged

in a constructive political dialog, and we are discovering new opportunities for joint business, cultural, and scientific initiatives.

It is obvious that Russia and the U.S. share long-term interests, genuine strategic goals, and certainly a great degree of responsibility before our own people and people of other countries. We talked about international security. This reality is not affected by the circumstances of the moment or the consolidation of political interests. Therefore, we can see no alternative to the consistent strengthening of the Russia-U.S. relationship.

In the course of this summit, we have agreed upon specific guidelines that will navigate us through the process of cooperation in the forthcoming 3 years. This has to do primarily with addressing the threats and challenges of today—first and foremost, fighting terrorism. We have agreed to better coordinate our efforts on these fronts, including through the Russia-U.S. working group on counterterrorism, which has existed 5 years. Among the highlighted priorities have been the neutralization of the systems of financing and recruiting of terrorists and work on identifying terrorist cells, et cetera.

We are ready to jointly work on the pressing problem of stemming the illicit trade in MANPADS. Our colleagues today agreed upon this in very concrete terms. I'd like to note that on the sidelines of this summit, the Russian Minister of Defense, Sergey Ivanov, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signed a Russian-U.S. arrangement on cooperation in enhancing control over MANPADS. It is important to neutralize the attempts to proliferate weapons of mass destruction.

We talked a lot about nonproliferation. We talked a lot about the situation in Iran, about the situation in Iran—North Korea, and we share a common opinion in this regard, and we are taking a similar approach. We should put an end to the proliferation of missiles and missile technology. The proliferation of such weapons is not

in the interest of specific countries or the international community in general.

We have also exchanged our views on the situation in Iraq, in the Middle East. Russia and the U.S. have at their disposal some solid opportunities for normalizing the situations in places where regional crises take place. We intend to actually use this potential.

We have paid great attention to economic cooperation including, as has already been said, the possible accession of Russia to the WTO. We have reaffirmed our intention to continue our search for mutually acceptable solutions of the outstanding problems. Russia is ready for a reasonable compromise, but this compromise should not go beyond the usual responsibilities assumed by countries acceding to the WTO. In the presence of the press, I would like to thank the President of the United States for the serious message that our negotiators noticed in the course of negotiations, a message aimed at resolving all the problems that stand in the way of Russia's accession to the WTO. I'm sure that not only Russian economy but also the U.S. economy are interested in the positive outcome.

We have also discussed the issues relating to Russia-U.S. energy dialog. We've had some progress in this area, some good progress. We're going to continue this dialog. Some issues have been positively resolved in terms of expanding the operation of U.S. companies in Russian energy market. ConocoPhillips, as you know, has bought a stake in Lukoil, one of the major Russian oil companies. It bought a stake that used to belong to the Russian state. This happened recently, and I'm confident that this will be a success story both for Russian and U.S. partners. Another important and interesting opportunity is our co-operation in the supplies of liquefied natural gas. In the year 2010, 2011, a large amount of liquefied natural gas can be supplied from Russia to the United States.

Our investment cooperation is becoming generally bilateral. The first steps, but con-

fident steps, are being made by Russian companies that are starting to invest their capital into American economy.

We have also discussed the status and prospects of Russia's cooperation in science, high-tech, in particular, in the exploration of outer space.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I highly appreciate the outcome of this summit. Later this year, we are going to meet a few more times within the framework of various international fora. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the President of the United States, who has accepted the invitation to participate in the festivities on the occasion of the anniversary of the great victory in May—on May 9th in Moscow. This is a natural manifestation of respect of historic memory and the memory of the alliance that bonded our two countries in the years of the Second World War.

Thank you.

Russia-U.S. Relations/Democracy

Q. Mr. President, 4 years ago when you first met with President Putin, at a time some in the world were questioning his commitment to democracy, you reassured a lot of those critics by saying that you had looked into his soul and saw a man that you found trustworthy. You've just listed some concerns here today. I'm wondering if you could unequivocally and without reservation repeat that statement today?

And Mr. Putin, I'd like to ask you to address critics in the United States and elsewhere who saw Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Yeltsin as taking early steps on the path to democracy and worry that you have reversed course.

President Bush. One thing I—that gave me comfort in making the statement I made in Slovenia was that Vladimir said, “When I agree with you, I’ll agree with—I’ll tell you, and when I disagree with you, I’ll tell you.” In other words, we’ll have a very frank and candid and open relationship. And that’s the way it’s been. There

was no doubt in my mind what his position was on Iraq. He didn't kind of hedge. He didn't try to cloud up the issue. He made it abundantly clear to me that he didn't agree with my decision. And that's an important part of having a trustworthy relationship, a relationship where, when a person tells you something, you know he means what he says and yes means yes and no means no. Sometimes in politics, yes means "maybe" and no means "if." This is the kind of fellow who, when he says yes, he means yes, and when he says no, he means no.

And we had a discussion about some decisions he's made. He's had some interest in the decisions I've made. And that's a very important dialog. And as I said—I'll say it again—I think it's very important that all nations understand the great values inherent in democracy, rule of law and protection of minorities, viable political debate. And when I brought that—I don't want to put words in—Vladimir can speak for himself on this issue, but all I can tell you is he said—yes meant yes, when we talked about values that we share.

