

Timchenko: Everything has to be paid for, and acquaintance with top officials as well

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Founder and owner of Volga Group agrees that money loves calm. In a new ITAR-TASS project named "Top Officials", he revealed how sanctions influenced his business



by
Andrey Vandenko

PART 1

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Interest towards Gennady Timchenko is obvious. The former co-owner of Gunvor Group whose private capital under various assessments stands between \$6 billion and \$12 billion, is not only a member of the club of Russia's richest and most influential people. He is also on the list of selected individuals who fell under the U.S.



alized sanctions in March and whose companies – including – were placed on U.S. blacklist in July.

- What are you suffering for, Gennady Nikolayevich?

- I wouldn't say I'm actually suffering too much although I do feel certain discomfort. I've gotten a feeling I'm not free. I've always considered Russia to be my home but I lived most of the time abroad in the past twenty-five years, moving from one country to another. Now I've virtually become travel-banned. My family has left for France and I can't join them... Now I'm cut off from all of that. From my family, from my much-loved dog.

- What breed is it?

- Labrador.

- Will you confirm supposition?

- It's true. Rommie is Connie's daughter from the first litter. We tried to keep the information to ourselves, though. Frankly speaking, I wasn't a dog fancier previously but I think Vladimir Vladimirovich (Putin) wanted to hand over a puppy to a reliable master and I naturally agreed. I chose Rommie myself. I liked her right away. She is black with whitish spots on the chest. She lived in the presidential residence on Rublyovskoye Shosse until she turned seven months old while all the injections were given to her and the documents were obtained. Then I took her to Switzerland. She's turned into a family member over ten years.

I'm accustomed to wandering around the world and spending 500 hours a year aboard a plane. Being on the move all the time is normal for any large businessman. But I always knew I could reunite with my family at any time. Now it's different, and that's what is really saddening. My son



nineteen years old July 11. He had to come to Russia from
and where is studying at a university to mark his birthday.

- Is he a citizen of Finland, like you?

- My son was born in Helsinki and there are no obstacles for him or other members of our family to keep up Russian citizenship, too. I've never made a secret of my dual citizenship. I did everything legally, with a due observance of law. You remember the 1990's. I needed a second passport then to be able to move around the world freely and to prevent a waste of time while awaiting foreign entry visas. Our business was developing rapidly then and mobility meant really much for me...

- Why don't you go to Europe now, by the way? It was the Americans that blacklisted you, not Europeans...

- Formally there are no obstacles. I can board a flight for Paris, Geneva or London right away. I have quite a few friends and partners in Europe and they won't let me down if something happens. Alas, there are reasons for misgivings about possible provocations on the part of U.S. secret services. That's why my traveling is restricted now. Believe me, these are not just my fantasies. There's reliable data the details of which I can't reveal to you, quite understandably. Still we're working on the issue.

- I think it'd be more correct to ask you who are you suffering for rather than what for. The U.S., which is willing to jab Vladimir Putin, doesn't conceal it's targeting his closest circle.

Businessman's private collection of art. © ITAR-TASS/Vyacheslav Prokofyev



can say I'm suffering for my homeland and for its president, domestic and foreign policies I support. Including Crimea.

I came back before the sanctions and the March referendum in Russia. I felt it was about time. As you can see, I live in a house designed in classic Soviet style. Even the pictures I put up here are in the Socialist realism style. Many paintings were painted by the Tkachev brothers. I'll show their canvasses as we walk around the rooms. Those brothers were born in the Bryansk region, by the way, almost on the border with Ukraine.

- I noticed you use a walkie-talkie to call an assistant or a housekeeper.

- That's a big building, two stories. Plus four hectares of land around it. It's no use shouting here.

- And the mobile phone?

- Edward Snowden has taught us to handle this thing more cautiously. We're being watched.

- By the Big Brother?

- By big and little brothers... I have to take this into account. Naturally, I speak over the phone, too, but I remember that alien ears are listening to me in addition to my interlocutor. So I understand clearly what to say and whom to say it to.

- Nonetheless, do you have an e-mail and do you appear on social networks?

