

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON



MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin (S)

PARTICIPANTS: President Clinton  
President Boris Yeltsin

Notetakers: George Chastain, Doug Bailey,  
Frank Jarosinski, Joel Schrader,  
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Interpreter: Yuriy Shkeyrov

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: April 25, 1999, 10:35 - 11:58 a.m. EDT,  
NATO Summit Trip Building

President Yeltsin: Hello, Bill. (U)

The President: Hello, Boris. (U)

President Yeltsin: Well, I am calling on Sunday, and this is a traditional day off for us. But it is not a day off for you and me. (U)

The President: No, not today. (U)

President Yeltsin: This is because of the situation in the Balkans and the continued military action by NATO against Yugoslavia. We have agreed with you to step up efforts in all directions to find a way out of the Kosovo tragedy. This is also an ecological problem because the Danube is flowing into the Black Sea and it is extremely important to us that the sky over Europe is not clouded over again. You know I have sent Chernomyrdin as my special envoy on this Yugoslav problem. You know him and trust him. (S)

The President: Yes, I do. (U)

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President Yeltsin: Out of six points, we have negotiated five. [Note: reference to six points announced by Chernomyrdin after his meetings with Milosevic.] Out of the five points you named we have gotten Milosevic to agree to four of them. [Note: reference to five points discussed by Secretary Albright and Minister Ivanov in Oslo.] There is only one point remaining.

~~(S)~~

[Note: reference to a continuing disagreement over an international security force.] We have agreed to [Note: reference to what has been agreed between Russia and the FRY] the following points: the safe return of refugees and displaced persons, then international assistance in the reconstruction of Yugoslavia's economy, including Kosovo and the region as a whole, and an international presence under UN auspices with the participation of Russia agreed to by Yugoslavia and here, of course, is meant a military presence. Then the pullout of troops and resuming work on the political regime on the future autonomy of the region. And then the reduction of the military and police forces in Kosovo accompanied by pullout of units along the border with Yugoslavia. And international assistance in reconstructing the Yugoslav economy including Kosovo and Europe as a whole because many countries have suffered including Russia. Launching of a peacekeeping operation would be under UN auspices, and Russia is prepared to take part in this. ~~(S)~~

In our view, this is a big and important step forward. We are continuing our active efforts along those lines with Belgrade on format and composition and mandate for this operation. This is a difficult task, but we shall pursue it persistently in order to find a final solution to the problem. ~~(S)~~

It is important that your special envoy, Talbott, whom I know quite well, get involved in our efforts, but this will not be enough. So, I propose we move the remaining issues for discussion of the war to the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. This would give an opportunity for Mr. Gore to look good in his election campaign in relation to the situation in Yugoslavia and would produce a good result because Gore and Chernomyrdin know how to negotiate with each other. This Commission will work for some time and where it will work doesn't matter to me or Chernomyrdin. It could work in either Washington or Europe or Moscow or intermittently in all those places. ~~(S)~~

Well, in other words, there are signs of the possibility of reaching a mutually acceptable solution, and I count on your weight for its support, but what is important is that air raids

be suspended to provide a good background to the Commission for progress and acceptable results in getting the situation around Kosovo back on a political track. I believe we should set aside our emotions and work in a pragmatic way to arrange a political settlement against the background of discontinuation of air raids by NATO against Yugoslavia. At least for the time of the work of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, and in this case we will create the impression that everyone saved face in getting out of the tragic situation in Kosovo. ~~(S)~~

I spoke with Chernomyrdin several hours ago but it was too early to talk to you because it was four in the morning in America. If we establish the position to refer the issues to the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, it would create an opportunity for Gore to be the peacemaker. ~~(S)~~

We are working in all areas and directions, including our government delegations and the visit to Belgrade by our Patriarch who had a successful mission. So we are attacking Milosevic from all sides, and there was also assistance from our Parliament. Let us forget at this stage all other issues and get to solving this one because this problem is worse than the others, and it is worth dozens of billions of dollars. ~~(S)~~

