

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Press Briefing – Sochi 2014

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H. ANDREW SCHWARTZ: Good morning – good morning and welcome to the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We’ll confine all questions about Richard Sherman until after the briefing.

Thank you for being here this morning. We’ve got some weather coming into Washington, so it’s great to have such an excellent turnout. This is obviously a very timely briefing, and we’ll get right to it.

I’m joined here by my colleagues from the Russia-Eurasia program – Andy Kuchins – Dr. Andrew Kuchins, who is our Russia-Eurasia program director, and Dr. Jeff Mankoff, who is his deputy. I’m also joined by the Honorable Juan C. Zarate; Juan, of course, was deputy national security adviser during the Bush administration and is a senior adviser here at CSIS, and our key person on counterterrorism and many other issues. So with that, I’d like to offer Andrew Kuchins the microphone, and we’ll get started. We’ll have some brief remarks to open up by our principals here, and then we will open it up to your questions. Thank you for coming.

ANDREW KUCHINS: Well, good morning, everybody. Welcome to CSIS. As Andrew said, I think we’re all glad you braved the rumor of a snowflake in Washington, D.C. later today to come here this morning. You know, it’s always a good thing, before doing a press briefing to just check the news, and so I checked the Moscow Times, and the title of a story was “potential suicide bomber reported in Sochi.” Now, you guys have already probably heard about this story. It has two parts.

First of all, there is this video that was produced by – supposedly by the Dagestan Vilayat, which is a part of the Caucasus Emirate, headed by the maybe alive, maybe dead Doku Umarav, and they – supposedly this is a video of the two suicide bombers who took out – conducted the acts in Volgograd. Maybe; I don’t know. I watched the video, you look at – but you look at these guys, and you can’t – they look a little bit like Wayne and Garth in a Saturday Night Live skit, and I do wonder whether some of this is a hoax conducted by folks. Imagine yourself in a dorm room in a university; this could be a – I don’t want to take this lightly at all, but when I look at this, this is the – sort of the first thought I had.

And then the story of the suicide bomber, Ruzanna Ibragimova, who has supposedly been spotted in Sochi, reported by Alexander Valov, the head of blogsochi.ru, you know – what’s the – how serious this is, it’s hard for me to say, but when you read the story, you really kind of have to scratch your head. It says it was unclear whether Ibragimova was carrying any explosives with her. It was also not immediately clear how a suspected terrorist, who was supposedly interrogated by law enforcement officials in the past could get into Russia’s Olympic capital and heightened security.

She was – Valov published a copy of the official letter send by the local FSB to the Krasnodar Anti-Extremism Center asking them to chase the subject – that’s a good idea – who arrived in Sochi on January 10th or 11th. The letter describes Ibragimova as someone who limps – quote, “limps slightly; her elbow does not bend, and she has a 10-centimer long scar on her left cheek.” How she got past the security does make one wonder whether, again, actually, is this really true, or could this be a hoax? And if it’s not a hoax, then, you know, how could someone who obviously looks like an extremist shahidka – actually is an extremist shahidka – has been

interrogated and identified as an extremist shahidka could get through – could get through security. It doesn't give one great confidence.

Anyway, we can talk more about that later. But it is unusual – these games are unusual. I mean, how many times has CSIS actually held a press conference before an Olympic games? My suspicion is, never, and that's a hint that these are – and it's a press conference, which – actually, heads of major news organizations actually showed up, so this is a rather unusual event. Let me start by saying, these games are very, very personal, I think, for Vladimir Putin. I mean, has any winter Olympic games in history been so identified or attached to a national leader as these games are to Mr. Putin?

I mean, in 2010, was anybody talking about Stephen Harper much when the games were in Vancouver, or George W. Bush in 2002 in Park City? Actually, ironically, the Park City games, if they gave any political – if they were politicized for anybody, they were a boost to Mitt Romney, who was running the games at the time. But this is pretty unusual. Now, you'd probably have to go back to the 1936 summer games in Berlin – Hitler's games – the Nazi games to have a games that are attached, that are so politicized, in a way – and I don't mean in any respect to, you know, compare Vladimir Putin to Adolf Hitler or, you know, current Russia to Nazi Germany, but it's just a comment in the nature of these games. And those might have been games where you would have had a press conference at CSIS if, at the time, CSIS had existed.

So why? Well, you know, I think it goes back to, first of all, when Putin personally went to Guatemala City, and – ironically, on July 4th, 2007, and he gave a very convincing and impassioned speak (sic) to the Olympic committee to award the games over the other three finalists at the – at the time – in Austria and South Korea – and he convinced the committee to award the games to Russia.

Now – and for Putin – he's said this on numerous occasions, that he looks upon – you know, holding an Olympic games – you have to be a country actually that – I mean, to put it in layman's terms, that has its act together. You know, you have to be a major country. This is not a small undertaking, to put on an Olympic games.

And so this is – represents – you know, this is not Russia of the 1990s that was, you know, the wild, wild east, you know, where we had the images of the Russian mafia basically running the – running the country to the extent that it could be run, or organized crime – or actually, I refer to it as disorganized crime. No, this is Vladimir Putin's Russia, in which he has restored a sense of order and stability to the country, and the country is suddenly finding itself much more wealthy than it was.