- I'll tell you frankly I don't know how to use the computer and I'm not going to learn how to do it. Lena, my wife, completed computer courses,



now to use the Internet and now communicates with staff by e-

she receives up to 150 emails a day and she has to answer all of them because it's a rule with cultured people. And imagine how many emails I might be getting. I just don't have time to correspond with the whole world. And that's why I decided that the computer wasn't meant for me. I know how to text and that's enough. If I need to read something urgently or to get a document, I can use a notebook of someone of my home folks or assistants. There's no problem with it, you see, because everyone around has all these gadgets. As for the news in the Internet, I don't read it and hence have a sound sleep at night.

- Following the advice of Professor Preobrazhensky? (*Prof. Preobrazhensky, a hero of Mikhail Bulgakov's short novel 'A Dog's Heart' who recommended his assistant to stop reading Soviet papers before lunch, as they spoiled appetite. – ITAR-TASS*).

- Exactly. And I feel really well. Internet is filled with so much stuff that you really get astonished sometimes. And I often learn the things about myself that have nothing in common with reality.

- Recently there was a publication about your Ukrainian roots...

- It so happened that my father's parents died too early and he lived in an orphanage shelter for some time. It's too difficult to trace our familial history but I know that my grandparents hailed from the Kharkiv region, which is located in Novorossia.

- Or the Sloboda area...

- Whatever you call it, those lands were incorporated into Soviet Ukraine only in 1922. One of the people reigning there now is practically my neighbor in Geneva.



Who's that?
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iskiy (Ihor Kolomoisky, current Governor of Ukraine's Dnepropetrovsk region. – ITAR-TASS). Our houses are located close enough. I am not acquainted with Mr. Kolomoisky personally but I've heard about him really much. But these stories are not for the media. For the prosecutorial agencies, probably...

- Did you speak with Vladimir Vladimirovich about it?

- No, of course not! Firstly, we don't see each other as you may think. Secondly, I never meddle with the spheres where I'm not competent. I'm not a politician and I'd don't speak up on these issues.

PART 2

On friendship with Vladimir Putin, sanctions and taxes

- How many years do you know each other?

- More than twenty. But when I am asked questions about our friendship, I always say, well, please turn to Vladimir Vladimirovich with it. If I call myself a friend of his, this won't look appropriate.

- Nonetheless, the president mentioned your wife when he was speaking about the aftermath of the sanctions.

- I'll tell you why. We have several places for contacts with the head of state. Most often, it's at fitness. I'm a founder of the Yawara-Neva club where Putin has always been honorary president.

- Kind of a "gentle way to victory"?



right. It's how judo is translated. Together with the Rotenberg family, I initially supported the club with finances. We brought together the best judokas there and today Yawara has the title of a multiple champion of Europe among clubs.

- Who would say it doesn't...

Gennady Timchenko's private collection of art. © ITAR-TASS/Vyacheslav Prokofyev

- Money does not always guarantee success and Russian football shows a graphic instance of it. Vladimir Vladimirovich and I have other common interests in sports – ice hockey and alpine skiing. One more shared point of interest is the Russian Geographic Society. Vladimir Putin asked us at a regular meeting of our society, which took place after the imposition of sanctions, about our sensations in the new reality. I told him everything was OK but there were some subtle moment. I said my wife had been unable to pay for a spinal surgery at a German clinic. The managers issued a bill and the payment did not get through although the sanctions were not supposed to affect family members and the Europeans did not put us on any stop lists. Then we found a way out of the situation, of course and paid on the bill but I think you'll agree what happened was an act of silliness. Even now, almost four months after the surgery Lena has not fully recuperated, although she should long have recuperated. Physicians say this is because of the stress in the wake of events.

- Did you clear it out why the initial transaction did not get through?

- That's very simple. Even the large private European banks are captives of the world financial system, which is controlled by the U.S. The Americans can do whatever they want to anyone. You know France is being persistently persuaded to give up the contract for supplying Mistral amphibious assault ships to Russia and in exchange it's getting the



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s that the size of its penalties for doing transactions with Iran, and Cuba will be revised. If you try and call a spade a spade, we're dealing with a showing of explicit blackmail. Department of State officials make phone calls to the managers of European banks and dictate to them which Russian accounts the latter should block. Many executives prefer to shun these risks and to act out the persistent recommendation of trans-Atlantic partners.

