

Gorbachev Says Putin Should Go

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Medvedev congratulating Gorbachev on his 80th birthday on Wednesday at the Gorki presidential residence. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, in comments published on his 80th birthday Wednesday, accused Russia's leaders of rolling back democracy and advised Vladimir Putin not to return to the presidency next year.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich [Putin] has already served two terms, and one more as prime minister. I would not run for president if I were in his place," Gorbachev said in an interview in the weekly *Argumenty i Fakty*.

A year before a presidential election in which Prime Minister Putin has hinted he will run himself or endorse President Dmitry Medvedev for a second term, Gorbachev said he likes both members of the ruling "tandem" as people.

"But both of them must understand their time is limited," said Gorbachev, whose 1980s reforms eased decades of oppression in the Soviet Union but hastened the superpower's breakup in 1991.

After eight years as president, Putin steered Medvedev into the Kremlin in 2008, when the Constitution barred him from seeking a third straight term. He is technically subordinate to Medvedev, but is widely seen as Russia's paramount leader.

"People ... do not want to be a mass, a flock led for decades by the same shepherds," Gorbachev said.

In a separate interview, also published Wednesday, Gorbachev called the situation in the country "worrisome," mainly due to social problems.

"Of course, there is no mass famine and no complete energy or heating blackouts, but there are plenty of shortages, and what people have — medicine, food, children's goods, utilities services and many other things — is becoming ever more costly," Gorbachev told Interfax.

He also accused the authorities of cracking down on people's rights while failing to ensure their safety or proceed with reforms.

"There's much talk about modernization, for one thing, but very little to show for it," Gorbachev said.

He said fair elections to the State Duma slated for December are the only thing capable of bringing about "positive change."

"The people will figure out ... who's able to solve their problems while in power," Gorbachev said.

Meanwhile, a poll by state-run VTsIOM indicated that the Russian public remains divided on Gorbachev's legacy, Interfax reported.

About 42 percent of the populace think he played a crucial role in the Soviet breakup, while 37 percent believe it would have happened regardless of who was in power, the survey said.

Still, the last Soviet leader is not without admirers in Russia. Unidentified activists have placed street signs saying "Ulitsa Gorbacheva" on houses on Ulitsa Lenina in downtown Yekaterinburg, Interfax said Wednesday.

The fake signs were removed within hours, but a legal advertising billboard reading "Thanks to Gorbachev" remains standing on the street, the report said.

Also Wednesday, Medvedev told Gorbachev during a meeting that he would be awarded the Order of St. Andrew, Russia's highest order, for his service. Medvedev said leading the Soviet Union during a "very complex, dramatic period" was a tough job.

"It can be assessed differently, but it was a heavy load," Medvedev said, adding that he will invite Gorbachev to the Kremlin to give him the award.

Gorbachev celebrated his birthday with family and friends in Moscow on Wednesday. On March 30, he plans to attend a charitable gala concert in London's Royal Albert Hall to help raise money for treating patients with blood cancer, the disease that killed his wife, Raisa, in 1999.

(MT, Reuters, AP)

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