

## **KONSTANTIN EGGERT INTERVIEW**

**In this interview Konstantin Eggert discusses the fall of the Soviet Union and his experiences as a reporter in the final days of Gorbachev's leadership of the Communist Party.**

### **Discuss Gorbachev and his belief in Socialism.**

I think Gorbachev is one of the last few believers in Socialism as an idea in its pure form. He told me personally that he believes that the real Socialism in Russia was created by Lenin and was bent out of shape, crooked, and then destroyed by Stalin. This was the great idea of the late 1980's, when everybody believed that Socialism could be somehow sort of spiced up, brushed, and once again sort of put into real action. There would be very few people today who would say that this could have worked in any way, but Gorbachev still insists that it could and that if he was given more time, if he was given more maneuvering space, if there was no Yeltsin, so-called democrats, as he calls them, he'd have done the job. I don't know whether for him it's a true belief or a way of holding on to the past -- of proving to himself that he was not a failure because so many people grant him as a failure.

### **Discuss Gorbachev's early years. What were his influences?**

Gorbachev comes from the deep south of Russia. This was considered to be the hot bed of the right and the communist movement, so definitely his family was very much in the know about what happened there. I don't think that his family had suffered that much, as opposed to Yeltsin's family that was expelled. I think that to some extent that gives you an idea of why Gorbachev was projecting himself in the future. I mean, he was definitely intent on making a career in the Soviet Union.

To me, Gorbachev is quintessentially a Soviet man, not a Russian man, a Soviet man, the way the communist party envisioned. In the last Soviet constitutional in 1977, it was said that, "the communist party has succeeded in creating a new community of people - the Soviet people - which has no race, no nationality, probably no age". It was quite a bizarre social construction work, and to me, Gorbachev is part of this process. He was very keen on making his way up. He was keen to get an education. I think that the fact that he got a real university education was worth something, although what Stalin's education was worth, that's another matter.

So I think that in a way, his background didn't have this ideological impact on him. Many people suspect that he's a great rival but it's Yeltsin who has this big, big, big thing about this Soviet Union and about the Communist Party even when he caught up on this opposition movement that he basically straddled it because he always felt this bitterness about the communist. Gorbachev was not like that. I think he really believed in the system.

**When Gorbachev was a young communist, did he have any thoughts about reforming the system? Was he at all influenced by Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in the summer of 1956?**

When Khrushchev denounced Stalin in the summer of 1956, Gorbachev was still a young communist. He was only twenty-six-ish and he was starting his career. We can suspect that he listened to this speech - not in person, obviously, because he couldn't have been invited as a delegate to the Communist Party Congress in Moscow. It was supposed to be a "secret speech", quote unquote. It was read out to the Communist Party cells, but it was never published in the open. I suppose that he may have been quite startled by it, as a lot of people were, because a lot of them really believed that everything was right under Stalin.

We have no reasons to think that Gorbachev had any opposition thoughts at that time. In fact, the way he moved up his whole career, just like most other communist party reformers, shows that they probably came to the realization that the system cannot work fairly late. Those who thought that you need to reform and who made their position vocal and who made their position known were wiped out fairly quickly to insignificant positions or into retirement. I think Gorbachev was always very cautious, and even if he had some feelings, he would hide them deep inside. Also, it's very difficult not only to live in the system but also to work for the system. To be bought into the system and at the same time have these hard thoughts about the system, it's double-speak. Gorbachev, I think, at that time of the speech was not having any kind of rebellious thoughts. It probably came later.

**What were Gorbachev's reactions to the West during his travels abroad?**

Gorbachev came from an agricultural area, which at some point in time before 1917 was the, I would say, canteen of Russia. Russia fed off of the deep south. And Gorbachev coming out of there and having to struggle every year with harvest, with inefficient Soviet agriculture, he was probably really impressed by the affluence of the West and by the fact that you can walk into supermarket and see dozens of varieties of bread, dozens of dozens of varieties of sausage. Having sausage was something that testified to the fact that you lead a good life. To buy sausage in the Soviet Union you would come up to your relative, to your neighbor and say, do you have sausage on the shelf? You never ask what kind of sausage. And he said, yeah, there is, and you would go there and you try and buy it.

Gorbachev was responsible for agriculture in the late 70's. That was the beginning of a very hard time for the Soviet people because the scarcity of elementary things was becoming evident. There was less and less a variety in what was sold in the shops.

I actually think Gorbachev liked going to the West very much, because when he went there in 1984, when he came to the United Kingdom and met Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he already had a slightly sort of condescending attitude to the traditional routines of the Soviet leaders going abroad. He didn't visit the Karl Marx grave in the Highgate Cemetery. Instead he and his wife went on some sightseeing.