So the timing – now, in 2007 – this is after, literally, Russia became financially sovereign – 2005, Russia pays off its debt to the IMF. And in 2006, it pays off its debt to the Paris Club, so Russia is financially sovereign, which means, in Putin's mind – and I think appropriately so – that Russia is politically sovereign. We are actually a real, independent country again. And so the timing that he can go – then go down to Guatemala – go to Guatemala City and do this is significant. Remember, it was 2006 that Russia held for the first time the G-8 meeting in St. Petersburg.

Now, I should have thought at the time that, hmm, 2014 – probably if, you know Russia is hosting those Sochi games, that should have been a big hint that, probably, Vladimir Putin was going to be running Russia in 2014. I didn't quite put that together at the time, but I should have. And so, thinking into the future, I would think, well, Russia has also won the 2018 World Cup – FIFA World Cup. Now, that's going to be after the 2018 presidential election. So my bet is that Vladimir Putin will also be presiding over the FIFA World Cup in 2018, assuming things go well here in 2014.

Now, why are the games unique as well? Well, first of all, there is the location. For Putin, this is very personal as well. He spends a lot of time down in Sochi; in the context of the Valdai Discussion Club, a group that Jeff and I have met annually with Mr. Putin and other Russian leaders – several times we've gone down to Sochi to meet him at his nice spread down there, shall we say?

You know – and Sochi, well, it's kind of like a Russian California, you know? You can swim in the sea in the morning, and then you can go into the mountains – and they're only 45 minutes away; you don't have to drive three-and-a-half hours – four hours – or, if you're in traffic, like six hours to Tahoe, and you can ski. You've got this sort of very unique combination, and it's kind of bizarre that Russia – a country that's known for being a northern country, is hosting the winter Olympics in a subtropical climate. Go figure.

But the really significant thing about Sochi's geography, obviously, is its proximity to the Northern Caucasus, and this is also a very, very personal issue for Vladimir Putin. I mean, his rise to political stardom in Russia – to the national caliber took place when he was initially prime minister in the fall of 1999 – when the – when the second Chechen War started. And the first Chechen War, of course, was a representation of the humiliation of Russia, where Russia effectively lost a civil war on its own territory. Russian troops performed miserably.

In the second war – and particularly in the beginning, Russian military forces – their security forces performed better than they had, and the perceived success of those early strikes on the terrorists and opposition in the second Chechen War were a big boost for Putin's popularity. And it was where Putin also kind of bonded with the Russian people, with his – you know, his kind of macho way of being. You know, he said famously, I'm going to wipe them out in the outhouses – you know, well – you know what?

OK, guess what – you know, Russian, to get the vernacular – actually, what Putin was saying – Russian is a rich language, and it's also a very rich language of four-letter words, or in Russia, as they call it, “mat” – it's tied to the word mother – you hear what I'm saying? So think of what he said. It was basically, I'm going to “F” them up in the blankhouses – or in the beepers, OK? I mean, really, that's what he was saying, OK? It's much more kind of earthy and down to – yeah, I'm going to mess these dudes up. And he saw this as part of his mission, that he was going to deal with the separatists and later, terrorist groups with this threat in the Northern Caucasus – initially in Chechnya, because he saw it as – literally as a mortal threat to the Russian – to the Russian nation.

And so the biggest – his MO is, he brought stability, and the fact that hopefully, an Olympic games for the first time in history can be held in such close proximity to a conflict zone. Now, it's a relatively low-level, you know, insurgency going on in much of the Northern

Caucasus today – again, is a totally unique aspect about these Olympic games, and it’s why we’re having this press conference here. And if you can successfully hold these games next to this area, which Putin saw as his mission as Russia’s leader to bring stability to, then yes, he’s been – he’s been successful. So he’s got a lot riding on it.

Just a quick word about the controversy over the LGBT legislation, which has attracted so much controversy – the law and propaganda against pedophiles and homosexuality. You know, many have asked the question, well, why in the world – why would Putin and the Russians, you know, implement this piece of legislation when – on the eve of this big international event when they know it’s going to attract a lot of, you know, negative attention and press?

Well, you know what? The legislation, in my view, is not really addressed to the international community. Putin doesn’t really care, frankly, about what the international community thinks about this, although in his press conference, you know, he will defend it in kind of comparative terms that, you know, look, actually, our legislation, you know, is quite liberal when you compare it with most of the rest of the world et cetera, et cetera. It’s aimed at a domestic audience and it’s done for domestic political reasons, I think, to support his constituency.

Now let me say a quick word, finally, about the terrorist – that would be a good segue – over to Juan, because I’m going on too long. Look, the terrorist threat is very real, you know, regardless what is true or not true about this video and Ruzanna Ibragimova, et cetera, and obviously, the tragic terrorist acts in Volgograd that took place a few weeks ago at the end of 2013 attest to that.

But I think what we’re talking about right now really aren’t separatists, OK, even though Doku Umarov is head of the Caucasus Emirate, which, in principle, talks about, you know, establishing a separate Islamic state in the Caucasus; that’s not really the ideology that motivates, I think, these people at this point. I think they’re motivated by a global jihadist ideology, which is common to that of al-Qaida and others around the world. This is what motivated the Tsarnaev brothers in – who bombed the Boston Marathon, who are also from Dagestan in the Northern Caucasus in last year.

Now, Doku Umarov himself – he may have been a Chechen nationalist 15 to 20 years ago, but again, if he’s still alive, he utilizes a global jihadist ideology; this is what you’ll see, you know, in his – what he said, particularly what he goes back to in July 13th, threatening the games, and with other subgroups that are kind of affiliated loosely with the emirate, this loose network.

