

Record of Conversation

Between M.S. Gorbachev and F. Mitterand in the evening in Latche (south of France)

October 30, 1991

F. Mitterand. Let's talk about Europe. If we talk about Europe on our side, it is all about the community of 12 states. The EU is now at a critical stage in its development. This is about the creation of the political institutions of the EU. But, of course, this process will not take place in all areas. Ultimately, the state remains a state. By 1997, the creation of an economic and monetary union of the EU is also anticipated. Much also remains to be done in the sphere of diplomacy. Decisions on this matter can be implemented at the session of the Council of Europe in December of this year.

M. Gorbachev. When you are speaking about diplomacy, what do you mean?

F. Mitterand. For now this is still an open question. There's something to think about. Only one thing is clear: if the political union of the 12 had been formed earlier, then Europe probably would have been able to intervene more efficiently and faster in order to prevent the civil war in Yugoslavia.

M.S. Gorbachev. Yes, the situation in Yugoslavia is indeed difficult. Some people stimulated the centrifugal forces in the beginning, declaring that they were allowing the independence of Slovenia and Croatia and the destruction of the integrity of the Yugoslav Federation. This immediately emboldened the separatists.

F. Mitterand. But separatism existed there before. Indeed, the Germans immediately came out for the recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia. As for me, I have spoken out against the independence of these republics since June. Most of the other EU member states followed my example. Not that I was negative about the very idea of independence. I just proceeded from the premise that independence should be proclaimed in compliance with

international agreements, in particular the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act, as well as the Paris Charter for a New Europe. In my opinion, the other option – a declaration of independence under pressure from nationalist forces – would hardly be welcome. Most other states agreed with this point of view. However, a different position is needed. The fact is that Slovenia and Croatia at one time were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In addition to German influence, they were also influenced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Vatican. It was difficult for Slovenians and Croatians to get along with Serbs, people adhering to Orthodoxy and Islam, raised more in the spirit of Byzantine rather than Roman traditions. During the period of major historical trials, Serbia was an ally of France.

M.S. Gorbachev. And Russia also.

F. Mitterand. I once met with J. Major and discussed Yugoslavian issues with him. He asked me what would happen next. I answered him: well, Croatia will probably turn to the armed forces of Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Turkey for help. Serbia, in turn, will address a similar request to Great Britain, Russia and France. Our armed forces would therefore be in Yugoslavia, and such a situation will arise as at the beginning of the First World War in 1914. Major was clearly surprised. He said that he would not send his soldiers anywhere. I don't know if he took my statement seriously. Maybe a not entirely accurate translation played a role. But be that as it may, there was a serious element in my statement, since we must not recreate the competitive environment as it arose at the beginning of this century. This option would have meant significant drama for the whole of Europe.

Therefore life itself brings the EU countries to the creation of a political union. There is no escape from history. It is only necessary to jointly discuss all these problems in order to find common approaches.

I would like to know what kind of relationship there can be between the EU and your country. You, of course, know that the Americans are tempted to expand NATO's functions and change it into more of a political rather than a military alliance. I have a different point of view on this matter. I think that going forward NATO should continue to remain loyal to the alliance on the basis of which this organization was created. It would be very bad if the North Atlantic Alliance was endowed with functions that in principle fall under the jurisdiction of the CSCE or

the EU. The European-wide process became possible in many respects thanks to the concerted actions of the USSR and France. You will, of course, remember that France was practically the only country that supported your initiatives in the field of European-wide cooperation. Our cooperation yielded a good result. So, let us not allow the elimination of the fruits of our cooperation. If we give NATO excessive powers, then countries that are not members of NATO will feel out of place. The role of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe will also decline. We are going to discuss all these questions in Rome on November 8th of this year.

A roughly similar plan is also being discussed in the economic field. What do we do with the states of Eastern and Central Europe apart from the Soviet Union?. What can be done to ensure that these states begin, little by little, to offer to help each other within the framework of a common organization? How to avoid a situation in which, on the one hand, there are the applicant states, and, on the other hand, the states on whom it depends whether to provide assistance or to deny it. These types of issues should be resolved primarily within the framework of collective international organizations. That is how many of the problems Europe is currently facing are arising. But, after all, Europe is also America. This situation will persist for a while. I agree that the United States will continue to play an important role. This is just a recognition of existing realities. However, in the future, Europe should be Europe itself. At the same time, it is important that the changes in the Soviet Union have encouraged a political and economic rapprochement between the West and the East and the creation of what you call the common European home.

