

1 **Transcript: CNN interview with Vladimir Putin (August 29, 2008)**

2 *"We did not seek such conflicts," Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin told CNN's Matthew Chance.*

3 **Matthew Chance:** Many people around the world, even though you're not the president of Russia anymore, see
4 you as **the main decision maker in this country**. Wasn't **you that ordered Russian forces into Georgia and you**
5 **who should take responsibility for the consequences?**

6 **Vladimir Putin:** **Of course, that's not the case.** In accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation,
7 the issues of foreign policy and defense are fully in the hands of the president. The president of the Russian
8 Federation was acting within his powers.

9 As is known, yours truly was at that time at the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing. This alone made it
10 impossible for me to take part in preparing that decision, although of course, President Medvedev was aware of
11 my opinion on that issue. I'll be frank with you, and actually there is no secret about it, we had of course
12 considered all the possible scenarios of events, including direct aggression by the Georgian leadership.

13 We had to think beforehand about how to provide for the security of our peace-keepers and of the citizens of the
14 Russian Federation who are residents of South Ossetia. But, I repeat, such a decision could only be taken by the
15 president of the Russian Federation, the commander in chief of the armed forces, Mr. Medvedev. It's his
16 decision.

17 **Matthew Chance:** But it's been no secret either that for years you've been urging the West to take more
18 seriously Russia's concerns about international issues. For instance, about NATO's expansion, about deployment
19 of missile defense systems in eastern Europe. Wasn't this conflict a way of demonstrating that in this region, it's
20 Russia that's the power, not NATO and certainly not the United States?

21 **Vladimir Putin:** **Of course not.** What is more, **we did not seek** such conflicts and **do not want them** in the
22 future.

23 That **this conflict has taken place** -- that it **broke out nevertheless** -- is only **due to the fact** that no one had
24 **heeded our concerns.**

25 **More generally,** Matthew, I will say this: **We must take** a broader view of this conflict.

26 **I think both you and your -- our -- viewers** today will be interested to learn a little more about **the history of**
27 **relations between the peoples and ethnic groups in this regions** of the world. Because people know little or
28 nothing about it.

29 **If you think that this is unimportant, you may cut it from the program. Don't hesitate, I wouldn't mind.**

30 **But I would like to recall** that all these state entities, each in its own time, **voluntarily integrated** into the
31 **Russian Empire**. Back in the mid-18th century, in 1745-1747, Ossetia was the first to become part of the
32 Russian Empire. At that time, it was a united entity; North and South Ossetia were one state.

33 In 1801, if my memory serves me, **Georgia itself, which was under some pressure from the Ottoman Empire,**
34 **voluntarily became part of the Russian Empire.**

35 **It was only 12 years later, in 1812, that Abkhazia became part of the Russian Empire.** Until that time, it had
36 remained an independent state, an independent principality.

37 It was only in the mid-19th century that the decision was taken to incorporate South Ossetia into the Tiflis
38 province. Within a common state, the matter was regarded as not very important. But I can assure you that
39 subsequent years showed that the Ossetians did not much like it. However, de facto they were put by the tsar's
40 central government under the jurisdiction of what is now Georgia.

When, after World War I, the Russian Empire broke up, Georgia declared its own state while Ossetia opted for staying within Russia; this happened right after the events of 1917.

In 1918, as a result of this, Georgia conducted a rather brutal punitive operation there, and in 1921, it repeated it.

When the Soviet Union was formed, these territories, by Stalin's decision, were definitively given to Georgia. As you know, Stalin was ethnically Georgian.

Therefore, those who insist that those territories **must** continue to belong to Georgia are **Stalinists**: **They** defend the decision of Josef Vissarionovich Stalin.

Yet, whatever has been happening recently and **whatever the motives of those involved in the conflict**, there is no doubt that all that we are witnessing now is a tragedy.

For **us**, it is a special tragedy, **because** during the **many years that we were living together** the Georgian culture -the Georgian people being a nation of ancient culture -- became, **without a doubt, a part of the multinational culture of Russia**.

There is even a tinge of civil war in this **for us**, though of course Georgia is an independent state, no doubt about it. We have never infringed on the sovereignty of Georgia and have no intention of doing so in the future. **And yet, considering the fact** that almost a million, even more than a million Georgians have moved here, **we have special spiritual links** with that country and its people. **For us**, this is a special tragedy.