- And what did you do with your Visa and Master Card? Threw them away?

- I stopped using them. Now I'll have to take a wallet along with me, like in the old days.

- Or a suitcase with money.

- The pockets of my jacket are not bagging too much, it seems. And if you take plastic cards, what's left now is the Swiss medical assurance, an international driving license and a plastic ID from Finland, an analogue of Russia's domestic passport. But I also added China's Union card to the collection. I obtained it as soon as the sanctions took effect.

- Did you try it out?

- Of course I did. It works perfectly. And it is accepted in a lot of places. In some sense, it will be more reliable than Visa. At least the Americans won't be able to grab it. You probably heard a story about a concert that Timberlake was expected to give at Hartwal Areena in Helsinki, which I co-own together with the Rotenberg brothers, but he started getting threats and face significant problems back at home if he received anyone of the Russians on the EU list. And as a result, a new term for holding the concert appeared: Justin was not to meet with me personally. And I did



to go to that show all the same because Timberlake is not an
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me in any way.

- And my I wonder where you pay taxes today.

- Over the past fourteen years, I've been paying them in Switzerland and prior to it, in Finland. I am a diligent tax payer and I hope to remain one in the future, too. But still I scrupulously transfer to Russia the monies I owe to the Russian budget. In theory, I could have cut down the transfers citing the rule on inadmissibility of dual taxation but I never did this – I realized the proceeds that my monies were going off in wages to Russian doctors, teachers, and the military while I was not going to go bankrupt under any circumstances. I wouldn't get poor if I shared the budget with others.

- Rossiya bank where you are a shareholder has changed over to transactions in rubles. How did this affect its performance?

- There's been no major worsening. We managed to focus, to summon our resources. The bank received support from Russian companies. Large energy corporations transferred their accounts to our bank. I'm not citing some exact figures here because I'm not a bank manager. It would silly of course to deny the emergence of some constraints in connection with the sanctions. For instance, we cannot make transactions with the West or take loans there. But that's not critical. The current situation highlights the problem of this country's financial security in general and its vulnerability to external impacts.

But this applies to any sphere of life, and not only the monetary business. The sanctions make themselves manifest in the most bizarre ways. For instance, Gulfstream company has refused to perform its duties under a contract by the suspending the flights of my jet, which I had purchased from them for quite some money.



What was the essence of that refusal?

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They prohibit any contacts with me to Gulfstream. They can't discuss either the future supplies or the performance of this jet with me. The aircraft is not serviced and is halted to a standstill.

- Here?

- Yeah, it's in Moscow. My jet cannot be operated because the manufacturer does not provide spare parts for it and the pilots cannot use navigation equipment or built-in maps. After all, even in the French Falcone has many items made in the US.

- And what transport do you travel on now?

- As a police detective said in the Soviet-era police miniseries 'The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed', "We have our own methods to handle Kostya Saprykin." In case of emergency, you can always arrange a chartered flight, although this isn't very convenient.

- And do you use private helicopters?

- They are not American, they're European, and they're still flying. What if you ask about tomorrow. Even the French Falcone jets have many component parts made in the U.S.

The U.S. is capable of spiting us and doing certain damage to our economy and the financial sphere, as well as to track down some of our most touchy spots but on the whole our position is clear and correct. Russia is a sovereign state defending its national interests. I think the Americans are especially embarrassed by our refusal to jump into bed with them obediently, like all others do. Hence the spiteful reaction.

- But for you and for the people of your circle the amount of personal discontent is so big that a thought about carrying the can for someone else comes to you.

- But why for someone else? I never separated myself from Russia.

- Still don't you feel like being a captive of the situation?

