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Oral History Interview with Grigory Berdennikov

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Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

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Grigory Berdennikov ☐☐
☐☐☐Russia ☐☐

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person, in Moscow on 20 October 2016

Michal Onderco: Mr Berdennikov, you were involved with the Russian disarmament and non-proliferation policy for thirty years or so, right?

Grigory Berdennikov: And even before. Since 1973 I worked in the political section of our mission to the UN in New York dealing with issues connected with the First Committee.

Michal Onderco: So more than 30 years. I want to start my questions will be in three areas: the first will be about what happened before the conference, one will be about what happened during the conference, and one will be about what happened after the conference.

Grigory Berdennikov: [laughing]including today?

Michal Onderco: It's going to be more about what happened immediately after the conference.

Grigory Berdennikov: All right. Please, go ahead.

Michal Onderco: Of course, between the 1990 conference and 1995 many things happened. One of them was of course the break-up of the Soviet Union, there was progress in disarmament steps with the United States, the new START negotiations. How did that influence what Russia already...

Grigory Berdennikov: The expectations were high of course.

Michal Onderco: In what way?

Grigory Berdennikov: At that time I think many people thought the speed of ending the arms race would be faster. And some non-aligned had an idea that there should be more or less immediate progress towards a complete ban of nuclear weapons.

Michal Onderco: That was already in the early 1990s?

Grigory Berdennikov: What was different from the previous period, in the multilateral field, was the start of CTBT negotiations at the CD in 1993. That was the main feature of the time. One should bear in mind that during previous NPT review periods the CTBT was the main demand from the non-aligned. And actually the 1990 review conference was not so happy an event because there was nothing on that issue. The history of the CTBT issue in the `70s and the `80s was very simple: when there was a Republican administration in the United States it was more or less zero progress on the issue, when the Democrats were at the helm, there was at least something. So this was the main feature, and that gave us, the nuclear weapon states, a strong position, we thought, to work for a successful outcome of the '95 conference. The position of the Five was in favour of the indefinite extension of the NPT, at least the declared position, with some nuances concerning the possible fall-back positions of different states.

Michal Onderco: Did Russia have a fall-back position?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, our instructions as far as I can remember were to work for the indefinite extension, and then, if it is completely impossible, to submit views on what to do next to Moscow. So it was not that we had, already in our pocket, a fall-back position. And it was good that the events at the conference did not compel us to seek it.

Michal Onderco: And how did you see the pressure from the non-aligned on disarmament?

Grigory Berdennikov: It was strong, but we could deal with it because we had the CTBT effort under way not to mention other important things like START.

Michal Onderco: Well Russia had historically not that bad relations with the non-aligned countries so...

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, it is true. But on that issue we never saw each other completely eye-to-eye because they had what we felt was a really radical position, without taking into consideration our security needs. And our attempts to explain to them our view on how it works in reality, time after time, failed, because people wanted to have a clean public position, which, in its turn, was understandable.

Michal Onderco: Was there a domestic discussion about the Russian negotiating position? Apart from the Minister of Foreign Affairs were there other parties who were involved or were pushing..?

Grigory Berdennikov: Sure, we always had a multiagency agreed position.

Michal Onderco: So who was involved and what were their interests?

Grigory Berdennikov: The military, the nuclear industry, of course.

Michal Onderco: The military?

Grigory Berdennikov: Of course.

Michal Onderco: And they were, of course, also in favour of the indefinite...

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes. We had no difficulty from them on that issue at all.

Michal Onderco: Was there any involvement for example of the Parliament, of the legislative branch at that moment?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, frankly speaking I do not remember that we had some kind of hearings on the NPT extension issue before the conference, but maybe it is a memory lapse, because I was based in the CD at the time.

Michal Onderco: Ok, so in the run-up to the conference...

Grigory Berdennikov: It was not a hot political issue internally at that time. Rather at home there was a consensus in favour of indefinite extension.

Michal Onderco: There was a consensus.

Grigory Berdennikov: And there was no criticism of that approach. We didn't hide it from the public that we are in favour of indefinite extension. And there was no controversy about it.

Michal Onderco: In the run-up to the conference, did Russia try to lobby directly other countries?

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes.