And, I assure you, while mourning the Russian soldiers **who died**, and above all the innocent civilians, many here in Russia are also mourning the **Georgians who died**.

The **responsibility for the loss of life rests squarely with the present Georgian leadership**, which dared to take these criminal actions.

I apologize for the long monologue; I felt it would be of interest.

Matthew Chance: **It is very interesting that you are talking about Russia's imperial history in this region** because one of the effects of Russian intervention in Georgia is that other countries in the former Soviet Union are now deeply concerned that they could be next, that they could be part of a resurgent Russian empire ... particularly countries like Ukraine, that have a big ethnic Russian populations, but also Moldova, the central Asian states and even some of the Baltic states. Can you guarantee to us that Russia will never again use its militarily forces against a neighboring state?

Vladimir Putin: **I strongly object to the way this question is formulated.** It is not for us to guarantee that we will not attack someone. We have not attacked anyone. It is we who are demanding guarantees from others, to make sure that no one attacks us anymore and that no one kills our citizens. We are being portrayed as the aggressor.

I have here the chronology of the events that took place on August 7, 8 and 9. On the 7th, at 2:42 p.m., the Georgian officers who were at the headquarters of the joint peacekeeping forces left the headquarters, walked away from the headquarters -- where there were our servicemen, as well as Georgian and Ossetian servicemen - saying that had been ordered to do so by their commanders. They left their place of service and left our servicemen there alone and never returned during the period preceding the beginning of hostilities. An hour later, heavy artillery shelling started.

At 10:35 p.m., a massive shelling of the city of Tskhinvali began. At 10:50 p.m., ground force units of the Georgian armed forces started to deploy to the combat zone. At the same time, Georgian military hospitals were deployed in the immediate vicinity. And at 11:30 p.m., Mr. Kruashvili, brigadier general and commander of the

82 Georgian peacekeeping forces in the region, announced that Georgia had decided to declare war on South
83 Ossetia. They announced it directly and publicly, looking right into the TV cameras.

84 At that time, we tried to contact the Georgian leadership, but they all refused to respond. At 0:45 a.m. on August
85 8, Kruashvili repeated it once again. At 5:20 a.m., tank columns of the Georgian forces launched an attack on
86 Tskhinvali, preceded by massive fire from GRAD systems, and we began to sustain casualties among our
87 personnel.

88 At that time, as you know, I was in Beijing, and I was able to talk briefly with the president of the United States.
89 I said to him directly that we had not been able to contact the Georgian leadership but that one of the
90 commanders of the Georgian armed forces had declared that they had started a war with South Ossetia.

91 George replied to me -- and I have already mentioned it publicly -- that no one wanted a war. We were hoping
92 that the U.S. administration would intervene in the conflict and stop the aggressive actions of the Georgian
93 leadership. Nothing of the kind happened.

94 What is more, already at 12 noon local time, the units of the Georgian armed forces seized the peacekeepers'
95 camp in the south of Tskhinvali -- it is called Yuzhni, or Southern -- and our soldiers had to withdraw to the city
96 center, being outnumbered by the Georgians one to six. Also, our peacekeepers did not have heavy weapons,
97 and what weapons they had had been destroyed by the first artillery strikes. One of those strikes had killed 10
98 people at once.

99 Then the attack was launched on the peacekeeping forces' northern camp. Here, let me read you the report of the
100 General Staff: "As of 12:30 p.m., the battalion of the Russian Federation peacekeeping forces deployed in the
101 north of the city had beaten off five attacks and was continuing combat."

102 At that same time, Georgian aviation bombed the city of Dzhava, which was outside the zone of hostilities, in
103 the central part of South Ossetia.

104 So who was the attacker, and who was attacked? We have no intention of attacking anyone, and we have no
105 intention of going to war with anyone.

106 During my eight years as president, I often heard the same question: What place does Russia reserve for itself in
107 the world; how does it see itself; what is its place? We are a peace-loving state and we want to cooperate with
108 all of our neighbors and with all of our partners. But if anyone thinks that they can come and kill us, that our
109 place is at the cemetery, they should think what consequences such a policy will have for them.