M.S. Gorbachev. Much here depends on how America positions itself towards a future united Europe, just as America sees Japan. These are two headaches for Americans, especially when it comes to Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals. This, after all, is a huge space with almost 600 million inhabitants, with a huge scientific, technical, economic, and intellectual potential. It is here that we must find answers to emerging questions. Maybe there are answers to the positions of certain countries in connection with changes in the Soviet Union. Maybe in this context we could find a response to the amendments that are observed in the European policy of the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany.] I mean what was revealed in the famous Baker-Genscher statement. Perhaps this is also where Germany's support for NATO's role, which you are talking about, comes from, i.e. as a kind of instrument for influencing European affairs. In turn, such a

position, apparently, provides the Germans with a free hand for action regarding Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and further to the East.

F. Mitterand. You are speaking about a free hand. The Germans really have the right to establish relations with any states. Nobody will forbid them this. But it is also obvious that Germany's influence rests on its financial capabilities.

M.S. Gorbachev. But there is still a coordinated international policy. So, this freedom is relative, especially if we want to comply with major treaties signed by more than one dozen countries.

F. Mitterand. You're referring to the pan-European process?

M.S. Gorbachev. Yes. This is my view, and my estimates for the future are also related to it. There are two pillars. These are the European communities that are acquiring a system of political institutions. It is also the alliance of sovereign states based on the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. There is also cooperation between them within the framework defined by provisions of the documents of the pan-European process and efforts in the area of disarmament. The role and presence of the United States and Canada also fit into this concept. But this should be a European policy, not an American policy towards Europe.

F. Mitterand. The reality is that the majority of European states do not want to change the very nature of our relationship with the United States. On the other hand, the republics that used to belong to the USSR are now losing their positions. It is important for them to understand that while the European communities are strengthening, the unity of the republics of the Union is weakening under the influence of nationalist sentiments. Of course, it would be important to rely on both of these pillars. But one of the pillars has already been created. As for the other pillar, it is not known what is happening to it. If the inhabitants of all these republics (more than 300 million) were with Gorbachev, the issue would be resolved.

M.S. Gorbachev. I believe that from what you said regarding European affairs it follows that there is a need for a detailed study of these issues on our end and on your end, so that in future we can exchange views within the framework of the Soviet-French political dialogue.

F. Mitterand. I support this proposal. As for Europe, sooner or later it will take shape.

M.S. Gorbachev. Alright, as I understand my task, I will need to strengthen the second pillar.

F. Mitterand. But we also want the same. It is no coincidence that in my televised speech I spoke out in favor of a strong, united Union fortified by federal ties . This would be very important not only for your compatriots, but also for the interests of France and Europe as a whole. France will never, under any circumstances, encourage the destruction of the Union. Under Stalin, such a position was beset with certain problems. But even then, at the time of de Gaulle and Stalin, France and the USSR were allies. This is all the more important now, when your country is becoming truly democratic.

I repeat, I am confident that Europe will take shape. Our entire policy is aimed at facilitating the achievement of this goal as quickly as possible. If this does not happen as quickly as we would like, then a situation will arise, the consequences of which will be felt by Europe for centuries to come.

I am also confident that Europe will take shape together with you. When I put forward the idea of a European confederation, I was immediately questioned in France, how do you intend to create this together with communist Russia? I responded, yes, together with Russia. Moreover, it is for Russia to decide for itself what its ultimate fate will be. I have to say that this kind of answer of mine caused a negative reaction in some places. It is precisely because of this that some Eastern European states, previously members of the Warsaw Pact, in particular Czechoslovakia, have now distanced themselves to some extent from the ideas of the European confederation. I recently had a conversation with Havel on this topic. I asked him, surely you really believe this is very important. But how can this be important from the point of view of history? After all, history will eventually put everything in its place. And it would be better if this would happen during my lifetime, and not after my death. That's why I need to hurry. You know that I am telling the truth – you yourself a few days ago sent me a kind message with

congratulations on my 75th birthday. Therefore, I have really barely enough time to help achieve this goal.

R.M. Gorbacheva. When Mikhail Sergeyevich talks about the role of the president in history, about his possible role, I think with sorrow that the matter is not only what this role will be, but how to prevent tragedy in our country, to prevent *perestroika* from ending in tragedy for the current generation of people.

M.S. Gorbachev. There are big and small tragedies. The question is when a more serious tragedy could occur. I recently spoke with representatives of the business community. One of the entrepreneurs was present at this conversation. We talked about the crisis, about the ways out of it. In this, the crisis was characterized as the acknowledgement of a series of mistakes. And this one entrepreneur asserts that he does not agree with this kind of judgment. In his opinion, a crisis is a way out of a totalitarian system. It is impossible to achieve this goal painlessly. Before it can get better, the system must go through a state of crisis. My interlocutor insisted that he was waging an uncompromising struggle with the head of our government at the time of the advance of the anti-crisis program. My interlocutor asked what the anti-crisis program is anyway. It is not to leave the old system, but rather to preserve it. To a large extent, I agree with him, but there is the problem that Raisa Maksimovna spoke about. I foresaw it two or three years ago, when the 90th anniversary of the birth of our prominent writer Leonov was celebrated. I went to see the writer to congratulate him. Leonov – and he, despite his 90 years, was aware of everything that was happening with us, he understood all the nuances – he told me the following: ahead of you are major difficulties. What you are doing now should change the shape of society for 100-200 years ahead. But people after all live their own lives, and they want to live better today than they did yesterday. You cannot escape from this. No one will believe in a happy future. People should feel an improvement in their own lives. But it is difficult to achieve positive results, especially when it is necessary to implement substantial reforms. This is what our problems are rooted in. And Raisa Maksimovna is absolutely right when she raises this kind of question. It is a very difficult situation.