Michal Onderco: Can you tell me a little more about that?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, as usual we went to a number of countries, maybe about fifty, and put forward our position in favour of indefinite extension. In most cases, the counterparts were not surprised, quite polite but uncommitted.

Michal Onderco: So were there also cases where they were not polite?

Grigory Berdennikov: [laughing] Well that I don't remember.

Michal Onderco: Was that well received?

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, well it was something that was very much expected of the nuclear weapon states because the Americans and the rest of the P5 did some lobbying too.

Michal Onderco: Did you in some way coordinate? Or divide the countries?

Grigory Berdennikov: Oh, that I don't remember... Maybe yes. We were in close contact with other members of the Five and shared our impressions. And we were glad that we could find a common position.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned that you were in close contact with the Five, and you also mentioned that there was an agreement between the Five on the fact that there should be a push for indefinite extension. So your contacts within the Five were mostly about the strategy and the tactics?

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, and especially in New York, because basically the tactics cannot be foreseen before the game. It was done, while the show was already on.

Michal Onderco: That means, already in New York, during the conference?

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes. We had, if my memory serves me right, two times a week meetings of the Five. The place was the Leopard restaurant on the First Ave. I have never had so much of alligator meat at any other time of my life.

Michal Onderco: So there were, just before the conference, revelations that Iraq engaged in an illicit nuclear programme. How did that change what you went to the conference with?

Grigory Berdennikov: I don't remember that it had any influence. The conference was not about resolving all proliferation issues but a practical exercise with one major purpose - to extend the Treaty. And it was important to concentrate on how to reach that goal.

Michal Onderco: And the goal was indefinite.

Grigory Berdennikov: The goal was the indefinite extension of the NPT.

Michal Onderco: So how did you see for example the ideas that the IAEA mandate should be strengthened? Did you agree with those?

Grigory Berdennikov: We thought that it was worth the price. It was in the realm of possibility.

Michal Onderco: So let's move to the conference and at the conference there were these three basic proposals. The first one was the indefinite extension put forward by Canada, there was a proposal from [..]

Grigory Berdennikov: No. Canada came later.

Michal Onderco: Ok, so who came first?

Grigory Berdennikov: The proposal for 25 years of extension which was put forward by Venezuela.

Michal Onderco: And what did you think about that proposal?

Grigory Berdennikov: That is was not what we expected.[laughter]

Michal Onderco: There was also a proposal put forward, I think, by Mexico, that there should be a rolling number of extensions based on performance.

Grigory Berdennikov: This was also less than we expected.

Michal Onderco: Less than you expected. And then there was, of course, the Canadian proposal.

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, the Canadian proposal which provided for the indefinite extension was the most important proposal at the conference and it ensured its positive outcome. I remember personally thanking the Canadian delegation for submitting this proposal. This proposal signalled a fundamental change in tactics of how to obtain the desired outcome of the conference. First the P5 were trying to build a consensus for the indefinite extension through patiently talking to other participants about the benefits for all of such a decision. But the tabling of proposals for less than indefinite extension demonstrated the shortcomings of this method of work. In order to have a consensus in the end we had to abandon working for a consensual decision. And switch to a majority decision.

Michal Onderco: Was that a strategy?

Grigory Berdennikov: Of course. Nothing falls from above you know? People are responsible.

Michal Onderco: So tell me more about it.

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, that was the crux of the matter. As I said all of us went to the conference with an idea that we should sit together with all delegations and

explain to them that it was really in the interests of world peace, of everybody, to have an indefinite extension. But very soon, I would say, after one week of the conference, it was crystal clear that the position for indefinite extension was portrayed by some as a sort of a radical, even an extreme solution favoured by a minority of influential participants. Our approach was countered by so-called 'compromise,' middle ground' solutions. 'Compromise' solutions were, of course, more appealing for lots of participants. I wouldn't say for the majority of delegations, but for lots of delegations who were reluctant to agree to the indefinite extension unless they were given a proof that this was inevitable, no matter what they had been told about it. The treaty itself provided for a majority decision for the extension purposes. Now the trick was how to demonstrate convincingly that the majority really wanted an indefinite extension and had the resolve to push it through.

Michal Onderco: So who came up with the idea for the trick?

Grigory Berdennikov: This you should ask others.

