

Gorbachev Interview

'I Am Truly and Deeply Concerned'

Interview Conducted by *Matthias Schepp* and *Britta Sandberg*

In a SPIEGEL interview, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev discusses the dangers of poor relations between Russia and the West in the Ukraine crisis, saying there is a danger that things could get worse. Germany, he says, has a significant role to play.

Thick snowflakes fall in front of the window of the office on Leningradsky Avenue in northwestern Moscow. Mikhail Gorbachev's foundation has been located here for the past 23 years -- a place for political research projects, charity initiatives, conferences and book publishing.

Photos from bygone eras hang on the walls. There's one showing the former Soviet leader with George Bush Sr., in another he is with François Mitterrand. Still others depict Gorbachev with Helmut Kohl and Shimon Peres. There are also numerous images of his wife Raisa Gorbachev, who died in 1999 after a battle with leukemia. One in oil hangs over his desk while the large-format photograph across the room is the last photo taken of the former first lady. Gorbachev's voice falters when he speaks of her.

The 83-year-old has undergone three serious operations recently -- one on his spine, prostate surgery and another on his carotid artery. Now he's facing a fourth. The medication he takes has changed his face and he no longer likes to be photographed. "I always look like a bulldog in photos now," he says. "Mr. Gorbachev, you don't look like a bulldog," we respond. "Of course I do -- now stop it."

He then dispatches a press officer to grab a photo of him published by a Russian newspaper. If one was so inclined, slight similarities with a bulldog could perhaps be found. Even more so after the two-and-a-half hour interview he gave SPIEGEL. He has seldom been so combative.

SPIEGEL: Mikhail Sergeyevich, few contributed more to ending the Cold War than you. Now it is returning as a result of the Ukraine crisis. How painful is that?

Gorbachev: It gives one a feeling of *déjà-vu*. Perhaps that would even make a good headline for this interview: Everything appears to be repeating itself. There was a time for building a Wall and a time for tearing it down. I'm not the only person to thank for the fact that this wall no longer exists. (Former Chancellor) Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* was important, as were the protests in Eastern Europe. Now, new walls are being built and the situation is threatening to escalate. I do, in fact, see all the signs of a new Cold War. Things could blow up at any time if we don't act. The loss of trust is disastrous. Moscow no longer believes the West and the West doesn't believe Moscow. That's terrible.

SPIEGEL: Do you think it is possible there could be another major war in Europe?

Gorbachev: Such a scenario shouldn't even be considered. Such a war today would inevitably lead to a nuclear war. But the statements from both sides and the propaganda lead me to fear the worst. If one side loses its nerves in this inflamed atmosphere, then we won't survive the coming years.

SPIEGEL: Aren't you overstating things a bit?

Gorbachev: I don't say such things lightly. I am a man with a conscience. But that's the way things are. I am truly and deeply concerned.

SPIEGEL: The new Russian military doctrine labels NATO's eastern expansion and the "reinforcement of NATO's offensive capabilities" as one of the primary threats facing Russia. Do you agree?

Gorbachev: NATO's eastward expansion has destroyed the European security architecture as it was defined in the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The eastern expansion was a 180-degree reversal, a departure

from the decision of the Paris Charter in 1990 taken together by all the European states to put the Cold War behind us for good. Russian proposals, like the one by former President Dmitri Medvedev that we should sit down together to work on a new security architecture, were arrogantly ignored by the West. We are now seeing the results.

SPIEGEL: The Ukraine conflict is a personal one for you -- and not just for political reasons.

Gorbachev: That is correct, and anything else would be strange. I am, after all, half Ukrainian. My mother was Ukrainian and my wife Raisa was too. I spoke my very first words in Ukrainian, and the first songs I heard were Ukrainian. The southern Russian region of Stavropol, where I come from and where I once served as party chief, had a partnership during Soviet times with Ukraine's Donetsk region, where this terrible war is raging today. Back then we offered each other mutual help. We were friends and we lived in one state. Still, even today I have friends and relatives in Ukraine -- as do most Russians.

SPIEGEL: As general secretary of the Communist Party, you fought for glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) in your country. Has everything that you pushed for during your political life fallen into ruin under Putin?

Gorbachev: I take an entirely different view. Glasnost isn't dead and neither is democracy. A new generation has grown up in Russia under entirely different conditions -- and it is much freer than in the Soviet Union. The clock can no longer be turned back. Nothing has fallen into ruin.

SPIEGEL: Yet Russian leadership is more authoritarian than it has been in a long time.

Gorbachev: What do you mean by "a long time"?

SPIEGEL: Since pre-Gorbachev times in the Soviet Union. There are once again limits on the freedom of opinion and the press, and elections aren't free.