So with all that, you know, Putin’s got a lot riding on the games. And, you know, Sochi is the holy grail, I would think, for a terrorist to – Islamic jihadist terrorist individual or group to go after, and so in a way, we have kind of the ultimate showdown, because for Putin – he’s got a lot riding on it; this is a very juicy target. You know, in – this is sort of – in American vernacular, it’s high noon at the O.K. Corral; in Russian terms, it’s – (in Russian) – you know, who’s going to get whom, or, you know, in Spanish terms, this is mano-a-mano, or, you know, in NFL football, this is, you know, Richard Sherman vs. Michael Crabtree last Sunday, right? You know, who’s going to – who’s going to prevail?

The question, though – and this is where I leave it to Juan, who really knows something about these groups and individuals is one of operational capabilities. I mean, Sochi is supposedly under lockdown – although you read a story like this and you go, really? (Laughs.) You know, but you don't necessarily have to hit Sochi to spoil the games. And this was my concern when I – my response to the Volgograd bombings a few weeks ago. You know, a series of Volgograd-caliber attacks would virtually terrorize all of Russia and spoil the games, and that would be a great tragedy.

And finally, just a word about Umarov: Is he dead? I'm kind of skeptical about that. I mean, the reportings of Mr. Umarov's death have been many in the past, and one would think in particular, that if he were taken out by the FSB, the Russian authorities – you know, they would want to, you know, show the video of his dead body to bring a greater sense of calm about the games themselves. But, you know, whether he's dead or not, I'm not sure how much that would actually make a difference in that I don't think that Umarov is as much sort of operational capacity as, let's say, Shamil Basayev did 10 years ago.

And the network is so loose itself that maybe the absence of his leadership would leave others possibly, OK, competing to carry out or be able to claim taking the responsibility for carrying out the act which would gather all of the attention. But, you know, let's all pray that that doesn't happen. Thank you very much, and for any difficult questions, my colleague Jeff Mankoff will address them.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Thank you, Andy, and we've had an interesting confluence of events in D.C. today. We have – D.C. schools are closed; Virginia and Maryland schools are closed, so I think our children all, when they were flipping back and forth between Spongebob this morning, learned how to curse in Russian. So this is great. (Laughter.) So this is great. Thank you for that.

Juan, I'll leave it with you.

JUAN ZARATE: Thanks, Andrew. It's a real pleasure to be here; thank you all for attending. Andy, it's great to be here; I think part of the reason you get great attendance is because CSIS has great expertise in you and your team. So really a pleasure to be here.

What I wanted to address was more specifically the terrorist threats and to give you some perspective. In my particular, from my vantage point when I sat at the White House and the Treasury Department when we worried about security of every Olympic games post-9/11, because the reality is, the security of the Olympics, whether they're in the United States or in London or in Athens or in Sochi, become a principal concern for policymakers around the world, because the Olympics become such a target-rich environment for terrorist groups, including those that have designs not just globally, but perhaps locally and regionally.

And I think the security concerns with respect to Sochi are even greater and even more justified in this regard. And let me explain why. The terrorist groups led by the Caucasus Emirates – but not solely – and their affiliates, but also Central Asian groups like IMU and IJU, have the clear intent to try to disrupt the Sochi Olympics or at least to embarrass the Russians, and in particular, Vladimir Putin, who has so personalized the Olympics and the success of them, as Andy has described.

The intent has been declared; Doku Umarov, this past summer, has been very clear about the desire to have major attacks on the Olympics, or at least major disruptions. Significantly, in July, he lifted the putative ban on the attacks on civilians, which in many ways opens up the target set for terrorist groups to attack softer targets, transportation hubs, civilian sites, and they clearly have the desire to engage in these attacks, as seen through their video postings, their blogs and their communications. And so the intent is clear, and it's there, and it would have been obvious even absent their open declarations, but the open declarations have really made it very clear for authorities.

They also have the capability. We've seen that with the three attacks in Volgograd since September. We've seen this in their past attacks, in particular those directed by Umarov since 2009 – the high speed attack between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the airport attack and other attacks that have predated.

What's interesting and important here is that the Caucasus Emirates and their various groups and operatives demonstrated multiple modalities in terms of attack vectors. That is to say, they can use a variety of means to attack, not just a variety of targets to focus on. And so they've used suicide bombers, to include the now-famed black widows; they've used teams of operatives; they've used assault teams. They've vectored against airplanes and metros and trains, hospitals, security sites.

And so the modalities and capabilities sort of match here in that they have a target-rich environment, and they've demonstrated the ability to organize different types of attacks based on the opportunities available to them. And that's why the reports of a singular black widow getting into Sochi becomes concerning, in part because you have the potential that she's a singular actor intended to disrupt, but it also could be that she's a part of a broader series of suicide bombers who have been dispatched to attack different sites. And so no doubt the Russians are following not just reports of a singular actor, but multiple threat threads and individuals that they're concerned with.

Lastly, they have the opportunity – the Olympics, as we all know, is center stage. The world's media will be trained on the Olympics – both the activities – the social activities around it. In addition, you have the proximity, rather brazen on the part of Putin, in a sense, to place the Olympics so close to the Caucasus and to give the terrorist actors, who are used to operating in this environment, the opportunity to plan attacks not just in Sochi but in the immediate environs.

