

Gorbachev Accuses Putin of Conceit

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Gorbachev

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on Monday described Russia as an imitation of democracy and accused its current rulers of conceit and contempt for voters, in his harshest criticism of the government yet.

Gorbachev criticized Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his protege, President Dmitry Medvedev, for saying they will decide between them who should run for president in the March 2012 presidential vote.

Gorbachev denounced the statements as a show of an "incredible conceit" and disrespect for voters.

"It's not Putin's business. It must be decided by the nation in the elections, by those who would cast ballots," Gorbachev said at a news conference. "Can't other people also run?"

Gorbachev has previously avoided personal criticism of Putin, who has remained Russia's No. 1 politician after shifting into the premier's post following two presidential terms. Putin is widely expected to reclaim the presidency in 2012.

Gorbachev, who will turn 80 next week, said Russia has only "imitations" of a parliament and judicial system.

He called for an investigation into last week's statement by an assistant to the judge who convicted oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky who said the judge did not write the verdict and read it against his will in the Moscow courtroom.

Judge Viktor Danilkin found Khodorkovsky guilty in December of stealing oil from his own oil company and extended his prison term through 2017.

The assistant, Natalya Vasilyeva, who is also the spokeswoman for the court, said the verdict was imposed upon Danilkin when it became clear his own ruling would not please top Russian officials behind the politically driven case.

"I fully trust her," Gorbachev said of Vasilyeva.

Putin has been seen as the driving force behind the unrelenting legal attack on Khodorkovsky, who challenged him early in his presidency and has been imprisoned since 2003. Shortly before the verdict was announced, Putin called Khodorkovsky a thief and said he should stay in prison.

Gorbachev said Monday that Khodorkovsky's case had clear political roots, tracing it back to the tycoon's criticism of Putin. "Politics shouldn't have been involved in that, but they were," he said.

Gorbachev also denounced the main pro-Kremlin United Russia party as a "bad copy" of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and warned that the government's efforts to sideline political opponents could backfire.

"The monopoly ends in rotting and hampers economic development," he said.

Gorbachev, who is revered in the West for the role he played in ending the Cold War, is disliked by many at home for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the years of social and economic turmoil that followed it.

He said the uprisings that toppled the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt and continue spreading across the Arab world had many things in common with the collapse of Communism.

"People are striving for a better life," he said. "They have nothing to lose."

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