Gorbachev: Then we have the same view of things. Since then, I have become an old man and I have a long journey behind me. When I became a member of the Communist Party, I wrote an essay called: "Stalin, our war glory, Stalin inspires us, the youth." Today I support those who fight against venerating Stalin.

SPIEGEL: Putin is limiting democracy, but a majority still appears to be satisfied with his leadership. Why?

Gorbachev: When Putin moved into the Kremlin, he inherited a difficult legacy. There was chaos everywhere. The economy was crippled, entire regions wanted to secede. There was a threat of Russia disintegrating. Putin stopped this process and that will remain the greatest achievement of his time in office. Even if Putin hadn't managed to achieve anything else, he will always be credited with that. Yes, he does sometimes resort to authoritarian methods. I have often spoken out against this. That's also why I opposed him taking office for a third term.

SPIEGEL: Does Russia need a new top-down perestroika, as recently called for by former finance minister Alexei Kudrin, a Putin confidant who is also highly respected in the West?

Gorbachev: You are welcome to tell Alexei Kudrin that I agree with him. Russia is only halfway along the path to democracy -- the rest still lies ahead of us. Unfortunately, the Kremlin is currently focused on a conservative agenda. I think that's a mistake.

SPIEGEL: What drives Putin? Years ago, you wrote that he was only interested in staying in power.

Gorbachev: I can't look inside of Putin, so I don't know. But we will not progress without democracy and popular participation. We need free elections and people's involvement in the political process. Things cannot continue as they have until now, with a law being discussed for the first time in the morning and then already getting passed that night.

SPIEGEL: Are the Russians ready for more democracy?

Gorbachev: That's a question you will have to ask our opposition, which isn't very powerful.

SPIEGEL: But we're asking you.

Gorbachev: It's simply not okay when those who think differently are oppressed or when someone like anti-corruption blogger and politician Alexei Navalny is placed under house arrest just because he opened his mouth. It's not good when government offices or key posts in state-owned businesses are assigned on the basis of friendships, as happens here.

SPIEGEL: With the economy struggling and the ruble collapsing, do you think there's any chance Putin will change course?

Gorbachev: He really doesn't need to be afraid because he is still very popular. If Putin has the feeling that he no longer has any other choice, then I think he will act accordingly.

SPIEGEL: In November, during the presentation of your new book, you said that Putin suffers from an affliction that was no stranger to you during your time in the Kremlin: an excess of self-confidence. Putin, you said, sees himself as being second only to God.

Gorbachev: Perhaps he considers himself to be equal to God (laughs). Of course Putin isn't God. But those who carry responsibility also need to be determined and capable of taking decisions -- in other words, a healthy portion of self-confidence.

SPIEGEL: You, yourself, were often accused of being irresolute.

Gorbachev: Then how did this allegedly indecisive Gorbachev manage to push through perestroika against immense resistance? How did he declare glasnost, which allowed the freedom of word and religion? Why did he provide the freedom of travel, when, previously, every Soviet citizen who wanted to go abroad had to go through a lengthy procedure? And why did this allegedly irresolute person suddenly decide to end the nuclear arms race by completely eliminating medium-range missiles and reducing long-range missiles by half? If all of that wasn't courageous and decisive, then what is?

SPIEGEL: Still, does it bother you that many in your country see you as the man who destroyed the Soviet Union?

Gorbachev: Many today know that isn't true. Unfortunately, I even hear that kind of innuendo from President Putin, not to mention the so-called patriots. They would love nothing better than to drag me and the Communist Party to court on charges of high treason.

SPIEGEL: Would it have been better if the Soviet Union had remained intact?

Gorbachev: Surely. The rapidly induced collapse of the Soviet Union is also part of the deeper reason for the current Ukraine conflict.

SPIEGEL: You're speaking of 1991, when the Soviet Union broke up as a result of its conflicts between different nationalities and because of economic and supply crises.

Gorbachev: The opponents of perestroika had already lost the public political battle, so they instead focused on escalation and instigated a putsch. They wanted power, but they destroyed the Soviet Union. My successor Boris Yeltsin prescribed a shock therapy under which Russia still suffers today. I had a reform program. Although union was a part of the Soviet Union's name, it wasn't really a union. The republics had only very limited sovereignty and competencies. That's why I presented a reformed union treaty that was to be signed on August 20, 1991. But the nomenklatura feared the new era.

SPIEGEL: In a farewell speech before you left the Kremlin at the end of 1991, you emphasized the successes of your policies and said that no one living in neighboring countries needed to fear Russian troops any longer. Now, that fear is back.

Gorbachev: Unfortunately, we forget the things that history teaches us.