Michal Onderco: Ok. So at the Leopard there were the P5, was there anyone else?

Grigory Berdennikov: No, just the P5. And since it was clear that it wouldn't be possible to have a consensual decision we favoured just by talking, we thought that there should be a device that would put a certain pressure. And that device was considered to be a draft counter-proposal to the proposals by the opposition to the indefinite extension.

Michal Onderco: The Canadian one?

Grigory Berdennikov: The Canadian one. And we thought it would be useful if such a proposal would not be officially put by a member of the Five, but by a friendly delegation with impeccable non-proliferation credentials. Someone mentioned Canada and we agreed to ask the Canadian friends to come up with such good offices.

Michal Onderco: And that was a counterproposal to Venezuela's?

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes.

Michal Onderco: OK.

Grigory Berdennikov: I don't remember if the Mexicans put forward in writing their proposal.

Michal Onderco: I think they did.

Grigory Berdennikov: Maybe. But the Venezuelans definitely did. And the trick was not only to put forward a counterproposal, but to start gathering co-sponsors as many as we can. This was the most important part of it. Because we thought that we had the majority with us, and it turned out that we were right. In about a week after the Canadian proposal was tabled, we reached the point where the majority of the countries who participated in the conference signed up as cosponsors under it. It ensured that if we were to put it to a vote, according to the treaty, it would be approved.

Michal Onderco: But that of course, that was a gamble, because it could as well end up that a majority of countries would not vote in favour.

Grigory Berdennikov: No, we did our counting, and we came to a strong conclusion that it was almost a sure thing.

Michal Onderco: And you mentioned already before that there were some countries who needed to be persuaded that they should go for indefinite extension and not for the 25 years. Were these mostly the Western countries or mostly the non-aligned?

Grigory Berdennikov: Of course mostly the non-aligned, most of the Western countries were after all allied with the Western members of the P5 who were pushing for the IE. Not our allies but theirs

Michal Onderco: I'm trying to think who were the Russian allies in that moment.

Grigory Berdennikov: But it turned out to be the right counting.

Michal Onderco: Because other interviewees suggested that, for example, there was not so much a fear about how will the non-aligned vote but about how, for example, would Australia vote, or Japan, or Germany ...

Grigory Berdennikov: They know better, but we were proven to be right.

Michal Onderco: But what gave you the certainty that they would go for the indefinite extension?

Grigory Berdennikov: Who?

Michal Onderco: Well, the Germans, for example?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, we were sure, that if some other members of the P5 would really work with them, it would happen.

Michal Onderco: Ok, we talked a lot about how the Canadian position came about, and the other country that is very often mentioned with reference to consensus building is South Africa. And many mention that the South African push for the indefinite extension was surprising to them. Was that surprising to you as well?

Grigory Berdennikov: We were not sure about it but it was very good that they came out with a reasonable position.

Michal Onderco: So there was no cooperation with South Africa?

Grigory Berdennikov: We welcomed their support for the indefinite extension. It helped other NAM delegations to adopt the right approach.

Michal Onderco: But you may have had other ways.

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, it was not a surprise for us. We knew that not only the Western allies would do it, but that many others would follow, and the counting again was right and the whole scheme was right.

Michal Onderco: So can you tell me a little more about what was the discussion going on within the Friends of the President? Because that was where most of the discussion was going on.

Grigory Berdennikov: The one that Ben Sanders headed?

Michal Onderco: No, the Friends, the group that was chaired by the Ambassador Dhanapala where he brought together ambassadors of 20 countries.

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, well, he had, as far as I remember, separate meetings with different...

Michal Onderco: So how were other countries brought on board? Was it purely bilateral or was it also multilateral negotiation?

Grigory Berdennikov: No, the Canadians were working through bilateral, maybe they had a meeting of the Western group - I don't know, I didn't participate. But they were working with different delegations bilaterally, maybe with the help of others. Dhanapala had meetings with the heads of delegations, bilateral, basically trying to feel where the situation was inclining.

Michal Onderco: How did you see his chairmanship of the conference?

Grigory Berdennikov: It was very helpful and constructive.

Michal Onderco: Was he in any way crucial in shaping the final outcome?

Grigory Berdennikov: I think that the crucial role in shaping the final outcome was this scheme of tabling the Canadian resolution and gathering co-sponsorships.