When I talked with Chernomyrdin today he agreed to work in the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission on this issue. So we will not leave much room for maneuver to Belgrade and will keep them in our sights, also including their political network. So what is your reaction? I am waiting for it. ~~(S)~~

The President: First of all, I want to thank you for making the vigorous efforts you and Viktor Stepanovich are putting into this. Secondly, I think your idea of the Vice President and Chernomyrdin working together on this might work, but I think that they probably ought to have a telephone conversation. Then Strobe Talbott should meet with Chernomyrdin early this week to see what is possible. ~~(S)~~

On this specific thing that has been achieved so far in your work with Milosevic, I would like to make a couple of comments. On a commitment by the U.S. and Europe to regional development and intensive assistance to everyone affected, I completely agree. I have repeatedly said we have to build a positive future for Southeast Europe to prevent them from falling back into old hatreds. Now on the details. Based only on what you have said to me and what has been reported in the news on what

Milosevic has said, I would like to talk about the details --

~~(S)~~

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] So you do agree that Gore and Chernomyrdin resume their work? ~~(S)~~

The President: I think that we should have Gore and Chernomyrdin talk on the phone tomorrow, and what I would like to do is to have Strobe Talbott fly to see Viktor Stepanovich Tuesday or tomorrow or whenever you want him to go. And let me comment now -- ~~(S)~~

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] Well, I thought that after today's conversation we can tell the media that myself and President Clinton have found a common point of view on how we can solve this problem together and then the details can be worked out later, and we will continue to work actively with Milosevic on all these questions. ~~(S)~~

You know that I have decided not to send seven military ships to the Mediterranean as we have agreed, and I will continue to comply with what I promised. And what assistance we have given to Yugoslavia is only humanitarian in nature and delivered by road. There were some difficulties on the Hungarian border, but now these have been settled. Milosevic is insisting that we supply to Yugoslavia the anti-aircraft system S-300, but we shall not give this system to him, and you can believe me on that.

~~(S)~~

The President: Thank you. (U)

President Yeltsin: Because it will not allow any planes close to the borders of Yugoslavia. Well, I am listening to you Bill.

~~(S)~~

The President: First of all, let me respond to what you said we can tell the press and then I have to talk a little about the details of the proposal. I think we should say as little as possible about the specifics of what we are going to do in the long run because I have not talked to Gore at all about this and, in all fairness, I have to talk to him. I think we should have Gore and Chernomyrdin talk tomorrow and have Strobe Talbott and Chernomyrdin talk the next day and see if we can work it out. ~~(S)~~

It is fine for you to say we agreed to pursue a diplomatic solution at a very high level and that you and I are going to

personally work on it and maintain a high level of involvement. I at least need to have a brief conversation with the Vice President before I commit him to it. But I have no problem with your saying I am encouraged by your personal involvement and Chernomyrdin's. As you know, I do not believe there can be a settlement without Russia's leadership and involvement. (S)

Now, I would like to talk about two things very briefly. One is the peacekeeping force. I think it is, in theory, fine to have it be under the UN, and I also think Russia should be a strong part of it. Now I know that Milosevic does not want NATO to be any part of it. If I could design it the best way I could, I would have it look like the work we are doing in Bosnia. There are two things you should keep in mind as you work through it in coming days. The first is that I don't think the refugees will go home unless there is a NATO and an American presence. The second is, in order to make this work, the UCK and KLA have to disarm, and I don't believe anyone but NATO and the U.S. can do this. (S)

I would like to make another point, which is that there would have to be a large number of forces, and one of the things they will have to do is to protect the Serb minority from angry Kosovars seeking revenge once they are back in the country. I think you know me well enough to trust me when I say we will protect the Serbs as well as the Kosovars by working with you, but we are going to need a lot of forces to do that. (S)

