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Lebedev Discusses Gorbachev, Russia-West Ties

By Des Brown

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Lebedev holding his paper, The Independent, in its London newsroom.

Evgeny Lebedev, owner of London's Evening Standard and national paper The Independent, is the most accessible of Britain's media owners and the most unusual. His father used to work for the KGB, he is an often present member in the capital's high society — he co-presented the recent London Evening Standard Theatre Awards — and mingles with stars whom he readily name-drops — "I'm good friends with Andrew Lloyd Webber."

Lebedev is very much a child of the Cold War, born in Moscow in May 1980. He moved to London in 1988, where his father Alexander Lebedev, now a billionaire banker, worked with the KGB's Foreign Service at the Russian Embassy.

"Interestingly, we lived on Kensington High Street, which is where the offices of the newspapers are now based," he said in a telephone interview last month. "In a way I've come full-circle, from growing up there and going to a Church of England primary school just off

Kensington High Street, which was a huge culture shock for me. I'd come from a Soviet school where we sung the Soviet anthem in the morning, and here we sang church hymns in the morning. It was quite a strange experience to be standing there in the assembly hall singing church hymns. It seemed completely unnatural, coming from a predominately atheistic or agnostic country. But I've always felt very accepted. I've never at any time felt like an outsider."

When he arrived in the United Kingdom, it was the era of Mikhail Gorbachev. He and Lebedev's father co-own Novaya Gazeta, and he also serves as the chairman of the Raisa Gorbachev Foundation. Yet Gorbachev's reputation is low in Russia nowadays.

"I don't think necessarily his reputation has waned by any means in the West," Lebedev said. "His reputation and his political standing is that of [Nelson] Mandela or John Paul. It's mostly in Russia where his legacy has lapsed in many ways. It's always been such, and the more time goes on the more people will grow to understand what he's done to bring down that huge divide in the world — and what he fought for, democracy and freedom."

"I know him personally very well. I met him when I was quite young and what struck me when I first met him was how warm and open he was, which is very unexpected for a former Russian/Soviet leader," Lebedev said.

Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's definition of the Soviet Union as "The Evil Empire" is for many in the West currently serving as a template for contemporary Russia. But are we, as Gorbachev warned in Berlin last month, "on the brink of a new cold war" or will the serious rift in relations pass?

"My hope it is the latter rather than the former," Lebedev said. "My personal view is that there's been not enough engagement, not enough discussion. It feels like two sulky individuals who keep retreating into their corners and not sitting down and ironing out their differences. I can see why this happened. I can see why Russia did what Russia did. I can see why the West did what the West did. I can see the need for sanctions, but I'm not sure that sanctions are achieving the result that they were supposed to achieve."

The West, he said, has made a mistake by trying to see Russia develop along the lines of the West. "That's an impossibility because Russia is a different country, with a different history, different type of people, different ways of life, different traditions. There is a tendency in the West to try to impose values by which people live in the West on, let's say, Russia. And, of course, we may get there, but it will take time because if you think what the country was only 20 or so years ago, it's made huge leaps forward."

The dynamic British newspaper market now exists in the era of iPads and rolling 24-hour TV news channels, and newspapers no longer serve the role they did 30 years ago. When Lebedev purchased the London Evening Standard in 2009, it was for just £1. One of the first things he did was make it a free paper.

"I think we live in an age where print journalism needs to be reinvented — whether it's online, tablets or taking a city newspaper free, which is what we did," Lebedev said. "With the Rupert Murdoch newspapers, their approach was all content should be paid for, so they've gone behind paywalls — whereas our approach was journalism available for everyone."

The Evening Standard is now read by 2 million people on a daily basis, up from under 200,000 when Lebedev purchased the title. "It's very gratifying to see every evening people going home on the train and every person on the train is reading the Evening Standard."

Campaigning has been a great part of his newspapers. The Standard's "Dispossessed" campaign has raised over £10 million for London's poor, the biggest amount ever by a newspaper campaign. A campaign over Christmas will raise money for homeless servicemen.

The Independent also has run international campaigns — for instance, against elephant poaching and in support of tigers. "Conservation is an issue very close to my heart," Lebedev said, pointing to his grandfather, who was "a top biologist in the Soviet Union and wanted me to follow in his footsteps."

Lebedev works with the World Wildlife Fund in helping preserve the Siberian tiger and leopard.

If the Siberian leopard population is not built up, they are in danger of becoming extinct. "The major issues are poaching ... though poaching has gone down in recent years, partially due to the work of the WWF and related organizations, and partially due to the Russian president's interest."

He also spoke about raising money for reintroduction programs, which includes bringing in leopards from zoos around the world, putting them in a fenced enclosure and getting them to breed.

"Their offspring would then be allowed to be raised by their parents in completely wild circumstances, not having any contact with humans and learn to fend for themselves, hunt for themselves and eventually release them into the wild," Lebedev said.

"The support of the Russian government here is crucial because the long-term maintenance of such a program could not be done without the participation of the Russian government."

Lebedev has been a naturalized Briton since 2010 and obviously adores London. "To me, London is the greatest capital in the world, at this time, at this day and age," he said. "It's changed a huge amount since I first came here in the summer of 1988. It's very exciting both culturally and economically, and it feels like the center of the world."

"It's got very good security and, in my opinion, a good climate. It's got a nice balance of sun and rain," Lebedev said on a rainy November afternoon." When people tend to complain about the weather in the U.K., I say to them: 'You should try and go living in Moscow between the months of November and March.'"

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