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Ex-Soviet President Gorbachev Says 'Disunity' With Russia Weakens Europe

By Jennifer Monaghan

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Photograph of President Reagan (C) and Vice-President Bush (R) meeting with General Secretary Gorbachev on Governor's Island, New York, Dec. 7, 1988.

Former Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev has called on Russia and the West to put an end to their war of words and retaliatory sanctions over Ukraine and discuss a practical solution to the crisis.

"How can you conduct a dialogue if you 'punish' the people in power who influence politics?" Gorbachev said in an interview with the Rossiiskaya Gazeta daily published Thursday.

"It is necessary to talk to each other. It is an axiom which has been needlessly forgotten," he added.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate was particularly harsh on the West's approach to the crisis, saying its unwillingness to acknowledge Russia's views and geopolitical interests was one

of the main reasons for the deterioration in their bilateral relations.

The former Soviet leader also criticized the tit-for-tat economic sanctions introduced by both sides in recent months, but praised Russia for not responding to the latest round of punitive measures brought against Moscow by the West, saying it was a step in the right direction.

"The disunity between Russia and the European Union is damaging everybody. It is weakening Europe at a time when global competition is growing and when other 'gravity centers' of world politics are becoming stronger," Gorbachev told Rossisskaya Gazeta.

Relations between Russia and the West have soured this year following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March and its perceived support of separatists in the east of Ukraine.

The U.S. and its allies have brought several rounds of economic sanctions against Moscow, prompting a retaliatory Russian ban in August on a range of Western food products.

But Gorbachev, who urged both sides not to get dragged into a second Cold War, said Russia and the West should put aside their differences to unite against their common enemies.

"New and extremely dangerous extremist movements such as the Islamic State have emerged in recent years. Problems like environment, poverty, migration and epidemics are also aggravating [to both Russia and the West]," Gorbachev was quoted as saying.

The militant group Islamic State, which has gained large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria in recent months and is infamous for its violent methods, has threatened both the U.S. and Russia in public addresses.

Gorbachev, 83, served as the Soviet Union's last leader before its collapse in 1991. Having suffered from diabetes for a number of years, he recently spent time in hospital following a health scare.

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