- Well, maybe... You have to pay for everything in this life. And for your being acquainted with the country's top leaders, too. But one can put up with business costs and personal inconveniences when state interests are at stake. These are trifles on the background of global problems. I see everything perfectly. It's naïve to think that someone will be able to intimidate us in this way. Blackmail is counterproductive. We'll go through anything and will find a way out of the situation. Apart from posing a problem, the sanctions also offer a stimulus. There is no depending on the outside world to such a degree, whether the situation concerns our defense industry, finances, or foodstuff security... We should develop our own industries. Take the water we're drinking now, Aquanika, which is also embraced by the sanctions. We produce it in the forests of the Nizhny Novgorod region. It is taken from a relict sea at the depth of 200 meters below surface. By the way, it is in contrast to the world-famous U.S. brands that can hardly claim to offer natural products. Who did our water obstruct? It's something inconceivable! Ivan, my son, prompted a nice idea to us. We'll be mentioning in our promotion campaign that this is subject to sanctions. It will thus get a special taste.

- Novatek will scarcely profit from this notoriety. Its shares in the U.S. fell immediately after its placement under the U.S. sanctions

But, sanctions are far from pleasant. We've retained the right to operate and to do commerce in the West and in the East but lending to us is restricted. U.S. banks cannot issue loans to us for more than ninety days now. As I've said, the problem is the Europeans are scared by the Americans. A system pegged to the U.S. dollar dominates the world and there is no alternative to it so far. BRICS (an informal association of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – ed.) is creating a bank of its own. Many Chinese financial institutes are opening offices in Europe and the yuan may replace the dollar sometime in the future but in any case this will not happen overnight.

- For the time being, though, you've asked — rather impolitely – to withdraw from the South Stream.

- It's true. We hoped to make our strong contribution to the common cause, but you see Mr. McCain came to Bulgaria and talked the national government into renouncing our services. In the meantime, Sroytransgaz has taken part in large-scale international projects. We built a section of Nord Stream between Germany and the Czech Republic and laid the pipelines in Arab countries. From the viewpoint of business, the loss of the South Stream is an unpleasant thing for us, but who should I lodge complaints with? The Americans?

- I think the White House hopes all of you – those who cannot travel abroad and those who cannot board jets – will get together some day and will go to the Kremlin to beg for a softening of its position on Ukraine...

- Oh no, this is out of the question! Vladimir Putin proceeds from Russia's interests in any situation. And that's it. There can be no 'compromise solutions' in that sphere. No one of us will ever argue the issue. We've some financial difficulties because of sanctions, of course, but these



st don't compare with the scope of tasks faced by the entire
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- And still someone continues cutting your tail off bit by bit. I suspect it was sanctions, too, that compelled you to jettison your aviation business.

- You're right. I had no plans to withdraw my assets from the Pulkovo or Sheremetyevo airports.

- Who acquired your stakes?

- The deal is bought in, what for to speculate on this topic?

- Was it also the Americans who forced you to bid farewell to Gunvor?

- No. Mr. Tornkvist and I had long been mulling a possible break-apart. Tornbjorn has a different vision. He wants to trade all over the world while I have grown increasingly more inclined toward Russia. In a word, the divorce at Gunvor was planned beforehand but the storm gathering over my head sped it up.

- Was this a redistribution of assets or a standard monetary transaction?

- We agreed to keep details confidential for the time being and I wouldn't like to break up this confidentiality?

- But will your partner and you have joint investment projects in Russia?



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ist said he was open for any proposals on my part but we haven't had any details so far. We still have some common business left. For instance, Gunvor and my own company Volga Group have stakes in Kolmar Coal Company. This is what I can tell you. The more I will expound on my plans, the more hitches the Americans will get. I think our problem is we had too much trust in our Western partners. They appealed to us, make your business transparent and open up. You know, when we make detailed explanations on one or another issue, we arm our foes. We are an open structure in the volumes that are required by law. We don't need excessive transparency. It is not in the interests of business security.

- Sure thing. You certainly felt more convenient when you lived quietly in Geneva.

- You're right. I was invisible for the media. Everyone who was obliged to know about my activity did know it. I mean the tax officers and bankers. Fiscal agencies are like physicians – you tell them all the details and don't conceal anything. Where you got this dollar or where you remitted the other one.

- In a sense, you have a small jubilee date now. The former candidate for presidency, Ivan Rybkin, mentioned your name in public for the first time ten years ago, calling you the biggest shadow oligarch in the country.