And as Andy rightly said, the terrorists, in this context, for the purposes of disruption and embarrassment, don't necessarily have to get into the inner rings of security within Sochi to have a declared, successful attack. They need only create a sense of terror or disruption in the immediate environs or even in the transportation hubs, as we've seen with Volgograd, to create a sense of instability. And I would dare say if you saw a successful attack significant enough, even in the far aboard from Sochi – for example in Moscow – you would begin to see debates in delegation circles as to whether or not to withdraw athletes and to stop participation in the Olympics, and that would be disastrous for the success of the Olympics.

A final point in terms of why this threat is so unique at this time, and I think it's – it has gone relatively unreported but I think it's critically important as an accelerant to the threat, and

that is the fact that, as Andy said, we are talking about a movement and a set of actors who view themselves as part of a global jihadi movement. And so this, in many ways, is born out of the Chechen conflicts and insurgencies of the '90s and early 2000s, but these groups have been animated and populated by global jihadi actors, many of whom have interacted with the leadership of the Caucasus Emirates, many of whom have gone on to fight, including now in places like Syria.

And I think it's critically important to keep in mind that the Russians have taken a very open and active role diplomatically in supporting Assad, which has brought Russia back into the center as a far enemy for the global jihadi movement. And you've begun to see that narrative play out in some of the terrorists' discourse. And I think that becomes important as an accelerant because Russia is not just an actor in regard to the Chechen or Dagestani or Ingushet insurgency or fight, but is also a global actor in the context of the global jihadi narrative. And Syria, in many ways, is a key accelerant to that, both in real terms and in ideological terms.

What are the concerns for the U.S. in this regard? And I think you've started to hear more and more about this from U.S. lawmakers and the security officials. But they're threefold – first the obvious fact that you have a real terrorist threat here. These aren't just imaginings or sort of, you know, one-off threat threads that have to be chased down, as often the U.S. has to do, but this is a real terrorist threat that exposes athletes, sponsors, U.S. citizens that are going to attend the event.

Two, you always have the question of venue security. And Andy has raised a very good question as to how secure actually are the rings of security around the Sochi venues and sites, but how well are they secured? You can secure the venue but have you secured well enough where the athletes and sponsors are staying? If you've secured that, have you secured well enough the ingress and egress, the transportation in and out? And so the raw security questions emerge as very important questions, and there's growing – a growing sense of lack of confidence in that security, even despite the Russian assurances.

And lastly, and perhaps most importantly, you've started to hear, including from Chairman Rogers of the House Intel Committee, concerns over lack of visibility and cooperation from the Russians. As I was mentioning to Jill before we started the remarks, usually what you have in the Olympics, most countries are very prideful, wanting to secure the Olympics, manage it themselves, and to succeed for national pride and other reasons, with the U.S. offering support and help in a variety of ways.

Most countries don't accept the support initially because they can do it themselves, but as you get closer to the day of the event, most countries begin to accept more and more of the assistance because the reality of the – of the daunting task of securing the Olympics – and frankly of the threat to Western athletes and sponsors – becomes more real. That I don't think is happening in the Russian context.

In fact, I think the reverse is happening, that the Russians have grown more and more concerned over the threat and are concerned over the perception of insecurity and therefore have not wanted to allow the United States and other security services in on the ground to assist. In an

Olympics like London, as you can imagine the U.S. worked very closely with British security officials to create cohesive command centers, response plans, et cetera. That, in my estimation, is not happening in the context of Sochi, and that has created concern. It is why I think you've started to hear U.S. officials speak openly about those concerns.

In addition, that's why I think you've started to see reports today in the press about contingency plans that the U.S. is making for a potential worst-case scenario – transport aircraft being prepositioned, naval aircraft – naval resources and warships being placed offshore in the worst-case scenario, if, for example, you had wounded athletes or citizens who needed to get them out. And so you're going to see a lot more of that, where the U.S. is trying to vector and take into account the fact that we don't have on-the-ground cooperation resources as we have in the past.

Now, very quickly, the challenges for the Russians and for the international community – because I think this is not – you know, any Olympics is an international event despite the fact that it's been so personalized by Putin and the Russians – but the Russians have to not only secure the sites, as they're trying to do, with physical security and intelligence and vetting of individuals, but they are going to want to disrupt as much as possible any terrorist activity abroad. And this is why you've seen the reports of the death of Doku Umarov. I think that regardless of whether or not it's true, it's an attempt to demonstrate that the Russians are doing something to try to disrupt these activities.

And I agree with Andy that with respect to the individual, I think it matters much less as to whether or not he's alive now with respect to the security of the Olympics because I think all the terrorist groups that want to attack the Sochi Olympics know that they want to attack the Sochi Olympics and will try to do so.

They obviously need to secure the site and they need to worry about the perception of security. I think this is key because, again, you could have a relatively minor terrorist attack, you know, during the opening ceremonies or something, in the general environs, and it begins to affect the sense of security for the Olympics, and in many ways the terrorists begin to win in terms of that perception.

A quick, final note that we often forget but is squarely in the minds of security officials: You have not just the Winter Olympics in February but you have the Paralympics in March. And so you have two sets of events that are critical internationally that require the Russians to engage in security not just in the month of February but February through March. And I would dare say that the terrorists probably would prefer to attack the Sochi Olympics in February but if they could launch significant and serious attacks against the Paralympics or those environs around it, they would probably view that as successful.