The other thing that is unclear in the commitment that Milosevic made is to what extent the Serb forces would be withdrawn. But from newspaper accounts he said not all troops will be withdrawn. I do not believe the refugees will go home unless the Serb military and police and paramilitaries are gone. And keep in mind, if Russian forces are in there, that should help them deal with their legitimate concerns about maintaining the sovereignty issue. But they have to withdraw or there is no point in our doing this. The measure of success is bringing all the refugees home. (S)

Now, on the question of a bombing pause. There was a huge debate at the NATO meeting, well, not a debate, but a discussion, and there was a unanimous feeling that there could be a pause only if all the refugees could come home and secondly, agreement on an international security force and third that the Serbs must begin their withdrawal. I agree a bombing pause might be helpful, but we have to work on getting the security forces out and get the beginning of a withdrawal -- not

just you and me, but Milosevic also has to agree because all 19 members agreed to this, and I am bound by the decision the group has taken. And I think it is a good decision. You have made so much progress, we might be able to get this done in the next few days if we just work on it. (S)

President Yeltsin: Well, Bill, we are continuing and shall continue to work actively with Milosevic as if we were converting him to another faith. And I believe that on this one point that was mentioned by you that we did not manage to get Milosevic to agree on, we shall be able to do so soon. I know Talbott, and I trust him, but now we should raise the levels of these contacts and I believe that these contacts should be on the level of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. We shall help and aid Chernomyrdin in working with Milosevic, so as to make Milosevic agree to the solution of the remaining issues. And finally, so that everyone gets the impression that it is you and me that stopped that war. This would influence the domestic political situation in your country and especially in this country, but what is most important is that it will help put an end to this conflict. (S)

The President: Yes. (U)

President Yeltsin: You know that I am hearing concerns by our military who are talking about getting military servicemen to go and help Milosevic. You know I have condemned this in the strictest terms and convened my Security Council and said there should be no talk about that. Any General that speaks of sending troops to help Milosevic will be summarily dismissed from the military. (S)

The President: Thank you. (U)

President Yeltsin: Well, there is one commander in the Military District of the Far East, Colonel-General Chechevatov, who was going to get a battalion which would go to Yugoslavia to help Milosevic. I dismissed him from his post. All our law enforcement agencies and ministries are strictly under my command and report only to me. So there will be no surprises here, and no unexpected things will come. We shall maintain contacts with you at all times. (S)

Well, let us by today's conversation solve two problems with two tasks. Let us resume the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission and instruct them to take up the Yugoslav problem. As soon as the Commission, at the very hour and minute it starts working, the

air raids should stop. Of course, Talbott will be involved in that as a member of the Gore team, and he will deal with technical matters, not the big politics. So let us decide on these two questions, and if we can announce this in the media, this will mark an end to the tragedy. (S)

The President: But -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] You understand, you see what a difficult situation I am in, and I am holding myself and stifling my emotions, and I am talking with you in a constructive way. I also am leaving room for our subsequent cooperation. Well, of course this cooperation should not be abruptly stopped by the many Russians who write me letters on this issue. Let us do this Bill, and we should consider our conversation today constructive and a useful one. (S)

The President: Well first -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] Do you agree? (U)

The President: Boris, first of all, I agree this has been a useful conversation, and I am encouraged by your energy and personal involvement you have put into this. We cannot solve this without your leadership, but I have to make three points that make it impossible to make the announcement to the press as you suggested. I hope you will listen to me carefully. (S)

First of all, I cannot get Gore into this publicly until I at least talk to him about it. He has had very limited involvement at this point, and I owe it to him to have a conversation with him before I put him into the middle of this. I know you understand he has been my partner for six years now, and he is running for President, and I can't run. I don't want to do anything that involves him in this way without talking to him. (S)

The second thing is, as I said, we just voted -- all 19 leaders of NATO -- to have a pause only when agreement on the security force, refugee return, and when withdrawal of Milosevic's forces can begin. I cannot unilaterally change that, and I don't want to say in public anything that implies I have abandoned what the others have agreed to. (S)