Michal Onderco: And when you approached the Canadian with that idea, were they very happy to jump on board?

Grigory Berdennikov: From what we heard about it -and it was not us who approached them - they were happy to help.

Michal Onderco: OK, other P5 countries.

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, other P5 countries.

Michal Onderco: Ok, some of the things that were agreed at the conference were of course the concessions to other countries. How were these negotiated?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well it was side negotiations. They were not directly connected with the main work done at the conference. We thought, for us, there was no problem with the side agreements. After all we voted at the UN for the Middle East NFZ resolution year after year before the conference. It might have been a problem for some other members of the Five, but they found it possible to come to an agreement with the Egyptians. And from our viewpoint it was very good.

Michal Onderco: So how did you see the Egyptian idea for the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone?

Grigory Berdennikov: We were supportive.

Michal Onderco: Did you see it as a realistic idea at the time?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well again, we supported it.

Michal Onderco: And what were you thinking about the idea for the strengthened review process?

Grigory Berdennikov: Again, we thought that if we want to have a smooth conference, and in the final analysis we definitely were in favour of a smooth conference, we thought that it was a price worth paying.

Michal Onderco: So you've mentioned about a lot of things that it would be 'a price worth paying' for the final outcome. So what would not have been a price worth paying for a smooth conference?

Grigory Berdennikov: Something less than indefinite extension would definitely not be worth paying for a smooth conference. We were quite ready to have a vote, no difficulty for us...

Michal Onderco: So why did you then want consensus?

Grigory Berdennikov: Because it is better for the Treaty. Because it is better to share the responsibility for the outcome with everyone, to involve everyone, of course! Everybody agreed to what you were pushing! What better can you wish for?

Michal Onderco: You've already mentioned at the beginning that there was a conversation about disarmament and that the non-aligned were bringing that up...

Grigory Berdennikov: As they always do.

Michal Onderco: Where were your boundaries on that issue at the conference?

Grigory Berdennikov: We were pushing for CTBT at that time, and that was the main issue for everyone at that time. So, on that issue we had a very good position. At that time it was the focus of the disarmament agenda, and as I mentioned in the beginning, it was the most important point for the Non-Aligned for many years, for decades actually. Look at the results of the first SSOD, for example.

Michal Onderco: But already at that time some of the Non-Aligned were coming up with the idea that there should be for example a timeline, that is coming back now, and that this is something that should be discussed.

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, for the timeline: all timelines are artificial, definitely. And in this area to have a timeline is not possible. Some of them for example said that first we must have the CTBT and then we will have the indefinite extension. But all of them, the most active, were intimately involved in the negotiations in Geneva and they knew first hand that it was not because the nuclear weapon states were dragging their feet but that the issues were such that they needed time to be resolved. And we didn't play with that idea because we made the treaty reality the next year, 1996.

Michal Onderco: And how did you see the dynamics within the NAM, did you see them as one block or were there a lot of divisions among them?

Grigory Berdennikov: Definitely there were divisions, as always, but they had an official position that was agreed among them and that position didn't include

indefinite extension. So, officially, they were not in favour of indefinite extension. But this did not prevent some of them from joining as co-sponsors the Canadian proposal.

Michal Onderco: Were there many of them who privately expressed that they were in favour?

Grigory Berdennikov: You mentioned...

Michal Onderco: -South Africa.

Grigory Berdennikov: South Africa was one, there were others too. But in the end because of the device that we used they had to agree to it. There was no other choice.

Michal Onderco: It's interesting - the Non-Aligned countries, if they were to vote as a bloc they would have a majority.

Grigory Berdennikov: No, and we had a proof! We had a proof, on paper! This proof was the list of names of the co-sponsors of the Canadian proposal. And they had to face it. They could not vote against the resolution they were co-sponsoring. The co-sponsorship was the device, because it was the equivalent of actual voting. It was voting without formal voting.

Michal Onderco: So who brought them to co-sponsor a position that was against the agreed NAM position?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, talk to them. The reasonableness of our proposal, I guess.

Michal Onderco: Was there any country that really surprised you at the conference, that its position really surprised you?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, I wouldn't say so. We knew what was going on. Did we have a plan to use this device before the conference? No we didn't, it came at the conference.