- Ivan Petrovich was fulfilling the task set forth by Boris Abramovich (*Berezovsky*. – *ITAR-TASS*), God rest his soul.

PART 4

On tycoons and new business plans



means. I had neither meetings nor contacts with him... But he picked me out so as to link me to Vladimir Putin and to use this in Ivan Rybkin's election campaign. He was a talented man! I was suddenly propelled to popularity thanks to him. The media started writing about me and seeking meeting with me.

Sometimes they would publish other people's photos and put captions under them saying it was me... I've gotten used to journalists' attention over the ten years since then, of course, but still I don't crave publicity. Business loves calm.

- Did the latest imbroglio break up a lot of your plans?

- All of it is relative. I had practically no significant projects left in Europe.

- But it looked like Novatek was going to advance its gas trading business to the Old Continent.

- This is not permitted by Russian legislation, which says that Gazprom is a monopoly supplier to Europe. It builds its policy towards foreign partners independently. We don't meddle with the process.

Quite possibly, other Russian companies will be admitted to the European market over time, but in any case it's the state that must decide.

Gazprom has so much significance for the country's economy that each step linked to it should be weighed out. One awkward step may bring about a lot of harm.



**believe independent producers of gas shouldn't be admitted
power of Siberia pipeline, don't you?**

- Do you mean to say Gazprom will be investing and others will then be cutting into the pipe? But that's not possible. One should contribute to the process from the very beginning. Big amounts of money are named, between \$ 50 billion and \$ 60 billion. And the desire of independent investors should be substantiated with the readiness to invest in the construction of infrastructure.

- And what about Yamal LNG? Have you decided whom you'll sell 90% in that company?

- The process is underway. Interest has been shown by the Qataris, Indians and Chinese. We are not speeding it up.

- I heard the Japanese had dropped off.

PART 5

On his participation in construction of stadiums for 2018 FIFA World Cup, the Kerch bridge and assets

- Construction of stadiums for the 2018 FIFA World Cup championship is also a rather expensive project.

- I'll show you one more table as illustration. Look at the price estimates of the works. A total of 24 billion rubles is to be allocated for a stadium in Kaliningrad, nineteen billion in Rostov-on-Don, seventeen billion in Samara, and if you take Nizhny Novgorod and Volgograd, where everything should be built from scratch, the costs stand only at around fifteen billion for some reason.



**s are saying the projects in Kaliningrad and Volgograd may
up.**
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- The decision will be taken jointly with FIFA but I'm saying bindingly we won't fit ourselves into the cost estimates that have been proposed, while Sroytransgaz has no plans to work at a loss.

Let them revise the budgets or redistribute the funds or else we'll give up those projects. We won't build them for this money. Seventeen billion rubles is a minimum necessary for a break-even result.

I'm aware of the social responsibility of business and then, of course, Volgograd is not an alien city to me because my parents live there. And Nizhny is the home city for Sibur and Aquanika companies, but rules should be the same for everyone.

We are a commercial company, we must earn money. And now recall my alleged closeness to President Putin. It's the state that allocates funds for the construction of stadiums, but we don't have any preferential advantages in this sense. In other senses, we don't have them as well. Preferential advantages are more of a fable than truth.

Take the story of the Central Automobile Ring Road around Moscow. ARKS company was eyeing participation in the project, and we were bidding in accordance with the usual procedure without any clouting. Alas, the selection of a contractor was not appropriate.

You may well remember that bidding contests here were often won in the past by those who engaged in overt dumping – by citing the prices for which nothing could be built in practice. After this, supplementary agreements and new cost estimates of some sort would surface... There was one more replay of the situation again.

We know how much construction of a road costs and we planned to contract a section of the new ring road but we failed. The bidding was won by a company that did not have enough experience. Well, let them try and build something...



a more interesting prospect. I mean various options of a link across the Kerch Strait (*a body of water that links the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and separates the Crimean Peninsula from the rest of Russia.* – ITAR-TASS).

- A tunnel or a bridge?