Now, there is a third problem that you and I both have if we do this. We have got to decide how to deal with the European Union because they have been very involved in this and, if we resolve

this we need them to come up with most of the money to rebuild Southeast Europe and to provide economic aide for everyone involved. So if we do this -- (S)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] You should -- (U)

The President: Let me finish -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] Understand, Bill, the work of this Commission has an international reputation and they could invite both NATO leaders and Milosevic to take part. I can guarantee you that on the part of Milosevic. (S)

The President: Yes, I understand that but wait -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] And you can guarantee this on the NATO side and this would form the basis for the end of the war. (S)

The President: Yes, but what I am saying is -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] So, do not push Russia into this war. You know what Russia is. You know how it is equipped, but don't push Russia into this. (S)

The President: Wait a minute, Boris. I am agreeing with what you are trying to do, but what I am saying is you have got all of the Europeans here taking the lead in this initiative, and we have to figure out how to deal with this before dropping it on them in the newspaper. They are our allies and our friends, and they have to come up with most of the money to rebuild the region. We just can't have them wake up in the morning and read it in the newspaper no matter how good it would be for us and our countries. (S)

Boris, how about this. I would like to say today that we talked today for an hour, and that I thanked you for your leadership for peace, and that we agreed on further steps. And then have Gore and Chernomyrdin talk early tomorrow in the morning and work out the arrangements for next steps. Then we can have more to say tomorrow and that will give me more time to get the Europeans in a positive frame of mind. (S)

I am not trying to push you into this conflict, Boris, and I believe we can make this initiative work. But, I am no good to you, unless I can hold our group together and then in the end they can come up with the money to make this work. (S)



Boris, how about this. Suppose we say today you and I talked for an hour, and I agreed with you that we would work together to find a diplomatic solution to this conflict at the highest levels and that we will provide more details in the days ahead. That gives us time to figure out what to do with the Europeans and gives me time to talk to Gore, and time for Gore to talk to Chernomyrdin. But it has the benefit of getting your peace initiative out today, which I think is important. (S)

President Yeltsin: Well, Bill, you can't deny the work of, let's not call it a commission, Gore and Chernomyrdin would be useful and could provide the basis for a solution. We should decide that the very moment the commission starts working, there will be an end to the air raids, and at the same time the troops in the Yugoslavian units will pull out of Kosovo, and we will get Milosevic to do this. You can depend on me to get Milosevic to do this. Then we should reestablish Kosovo autonomy so all the populations that inhabit the region, no matter the ethnic origin, Albanian or Serb, could get back there and live together. Serbs are also fleeing to save themselves from NATO air raids. (S)

You know that Kofi Annan is coming to Moscow, and I will meet him, and I will do so in a way that we have a common position. Just a moment. Well, in this way, we shall unlock the situation and give the commission a chance to work. And it will work only when air raids stop. Milosevic will not slip out from our influence -- he will do everything we tell him to do. I hope your line of communication is a closed one like mine. (S)

The President: Yes. Let me ask you something, Boris. I need to talk to Gore and do some more work on this. Can we talk again tomorrow, and then have Gore talk to Chernomyrdin tomorrow? (S)

President Yeltsin: Let them begin the work, and then we shall continue efforts to work together so it looks like we stopped the European war, the World War. I realize that ground forces do not carry nuclear weapons now but of course they are capable, and if you bomb the power plants and fuel sites that would mean that there will be ecological instability in Europe for a long time. Well, I am listening to you Bill. (S)

The President: Boris, this might work if we can get the agreement on the security force and the beginning of withdrawal, then we could get a pause. If we get an agreement on the return

of refugees, agreement on the security force and the beginning of a withdrawal, then we can have a pause in the bombing and a process that could work. I think it is very important what we say and how we say it. I know the Europeans would support that kind of process and would finance the reconstruction that needs to be done in Kosovo. It is important that you and I not say this will happen just because you and I agree, because Milosevic has to agree as well. That is why I believe you and I have to talk again after Gore and Chernomyrdin talk. ~~(S)~~