Michal Onderco: So when you came to New York there was not yet a plan on how to get ...

Grigory Berdennikov: No, we had, all of us, all of the Five had first a plan to talk to people.

Michal Onderco: At the conference?

Grigory Berdennikov: At the conference, about the wisdom of having an indefinite extension. We had a very open position, on how it was good for everyone, so forth. But clearly it did not work and we were quite sure that it wouldn't work by the end of the first week. And then we came up with this...

Michal Onderco: You mentioned already that before the conference you approached 50 countries, and from those approaches it came...

Grigory Berdennikov: No, it was not very clear. Basically when you approach someone on a multilateral issue, people sometimes are not completely in the picture even in

the capitals. When you come to them and speak about, say, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, tell them that your position is such and such, they most often would thank you and say that they will report it to their masters in the capital and that's it. Basically, such approaches are routine. So when they come to a conference, in some cases their instruction is just 'follow the decisions of the Non-Aligned Movement'. In other cases they have more elaborated positions. But it is only at the event that they really face the substance of the issue.

Michal Onderco: You mentioned that they report things to their political masters in the capital. During the conference, were you still lobbying in the capitals?

Grigory Berdennikov: No, for us it was not necessary.

Michal Onderco: You did it before. So there was no longer engagement through capitals.

Grigory Berdennikov: No, it was not really useful, because the instructions were already in. I do not remember that we had to apply to the capitals during the conference. Sometimes that happens but not in that case, in that case the situation was manageable in New-York.

Michal Onderco: At the end the agreement to extend the Treaty was done by the chair of the conference in a way that many say was very unconventional. Do you know how he came up with that idea, to ask whether there was someone opposing and then smashing the hammer?

Grigory Berdennikov: No, it was the usual practise; it is always done this way at the CD. The chair asks whether there is an opposition to a proposal and if there is a silence it is the consensus.

Michal Onderco: Once the decision for an extension was done, was there satisfaction among the P5?

Grigory Berdennikov: Sure, we have fulfilled the instructions we had.

Michal Onderco: What were your expectations about how the treaty would perform in the most immediate future? Did you expect for example that there would be new member coming?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, we had our expectations about the new members, and it proved true.

Michal Onderco: You were expecting already Brazil for example?

Grigory Berdennikov: Sure, it took a lot of effort and years of work with Brazil. And finally it came to the conclusion that it was in Brazil's interest to join the Treaty, which we welcomed very much. And now only three or four countries are outside the treaty.

Michal Onderco: Depending on how you count DPRK.

Grigory Berdennikov: Yes, that's why I'm saying three or four. We hope that the day will come when they would be willing to join the Treaty.

Michal Onderco: We already touched upon the Middle East, and we touched upon the fact that Russia always supported it. What were, however, your realistic expectations about the motion?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well to be frank, we had our doubts about the possibility that Israel would see the light and join the NPT at that time. This uncertainty is still on, but it doesn't mean that we should stop working for it.

Michal Onderco: Is there something crucial about the conference which I should have asked but didn't?

Grigory Berdennikov: Well, I am sure that the device we used with gathering co-sponsors for a good resolution was the right thing to do. And it was the only way to have a consensus for the indefinite extension. If we didn't go for it, we would have either a completely failed conference, and then what would have happened with the treaty I just cannot imagine, or we would have to change our own positions. Since the majority of the participating States, as it was proven by the co-sponsorship of our draft decision, were in favour of the indefinite extension, we were sure we should not bend to the minority and go for something less. If we were to do that it would be a tragedy for the non-proliferation regime as a whole. Who knows would the NPT still be with us or not?

Michal Onderco: Well one thing that you didn't talk about almost at all were the negotiations in the conference and in the committees of the conference and, of course, in the group that was convened by Dhanapala. Were these less consequential than the bilateral negotiations?

Grigory Berdennikov: Everything was put forward to the group when in substance it was already clear what the end result of the group work would look like. It was very well prepared and very well executed. And the Chair played an indispensable role in the success of the conference.

Michal Onderco: And it was all prepared by the P5.

Grigory Berdennikov: I would rather put it like that: the P5 played the role commensurate with its responsibility in this area.

Michal Onderco: Thank you very much for your time.