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Mikhail Gorbachev: I am against all walls

October 16, 2014 Maxim Korshunov, RBTH

The first and last president of the Soviet Union spoke with RBTH about the past and how it should inform the present.

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Mikhail Gorbachev at World Forum on Enterprise and the Environment, Oxford, Britain on Jun 27, 2010. Source: Features/Fotodom

As the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall approached, Maxim Korshunov of RBTH sat down with Mikhail Gorbachev, the first and last president of the Soviet Union, to discuss the historic rapprochement between East and West and the prospects for a new Cold War.

Russia Beyond the Headlines: 1989 is the year that the Berlin Wall fell. But that only happened in November. In the summer of that same year, at a press conference following your negotiations in Bonn with Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl, you were asked, "And what about the wall?" You answered, "Nothing under the sun is eternal. [...] The wall can disappear as soon as the conditions that gave birth to it no longer exist. I don't see a big problem here." How did you assume events would unfold back then?

Mikhail Gorbachev: In the summer of 1989, neither Helmut Kohl nor I anticipated, of course, that everything would happen so fast. We didn't expect the wall to come down in November. And by the way, we both admitted that later. I don't claim to be a prophet.

This happens in history: it accelerates its progress. It punishes those who are late. But it has an even harsher punishment for those who try to stand in its way. It would have been a big mistake to hold onto the Iron Curtain. That is why we didn't put any pressure on the government of the GDR [German Democratic Republic – East Germany].

When events started to develop at a speed that no one expected, the Soviet leadership unanimously – and I want to stress "unanimously" – decided not to interfere in the internal processes that were under way in the GDR, not to let our troops leave their garrisons

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under any circumstances. I am confident in that decision that it was the right decision.

RBTH: What made it possible to finally overcome the division of Germany? In your opinion, who played a decisive role in its peaceful reunification?

M.G.: The Germans themselves played the decisive role in uniting Germany. I am referring not only to their massive demonstrations in support of unity, but also to the fact that the Germans in both the East and the West proved in the post-war decades that they had learned the lessons of the past and that they could be trusted.

I think that the Soviet Union played a crucial role in ensuring that the reunification was peaceful, that the process did not lead to a dangerous international crisis. In the Soviet leadership, we knew that the Russians – that all the peoples of the Soviet Union – understood the Germans' desire to live in unity and to have a democratic government. I want to note that besides the Soviet Union, the other participants in the process of definitively solving the German issue also demonstrated balance and responsibility. I am referring to the countries in the anti-Hitler coalition – the United States, the United Kingdom and France. It is no longer a secret that Francois Mitterrand and Margaret Thatcher had major doubts regarding the speed of reunification. The war still left a deep scar. But when all the aspects of this process had been settled, they signed documents that spelled the end of the Cold War.

RBTH: It fell to you to decide the fateful problem of global development. The international settlement of the German question, which involved major world powers and other nations, served as an example of the great responsibility and high quality of the politicians of that generation. You demonstrated that this is possible if one is guided – as you defined it – by "a new way of thinking." How capable are modern world leaders of solving modern problems in a peaceful manner, and how have approaches to finding answers to geopolitical challenges changed in the past 25 years?

M.G.: German reunification was not an isolated event, but a part of the process of ending the Cold War. Perestroika and democratization in our country paved the way for it. Without these processes, Europe would have been split and in a "frozen" state for decades longer. And I'm sure that it would have been a degree of magnitude more difficult to get out of that state of affairs.

What is the new way of thinking? It is recognizing that there are global threats – and at the time, it was primarily the threat of a nuclear conflict, which can only be removed by joint efforts. That means we need to build relations anew, conduct dialogue, seek paths to terminating the arms race. It means recognizing the freedom of choice for all peoples, while at the same time taking each others' interests into account, building cooperation, and establishing ties, to make conflict and war impossible in Europe.

These principles lie at the foundation of the Paris Charter (1990) for a new Europe – a vital political document signed by all the European countries, the U.S., and Canada. As a result, its provisions needed to be developed and solidified, structures needed to be created, preventive mechanisms needed to be established, as did cooperation mechanisms. For example, there was a proposal to create a Security Council for Europe.

I don't want to contrast that generation of leaders with the subsequent generation. But a fact remains a fact: it wasn't done. And European development has been lopsided, which, it should be said, was facilitated by the weakening of Russia in the 1990s.



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Mikhail Gorbachev on the red carpet of Cinema for Peace in Berlin on Aug 15, 2010. Source: DPA / Vostok-Photo

Today we need to admit that there is a crisis in European (and global) politics. One of the reasons, albeit not the only reason, is a lack of desire on the part of our Western partners to take Russia's point of view and legal interests in security into consideration. They paid lip service to applauding Russia, especially during the Yeltsin years, but in deeds they didn't consider it. I am referring primarily to NATO expansion, missile defense plans, the West's actions in regions of importance to Russia (Yugoslavia, Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine). They literally said "This is none of your business." As a result, an abscess formed and it burst.

I would advise Western leaders to thoroughly analyze all of this, instead of accusing Russia of everything. They should remember the Europe we managed to create at the beginning of the 1990s and what it has unfortunately turned into in recent years.

RBTH: One of the key issues that has arisen in connection with the events in Ukraine is NATO expansion into the East. Do you get the feeling that your Western partners lied to you when they were developing their future plans in Eastern Europe? Why didn't you insist that the promises made to you – particularly U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's promise that NATO would not expand into the East – be legally encoded? I will quote Baker: "NATO will not move one inch further east."