110 **Matthew Chance:** You've always enjoyed over your period as president of Russia, and still now, a very close
111 personal relationship with the U.S. President George W. Bush. Do you think that his failure to restrain the
112 Georgian forces on this occasion has damaged that relationship?

113 **Vladimir Putin:** This has certainly done damage to our relations, above all government-to-government
114 relations.

115 But it is not just a matter of the U.S. administration being unable to restrain the Georgian leadership from this
116 criminal action; the U.S. side had in effect armed and trained the Georgian army.

117 Why spend many years in difficult negotiations to find comprehensive compromise solutions to inter-ethnic
118 conflicts? It is easier to arm one of the parties and push it to kill the other and have it done with. What an easy
119 solution, apparently. In fact, however, that is not always the case.

120 I have some other thoughts, too. What I am going to say is hypothetical, just some suppositions, and will take
121 time to properly sort out. But I think there is food for thought here.

122 Even during the years of the Cold War, the intense confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United
123 States, we always avoided any direct clash between our civilians and, most certainly, between our military.

124 We have serious reasons to believe that there were U.S. citizens right in the combat zone. If that is the case, if
125 that is confirmed, it is very bad. It is very dangerous; it is misguided policy

126 But, if that is so, these events could also have a U.S. domestic politics dimension.

127 If my suppositions are confirmed, then there are grounds to suspect that some people in the United States
128 created this conflict deliberately in order to aggravate the situation and create a competitive advantage for one
129 of the candidates for the U.S. presidency. And if that is the case, this is nothing but the use of the called
130 administrative resource in domestic politics, in the worst possible way, one that leads to bloodshed.

131 **Matthew Chance:** These are quite astounding claims, but just to be clear, Mr. Prime Minister, are you
132 suggesting that there were U.S. operatives on the ground assisting Georgian forces, perhaps even provoking a
133 conflict in order to give a presidential candidate in the United States some kind of talking point?

134 **Vladimir Putin:** Let me explain.

135 **Matthew Chance:** And if you are suggesting that, what evidence do you have?

136 **Vladimir Putin:** I have said to you that if the presence of U.S. citizens in the zone of hostilities is confirmed, it
137 would mean only one thing: that they could be there only at the direct instruction of their leaders. And if that is
138 so, it means that in the combat zone there are U.S. citizens who are fulfilling their duties there. They can only
139 do that under orders from their superiors, not on their own initiative.

140 Ordinary specialists, even if they train military personnel, must do it in training centers or on training grounds
141 rather than in a combat zone.

142 I repeat: This requires further confirmation. I am quoting to you the reports of our military. Of course, I will
143 seek further evidence from them.

144 Why are you surprised at my hypothesis, after all? There are problems in the Middle East; reconciliation there is
145 elusive. In Afghanistan, things are not getting any better; what is more, the Taliban have launched a fall
146 offensive, and dozens of NATO servicemen are being killed.

147 In Iraq, after the euphoria of the first victories, there are problems everywhere, and the number of those killed
148 has reached 4,000.

149 There are problems in the economy, as we know only too well. There are financial problems, the mortgage
150 crisis. Even we are concerned about it, and we want it to end soon, but it is there.

151 A little victorious war is needed. And if it doesn't work, then one can lay the blame on us, use us to create an
152 enemy image, and against the backdrop of this kind of jingoism once again rally the country around certain
153 political forces.

154 I am surprised that you are surprised at what I'm saying. It's as clear as day.

155 **Matthew Chance:** It sounds a little farfetched, but I am interested because I was in Georgia in the time of the
156 conflict, and the country was swirling with rumors. One of the rumors was that U.S. personnel had been
157 captured in combat areas. Is there any truth to that rumor?

158 **Vladimir Putin:** I have no such information. I think it is not correct.

159 I repeat: I will ask our military to provide additional information to confirm the presence of U.S. citizens in the
160 conflict zone during the hostilities.

161 **Matthew Chance:** Let's get back to the diplomatic fallout of this conflict, because one of the consequences is
162 that action is being threatened at least against Russia by many countries in the world. It could be kicked out of
163 the G-8 group of industrialized nations. There are threats it could have its contacts with the NATO militarily
164 alliance suspended. What will Russia's response be if the country is diplomatically isolated as a result of this
165 tension between Russia and the West?