So this is a two-month endeavor for the Russians that is going to be fraught with real threats and real concerns for the Russians, the U.S. and others who have Olympians at the site. Thank you.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Great. And with that we'd – with that we'd like to open it up to your questions. Questions, please? Jill.

Q: Yes, thank you.

James (sic), I'd like to ask – to follow up on that U.S. side of it. What does the United States do – to your knowledge, what is the state of play in terms of any type of cooperation in potentially coming in and getting Americans out of there, either people who are competing or tourists or officials? And what does the U.S. do if they do not have permission on the ground? What are the – let's say how do they work that out in advance? You were mentioning that.

MR. ZARATE: Yeah.

Q: What's the next step for the United States? What's happening right now?

MR. ZARATE: Well, ideally in the Olympics what you would have is, you know, State Department diplomatic security officials, FBI and other U.S. security officials, who are cleared into the various venues or cleared into a command center or in some way integrated into the on-the-ground security. I'm no longer in government so I don't know what the status of that is, but I would dare say, given the public comments that we've seen, that the U.S. government probably is not getting a lot of billets, so to speak, a lot of clearances for individuals from the State Department, from the FBI and others to be on the ground at particular sites.

Now, that's different from security for individual teams and such, but I would – I would venture to say that we're doing the best with what we can on the ground. And what you've seen – and you started to see publicly – is contingency planning, which would be led by the State Department, to try to determine what happens in the worst-case scenario. And that's why you've seen the reports of movement of U.S. military assets and personnel in this regard.

And so you would have, you know, the State Department leading that planning, trying to determine, you know, how best to get citizens in and out in case of an emergency. And you would hopefully have pre-cleared plans and clearances for ingress and egress in the case of an attack in Russia. But I would – I would assume that the Russians are going to want to control any of that. Any security service in any country is going to want to have full capability and control over what happens after an attack or a worst-case scenario.

And so it's likely the case that the U.S. doesn't have preclearance to, you know, move choppers in or assets in, in the event of an emergency. That's probably going to have to happen as events unfold.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Let's go to this gentleman right here. If you could identify yourself in the microphone that would be great.

Q: (Off mic.)

MR. ZARATE: I think the Syrian foreign fighter problem, and in particular the flow of Caucasus-based fighters in and out of Syria, amplifies the concern, I think. And part of this is, again, the ideological and narrative dimensions of what this does to animate the threat, but also populates sort of the environment with other actors who are trained, tested and perhaps willing to attack.

Keep in mind that the Syrian conflict has now attracted more foreign fighters than we saw in the Iraq conflict and more than what we saw during the Afghan mujahedeen days. And so this is a very serious threat. And you've seen plenty of reporting of Western European services, North African services, Gulf services, very concerned about the flows of fighters in and out of Syria.

And the one thing I would say is concern that officials should have at least is that the survival rate appears to be much higher in the Syrian foreign fighter context, whereas in Iraq what we saw was foreign fighters would flow in but they wouldn't flow out. That's not necessarily the case here in Syria where you have foreign fighters already starting to flow back. And what that means for the Russian service's ability to monitor who's moving in and out of Syria I don't know, but it's certainly something they should be concerned about.

MR. KUCHINS: Just to follow up on that, there are reports of hundreds of foreign fighters from the North Caucasus in Syria itself. So there's no – how many actually are there it's impossible to say, but there are many there.

And this is one really big reason – and I think it's been underestimated over the past two-plus years for why Putin has held this position on Syria, as he has, because when he looks at the – when he looks at, you know, who are the most effective, you know, fighters in Syria, he sees the same kinds of individuals and groups, sometimes literally the same individuals and groups, that he's been dealing with in the North Caucasus or that he and his Central Asian colleagues were dealing with back in the late 1990s, in particular coming out of – out of Afghanistan.

And that is in particular why this is – the issue is deeply, deeply personal for him. And there's some – I think if the – if the – if the Syrian conflict had receded and foreign fighters were leaving Syria, I think there's no doubt in my mind at least that that would increase the danger that those from the North Caucasus or others, maybe even not from the North Caucasus, would return there and increase the threat – increase the threat – the threat there.

A friend of mine was, a month or two ago, at the airport in Istanbul transferring, and he heard Russian spoken by people who clearly looked like what you would imagine a foreign fighter in Syria to look like. And it was rather unnerving, since he himself at the time was transiting into not the Northern Caucasus but the South Caucasus.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Bill Douglas, right over here.

Q: Bill Douglas from McClatchy Newspapers. I was just curious: A lot of us don't know about the capabilities of the FSB in terms of counterterrorism or handling something of

this magnitude. Can you all speak to their abilities to handle large-scale events like this, in view that they've had experience doing this before?

MR. SCHWARTZ: Jeff? (Chuckles.)

MR. KUCHINS: Thanks.

Well, Putin, in his press conference just the other day, you know, noted that, no, Russia has not had the experience of securing an event of the magnitude of the Sochi Olympics. So the answer is no. I mean, you'd have to go back to the Moscow Olympics in 1980, you know, for a – I think an international event of this magnitude, which the, quote, unquote, "Russians" had to – had to deal with. And of course that was in the context of just having invaded, attack Afghanistan, and which if course led to the – essentially the creation of the mujahedeen and much of the problem that we see here today.

So the simple answer is no. You know, Juan can speak to this much more effectively I think, that, you know, we never know the number of successes in preventing terrorist attacks; we only know about the failures. But simply the fact that we saw significant failures in Volgograd three times in the recent – the end of last year, October, and two in December – Kadogorsky (ph) also at the end of the year, and the – you know, the daily bombings and problems that there are in the North Caucasus.