**Discuss Soviet propaganda and its effect on the Soviet people.**

I think the Soviet people were really brainwashed every day. Basically what the Soviet propaganda told us was that, yeah, okay, we're not living an affluent life that the western people live, but we are brothers and sisters. We have a society where the spirit of community is much better developed. We are still a nuclear power, we have a quality of free education, free healthcare. This really had an impression on people. A younger friend of mine who spent quite a lot of time abroad once told me, you know, whenever I see a plane taking off with the Soviet red flag on the tailfin, I feel pride. A lot of people felt like that. They were convinced Russia was a great state, when in fact it was a colossus on the clay feet. Oil dollars were drying up. The ineffectiveness and technological backwardness of the Soviet economy in the late '70s became evident.

**Discuss repression and the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.**

You can talk about the queues. You can talk about the scarcity of things in the shops. You can talk about the fact that you couldn't freely go abroad. There was such a thing as an exit visa that was supposed to be put in a passport, and to get a passport you had to go through a lot of bureaucratic holes. Bureaucratization was the chief feature of the Soviet life. Imagine what it is getting an American driving license. It's quite difficult, quite a tedious process. Imagine doing it every day. This is what the Soviet life was. You could do nothing without a certificate from the authorities. You had to be checked all the time. Your ideological purity was to be verified every day.

I was a student at Moscow University. I studied Arabic. I wanted to go abroad. My mother, it so happened, was born in Stockholm because I had some relatives in Sweden. She was an old lady born in the early '20s. When the time came for me to go and practice my Arabic abroad my mother was subjected to interrogation. "Why was she born in Stockholm? Do you have relatives in Sweden?" She said, "No, they're all dead" - and they were by that time. "Why is your name German?" It so happens we have a lot of Germans in the Soviet Union. It was tedious. It was unpleasant.

In the end, they said, "Yeah, okay, we don't have any problem." In my college, because we had a chance go abroad to work abroad, we had special minders. We all knew they were there from the security services that were watching us, that were selecting us, that were trying to figure out what kind of attitudes we had. You always felt watched. It was like under Stalin where you felt you could be destroyed in a second. If you were not doing right, singing the right song, you could have been destroyed career wise. Anybody who wanted to make a career had to present the proper face, and that's why in the end, the society ended up in total hypocrisy. What we talked about in the kitchens during country picnics was completely different from what we were saying in the open. To me, the fact that nowadays you can say what you want, is the great thing that Gorbachev and then Yeltsin gave Russia.

**Discuss the scarcity and rationing of goods and services.**

I think for anybody who lives in the West, especially in America, it's difficult to imagine that in the Soviet Union you couldn't buy a car, not because you couldn't pay money for it, but because car production and cars in general were supposed to be luxury goods. If you wanted to get a car, you needed to be a good worker. You would have been put in a queue, and the queue to get a car would last for probably ten years or five years. Then when your time's up and your turn is coming up, you'll be called up to the trade union cell in your institute or factory. You would be told, "It's time for you to get a car; do you have your money?" You've had to save and that was very expensive. You really had to save. Then you go to a car factory and there you'd get a car. You pay for it. It was such a luxury thing for most of the population that people never drove cars in winter because Russian winters are harsh. The service is poor. So all the people were putting away their cars and only using them again when spring came.

I remember that late in Gorbachev's day, there was big talk about the prices rising again, especially for cars. The editor-in-chief managed to find a way of contacting a car factory, and they said, "We'll sell you twenty cars if you'll pay the older price." So there was quite a hustle and bustle in the editorial office. Who was going to get a car? Finally a list was compiled with a lot of senior people there. I was just supposed to help somebody to buy a car. We stood in a long cue, waited five hours to get it - just a simple Russian car. We drove out. We drove for ten minutes, no more. We're on a bridge; the car stops. The transmission's gone, completely, like it's irreparable. It's just something that was so natural. You would expect things to break down quite soon. The further the Soviet Union developed, the more things broke down.

I have to say that technology was really in shambles, and we still are living with these effects. The most popular car in the Russian federation today is an Italian Fiat car from the late Sixties. It's more or less remodeled, but it takes five to ten years for a new model to go on the street still. So you can imagine what kind of state the Russian economy was in.