SPIEGEL: Whose fault is that?

Gorbachev: You're asking me the eternal question of who is responsible: the wife or the mother-in-law

(laughs). Seriously though: Russia and the West both bear responsibility, if to a different degree. No one has displayed an understanding for the seriousness of the situation.

SPIEGEL: Who carries the greater responsibility for the Ukraine conflict?

Gorbachev: Casting blame isn't helpful in this highly dangerous crisis. But I do want to be clear about a few things. In November 1990, at the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Paris, the talk was of a new peaceful world order. George Bush, Sr. and I were especially active in promoting this. But nothing came of it -- a demilitarization of politics didn't happen. Instead, a dangerous winner's mentality became widespread in America. I criticize this attitude every time I visit the United States. I remind people of how John F. Kennedy took a stand against the demonization of people in the Soviet Union and said that a true peace could not be a Pax americana, that peace could not be dictated by America. There is either peace for all or there is no peace.

SPIEGEL: Did America not emerge as the victor of the Cold War?

Gorbachev: Would America have been able to achieve these massive changes without Moscow, without us? No! We showed at the time what is possible if we work together: We solved regional conflicts, we achieved German reunification, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe, nuclear disarmament. Unfortunately, America then started building a global empire, a mega empire.

SPIEGEL: When did America begin down that path?

Gorbachev: You know yourselves. When the Soviet Union fell, those who didn't wish us well shed crocodile tears as they rubbed their hands together beneath the table. The Americans began by surrounding Russia with so-called rings of defense -- NATO's eastward expansion. NATO intervened militarily in the Yugoslavian civil war without the consent of the United Nations. That was a precedent-setting case. All that triggered a backlash in Russia. No Kremlin leader can ignore something like that.

'Sanctions Are not an Instrument that Should Be Used'

SPIEGEL: It's interesting that an older generation of politicians -- (former US Secretary of State) Henry Kissinger, (former German Chancellor) Helmut Schmidt and former German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, for example -- are urging level-headedness in the Ukraine crisis. You yourself have addressed presidents Putin and Obama.

Gorbachev: Yes, and that was already one year ago, on January 23. I called on both to negotiate with each other because the Ukraine conflict is a threat to the entire world and not just to Ukraine and its neighbors. My letters were a cry from the depths of my soul.

SPIEGEL: Did you get an answer?

Gorbachev: I fell on deaf ears.

SPIEGEL: You had a similar experience in Berlin in November. The warnings you gave on the occasion of the Berlin Wall anniversary were dismissed as those of an aging politician. The Germans criticize you because of your pro-Putin stance. Does that bother you?

Gorbachev: The Germans love Angela Merkel. That's why people criticize me and not Merkel. But a smart country like Germany should not resort to the kind of level of conversation you might expect to find in a pub.

SPIEGEL: You met with Angela Merkel in the Chancellery. How did the talk go?

Gorbachev: Friendly. We spoke with each other for about an hour. But the balance of power was unequal. A female advisor to the chancellor was there, so I had two women against me. I could very clearly sense that the chancellor is under pressure -- both domestically and in terms of foreign policy. I explained to her that people needed to sit down for as long as it takes to find a solution. You won't achieve anything by tripping all over each other with rash statements. Angela Merkel agreed with me, even if she acts differently.

SPIEGEL: Did you criticize the West's sanctions against Russia in your talk with the chancellor?

Gorbachev: Ask Angela Merkel. I might pull your leg.

SPIEGEL: But we would like to get an answer from you.

Gorbachev: I have forgotten again everything that was said about that (laughs). You'll have to ask the chancellor. Incidentally, I didn't tell Putin anything about the conversation either. I'm even less inclined to tell SPIEGEL. If you want, you can ask me a third time now, but there's no point in trying to lead my down the slippery slope.

SPIEGEL: Why do you consider sanctions to be wrong?

Gorbachev: They damage the economies of both countries. It was wrong to exclude Russia from the G-8. That's vendetta-like and there is nothing to be gained from it. Sanctions are not an instrument that should be used if we want to maintain our exemplary relations.

SPIEGEL: It looks as though such relations are a thing of the past.

Gorbachev: A great deal of progress was made in the relationship between Germany and Russia after the fall of the Wall. We built up singularly good relations. We can't allow that to be destroyed now. At the moment, the West is largely shutting Russia out of efforts to solve global problems on issues ranging from the battle against terrorism and the Islamic State to climate change. What's the good in that? We need to "de-ice" our relations again and we urgently need a new thaw. We Russians will do everything to try to make that happen. I think Russia is orienting its policies in that direction. In Germany, though, it looks as though there is a competition to see who can be the most unyielding when it comes to Russia.