Now, it's not at the frequency of what we're seeing in Iraq right now. You listen to the radio and there are 25 car bombings a day, approximately. So magnitude for sure is a no. I think the capacity of the FSB is very, very hard – hard to say, but I think, to get back to Juan's point earlier, you know, the fact that the Russians have been reluctant to embrace support from the United States, I think partly out of reasons of – you know, intelligence cooperation is a very, very delicate matter in the best of times.

We had pretty effective intelligence cooperation with the Russians after 9/11. In fact, I think that that time the Russians were probably providing us, as I've heard, you know, more high-quality operational intelligence than we were able to provide them. But, you know, we know that the relationship and the level of trust between the two countries has deteriorated significantly since then. And that's a problem for sure. And then there is the sort of – the sort of – the nature of the Russian kind of psychology – and it's not just the Russian psychology but maybe more so that, you know, like we can do this on our own and we don't need your help.

And then for Putin, you know, this is such sore spot because it's like, we did not recognize, in his view, soon enough – and I think he's got a legitimate beef about this – that the nature of the threat, even in the mid-'90s, in the first Chechen War, when it was mostly a movement of national liberation, there was a significant, you know, foreign element there: fighters, also sources of financing and training, and training for them. That factor was much more significant in the second Chechen War and it really rankles him deeply, deeply that this was not adequately recognized. And this is a harping on the double standards.

It only accentuates, I think, some of the chip on the shoulder, so to speak, about this forum. Now, I think the State Department did a very smart thing a few years ago in actually putting Doku Umarov and the Caucasus Emirate, you know, on the list of recognized terrorist groups and individuals. But, you know, some would say in Russia that was too late – too little and too late.

And finally, you know, we have to look at, you know, what happened, you know, with the Tsarnaev brothers, you know, the fact that, you know, there was inadequate – inadequate communication between U.S. and Russian intelligence services tracking and following these guys. And when the elder brother had gone to Dagestan, which is really now the heart – the heart of the sort of Islamic threat region in the North Caucasus, for six or seven months, you know, how effectively were they – were they tracking him? We just – we just don't know. And not knowing doesn't, you know, lead to increased confidence.

Q: So was that tracking part of the Russians, or was that tracking on information sharing between the United States and Russia and/or both?

MR. KUCHINS: My suspicion: It's both.

MR. SCHWARTZ: Jeff, did you want to –

JEFF MANKOFF: Yeah, I would just add two things on this – on this topic.

One – and you've heard a lot of discussion of this in the Russian press recently in terms of the capacity of the security services – they're essentially structured differently from the way that security services in the West are structured. Their main goal is regime security rather than public security, let's say. And obviously with a high-profile, very politically significant event like the Olympics those two things are connected.

But nevertheless, I think that the goal of the security state that Putin presides over, and indeed out of which Putin himself came, is very much directed more at insulating the regime from pressures coming from outside rather than it is towards securing the public in general. And I think one of the challenges that that apparatus faces in the context of the Olympics is trying to make that pivot to do more of a public security role precisely because of the political importance that it has, and I don't know about their capacity to do that.

The second point that I would just emphasize here – and this is something that we haven't talked about but I think it's really important in a lot of contexts related to the Olympics – is corruption. The discussion in Russia has a lot of – in the lead up to the games is really focused on this element, on the amount of money that's been misappropriated, misplaced, gone into dodgy contracts and offshore bank accounts. By almost all accounts these are going to be the most expensive Olympics Games ever, upwards of \$50 billion. As much as a third of that may have just simply been embezzled or stolen.

Now, what does this all have to do with security? Well, I think operationally the security services can be supremely effective, but they're only, in the macro sense, as effective as their

weakest link. And in a lot of cases the weakest link is corruption. If you think about some of the successful attacks that have been carried out in Russia over the last decade or so, the one that really – is really striking, I guess, is the – when two female Chechen suicide bombers blew up a Russian aircraft in about – I want to say 2007 or so. I don't remember exactly.

MR. : 2004.

MR. MANKOFF: 2004, OK.

(Cross talk.)

MR. MANKOFF: Yeah, OK. And essentially what happened was these women bribed their way through security checkpoints. They bribed the guards at the airport to let them onto the plane even though, you know, they didn't – they hadn't gone through the proper procedures. They weren't searched. And then they detonated suicide bombs when they were onboard.

So, you know, the system can be set up in a way that's designed to focus on these kind of threats, but it only takes one person – one, you know, corrupt guard who's willing to look the other way in exchange for a bribe of one kind or another to have the entire thing to come apart and for a successful attack to be pulled off, and I think that's one of the real unknowns as we think about how secure the Olympics are going to be.

MR. ZARATE: That's a very important point, and just note that one of the planes that was targeted in that 2004 attack was headed to Sochi, interestingly. The one thing I would say about the Russian security services is, they are ruthless and effective when they want to be. And if you look at the history of U.S. designations of individual terrorists from the Caucasus regions or otherwise, most of those individuals end up dead, because the Russians kill them. So the Russians can be ruthless and effective when they want to be. There are huge limitations, and I think they're going to be challenged here.

Q: I'm Fatima Tlisova, Voice of America Russian service. My question is to anybody who takes it. In their latest statement, the Dagestani Ansar al-Sunnah took responsibility for Volgograd, but also they threatened to attack Sochi, including chemical weapons. How serious this threat can be, in your opinion? Is there any connection to Syria in your opinion? Thank you.