The Russians are survivors. The whole idea of being a Russian is to find ways around difficulties. Not to jump hurdles, but to find ways of how you bypass them. So if you wanted good meat, you had to have a friend that was a butcher. If you wanted to buy furniture, you had to have a friend in the furniture shop. If you had enough money, you could have bribed people into anything. When people talk about free education and free healthcare in the late 70's or the 80's, it was not that free. My mother's a doctor. I remember one of her acquaintances who was a surgeon telling his patients, "bring me a bottle of French Cognac." It was always, "you do something for me, I do something for you." It's, "I scratch your back; you scratch mine." The whole system was based on people pretending that they work and the government pretending that it pays. That was the way the Soviet Union existed. The government pretends that it pays us and we pretend that we work, and I think that sums up the Soviet experience for probably eighty-five percent of people. You had some people, say military industrial complex, which were very well paid. You had miners, which were paid

amazing money. You had some other categories, but the majority of your regular folks were leading a guaranteed existence, but a very miserable one by Western standards.

**What reforms did Gorbachev establish when he came to power? How did the Soviet people react?**

I suppose that when Gorbachev came to power, he was seen by quite a few people in the Politburo and the Soviet establishment as somebody who can fix things without changing the system. What helped is that he was one of the known protégés of the former head of the KGB. The fact that he was a protégé helped a lot, because that exposed to Gorbachev elements in the security services in the KGB and started him thinking about the mess in which the country was. I think his perception was that the colony was not working properly, that he needed to somehow modernize it, that he needed to give people incentive to work better. That's how Perestroika came into being. In a way Perestroika means rebuilding, transforming things. There was also *Uskaranía* the speeding up -- which meant making the economy more efficient, producing things quicker, doing them better. But I think that Gorbachev still considered it possible that all these things would be done within this centrally planned system that existed in the Soviet Union. That was his mistake, because you can't give people the incentive and then have somebody who plans that incentive for them. So I suppose that his economic beliefs were very hectic. He understood that something was wrong, but he didn't understand enough about the economy, and he was too much a prisoner to ideological dogma to say, look, we have to do something about it. We have to free people.

There was much debate about Gorbachev's book, about what he should have been doing. Many people say, look at China. Gorbachev should have gone the Chinese way, should have freed up the economy and then introduced some political change. My feeling was that going the Chinese way was completely impossible. Gorbachev went the only way that that was possible for Russia. In China there were and still are millions of peasants who treasure their land, who despite the fact that there was collectivization in China still liked to work on the land, still want to produce good products.

It's different with the Soviet Union... People did not trust the powers that be. If you told them, if you want to open a shop, open a shop. You want to open a restaurant, open a restaurant. You want to start a taxi company, do it. Everybody would have said, "no, don't take us for a ride. We know how it was done in the 1920s when Lenin opened up the economy for a bit and then everything was swept away by the state, and all those private entrepreneurs were exiled to Siberia." Nobody would have believed the General Secretary who would have stood up and said, "look, you have complete economic freedom." For people to believe that things were changing, it was political freedom that had to come first. I think in this respect Gorbachev went the only possible way.

### **Discuss the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Conference and its effects.**

I think it was in 1988 that the Nineteenth Party Conference took place. It wasn't a Congress. It was a conference. It was supposed to discuss the future of the party. It was the first real open debate about where the country was going and where the party was going. It determined the fault lines, the cleavages in Russian society for years to come. It turned out that the party was not united. What we were always given was the image of a united twelve million member party organization that all lived one life, spoke in one voice, or at least if it spoke different voices, it only did it in the kitchens. Then it all spilled out. There were people who were saying, "we can't back away from a traditional attitude to Socialism. We have to preserve what was won in the Civil War. We have to stick to our ideas. We can't change everything." I think those people were saying that, in a way, we were right defending what existed. They were saying, "look, if you give just a bit of freedom, it means you give all of freedom." There were those who were saying, "no, we can't live without democratization. We have to open up the system. People won't have a voice."

This was a fantastic time. It was a breath of fresh air. I think that this was the real turning point because in 1989 Gorbachev introduced new elections to the Supreme Soviet. They were supposed to be competitive with independent candidates. The Communist Party still preserved a guaranteed chunk of seats. That was a lot of excitement for people because a lot of Communist Party big wigs were just sort of kicked out and some young faces and our engineers, doctors, philosophers, journalists, suddenly became MP's, members of Parliament. But if you look back, that was already the second step. The first one was to open the party to debate, something that had never happened since the 1920s. I think that this was the point of no return. After that, he couldn't have gone any other way.

### **Discuss the turn against Stalin's era in the late 80s.**

When Andre Sakharov, the famous Soviet dissident, was allowed to return to Moscow in December 1986, it was already clear that something shifted. Then in '87 the wave of new publications of revelatory articles about Stalin's time started to appear in the newspapers and newer programs on televisions. Everybody was challenging assumptions. Every day an assumption was challenged. In a way, what happened in 1988 was a product of this early era of *glasnost* when we were supposed to say, "Yes, Stalin was bad, but Lenin was not."