SPIEGEL: But there are also many who see things differently. Former SPD leader Matthias Platzeck has proposed that a new referendum be held over Crimea under the aegis of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in order to provide legitimacy to the annexation under international law. What do you think of that idea?

Gorbachev: The new Germany wants to interfere everywhere. What legitimacy is needed for Crimea? Even if the referendum had deficiencies, there can be no doubt that the people there clearly and unambiguously said they wanted to be a part of Russia.

SPIEGEL: Your position on the referendum is astoundingly mild. Even Putin's own human rights commission detected voter fraud. Are you disappointed in the Germans?

Gorbachev: Many in Germany seem to want to participate in the new division of Europe. It's probably better if I stop here. Don't provoke me any longer. I am a Russian and I shouldn't say too much about Germany's domestic affairs.

SPIEGEL: Germany's internal affairs affect all of Europe.

Gorbachev: The way things stand between Germany and Russia has repercussions for the global political climate. We can never forget that, also in the Ukraine crisis.

SPIEGEL: What do you think a solution to the crisis might look like?

Gorbachev: An immediate cease-fire, followed by an international effort to rebuild the destroyed areas. If necessary, we need to invite Otto von Bismarck again. He said that Germany should never wage war with Russia. Germany already tried once during World War II to expand its sphere of influence into the east. What lessons does it still need? It hasn't been forgotten in my country: the massive destruction, the women who waited for husbands who never returned home. It is good that our people have reconciled with each other.

SPIEGEL: And Merkel nevertheless says today that Putin lives in another world. Do you understand where she is coming from?

Gorbachev: No, not entirely. And I'm not the only one who doesn't understand. Please recall President

Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. Putin clearly stated at the time where Russia's red lines are and that Russia does not agree to NATO's advance on its borders. For us Russians, by the way, Putin wasn't saying anything new. So why was it that our partners were so astounded? I get the impression that the German people understood Putin very well at the time -- in any case better than the political elite in Germany. It is a mistake to try to get rid of Putin.

SPIEGEL: Why would it be a mistake?

Gorbachev: It's hopelessly stupid and highly dangerous. Putin should leave office at the end of his term. Unfortunately, the German idea is very different. It envisions the further tightening of sanctions until the Russians take to the streets and topple Putin.

SPIEGEL: You don't appear to think much of Angela Merkel.

Gorbachev: On the contrary -- I like her as a person and a politician. But that doesn't mean I don't have the right to criticize her, just as she has the right to criticize me. The same applies in my relations to Putin. He is an experienced president who has done and continues to do much for Russia. At the same time, some things have to be said openly to him.

SPIEGEL: Are you a happy person today?

Gorbachev: I wrote a few years back that there aren't really any happy reformers. I wasn't in the best of spirits at the time and I allowed myself to get carried away with this sentence. Yes, when I look back, I am a happy person. Tackling major projects and leading an important state was, of course, great.

SPIEGEL: What does a typical day look like for you now? How do you spend your free time?

Gorbachev: My wife Raisa and I had a shared passion. We went on long walks every day, five to six kilometers. That helped me deal with stress. My legs, unfortunately, no longer play along, but I'm not the only one with that problem. I recently visited Helmut Schmidt. He was standing up when he greeted me, but he told me that he often has to use a wheelchair. Helmut Kohl and George Bush Sr. also have also begun relying on technical aids. I fear the time is coming when I will also have to motorize myself.

SPIEGEL: Is it difficult for you to accept that your strength is waning?

Gorbachev: In terms of my health, I felt very good until I turned 75. I continued to jet around the world. The death of my wife Raisa in 1999 was a difficult blow. The last year and a half hasn't been very good; I had to undergo three serious operations. Incidentally, all three took place in Germany. The whole world is fighting against aging, but there's nothing you can do about it. In some ways I feel old, but in others I still feel young. That's how I am.

SPIEGEL: What matters most to you in the years that you still have left?

Gorbachev: To live life and not just survive or vegetate and wait for death. I want to travel to America again in February to give lectures. Next to my books, they're my only source of revenue. I still have goals and that keeps me going.

SPIEGEL: What goals are they?

Gorbachev: I want to continue to be part of the discussion about Russia's future, about global peace and environmental protection. I want to write books, give lectures, attend conferences and give interviews.

SPIEGEL: To try once more to change the world and make it a better place?

Gorbachev: That's no longer necessary. Glasnost and Perestroika live on and they can no longer be stopped.

SPIEGEL: Do you have a fear of death?

Gorbachev: Not at all. I don't know why, but I have none.

SPIEGEL: Mikhail Sergeyevich, we thank you for this interview.

URL:

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