MR. ZARATE: I think – to Andy's initial point, I think part of this is building the perception of insecurity. And so you have to sort of modulate one's reaction to anything that terrorist groups indicate, but you have to take it seriously, of course. And I know one of the concerns that Russian and U.S. officials have had for a long time is the ability of groups in the Caucasus to get their hands on WMD, whether it's chemical weapons or nuclear components.

And that has been a source of great concern for a number of years. I think the fact that Syria is a cauldron of conflict, and you have chemical weapons available to the actors there certainly heightens that concern, but I myself have not seen anything in the open source reporting or otherwise that would suggest you've had sort of a caravan of chemical weapons moving to Sochi for attack. But it's the kind of thing you have to take very seriously, and no doubt it's something the U.S. authorities are looking at in terms of threat vectors.

MR. KUCHINS: That's an excellent question, although I thought you were going to bring the Circassian question, which is an excellent question also, but I'm sure somebody will subsequently.

You know, it was very striking to me, you know, in the diametrically opposed responses of U.S. and Russian officials to the August 21st brutal chemical weapons attack in Syria – the largest one that had been – has been perpetrated by a long – by a long shot. And it puzzled me a lot, and in thinking about it, I was trying to think of, well, what could be a plausible, you know, case where actually the two sides aren't fundamentally disagreeing so much, and the plausible case, I suppose, would be that actually, the – you know, the Russian government response that the – that the Assad forces had no incentive to use chemical weapons since they knew that was the only contingency which would possibly bring upon an American military strike – you know, there's a logic to that for sure.

But there's a corollary logic to that as well, I think, that if the opposition somehow could gain control of some chemical weapons in Syria and make it appear as though the – Assad's forces had carried out that strike, there would be a huge incentive for them to do that, because, of course, that would not only bring on the American military strike, but much more significant American and other international support for them in their fight against the Assad government.

And, you know, knowing at the time that before our agreement on the Chemical Weapons Initiative, the diffusion of chemical weapons sites around Syria – there are so many sites – it just seemed that, you know – gosh, you know, it would only – it would only take, again, you know, one person or one group to get a hold of, you know, one site amongst 40 or maybe even more than 40 that existed to be able to have access to the weapons.

So I think the – you know – (inaudible) – is supporting what Juan is saying; we have to take this very, very seriously, because of the transboundary or transnational nature of the groups and individuals that are fighting in Syria. Now, certainly, this is the one issue – in fact, this is – this is the moment in which the U.S.-Russia relationship began to turn around somewhat last year over the Chemical Weapons Initiative, and subsequently in our talks about the Iranian nuclear weapons – nuclear weapons program. But it's – whether it is true or not, what they are saying, it's certainly – clearly something that has to be taken very, very – with the utmost seriousness.

Q: Good morning; Roxanna Scott from USA Today. Andrew, I was wondering if you can elaborate a little bit more on the hoax element of this and whether we might expect to see more sort of reports coming out in the next two weeks before the opening ceremony, and also, what are your expectations for protests for human rights – anti-gay legislation, that kind of thing, particularly in the zone that they've, you know, set up outside the park – far from the park?

MR. KUCHINS: Well – oh, sorry. Sorry. In my opening remarks I was a bit too flippant, I think maybe, and – you know, although there is somewhat of – when I look at the picture and I look at the video, it just – you know, it does make you think that this could be a total hoax, you know, someone just having fun like the intern at KTVU News in San Francisco who fed the report to the teleprompter after the Asian airliner kind of crash-landed in San Francisco, about the name of the pilots, that supposedly the first one's name was Why So Low,

and et cetera. You know, sort of that kind of – someone trying to be funny, but not really – not really funny.

But I think we're going to see – I would expect to see more reports like this, for the reasons that Juan elaborated, simply to enhance or increase the sense of insecurity around the games. Now, there have to be, you know, for that to really be effective, I think there do have to be some terrorist attacks to accompany it. But I would expect to see more of this in the weeks – in the weeks ahead. I'm very – I can only say that I'm very, very relieved that, at least at this point, we haven't seen any more attacks of the magnitude of what we saw in Bulgohrad three weeks ago, because my greatest fear and I think the fear of probably all of us was that that could be the beginning of, you know, just a series of attacks that could take place on a weekly basis or some – or even more frequently that would effectively destroy the games, whether or not Sochi was attacked itself.

The – on the LGBT issue. You know, of course Putin tried to sort of deflect that in his press conference, although – (laughs) – in doing so it only kind of, I think, probably enraged many in the LGBT community more, and their supporters more, with the way he – you know, look, you're not – no one's going to get thrown – no one's going to get thrown in jail, this kind of legislation is actually more liberal than in many other places, and really what we're only talking about is propaganda about this that's being disseminated, but finally, you know, just leave our children alone. (Laughs.) You know, the effect that he was trying, I think, to address the problem, to diffuse the problem, I don't think that was a very effective way of doing it, shall we – shall we say. And all I can say is I hope that they – that Russian authorities have learned enough from the response they've seen, you know, to the issue over the last few months that they will handle it with the utmost care and do their best not to inflame the issue in responding to any kind of, sort of, act or, you know, demonstration or statements that take place.

But you know, after following Russia so – for so long, sometimes I feel that you can never underestimate their capacity to cut their nose off to spite their face. But maybe Jeff has something more enlightened to say on this.