166 **Vladimir Putin:** First of all, if my hypothesis about the U.S. domestic political dimension of this conflict is
167 correct, then I don't see why United States allies should support one U.S. political party against the other in the
168 election campaign. This is a position that is not honest vis-à-vis the American people as a whole. But we do not
169 rule out the possibility that, as happened before, the administration will once again be able to subordinate its
170 allies to its will.

171 So what's to be done? What choice do we have? On one hand, should we agree to being killed in order to
172 remain, say, in the G-8? And who will remain in the G-8 if all of us are killed?

173 You have mentioned a possible threat from Russia. You and I are sitting here now, having a quiet conversation
174 in the city of Sochi. Within a few hundred kilometers from here, U.S. Navy ships have approached, carrying
175 missiles whose range is precisely several hundred kilometers. It is not our ships that have approached your
176 shores; it's your ships that have approached ours. So what's our choice?

177 We don't want any complications; we don't want to quarrel with anyone; we don't want to fight anyone. We
178 want normal cooperation and a respectful attitude toward us and our interests. Is that too much?

179 You have mentioned the G-8. But in its present form, the G-8 already doesn't carry enough weight. Without
180 inviting the Chinese People's Republic or India, without consulting them, without influencing their decisions,
181 normal development of the world economy is impossible.

182 Or take the fight against drugs, combating infectious disease, fighting terrorism, working on non-proliferation.
183 OK, if someone wants to do it without any involvement of Russia, how effective will that work be?

184 That's not what we should be thinking about, and it's pointless to try to intimidate anyone. We are not afraid, not
185 at all. What's needed is a realistic analysis of the situation, looking to the future so as to develop a normal
186 relationship, with due regard for each other's interests.

187 **Matthew Chance:** The raw as you've mentioned areas of cooperation still between the United States and
188 Russia, particularly for instance over the issue of Iran's very controversial nuclear program.

189 Are you suggesting that you may withdraw your cooperation with the United Nations in tackling that problem
190 from the United States if the diplomatic pressure were to be ruptured up between Russian and the West?

191 **Vladimir Putin:** Russia has been working very consistently and in good faith with its partners on all problems,
192 those that I've mentioned and those that you added. We do so not because someone asks us and we want to look
193 good to them. We are doing it because this is consistent with our national interests, because in these areas, our
194 national interests coincide with those of many European countries and of the United States. If no one wants to
195 talk to us about these problems and cooperation with Russia becomes unnecessary, God bless, do this work
196 yourself.

197 **Matthew Chance:** And what about the issue of energy supply, because obviously European countries in
198 particular are increasingly dependent on Russian gas and on Russian oil. Would Russia ever use the supply of
199 energy to western Europe as a lever to apply pressure should the diplomatic tensions be ratcheted up?

200 **Vladimir Putin:** We have never done it. Construction of the first gas pipeline system was started during the
201 1960s, at the height of the Cold War, and for all those years, from the 1960s until this day, Russia has been
202 fulfilling its contract obligations in a very consistent and reliable way, regardless of the political situation.

203 We never politicize economic relations, and we are quite astonished at the position of some U.S. administration
204 officials who travel to European capitals trying to persuade the Europeans not to buy our products, natural gas
205 for example, in a truly amazing effort to politicize the economic sphere. In fact, it's quite pernicious.

206 It's true that the Europeans depend on our supplies but we too depend on whoever buys our gas. That's
207 interdependence; that's precisely the guarantee of stability.

208 And since we are already talking about economic matters, I would like to inform you about a decision that will
209 be taken in the near future. Let me say right from the start that it is in no way related to any crisis, not to the
210 situation in Abkhazia nor in South Ossetia; those are purely economic matters. Let me tell you what it's about.

211 For some time, we have had a debate about supplies of various products from different countries, including the
212 United States. And of course the debate is particularly intense, as a rule, as regards agricultural products.

213 In July and August, our sanitation services conducted inspections of U.S. plants that supply poultry meat to our
214 market. It was a spot-check inspection. It revealed that 19 of those plants ignored the concerns that our
215 specialists had raised back in 2007. These plants will be removed from the list of poultry exporters to the
216 Russian Federation.