President Putin. First of all, I would like to say that we discussed these issues at length, face to face, just the two of us. Russia has made its choice in favor of democracy. Fourteen years ago, independently, without any pressure from outside, it made that decision in the interests of itself and interests of its people, of its citizens. This is our final choice, and we have no way back. There can be no return to what we used to have before. And the guarantee for this is the choice of the Russian people themselves; no, guarantees from outside cannot be provided. This is impossible. It would be impossible for Russia today. Any kind of turn towards totalitarianism for Russia would be impossible, due to the condition of the Russian society.

As far as the questions that are being discussed among our partners in the media, I can only repeat what has been said by the President of the United States. First,

we are not going to make up, to invent any kind of special Russian democracy. We are going to remain committed to the fundamental principles of democracy that have been established in the world. But of course, all the modern institutions of democracy—the principles of democracy should be adequate to the current status of the development of Russia, to our history, and our traditions.

There is nothing unusual here, either. In every country, these overall principles are embodied in this or that way. In electoral law, we can compare the United States and a number of European countries. In the operation of major democratic institutions, there may be some differences, but the main, fundamental principles are going to be implemented in the form in which they have been developed by the modern, civilized society.

As far as the preceding period in our development, no doubt the credit that can be given to that period in the development of the Russian Federation for the fact that the previous generation of politicians, despite all the difficulties that have arisen due to changes in Russia, they have given the main thing to the Russian people—that is, freedom.

But I believe that a lot of people will agree with me, the implementation of the principles and norms of democracy should not be accompanied by the collapse of the state and the impoverishment of the people. We believe and I personally believe that the implementation and the strengthening of democracy on the Russian soil should not jeopardize the concept of democracy. It should strengthen statehood, and it should improve living standards for the people. It is in this direction that we're going to act.

Q. First of all, I wanted to ask another question, but we have an interesting conversation now. Therefore I'm going to ask about the following: It seems to me that you have nothing to disagree about. The regimes that are in place in Russia and

the U.S. cannot be considered fuller democratic, especially when compared to some other countries of Europe, for example—for example, the Netherlands. It seems to me that as far as Russia is concerned—[inaudible]—everything is clear, more or less. But as far as the U.S. is concerned, we could probably talk at length. I am referring to the great powers that have been assumed by the security services, due to which the private lives of citizens are now being monitored by the state. This could be explained away by the consequences of September 11th, but this has nothing to do with democratic values. How could you comment on this? I suggest that you can probably agree—that you can probably shake hands and continue to be friends in future.

President Bush. I live in a transparent country. I live in a country where decisions made by Government are wide open, and people are able to call people to—me to account, which many out here do on a regular basis. Our laws and the reasons why we have laws on the books are perfectly explained to people. Every decision we have made is within the Constitution of the United States. We have a Constitution that we uphold. And if there is a question as to whether or not a law meets that Constitution, we have an independent court system through which that law is reviewed.

So I'm perfectly comfortable in telling you, our country is one that safeguards human rights and human dignity, and we resolve our disputes in a peaceful way.

President Putin. I would like to support my American counterpart. I'm absolutely confident that democracy is not anarchy. It is not the possibility to do anything you want. It is not the possibility for anyone to rob your own people. Democracy is, among other things, and first and foremost, the possibility to democratically make democratic laws and the capability of the state to enforce those laws.

You have cited a curious example, the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a mon-

archy, after all. I have no doubts about the democratic nature of that country. That is certainly a democratic nation, but this is very different from the United States and Russia.

There are great differences between Russia and the U.S. as well. If we talk about where we have more or where we have less democracy, is not the right thing to do. But if we talk about how the fundamental principles of democracy are implemented in this or that historic soil, in this or that country, is an option; it's possible. This does not compromise the dignity of the Netherlands or Russia or the U.S.

Q. [Inaudible]—on some of the decisions he has made on his democratic institutions, or have you just agreed to disagree? And, President Putin, did anything President Bush said to you today prompt you to reconsider some of those decisions?

President Bush. I think the most important statement that you heard and I heard was the President's statement, when he declared his absolute support for democracy in Russia, and they're not turning back. To me, that is the most important statement of my private meeting, and it's the most important statement of this public press conference. And I can tell you what it's like dealing with the man over the last 4 years: When he tells you something, he means it.

He asked what some of my concerns were, and he explained answers. I told him that it was very important that capital see rule of law, that there be stability, there not be any doubt about whether or not—if somebody invests, whether or not the laws change. And I think Vladimir heard me loud and clear, and he explained why he made decisions he made.

But we had very frank discussions about a variety of issues. And the operative—again, the operative statement, the summary statement that I think is important for people to hear in our countries, precisely his opening statement to King's [John King, Cable News Network] question—

speaking about monarchies. Anyway—get it? [*Laughter*] It's late in the trip. [*Laughter*] Which is, firm belief in democracy. And I appreciate that.

