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Don't meddle in our affairs, Gorbachev warns the West

From **Adam LeBor** in Venice

MIKHAIL GORBACHEV has called on Western countries to stop interfering in Russia's domestic affairs. Putting pressure on President Putin over human rights at next month's G8 summit in St Petersburg, to be chaired by Russia, would be counterproductive, the last leader of the Soviet Union told The Times in an exclusive interview.

"Russia is not anyone's domain. Russia will work these things out —together with our partners and friends. The Presidents and Prime Ministers at the G8 can raise whatever they want. But the more it is seen that the West is putting pressure on, the more it will strengthen President Putin, because in essence his position is very close to the aspirations of the people," he said yesterday.

"I have said myself that Putin has made mistakes. But the principles of democracy are realised in a specific context, and you have to bear in mind the Russian historical, economic and social situation."

As Soviet leader from 1985, Mr Gorbachev introduced perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), unleashing forces that led to the collapse in 1989 of the Eastern bloc and, in 1991, of the Soviet Union itself. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 and founded the World Political Forum (WPF) and Green Cross International, an environmental organisation. Now 75, he is unlikely to return to party politics. Yet he remains influential in Moscow, where he often meets Mr Putin, and on the world stage. Especially concerned with the development of civil society and the environment, he nevertheless rejects the idea that the Western agenda must be adopted wholesale. Russia is moving in the right direction steadily and in its own way, he says.

Critics and human rights groups counter with concerns over a law introduced by Mr Putin strictly regulating nongovernmental organisations, and issues such as deaths and disappearances in Chechnya and police and army brutality. Speaking in Venice at the end of a WPF seminar on "Media between Citizens and Power", Mr Gorbachev said: "Why should foreign organisations be involved in the Russian political process? The Orange Revolution in Ukraine was mostly of domestic origin, because people were upset about corruption and angry over the Kuchma regime. But there is another factor, that the US Embassy was heavily involved, and of course America has great experience in interfering in the affairs of other countries. Had this same thing been happening in America, I am sure that they would have put an end to outside interference."

The West's stated concern with human rights was often hypocritical, he said, citing the recent speech in Lithuania by Dick Cheney, the US Vice-President, in which he had criticised the Russian Government.

Mr Cheney had then flown to oil-rich Kazakhstan, where President Nazarbayev had won a third term with a Soviet-style 91 per cent of the vote.

"I don't think many Western Governments are that concerned about these issues. If someone is 'our son of a bitch' he is forgiven, but if someone else takes an independent position, they don't like it. I too have a high opinion of my friend Nursultan Nazarbayev, but in our democratic media he is often criticised for his authoritarian ways. So there are double standards, and triple standards.

"But Russia has not lost a war, Russia is rising and will be rising and some people will find that inconvenient. We have heard a lot in the US about building a new American empire. But that train has left the station. This unipolar approach will not happen. In a multipolar world it is difficult to bring order and governance, but any other approach is dangerous."

Mr Gorbachev rejects Western concerns that Mr Putin is using energy supplies as a political weapon, especially after Gazprom, the Russian state-owned gas supplier, cut supplies to Ukraine in a price dispute. "This is not happening, I can assure you, and I am willing to put my head on the block. Russia is no less interested than Europe in having reliable supply and demand for oil and gas. Russia needs to finance its reorganisation — what are the sources for this? First of all, our energy. But I think it is rather strange that the West recommends that we have a free market in our natural gas and, when we start to, the West protests that we are charging market prices. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't."

Mr Gorbachev has bought a stake in an independent newspaper, Novaya Gazeta, which is famed for anti-corruption investigations and has criticised Mr Putin. The newspaper remains majority-owned by its journalists and its reporting will be as vigorous as ever, Mr Gorbachev pledges. "There is a good time for everything; we do not work according to a calendar set either in the White House or in the European Union. We have our own schedule."