217 Twenty-nine plants were given warnings that they must, in the near future, rectify the situation that our
218 sanitation specialists find unacceptable. We hope the response will be rapid and that they will be able to
219 continue supplying their products to the Russian market.

220 That information has just been reported to me by the minister of Agriculture.

221 Let me say once again that I would hate these things to be lumped together: the problems caused by conflict
222 situations, politics, economics, meat. They all have their own dimension and are unrelated.

223 **Matthew Chance:** Prime Minister Putin, this appears or may be interpreted in the United States as tantamount
224 to economic sanctions. Specifically, one of these 19 agricultural enterprises been importing to Russia that
225 you've found to be flawed?

226 **Vladimir Putin:** Well, **I am not an agricultural expert.** This morning, the minister of agriculture gave me the
227 following information.

228 I have already said it and want to repeat it. In July and August of this year, spot checks were made at U.S. plants
229 that supply poultry to the Russian market. It was found that some of the concerns raised by our specialists
230 earlier, in 2007, had been ignored and that the plants had done nothing to correct the deficiencies identified
231 during the previous inspections. For that reason, the Ministry of Agriculture decided to remove them from the
232 list of exporters.

233 At 29 other plants, certain problems have been found. They have been properly documented, with instructions
234 as to what needs to be changed in order for the previous agreements on deliveries from those plants to Russia to
235 remain in effect. We hope that they will quickly rectify the problems identified during those checks.

236 It has been found that their products contain excessive amounts of some substances that are subject to certain
237 controls in our country. They contain excessive amounts of antibiotics and perhaps some other substances such
238 as arsenic. I don't know; it's for the agricultural experts to consider. This has nothing to do with politics. These
239 are not some kind of sanctions. Such measures were taken here on several occasions in the past. There is
240 nothing catastrophic here. It just means that we should work on this together.

241 What's more, when the minister called me, he said, "Frankly, we don't know what to do. It'll look like sanctions,
242 but we need to take a decision. Of course, we could take a pause, too."

243 I think they said it's arsenic. But we have our rules. If you want to export to our market, you must adjust to our
244 rules. They know all about it. They were told about it back in 2007.

245 **Matthew Chance:** The U.S. won't like it.

246 **Vladimir Putin:** We too do not like some of the things being done. They need to work closer together with our
247 Ministry of Agriculture. Such things have happened before.

248 We closed it, and then we allowed them in again. It happened not only with regard to U.S. suppliers but
249 Brazilian, too.

250 **Matthew Chance:** To conclude --

251 **Vladimir Putin:** We could go on. I am in no hurry.

252 **Matthew Chance:** Prime Minister Putin, perhaps more than anyone else, you're credited with restoring a degree
253 of international prestige to this country. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the chaos of 1990s, are you
254 concerned that you're squandering that international prestige by your actions over Georgia, by actions like these
255 banning of bird meat imports from the United States? Is that something the concerns you?

256 **Vladimir Putin:** Well, I have told you that there is no ban on U.S. poultry. It's a ban on some plants that did not
257 respond to our concerns for a whole year.

258 We have to protect our domestic market and our consumers, as is done by all countries, including the United
259 States.

260 As for Russia's prestige: We don't like what's been happening, but we did not provoke this situation. Speaking of
261 prestige, some countries' prestige has been severely damaged in recent years. In effect, in recent years our U.S.
262 partners have been cultivating the rule of force instead of the rule of international law. When we tried to stop the
263 decision on Kosovo; no one listened to us. We said, don't do it, wait; you are putting us in a terrible position in
264 the Caucasus. What shall we say to the small nations of the Caucasus as to why independence can be gained in
265 Kosovo but not here? You are putting us in a ridiculous position. At that time, no one was talking about
266 international law; we alone did. Now, they have all remembered it. Now, for some reason, everyone is talking
267 about international law.

268 But who opened Pandora's box? Did we do it? No, we didn't do it. It was not our decision, and it was not our
269 policy.

270 There are both things in international law: the principle of territorial integrity and right to self-determination.
271 What's needed is simply to reach agreement on the ground rules. I would think that the time has finally come to
272 do it.