R.M. Gorbacheva. This is about daily bread.

F. Mitterand. I understand this well. I, however, insisted without much success that my partners also become aware of this. It was, as you remember, at the meeting of the seven in London. The same conviction also guides me now, when I strive to persuade partners regarding more effective assistance to the Soviet Union. I understand that if your situation worsens, if there are changes in the higher ranks, it will not benefit anyone, nor will international cooperation stand to gain from this.

M.S. Gorbachev. We have a common interest with you here.

F. Mitterand. In my opinion, the European communities have so far taken a restrained position on this issue. How do you, Mr. Morel, explain it, the mood in the European Commission?

P. Morel. Mr. President, decisions on collective action are available in principle. Simply, some countries do not operate as actively as France and Germany. The British are being careful. But good work has still been done within the framework of the G7.

M.S. Gorbachev. Major's position has recently improved. When the summit was held in London, he was excessively frosty and had taken an extremely rational position.

F. Mitterand. After his visit to Moscow, Major sent me a letter, in which he expressed support for the need for more active support for Soviet reform.

P. Morel. Mr. President, the Europeans are already making some good efforts. They are also ready to take other, more significant steps. The challenge, however, is how to spread the load more evenly, relating to the provision of aid to the Soviet Union. So far, Europeans are responsible for 80% of the aid, and the rest is provided by the Americans and the Japanese. We tell our American and Japanese friends that words alone are no longer sufficient and it is already necessary to move on to specific actions.

M.S. Gorbachev. When meeting with Bush, I told him an idea, and at the same time a wish. If the issues of cooperation are considered and resolved in the normal course of events, then, perhaps, we can continue commerce, and the discussion on ownership interests. The point, however, is that in the coming months a lot must be decided in the Soviet Union, if not everything. This is an extraordinary time that requires an appropriate approach dictated by the circumstances, especially since this is not about handouts, but about normal loans, concentrated over time, so that our economy, after it gets on the path to recovery, could, using its great opportunities, recover everything above and beyond what we had exchanged. So, there are great opportunities here for trade and increasing production for all the participants in the process.

P. Morel. A very important meeting of the deputy finance ministers of the G7 with representatives of the republics was held recently in Moscow. The conversation that took place was very instructive. As the French participant in the meeting told me, the U.S. representative was greatly impressed by what was said on the Soviet side and, it seems, clearly realized the full seriousness of the situation.

M.S. Gorbachev. We are now at the most crucial stage of reforms. Attempts at reform were also made under Stalin. Two attempts were made under Khrushchev. Under Brezhnev, Kosygin's reform appeared. But as soon as these attempts affected serious interests, they were immediately discredited and destroyed. This is understandable, because any reform is associated with initiative, and initiative, in turn, implies freedom, which, in turn, touches upon the issue of ownership. There is a need to eliminate the foundations of total domination. But it is precisely state property that constitutes the basis of the power of the *nomenklatura*. So everything here is ironclad and fatally linked.

R.M. Gorbacheva. And the *nomenklatura* bites.

F. Mitterand. Bites?

R.M. Gorbacheva. Didn't Foros give evidence of this? Moreover, it is particularly bitter when the people closest to them are seemingly involved in this.

M.S. Gorbachev. We must push our reforms forward.

F. Mitterand. The putsch made it much more difficult to implement the course you had started, and at the same time, it unblocked a lot.

M.S. Gorbachev. We indeed had a chance, but were unable to take advantage of it. It almost ruined the signing of the union treaty. It was on the basis of this treaty that the division of powers and the organization of a new government, including the executive, was supposed to be implemented. But without power, and especially the executive, nothing is possible. Therefore, we never took advantage of this chance.

R.M. Gorbacheva. All the more so since scum and all sorts of debris have come up to the surface due to the democratization processes.

F. Mitterand. We also have certain problems in this country. The French are forever complaining about everything, but overall their situation is not bad. Of the 58 million French people, 3-4 million actually live in difficult conditions, but in general France is among the most developed countries.

I hope that our meeting will be useful. Tomorrow we will continue our talks, following which we will hold a press conference.

[Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, donated by Andrey S. Grachev.

Translated by Sarah Dunn for the National Security Archive.]