MR. MANKOFF: Well, I don't know. But on this question of hoaxes or threats that may or not actually be real or that may or may not lead to attacks, you know, I think this gets back to the point that Andy made towards the beginning about how these particular games are such an important political project for Putin personally and for the Russian regime more broadly. There's a particular narrative that Putin and the government are trying to get across, and they're using the Olympics in order to advance that narrative about how Russia has recovered, about how it's back on its feet, about how they've succeeded in bringing stability not only to Russia but specifically to the North Caucasus, which has been such a volatile area for the last two decades. And so to the extent that the jihadists, the insurgents, whatever you want to call them, succeed in changing that narrative, succeed in getting the discussion surrounding the Olympics not to be that Russia's back on its feet, that Putin has brought stability, but rather that there is this instability, that there's this insecurity, and that's what everybody is focusing on, then I think it really gets at undercutting that message that the government is trying to get across, regardless of whether there's a successful attack. Obviously if there is a successful attack, that changes the narrative even more, but even if there's this kind of, you know, low-level chatter that basically takes the attention of everybody who's going to Sochi and who's looking at the Olympics off of

the, you know, attempts to use this to bolster the prestige of the regime, then in some sense that's a success for these insurgents as well.

MR. KUCHINS: Could I just add something to that? You know, I think – you know, Putin has been very successful, I think, in the eyes of many in his foreign policy in the past year. A successful Sochi Olympics kind of – kind of – kind of accentuates it. It takes the eyes off other issues that are going on inside Russia. Because some things that are going on inside Russia are actually quite problematic when you look at – I mean, one of the – one of Putin's, you know, most – the most important reason why Putin is popular in Russia is because Russians are living more prosperously than they ever have in their history, and they experienced this remarkable period of growth from 1998 to 2008. Had the dip after the financial crisis, came back to a level of about 4 percent growth, which was OK, not where they wanted to be. But since Putin has become president, Russian economic growth has actually fallen close to zero. In 2013 it was 1.3 percent. In the last quarter of 2013 it was close to – close to zero and incomes were falling. So this sense that he has brought prosperity to Russia – you know, the Olympics go – the Olympics go badly, you know, then, you know, they're disgruntled and people are looking around and saying, well, you know, actually this guy – things aren't going so well economically right now in Russia. If you were to have a dip in the oil price, which is so important for the performance of the Russian economy, then one can actually start imagining a scenario where his leadership is really under much more – much more pressure than one would have imagined.

So there's also, I think, an element of, you know, have the world focus on the successful Russia. Come to – they're going to come to Russia and see what the new Russia is like, and it's completely different from what the old Soviet Union was like. You know, this is not, you know, your father's Buick. This is the new Russia. And you know, this is one reason why they've spent so much money, even if a lot of it has been embezzled or whatnot, you know, to – as a showcase.

MR. ZARATE: Just one quick point. The question about protests is a very interesting one and important one because in planning for the security of any event, whether it's a G-20 meeting or the Olympics, you've got to account for a multiplicity of disruptions or potential disruptions. And so to the extent that there has been planning, I'm assuming that there's planning around everything from dealing with low-level criminality all the way to high-end terrorism. And in between there are disruptions tied to demonstrations or unanticipated gatherings of individuals that could be disruptive and could then combine with other threats to create a problem.

And so your question's a good one because we've been focused on the terrorist threat and the security around that, but any security service that's looking at a major event like this is looking at a full suite of potential disruptions and has to be taken into account, both singularly and then in combination.

MR. SCHWARTZ: We have time for just a couple more. (Off mic.)

Q: Yeah, Charlie Ericksen with Hispanic Link news service in – here in Washington. To – what sort of any kind of disruption or attack might cause the United States to withdraw, from your perception, from the Olympics? And secondly, what do you know about what preparations Mexico and Latin American countries are taking to ensure the safety of their athletes?

MR. : Definitely a question for Juan.

MR. ZARATE: You want to do this in Spanish? (Laughs.) You know, I don't know specifically what the Latin American countries are doing. Usually, what happens in events like this is that you have a reliance on the host country to provide the adequate security, the communications. Usually most delegations have their own security officers, protocols. The U.S. is certainly sort of best in class in that regard and probably the most demanding international player in terms of security for its athletes and citizens.

To answer your first question, I think, you know, absent an actual attack, what would be disruptive to U.S. participation in the Olympics – you know, the only thing I can imagine is if there were a very serious, credible set of threats directed at U.S. athletes or at venues that U.S. athletes would be attending, combined with a sense that the Russians aren't sharing enough information about what's being done to counter it and a sense that we have an inability to counter it ourselves. And so if there's a real sense of serious risk to our athletes that is imminent, that is material, and that can't be countered, then you would start to see a discussion in the Situation Room around what is to be done. But that kind of a decision is taken incredibly seriously. Nobody wants to see the Olympics disrupted. Pulling the American athletes out would be, you know, disastrous for everybody, I think, and would give the terrorists a victory. And so you would want to take that decision very carefully and only in the most serious of situations.

MR. SCHWARTZ: With that – excuse me – with that I'd like to thank everybody for coming out this morning. This briefing will be archived at CSIS.org. You can follow our Twitter feed at @CSIS for updates and we will have a transcript out later which we'll release on Twitter @CSIS and on our homepage, www.csis.org.

Thanks very much for coming this morning.

(END)