273 As for the public perception of the events that are taking place, of course this in large part depends not only on
274 the politicians but also on how cleverly they manipulate the media, on how they influence world public opinion.
275 Our U.S. colleagues are of course much better at it than we are. We have much to learn. But is it always done in
276 a proper, democratic way, is the information always fair and objective?

277 Let's recall, for example, the interview with that 12-year-old girl and her aunt, who, as I understand, live in the
278 United States and who witnessed the events in South Ossetia. The interviewer at one of the leading channels,
279 Fox News, was interrupting her all the time. All the time, he interrupted her. As soon as he didn't like what she
280 was saying, he started to interrupt her, he coughed, wheezed and screeched. All that remained for him to do was
281 to soil his pants, in such a graphic way as to stop them. That's the only thing he didn't do, but, figuratively
282 speaking, he was in that kind of state. Well, is that an honest and objective way to give information? Is that the
283 way to inform the people of your own country? No, that is disinformation.

284 We want to live in peace and agreement; we want normal trade; we want to work in all areas: to assure
285 international security, to work on problems of disarmament, on fighting terrorism and drugs, on the Iranian
286 nuclear problem, on the North Korean problem which is now showing a somewhat alarming tendency. We are
287 ready for all that, but we want this work to be honest, open and done in partnership, rather than selfishly.

288 It is wrong to make anyone into an enemy; it is wrong to scare the people of one's own country with that enemy
289 and try to rally some allies on that basis. What we need is to work openly and honestly on solutions to the
290 problem. We want that and we are ready for that.

291 **Matthew Chance:** Let's go back to the assertion that the U.S. provoked the war. Diplomats in the United States
292 accuse Russia of provoking the war by supporting the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by arming
293 them, by increasing forces in the territories and by recognizing their institutions ... basically giving them the
294 green light to go ahead and operate de facto. Wasn't it Russia that really caused this conflict?

295 **Vladimir Putin:** I can easily reply to this question. Since the 1990s, as soon as this conflict started, and it
296 started in recent history because of the decision of the Georgian side to deprive Abkhazia and South Ossetia of
297 the rights of autonomy. In 1990 and 1991, the Georgian leadership deprived Abkhazia and South Ossetia of the
298 autonomous rights that they enjoyed as part of the Soviet Union, as part of Soviet Georgia, and as soon as that
299 decision was taken, ethnic strife and armed hostilities began. At that time, Russia signed a number of
300 international agreements, and we complied with all those agreements. We had in the territory of Abkhazia and
301 South Ossetia only those peacekeeping forces that were stipulated in those agreements and never exceeded the
302 quota.

303 The other side -- I am referring to the Georgian side -- with the support of the United States, violated all the
304 agreements in the most brazen way.

305 Under the guise of units of the Ministry of the Interior, they secretly moved into the conflict zone their troops,
306 regular army, special units and heavy equipment. In fact, they surrounded Tskhinvali, the capital of South
307 Ossetia, with that heavy equipment and tanks. They surrounded our peacekeepers with tanks and started
308 shooting at them point blank.

309 It was only after that, after our first casualties and after their number considerably increased, after tens of them
310 had been killed -- I think 15 or 20 peacekeepers were killed, and there was heavy loss of life among the civilian
311 population, with hundreds killed -- it was only after all that that President Medvedev decided to introduce a
312 military contingent to save the lives of our peacekeepers and innocent civilians.

313 What is more, when our troops began moving in the direction of Tskhinvali, they came across a fortified area
314 that had been secretly prepared by the Georgian military. In effect, tanks and heavy artillery had been dug into
315 ground there, and they started shelling our soldiers as they moved.

316 All of it was done in violation of previous international agreements.

317 It is of course conceivable that our U.S. partners were unaware of all that, but it's very unlikely.

318 A totally neutral person, the former Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ms. Zurabishvili, who is I think a
319 French citizen and is now in Paris, has said publicly, and it was broadcast, that there was an enormous number
320 of U.S. advisers and that of course they knew everything.

321 And if our supposition that there were U.S. citizens in the combat zone is confirmed -- and I repeat, we need
322 further information from our military -- then these suspicions are quite justified.

323 Those who pursue such a policy toward Russia, what do they think? Will they like us only when we die?

324 **Matthew Chance:** Thank you.

325 **Vladimir Putin:** Thank you very much.