I remember this propaganda poster of Lenin's face and a slogan, "The Real Socialism" or "Cleaning Up the Past." It was some kind of attempt to prove that we are going back to the rules. Gorbachev really thought that we'd stop at Lenin and say, "You know, we had a bad patch, now we'll go back to the rules." But that was impossible, because Lenin was a vicious murderer and his regime was a precursor of Stalin's regime. Stalin would have been a nobody without Lenin.

Once you let the people open their mouths, it's very difficult to shut them up. That's why Gorbachev could not control the process anymore. To me, when

I think about the fate of Socialism in other countries where it still supposedly exists, for example, China, I always remember this experience in Russia. You go to a small corner, very quiet, and you whisper there, 'freedom', and suddenly it echoes all over the place, 'freedom, freedom, freedom', and you can't stop it. It's like an avalanche. That's my impression of this era.

**Discuss Glasnost and the road to democracy.**

I think that Glasnost was not democracy, but it was something without which democracy would have been impossible in Russia. Even if Russia is not a complete democracy - some would say crooked democracy, some would say a democracy that's a work in progress, some would say that Russia was unable to be democratic - there's still a debate and that means democracy, that we debate the fate of Russian democracy. So without the first small trickles of ideas that started in '86, '87, it would have been impossible for us to go on debating that today.

**Compare reforms Gorbachev established in the Soviet Union to the reforms Deng established in China.**

Many people think that the kind of process that Gorbachev started was a bit like the same thing that Deng started in China. I think it's a very superficial comparison because Russia is essentially part of the Western civilization, very remote parts, difficult to access, but still part of that ideological tradition.

China is a thing in itself. It is a country that sees itself as the center of the world, and nobody, not the Emperors, nor the Republicans, nor the Commandants, nor the Communists, managed to beat this idea of Chinese supremacy. So in a way, the Chinese are much more united and that's why it's much more easily led along any path. That's why in China, it was possible to introduce economic reforms without giving any kind of political freedoms...

In Russia, it was different process. In Russia, you had to give the people the voice before giving them bread, and that makes the two processes so strikingly different. That's why with all its imperfect democracy, with some censorship today, Russia still belongs to the G-8 Club and China does not. Russia and China have a difference in civilizational paths. And in this respect Gorbachev was very much the Russian European, somebody who wanted to move the Soviet Union closer to the West. Probably he thought that he could maintain Socialism at the same time, but what he was doing was breaking down the unnatural barriers. At some point in time he really believed that the Soviet Union could be a part of the West, but we needed to break down this mistrust. We needed to walk forward, and I think that is one of the most important elements of his legacy.

I suppose that the Chinese reforms were very much about being pragmatic, tough, selfish, and great. The Russian reforms were about different things. They were to a large extent about idealistic perceptions, which never came true. Some thought they were going to be Socialists with a human face. Some thought it was going to be a very mild version of Capitalism, but everybody believed in the future. Everybody believed in freedom. It was a revolution. China

didn't experience the revolution. I'm afraid when China experiences the revolution, it's going to be a very bloody one.

### **Discuss the Polish elections and the weakening of the Soviet Union in 1989.**

It's really interesting how 1989 packed into itself so many events, and if you look at May and June, 1989, it was the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow, the Tiananmen Square and then the Tiananmen Massacre, and it was the first era of democratic Parliamentary election in Poland, in which the anti-Communist opposition won resoundingly and formed a government. That was something that was really important, because that signified the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union's central European empire. And I think the fact that there were so many things packed in just one year, in 1989, from the new government in Poland to the fall of Ceausescu in December. That's just six months, and in between there was this huge domino effect of the whole former Soviet block just going through the chimney.

I think one has to give it to the Poles, that Polish resistance to Communism led by the Catholic Church and intellectuals and later by the solidarity trade union was a huge dent in the Soviet armor. The Poles never surrendered. They never surrendered to the Russians. They never surrendered to the Germans. And in the end they never surrendered to the Soviets. When one says that the Pope and Ronald Reagan have won the Cold War, it's an exaggeration but it's not too far from the truth. The Polish events had a huge effect on the Soviet Union. A war in Afghanistan or reforms in China, it's something that's far away. But Poland is next to us. It's just across the border. We've lived with the Poles in the same country in imperial Russia for more than a hundred years. To see people like us doing something completely different, just standing up and opposing -- that was something people couldn't believe. We couldn't believe it was happening on our doorstep. And in this respect, the victory of solidarity led coalition in Parliamentary elections in June, 1989, was something that started the final stage of the collapse of what was called the Eastern Block. The next year, the Warsaw Pact was gone.