President Yeltsin: We shall follow the work of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission every day and every other day. If there is something we don't like, we will give each other a call. ~~(S)~~

The President: Yes. (U)

President Yeltsin: I wanted to be sure that we have not planned [inaudible] our only aim is to stop the war so I believe that ... [inaudible] nothing that we can lose you and me can only gain from this. We can change our information for the media. [inaudible] ~~(S)~~

The President: Sorry, I did not hear that. (U)

President Yeltsin: The first point will be Gore-Chernomyrdin, we can change the second point that it will be that we agreed on conditions without going into details and it is not excluded that if everything is as we planned and the official hierarchy then we sign the letter [inaudible] although even if they do not take [inaudible] I trust this very much ... [inaudible] So -- ~~(S)~~

The President: Well I have a lot of confidence -- (U)

President Yeltsin: [interrupting] So what do you think about that, Bill? (U)

The President: We lost telephone communication for about five minutes, I have not heard the last three translations. Can you repeat them, not Boris, just the translator. (U)

President Yeltsin: OK. We have agreed? (U)

The President: No. No. I have not heard the last three translations. Can we just have -- (U)

RUSSIAN INTERPRETER: Mr. President, you should be assured that we are not taking sides with Milosevic. My only aim is to stop the war and stop the air raids and form the political basis for all sides to negotiate. And that we should use the same approach to all the sides of the conflict no matter how great their force. But it is most important that we find a solution to this most painful problem. We should stop the air raids. That would form the basis for the political solution of this tragedy. (S)

So I say again, of the five points enumerated by Albright, we got Milosevic to agree to four of them, and we have a statement signed by him on that. So probably we might change our second point in our information to the media, to say the first point will be that Gore and Chernomyrdin are working on this problem and the second point is that we have agreed on the conditions of the cessation of the air raids without going into details. So I don't also exclude if everything goes okay that this could help Chernomyrdin climb up the service ladder. (S)

Well, we also got a written request from Milosevic forwarded by his people regarding the union between Russia and Belarus and Yugoslavia. I tried to delay this, and we are saying we are not ready for this. I can tell you confidentially that this will never happen. (S)

The President: That is good. Let me say this, Boris. I think we are a little closer here in that I have no problem saying we have clarified conditions for a bombing pause. The most important thing is to say we have talked for an hour and committed ourselves to pursuing peace and that in the days ahead we will explain how we are going to do it. I will say again, I will have to talk to Gore before I can put him in the middle of this. (S)

President Yeltsin: And also you should take into account anti-American feelings are growing in our society. I should put an end to this, but this will not be possible to do while the air raids continue. So that is now the risk for you or me to get this Gore-Chernomyrdin to work with Milosevic and NATO so they elaborate on a short document that could be signed publicly. (S)

The President: Boris, I will work on nothing else but this for the next day. I will send Strobe tonight and have Gore get on the phone with Chernomyrdin. I will do nothing else but this,

but we have to be careful not to say something else in public that might make it impossible to work. ~~(S)~~

President Yeltsin: But you will tell this to Gore also? (U)

The President: Yes, I will tell him. As soon as I get off the phone with you, I will tell him. Okay? (U)

President Yeltsin: And I will instruct Chernomyrdin to start talks with Rugova. ~~(S)~~

The President: Good. Thanks, Boris. I will see you. Goodbye. (U)

President Yeltsin: I think our discussion was frank, constructive, and balanced. So we did not let out our emotions surface. (U)

The President: No, and we won't. (U)

President Yeltsin: We shall work for the future. (U)

The President: Goodbye friend, I will see you. (U)

President Yeltsin: I was more talkative than you. (U)

The President: Yes, but we are going to do this. I am very encouraged. If you are involved, we can do this. Goodbye. (U)

President Yeltsin: So, let's agree on this. This call was my initiative and the next will be yours. (U)

The President: Yes, and it will be soon. (U)

President Yeltsin: Very well, Bill. (U)

The President: Bye bye. (U)

President Yeltsin: Goodbye. (U)

The President: Goodbye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --