

Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev at the "Strasbourg dialogues" public forum,

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Thank you for inviting me to this forum. On this trip to Strasbourg – 20 years after my first official visit to the Council of Europe as the leader of the Soviet Union – it is very important for me to meet not only representatives of States and parliamentarians but also members of the public.

1989 was a pivotal year in the unfolding of events in Europe and in the world. History suddenly picked up pace, and this acceleration was symbolised by the fall of the Berlin wall. "Velvet revolutions" took place in the countries of central and eastern Europe. Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes made their exit from the historical scene.

Those events and the peaceful manner in which they took place were possible thanks to the changes embarked upon in the Soviet Union in the mid-eighties. We initiated those changes because the time was ripe for them. They were demanded by the people, who did not want to live shackled and cut off from the outside world.

We began with 'glasnost', or openness, allowing our citizens to openly discuss the country's problems. With freedom of speech came freedom of assembly, freedom of conscience and real, not sham, elections. People were allowed to have their own businesses and private property.

So, after a few years – a very short space of time in history – the fundamental constructs of the totalitarian system were dismantled and conditions created for democratic processes and economic reform. And having done this in our own country, we could not prevent similar things happening in neighbouring countries.

We did not foist changes on them. From the very outset I said to the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries: We need 'perestroika', we are going to reform our country. How you go about it is for you to decide yourselves. You are answerable to your own people. We will not get involved.

In essence this was a rejection of the so-called 'Brezhnev doctrine', the concept of 'limited sovereignty'. The initial reaction to that statement was scepticism – just another purely formal statement by just another general secretary, they said. But we followed it through. And for that reason, the various processes going on in Europe in the years 1989 to 1990 happened peacefully, without bloodshed. And that included the extremely complex process of reunifying Germany.

That happened by the will of the German people. Not because it was wanted by Gorbachev or Kohl or Bush. In America they often recall President Reagan's challenge: "Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" But could one person really do that? Especially as others were pushing in a quite different direction: Margaret Thatcher quite openly told us to keep the wall there.

When millions of Germans in east and west clamoured for reunification, we had to act responsibly. And the leaders of the countries of Europe and the USA lived up to that responsibility. As a result, it was possible to overcome the doubts and misgivings – and there were some, naturally enough – avoid the closing off of borders and preserve mutual trust. And in so doing we definitively drew a line under the Cold War.

The ending of the Cold war opened up unprecedented opportunities – it was a real chance for the new Europe, and that was echoed in the title of the Charter of Paris adopted at the end of 1990. It was the starting point for changes whose benefits are still felt today.

At the same time it has to be admitted that we could not really take full advantage of the opportunities that had opened up. And that was reflected in European development. Consequently, Europe did not become the force in world politics and did not acquire the political strength commensurate with its potential. New dividing lines appeared on the continent, wars broke out and blood was shed.

Instead of creating an all-embracing architecture for Europe's security NATO began to take on a function of Europe's and even the world's policeman. That organisation embarked on enlargement. The promises made when States emerged from the Cold war were forgotten. For ten years no one gave a thought to the Charter of Paris.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the USA and the whole of the West were overcome by a "victor's mentality". We are not looking to accuse other people of the collapse of our country. That was caused by internal processes. But when the West started rubbing its hands with glee and people began vaunting "reforms" that dropped tens of millions of Russians below the poverty line, our people felt very badly let down.

The "victor's mentality" did a great disservice to the West itself. Both politically and economically. After all, why would a "winner" change anything? Leave everything as it was - that was the mood prevailing at the beginning of the 1990s.

Europe succumbed to that mood. What is more, an attack was launched on the role of the State in the economy, with the dismantling of its social obligations to citizens and the social protection system for employees. On a global level, the principles of monetarism, corporate social and ecological irresponsibility, excess profits and hyper-consumption began to take hold as all but key driving forces and criteria for the development of the economy and society as a whole.

Because of that, we have been plunged into the crisis that is now shaking the world economy and is far from over. And if we limit ourselves to mere "fire-fighting" and do not start shifting towards a new model, the next crisis will be even more devastating.

Another problem of our time which people need reminding of over and over again is the persistent militarisation of world policy, the burden of stockpiled arms and the possibility of a new arms race.

Nuclear weapons are an extreme expression of the militarisation of international relations and political thinking. In recent years we have seen a worsening of the problem where the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons is concerned. But that problem must not be considered in isolation, solely in connection with Iran and North Korea.

The essence of the problem lies above all in the failure of the members of the nuclear club to honour the obligation they entered into in article 6 of the treaty on non-proliferation, namely to move towards nuclear disarmament. As long as this situation persists, the danger of new nuclear powers emerging will also persist. Today there are dozens of countries that have the technical capability.

Ultimately, eliminating nuclear danger will be possible only through nuclear disarmament. But is it a realistic prospect that, as a result, there will be one country with an arsenal of conventional arms bigger than that of all the other countries put together and will therefore have total world military supremacy?