- That's a big question! Experts favor the construction of a bridge in the Tuzla Spit area. This is correct from a strategic viewpoint, but a project like that will cost up to 300 billion rubles.

In addition, the authorities have ordered to launch traffic by December 31, 2017, which is a very tough deadline.

The logic of this option is obvious. A sea port has been built nearby and construction of access roads is being pondered. The matter depends on the bridge. The problem is it will traverse geological faults and heaven forbid that we have a 9-point earthquake...

The so-called Zhukov option suggesting a tunnel also exists. It will cost nearly forty billion rubles. Do you feel the difference?

- So what's the problem?

- The tunnel ends right in the city of Kerch. It wouldn't be appropriate to haul cargoes though a city with a population of more than 100 thousand people. And if we build a bypass road, we'll get into an area of historical monuments and no one will ever permit their destruction. So, we're thinking it over...

But the problem is to be resolved in any case. Ferryboats currently transport four freight trains across the Kerch Strait a day, while the tunnel will increase the throughput capacity by a factor of more than ten. Forty trains, not four! Which means one train every thirty minutes. And then the price also matters.

ng will the drilling of the tunnel last?

- Not more than three years. Active discussions between the experts on bridges and experts on tunnels are underway now. I invited both for a purpose of listening to both viewpoints.

- I suppose the option presuming 300 billion rubles would be considered more attractive?

- Many people think that way but not us. It's more important for us to do what is expected within the shortest possible period of time and at the smallest possible price. However, we need to start both with the bridge and the tunnel in the future. This will significantly decrease burden on the Kerch peninsula and Taman.

- Are you ready to get down to either project?

- Yes, if we're trusted with them. We do have resources. The Most construction company, where I have a blocking stake, built Russia's longest cable-stayed bridge between Vladivostok and the Russky island, as well as a road from Adler (*a remote district of Sochi. – ITAR-TASS*) to Krasnaya Polyana (*a mountain skiing resort. — ITAR-TASS*).

- Let's continue our sightseeing tour of your possessions. You are a minority shareholder of the National Media Group and you are said to own you shares directly rather than through Rossiya Bank.

- If only a very small percentage. I financed the projects linked to media assets but they presented interest for me exclusively from the commercial angle of view. It didn't consider them as instruments of influence. This isn't my mainstream business.



...nce, I am a minority shareholder at SOGAZ. I like the dynamics of development and the way its management is working, and that's why I'm trying to build up my positions there. As for the insurance business, I got there quite some time ago. Previously I had Alma, and now I have Region-Garant. In addition, I have a stake in Germany-based SOVAG AG.

- And when did you get into the freshwater business?

- A simple everyday story. I have an acquaintance, who engaged in several projects at a time and plumped into a financial pitfall and lost a heck of money. I helped him to recover. At a certain moment he came to me and said: "I'm sorry, I can't pay. Take my business if you want to." And that's how I became a producer of freshwater. However, the matter is familiar to me since it concerns the country's food safety. Aquanika is quite affordable in terms of price, but it is of premium quality.

- I bet you're supplying it to the Kremlin.

- We received the necessary certificates from the Federal Guard Service and the Presidential Executive Office but, frankly, I didn't check out the brand of freshwater they serve at official receptions. If you happen to be there please check for the water they have on the tables.

- I think you'll have an opportunity to do this much earlier.

- What's important for me is to offer quality products that won't make me feel ashamed in front of anyone.

- I know you're getting down to a project related to water in Syria. A quote from ITAR-TASS newswire: "Syria's General Commission of Water Resources and the Russian company Stroytransgaz, which is



ed by businessman Gennady Timchenko, have signed an agreement on the first stage of construction of an irrigation compound on the Tigris that will help curb droughts in the northeast of the country”.

- Well, if it's reported by ITAR-TASS, then this means it is true. We should assist the Syrians. We're working simultaneously in many areas. The Chinese, too, turned to us with a proposal to make a joint project on water resources. The partner, thanks to whom I obtained Aquanika, has a water deposit in China. Here's where the idea came from. Incidentally, I also think he has water resources in Crimea. I should check the information. If it's true then I will launch the output there, too.

PART 6

On the role of the Chinese market for Russia, love for tennis and hockey

- You mentioned China. As the head of the Russian-Chinese business council, could you possibly tell us why an intergovernmental agreement was not signed during the recent signing of the contract on the Power of Siberia pipeline? Can there still be changes?

- Only in what concerns an increase in the amount of supplies of gas to China. Recall that the Western transportation route also exists. The documents will be signed. A technical interval might be needed to refine some details. The Chinese market is developing at a speedy rate and it's crucial for Russia. Our cooperation will certainly continue and expand. If we lose the right moment, others — Americans or Europeans or Australians — will get there instead of us. The holy place is never empty, as they say.

Still getting there ahead of competitors is not the only thing. The Chinese and we ourselves will understand each other perfectly and will be getting on well.



you can do holidaymaking in the West and enjoy yourselves and money, but when it comes to serious issues they're always trying to show us we are from League Two.

It's like 'well guys, enjoy yourselves but always know where you belong to'. A moment comes when this kind of behavior on the part of those whom you think to be your partners becomes too embarrassing. You can't put up with double standards endlessly. That's why I'm breathing easier in Russia now.

- Don't you feel nostalgic for the shores of Lac Lemman? Rumors say you have a very particular tennis court in Geneva.

- Well, rumors are in the air. The court is unusual because of its underground location. When we started digging the ditch for it, the local residents decided that the crazy Russian was building a bomb shelter.

In fact, there was a hillside there and I decided to level it out by adding some soil. But permission was denied. Then I asked if I could build a tennis court and the answer was 'Yes'. Now I have a beautiful overgrown terrace on the roof. And walking there is convenient, too.

But I gave up tennis – pulled out of it practically undefeated. And... refocused myself to ice hockey.

- How did you get hooked on it?

PHOTO FROM PERSONAL ARCHIVE

[CONTINUE](#)

- I heard you're trying to bring your daughter into hockey by entrusting her the supervision of the Golden Puck tournament for children...

- That's a separate story. Ksenia studied in England, where she naturally developed a habit for an active lifestyle. Then she graduated from the University of Edinburgh and went together with a group of volunteers to India.

Humanistic aspect is one of the good traits of Western education. For several months, Ksenia taught the English language to little Indians. She lived somewhere high up in the mountains near Darjeeling, in a place 3,000 meters above sea level. Conditions there were practically inhumane. Why did I speak about it? My daughter developed willingness to engage in charitable activities while she was studying at an English school.

{additional:75:'Photo from personal archive':'left':'50'}- But you set a personal example. I mean that story with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Yuri Temirkanov.

- This was at the end of the 1990's. If memory serves me right, Yuri Khatuevich (Termikanov) and I happened to be sitting side by side at a reception in the Smolny Institute (a historic building currently housing the city government of St Petersburg. – ITAR-TASS). He told me then: "I wouldn't like to be the sexton of a collective that was created back in the czarist time and that saw Mravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich as conductors." It turned out they didn't have money to pay salaries to the musicians and Temirkanov had grave apprehensions that the orchestra would simply fall apart.

I offered my own money then. Salaries were paid out regularly for three years on a list provided by Temirkanov. And imagine the list contained



ons. No one knew about our agreement because I asked for
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tiality.

Truth surfaced after Temirkanov had been received by President Putin, whom he had explained why the best philharmonic and symphony orchestras in this country needed precisely targeted support. Vladimir Vladimirovich asked with surprise then: “And how have you been subsisting until now?” It was then that Yuri Khatuevich pointed to me...

Well, you’ve diverted my attention. I wanted to speak about my children, not about myself. Natalia, our eldest daughter, graduated from Oxford University, but some years ago came back to Russia after deciding she wanted to make it here. And Ksenia together with Gleb, her husband might continue living in Switzerland and they had all the opportunities for it but they decided to return to Russia. They are bringing up their son, and along with this, Ksenia continues her studies. She is currently mulling over which of the three business schools where she has been admitted to continue her education. I joined Ksenia to the procedures of the board of directors of the Transoil railway operator so that she could gain some practical experience. And still she spends most of her office hours at our family charity foundation. Ksenia has brought genuine professionals along with her there. We’re running dozens of different programs beginning with a permanent exposition of Russian arts at Louvre and support for the Russian Museum in St Petersburg to the Alyokhin Memorial chess competition to the restoration of cultural monuments.