President Putin. I have already mentioned that we have paid a lot of attention to these issues. I get the impression that sometimes the public in the now partner countries do not have the full knowledge and, consequently, do not have the full understanding of what is taking place in the Russian Federation. Naturally, within our countries, there are people who are in favor and there are those who are opposed to the decisions that are being made—for example, the decision on the new procedure for the election of regional leaders in the Russian Federation.

But those who are opposed are richer than those who are in favor. They have the opportunity to spread their opinion in the media, and we often do not pay the attention to that. I'd like to draw your attention to the fact that the leaders of the regions of the Russian Federation will not be appointed by the President. Their canvasses will be presented, will be submitted to regional parliaments that are elected through secret ballot by all the citizens. This is, in essence, a system of the electoral college, which is used, on the national level, in the United States, and it is not considered undemocratic, is it?

We discussed these issues at length and some of the ideas—I wouldn't say "advice"—but some of the ideas that I heard from my partner, who I respect a lot. And I believe that some of his ideas could be taken into account in my work, and I will pay due attention to them, that's for sure. Some other ideas, I will not comment on. Thank you.

Freedom of the Press

Q. To follow up on the issue of democratic institutions, President Bush recently stated that the press in Russia is not free. What is this lack of freedom all about? Your aides probably mentioned to you that

our media, both electronic and our printed media, print full coverage of the manifestations and protests in our country. Our regional and national media often criticize the Government institution. What about you? Why don't you talk a lot about violations of the rights of journalists in the United States, about the fact that some journalists have been fired? Or do you prefer to discuss this in private with your American colleague?

President Bush. I don't know what journalists you're referring to. Any of you all still have your jobs? No, I—look, I think it's important any viable democracy has got a free and active press. Obviously, if you're a member of the Russian press, you feel like the press is free. And that's—feel that way? Well, that's good. [*Laughter*] But I talked to Vladimir about that. And he wanted to know about our press. I said, nice bunch of folks. And he wanted to know about, as you mentioned, the subject of somebody getting fired. People do get fired in American press. They don't get fired by Government, however. They get fired by their editors, or they get fired by their producers, or they get fired by the owners of a particular outlet or network.

But a free press is important. And it is an important part of any democracy. And if you're a member of the press corps and you feel comfortable with the press in Russia, I think that is a pretty interesting observation for those of us who don't live in Russia to listen to.

But no question, whether it be in America or anywhere else, the sign of a healthy and vibrant society is one in where there's an active press corps. Obviously, there has got to be constraints. There's got to be truth. People have got to tell the truth, and if somebody violates the truth, then those who own a particular newspaper or those who are in charge of particular electronic station need to hold people to account. The press—the capacity of the press to hold people to account also depends on their willingness to self-examine at times

when they're wrong. And that happens on occasion in America. And that's an important part of maintaining a proper relationship between Government and press. I can assure you that the folks here are constantly trying to hold me to account for decisions I make and how I make decisions. I'm comfortable with that. It's part of the checks and balances of a democracy.

And so I'm glad to hear your editorial comment, so to speak, on your comfort with the situation of the press corps in the Federation of Russia.

President Putin. First of all, what do you mean when you say I keep silent—or we keep silent about this or that problem? First of all, I'm not the minister of propaganda. Second, we discuss all issues in absolute openness. As George said, today we discussed this issue, as well, with regard to Russia and the United States. But what is absolutely obvious is that in the United States there are a lot of mechanisms to uphold the freedom of the press. And as far as the fact that there is some kind of friction between the media and the Government, there is an ongoing debate, an ongoing critical debate, going on. There is a lot of criticism coming from the media with respect to the Government. This is a manifestation of democracy. What you

mentioned about the comments in the media of the actions of the Russian Government is testimony to the fact that we do have freedom of the press. Although we're being criticized often of that, this is not the case.

When we discuss these issues absolutely frankly, we, and I, in particular, do not think that this has to be pushed to the foreground, that new problems should be created from nothing. And I do not think that we should jeopardize the Russian-American relationship, because we're interested in the development of this relationship. We are paying close attention to all the comments of the press or opposing forces, but our responsibility is to—in spite of all these problems, of which there are plenty, our responsibility is to positively develop the Russian-American relationship.

I would like to thank the President of the United States for his constructive dialog that we've had today. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 5:50 p.m. in Constitution Hall at Bratislava Castle. In his remarks, he referred to Lyudmila Putina, wife of President Putin. President Putin spoke in Russian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter.

Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir V. Putin: Russia's Accession to the World Trade Organization *February 24, 2005*

The United States and Russia are committed to working together to complete our bilateral negotiations for Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2005. The results of the negotiations will enhance commercial opportunities between our two countries, support economic reforms that Russia has made a priority, and further integrate Russia into the world economy. Our trade ministers have made

progress in pursuing our bilateral negotiations, and we have instructed them to accelerate these efforts.

Russia and the United States will continue to work closely in bilateral and multilateral negotiations to resolve remaining issues in ways that benefit both countries. The rules-based system of the WTO will further strengthen our economic relationship in all areas, including