I will be frank here: such a situation would be an insurmountable obstacle to saving the world from nuclear arms.

So if we do not tackle the issue of demilitarising world policy, cutting military budgets, curtailing the creation of new types of arms and preventing the militarisation of space, talks on a nuclear-free world will be left hanging in the air.

Europeans must not think that this is basically an issue only for the leading nuclear powers - Russia and the USA. Firstly there are nuclear powers in Europe, including France and Great Britain. They also have to reduce their arsenals. Secondly, up to now US nuclear weapons have been deployed in Europe. And, most importantly, without an active political role for Europe it will be impossible to resolve the issue of demilitarising world policy.

The same applies, by the way, to any other global issue, be it ecology, combating poverty, migration, illness or attenuating the consequences of natural disasters. Only a strong Greater Europe will be able to play a truly decisive role in resolving these problems. And for that reason it is important to consider multilaterally how to build that greater Europe.

At the beginning of the 1990s a course was set for the accelerated enlargement of the European Union. I am not calling the achievements of that process into doubt. They are very tangible. But the results are nevertheless contradictory. Not everything in that process has been carefully thought through.

Every process, every joint-venture has its limits as to what is possible in terms of pace and scale. The scope for "digesting" the results is not unlimited. Expectations that all the continent's problems would be resolved by building Europe only from the West proved to be exaggerated.

A more measured pace for unification processes in the EU would allow more time to devise a model for relations with Russia and other countries which will not become European Union members in the foreseeable future.

It is self-evident that the model for relations with other European countries based on the fastest possible "absorption" of the majority of them into the EU while leaving relations with Russia unstable and uncertain has had its day.

But it seems that not everyone in Europe has understood this. We are justified in wondering whether that uncertainty is not perhaps linked to a reluctance to participate in Russia's renaissance. What kind of Russia do you need - a strong, truly independent country or merely a supplier of resources that "knows its place"?

In Europe, unfortunately, there are a fair few politicians who would like to impose a one-sided model for relations with Russia, such as "teacher and pupil" or "prosecutor and accused". Russia will not accept a model like that. What we want is to be understood. What we favour is mutually beneficial cooperation on an equal footing.

We have many problems. We are only half-way to sustainable democracy, effective state institutions and civil society, and a social market economy. We see what our problems are and talk about them. But Russia will move forward, we have managed to resolve the issue of our survival and integrity and we will resolve the problem of modernisation on all fronts. You can all be sure of that.

Russia is ready to be a reliable, honest partner, not only in the energy sector, which people love to talk about out of context, but above all in the construction of a genuinely unified European area, that common European home I talked about 20 years ago.

And I would like to emphasise: in a climate of increasing unpredictability, which will clearly characterise world development in the 21st century, at a time when there is ever more talk of shifting the centre of gravity of world development to the Asia-Pacific region, it would be irrational not to make use of the resource offered by Russia and even more irrational to try to weaken it.

I very strongly believe that Greater Europe cannot be built on anti-Americanism or on anti-Russianism. We have a common future.

Russia's position on most international issues is close to the position of the European Union and constructively complements it. European politicians should be clear that it is not Russia which is dividing EU members into "good" and "bad" and causing divisions in their ranks. In a Greater Europe, our common European home, we will all be stronger.

It would of course be naïve to think that such relations would do away with all the problems or disagreements. These are bound to happen, even between the closest of friends. But in no circumstances must we look at those issues in a spirit of confrontation. We must not squander the immense opportunities created by our history and geography and our common cultures that will enable the future Europe to become a driving force for progress towards global peace.

And it is here that an organisation like the Council of Europe can play an essential, key role. Its 60-year history spans two periods of European development. The values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law laid down as its foundation are genuine, pan-European and, ultimately, universal human values.

But the Council must remain true to those values and traditions in its work. It must not divide States into "good" and "bad" ones. It must help all European countries to overcome problems - and there are problems everywhere, in each European country - in the area of human rights, development of democratic institutions, strengthening of the judicial system and humanitarian issues. It must seek its place in efforts to enhance economic cooperation and surmount the ecological crisis. It must become closer to Europe's citizens, many of whom feel alienated from politics. When I spoke yesterday at the Council of Europe, I mentioned the idea of setting up a pan-European security structure. As soon as the Cold war ended and Germany was reunified, the Charter of Paris for a new Europe raised this issue. Eminent political figures proposed creating an operational mechanism along the lines of a Security Council (or Directorate) for Europe

To sum up, by way of conclusion, we all need the Greater Europe of the 21st century:

- a Europe without old and new dividing lines;
- a Europe effectively realising its moral values and cultural potential;
- a Europe forming a centre of power and influence in the world;
- a Europe capable of taking a lead role in devising responses to the major challenges of our time.

These goals are realistic and achievable. Success in attaining them is a necessity for Europe and the entire world.