In addition to this, we’re supporting recreation centers and movie houses in rural areas. We’ve accumulated thousands of requests for this. I personally love the project related to senior people.

A bus with ophthalmological equipment travels through remote villages and providing examinations on the spot. If needed, we arrange and pay the surgery for the removal of a cataract or replacement of an eye lens. At first sight, its’ not a very sophisticated action but it’s efficacious. Who of the people in a remote village will go to a regional or district center to rectify eyesight? And here they get treatment right at the doors of their homes.



...I read a funny letter that had come to my wife's email. An woman thanked her for surgery and for an opportunity to see the world again. At the end of it she complained: "But now I've noticed how much rubbish there is around. I'll have to do a cleanup."

Ksenia also has an original viewpoint as regards the problem of orphanages. She thinks there's no need in sponsoring them but we must support those who take children home for the purpose of adoption. We've designed a program for support of adoptive families; it concerns not only housing but also the involvement of psychologists and other specialists. I won't specify any figures now but the new family programs have helped families to find more than 200 children. Two residential compounds have been built in Gatchina in the Leningrad region, one near Ryazan and one more, near the city of Tambov. Incidentally, my partners who had learned about it also said they were willing to join our project.

- What budget have you earmarked for the actions of charity?

- If I'm not mistaken, it's about 600 million rubles this year. But the figure does not reflect the things that we are doing outside of foundation. In particular, the programs for assistance to sports. I was recently elected Vice-President of the Russian Olympic Committee. Now it's God's will that I should help others. It not the sums of money that are important. The money should be spent efficiently. And for this we need real professionals.

- Last year, Vladimir Potanin became the first Russian billionaire who joined Bill Gates and Warren Buffett's 'The Giving Pledge' philanthropic campaign. He agreed to donate no less than a half of his personal capital for charitable purposes in the future. What's your attitude to the giving pledge?

- The story invented by American philanthropists made much noise. Still it isn't quite clear yet, how it will be implemented in practice. Time will



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At one thing I'll agree with Potanin in that there's no sense in giving too much to one's children. We must give proper upbringing and quality education to children but the rest is up to them. This is how it was in our family. And all this talk that someone will give something to someone else sometime... well, I see an element of a game and craftiness.

If you take me personally, I can tell you clearly and definitively that I'll turn in everything to the state any time if this is needed. If only that were of real help.

- And what if it is needed tomorrow?

- Anytime! My wife and I have discussed this issue many a time. Neither she nor I need these billions.

- What do you still need to be happy?

- It might sound a bit sentimental but I sometimes need more emotional warmth. There's no substitution for hearty contacts. I'd exchange a lot of things for personal freedom. But along with this I remain a staunch optimist. I do believe everything will settle down and clear out. I am a forgiving person.

It's true that you sometimes bump into treachery and betrayal but keeping it within yourself will only make things worse. That's quite a burden and do you really need dragging it along? It's much easier to forgive and to forget...

- And what about the continued freezing in the relations with the West? Do you think it will last long?

- I do not exclude that in my case it might be so. Deep inside, I'm ready to live under sanctions. I'm quite sincere.



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TASS you are a knight of the Legion of Honor but I haven't heard about Russian state awards?

- I don't have them. But my wife and my daughter each received the Order of Friendship last year.

- Yes, I've read the order —for active engagement in charity and for the strengthening of friendship and cooperation. Noteworthy, with Russia. But it turns that you are only suffering for your homeland?

- Why then? I work for it.

INTERVIEWED BY ANDREI VANDENKO

Born November 8, 1959 in Luhansk, Ukraine. In 1982, Andrei Vandenko graduated from the Kiev National University of Taras Shevchenko specializing in journalism. Since 1989, he lives and works in Moscow. Vandenko has more than 20 years of experience in the interview genre. He was published in the major part of top Russian media outlets and is a winner of professional

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by
Andrey Vandenko