### **Discuss the fall of the Soviet Union.**

Right up to the coup, a couple of weeks before, something was in the air. There was talk about some dark conspiracies against Gorbachev. One has to remember that he tried to set up the new union treaty, which was supposed to create the new Soviet Union. He still believes that if he had signed, history would have gone a different way. There was this dense feeling of rumors, counter-rumors. But then again when I woke up the morning of August, 1991, I was still shocked. A friend of mine, a college mate of mine called me and said, "Do you know what's going on?" I said, "No, I'm sleeping." He said, "You know, the tanks are on the street. There's a coup d'etat. We live in a different country again." I switch on the radio and already we had new independent radio stations. There was one which was broadcasting all through the coup and there was a reporter reporting from a phone booth on one of the main thoroughfares in

Moscow saying, “We have tanks on the street.” I rushed off to my editorial office for a city newspaper, which was situated in central Moscow. The people had this feeling of “here they come back. We know what they’re going to do. They’re not going to spare anybody.” At that time, we still believed that the Soviet system was able of staging comeback. The only relief for me was to plunge into work because that distracted me from thoughts of what was going to happen to me.

Then I saw this press conference of the leaders and we see they’re shaking hands and we’re seeing them addressing a huge group of Soviet and foreign journalists. We thought, no, that’s not a real coup. The real coups are done a different way. They don’t hold press conferences and don’t field questions with such ineptitude.

Then we learned that we were blocked from entering the printing offices and printing our newspaper, which we needed. We just started printing newspaper edition on the Xerox, on the copier. I still keep them. I still keep those editions. It was like a flyer, and you’d take a pack of them and rush off to the street and go to where the soldiers were. They were positioned in key points in the central Moscow and we would try and give one to the soldiers and most of them took it. They were not supposed to do that. The lieutenant, their commander, climbs down from the tank, leads me a bit away and says, “Don’t worry. We’re not going to shoot at the people.” And you know, it was in a way probably the best period of my life, those three days. With this fear, with all the uncertainty, it was something that I will remember until the day I die because you felt that history was being made.

There was such feeling of community, of brotherhood, because Moscow was always sort of pro-reform. I remember I was walking back from distributing leaflets, and somebody had seen me doing so. They said, “Are you a journalist?” I said, “Yeah.” “Well, come home. You’re probably hungry. Come home and have dinner.” And then I walked into their apartment just like that. It could never happen today.

I think that on the second day, we already knew the system was collapsing, but we still thought there was going to be some big violence and bloodshed. When it really went, it really went not with a bang but with a whimper. Nothing happened. All these mighty armies, KGB, all those people that held sway over the country for seventy years, they just hid, just ran away. There was nobody to defend it. And I think that to some extent, it was a pivotal moment that has shown everybody the system would not have worked because nobody in the end believed in it. There was nobody to defend it. And I think one has to give credit to Boris Yeltsin for leading the country out of the situation.

### **Discuss Gorbachev’s role in the collapse of the Soviet Union.**

I have mixed feelings about Gorbachev’s role. Personally, I’m very grateful to him for giving me what he gave me and to my family, mainly the ability to speak up freely. But on the other hand, I think he’s a paradoxical figure. He, who believed so passionately in Socialism, is somebody who believes it still but was the one who undid it. He could have clung to his armies, to his security apparatus. He could have tried to stall it, but he thought about reforming it and

by reforming it, he destroyed it. But I think that Socialism is an illusion. It's something that if you took it to a logical extreme it would lead you either to failure or into a concentration camp. A lot of model Socialists compare Socialism with Christianity, and I think that's ridiculous because the whole idea of Socialism was to appropriate people's lives and make those lives subservient to the grand idea. It was like somebody being promised something in the future but this future never came, and it could have never come because people are different; they are unequal. Capitalism is not a great system, probably, but it's the only one we can have because there are only two types of equality, before God and before law, and this is something that Socialism never took into account.

**Discuss Democratic Socialism.**

I think the so-called Democratic Socialism, the softer versions of Socialism that exists in Scandinavia and mostly in Europe, actually, is something that was like a vaccination from the real Socialism, something that the ruling elites in the West understood needs to be done if they want to avoid the catastrophe that has befallen Russia and some other countries. It does not undermine human freedom. To me, and it's a very personal view, Socialism, when it's taken to its logical continuation is about taking away people's choice, taking away your freedom and giving you, or promising you something in return, something very nice - guaranteed existence, equality - all this nice talk. But in the end, you have to pay with your soul for it. That is something that I'm not prepared to do.