M.G.: The topic of "NATO expansion" was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist in 1991. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either. Another issue we brought up was discussed: making sure that NATO's military structures would not advance and that additional armed forces from the alliance would not be deployed on the territory of the then-GDR after German reunification. Baker's statement, mentioned in your question, was made in that context. Kohl and [German Vice Chancellor Hans-Dietrich Genscher] talked about it.

Everything that could have been and needed to be done to solidify that political obligation was done. And fulfilled. The agreement on a final settlement with Germany said that no new military structures would be created in the eastern part of the country; no additional troops would be deployed; no weapons of mass destruction would be placed there. It has been observed all these years. So don't portray Gorbachev and the then-Soviet authorities as naïve people who were wrapped around the West's finger. If there was naïveté, it was later, when the issue arose. Russia at first did not object.

The decision for the U.S. and its allies to expand NATO into the east was decisively made in 1993. I called this a big mistake from the very beginning. It was definitely a violation of the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990. With regards to Germany, they were legally enshrined

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RBTH: Ukraine and relations with Ukraine are a painful subject for every Russian. As someone who is half Russian and half Ukrainian, you wrote in the afterword of your book *After the Kremlin* that you are deeply pained by what is going on in Ukraine. What do you consider the way out of the Ukraine crisis to be? How will Russia's relations with Ukraine, Europe, and the U.S. develop in the coming years in light of recent events?



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M.G.: Everything is more or less clear for the immediate future – we need to fulfill everything prescribed in the Minsk agreements from Sept. 5 and 19 in their entirety. At the point, the situation is very fragile. The ceasefire is constantly being violated. But in recent days there is an impression that the process has begun. A zone of disengagement is being created, heavy weaponry is being removed. Observers from the OSCE, including Russians, are arriving. If we can fix this all, it will be a huge achievement, but only a first step.

We need to recognize that relations between Russia and Ukraine have taken an enormous hit. We should not allow this to turn into the mutual alienation of our peoples. An enormous responsibility lies on the leaders – Presidents [Vladimir] Putin and [Petro] Poroshenko. They need to show an example. We need to reduce the intensity of emotions. We can figure out who is right and who is guilty later. Right now, the most important task is to establish a dialogue on specific issues. Life in the regions that have suffered most needs to normalize, and problems such as territorial status need to be set aside for now. Ukraine, Russia, and the West could help with this, both separately and together.

Ukraine has a lot to do to ensure reconciliation in the country, to ensure that each person feels like a citizen whose rights and interests are safely guaranteed. This isn't so much an issue of constitutional and legal guarantees as of the reality of everyday life. So in addition to elections, I would recommend setting to work in a roundtable format as soon as possible, where all of the regions and all layers of the population would be represented, and where any issues could be raised and discussed.

With respect to Russia's relations with Western Europe and the U.S., the first step is to abandon the logic of tit-for-tat accusations and sanctions. In my opinion, Russia has already taken that first step by refraining from tit-for-tat measures after the latest round of Western sanctions. The rest is up to our partners.

First and foremost, I think they need to cancel these so-called personal sanctions. How can we conduct a dialogue if you are punishing the people who make the decisions and influence policy? We need to talk to each other. This is an axiom that has been forgotten, quite unfortunately.

I am confident that points of contact will emerge as soon as dialogue resumes. Just look around – the world is tense, there are common challenges and a mass of problems that can only be solved with joint efforts. The disconnect between Russia and the European Union harms everyone and weakens Europe at a time when global competition is growing, when other "centers of gravity" in global politics are gaining strength.

We can't give up. We can't be drawn into a new Cold War. The common threats to our security have not disappeared. New, highly dangerous extremist movements, particularly the so-called Islamic State, have emerged in recent times. Problems such as the environment, poverty, migration, and epidemics are getting worse. We can again find common ground in the face of common challenges. It won't be easy, but there's no other way.



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RBTH: Ukraine is planning to build a wall on the border with Russia. Why do you think it happened that the Russian and Ukrainian peoples suddenly fell out and now might be divided not only by a political, but also a physical wall?

M.G.: The answer to that question is very simple: I am against all walls. Let's hope that those who are planning such a "construction" come to their senses. I don't think our peoples will fall out. We are too close in all respects. There aren't any insurmountable problems or differences between us. But a lot will depend on the intelligentsia and the media. If they work to separate us, contrive to exacerbate our conflicts and quarrels, there will be trouble. The examples are well known. And so I urge the intelligentsia to act responsibly.

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A great man talking common sense.
I hope all world leaders will listen to his words of wisdom.
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a true statesman
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Ryan Jense

Tempered wisdom and fresh-air.....poverty, extremism, environmental degradation, epidemics, etc....these are the common problems (unifying and shared)....continued and new visions of a better world for all should be the bridge.....don't build more walls!
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Mira Kzyk · New York University

I know it is inherently hard for Russians to be objective about Ukraine and Ukrainians because they believe that they, the Russians OWN Ukraine. Heavy handed and violent mistreatment of Ukraine by Russia has occurred for too many centuries now. Today, Russian disinformation and propaganda about Ukraine is out of control in Russia itself, the news is neither objective nor truthful in the least. Free speech is all but eliminated in Russia and the state controls the media. So how do you begin to expect Russians to treat Ukrainians with respect when the state poisons the minds of it's citizens? Putin's Russia is an abomination in a world intent on cooperation and self-determination, since all the Kremlin wants is to control and dominate a new Eurasian Union. Putin's Russia is turning into a rogue state hell bent on destabilizing the world order and climbing over it's dead to claim a pyrrhic victory!
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