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The House That Built Who?

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This year is filled with anniversaries of events that happened in 1989. Back then Europe and the entire world witnessed a change of the sociopolitical paradigm, which soon led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the previous system of international relations.

In November 2018, shortly before an anniversary of the Soviet Union's breakup, the Levada Center released a survey showing that the number of those who regretted that event was the highest in the past ten years. Two-thirds of respondents felt nostalgic for the Soviet Union. Most of them were over 55, but their number had increased in all age groups over the past year, including the 18-to-24 age segment.

The Soviet Union has been gone for twenty-seven years, but the nonexistent country remains a virtual point of reference for both the state which has become its legal successor, and for society whose roots go back into the past even though more than a third of its members were born after 1991 or saw only the

last days of the bygone country. This appears to be particularly interesting in light of the ongoing events. In fact, the year 2018 drew a line in the international arena under what can be called the post-Soviet period. In other words, it is a period when the international system remained within the framework (albeit transforming) established during the Cold War-era confrontation.

Why did it happen now? Were there not enough events in the past century that knocked down the old system and brought new motivations into international practice? There certainly were many such events, but the past twelve months converted quantity into ultimate quality, and Russia's politics has yet to comprehend their implications.

Until recently Moscow believed that despite the obvious asymmetry of Russian and U.S. potentials, their relations were important for both of them and significant for the rest of the world, just as they were during the Cold War. The latest events, primarily the Syria conflict, where the Kremlin and

the White House clashed head-on like before, pushing everything else into the background, seemed to prove that. But Trump's presidency, not only chaotic but also quite straightforward in its intentions, has essentially closed two topics on which Russia and America were automatically expected to conduct a dialogue—nuclear arms control and Syria.

As for the former, the U.S.'s secession from the INF Treaty and the lack of interest in extending START mean that this topic is in limbo. As regards the latter, if the U.S. announcement to pull out of Syria is not a trick but the implementation of Donald Trump's long cherished plans, then one more area of interaction—measures to avoid dangerous incidents—will be gone too. This does not mean an end to the Russian-American competition in the Middle East, but it will become non-contact, indirect and not requiring mutual sensitivity or communication channels. But it is these channels, established by the military, that thus far have been the most effective form of interaction between the two countries.

Apart from that, Russia is of no interest or significance to Trump, as evidenced by the ease with which he speaks about relations with Putin: we may or we may not get along, we will probably meet or probably not, maybe now or maybe later... Trump, known for

his lack of aristocratic manners, does not treat anyone else this way.

The dismantling of institutions created when the Soviet Union was one of the world order architects accelerated in 2018. This affects many countries, primarily Western and especially European ones, which thought that the norms established after the end of the Cold War (as a result of creative reevaluation of the norms put in place in the second half of the 20th century) would last forever. But suddenly everything began to crumble. Russia is affected, too. Its policy throughout the post-Soviet period, despite Western accusations of revisionism, was motivated by the desire to preserve or recreate the status quo that existed before the dramatic breakup at the end of last century; naturally in hope that Russia would occupy a proper place in it, probably nothing similar to the Soviet one but worthy all the same.

However, the previous system is sinking into oblivion, while a new model—a long-awaited multipolar one—is opening up new opportunities for Russia but gives no guarantees and increases uncertainty immensely. In other words, Russia has to fight for its place again, but first it has to understand what kind of place this is, what kind of instruments (military, political, economic, diplomatic or communicatory) it can use for that, and whether it has all of them. Previous

methods which proved successful during the Cold War can be used to a limited extent only because so much has changed lately. So, nostalgia for the Soviet Union is on the rise at a time when the desire to restore it appears to be most inconsistent with evolving tendencies.

The times in which we live now began thirty years ago. Georgia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Berlin Wall, the First Congress of Soviet People's Deputies, the Baltics, Bulgaria, Romania, the Gorbachev-Bush meeting in Malta... a breakthrough into a different era.

This is not just a calendar date or an occasion to recall bygone days. For the present generation of leading politicians both in Russia and in the West the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc were events that determined their outlook and still continue to affect life. The period of the 1980s and the 1990s remains fundamental. But a new generation of people has come, for whom those changes are not a personal experience but part of historical memory, more or less learned.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the Cold War was a sort of a "joint venture" between the Western and Eastern elites (in the political, not purely geographic sense). Being in a state of confrontation, they jointly formulated the rules of coexistence and conduct. In other words, the generation of fifty- and sixty-year-

olds on both sides of the long-gone Iron Curtain is sharing a common historical experience but interpreting it differently.

Twenty- and thirty-year-olds in the European Union and Russia set out from the same platform but moved along diverging tracks. A new generation has grown up in the West which knows that the period of 1989-1991 liberated many peoples from tyranny and eliminated the threat of nuclear war, while their peers in Russia matured among an increasingly strong view that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe for the country and the world and that the military-political imbalance that followed eventually increased the risk of war.

For those who still shape political processes in the world, events at the end of the 20th century serve as the constituting basis for their actions and views. For those who will soon come to take their place (or have already come as in Italy or Austria), it is just a set of historical stereotypes entrenched in the minds of people and perceived differently in a new environment. As those events recede further into the past, the perception gap will only widen, further reducing the probability of reaching an understanding.

What do Russian people miss, according to the Levada Center survey? Different things. But one in three (36%) grieves over the loss of "the feeling of

belonging to a great power.” This feeling clearly has a Soviet connotation, even though the criteria of greatness have changed in the world. And one in four respondents regrets that we can no longer feel “at home everywhere” (24%).

But where is that home? Globalization meant to make the whole globe our home, which was supposed to be “flat” and standardized. But it did not work out this way. Global levelling created the “I am first” phenomenon (following America). In other words, the home is not everywhere, each person has his own home and it is a fortress. The survey indicates that over the past three decades Russian people have not come to view

their own country as their natural home and still miss the better home which “could have been preserved” (this view was expressed by the largest number of respondents over the age of 15—60%).

A new world overrules old dogmas. The West is painfully admitting that the hopes cherished in 1989 will have to be abandoned, and a “bright new world” in fact looks more like anti-utopia than utopia. It is a real struggle in convulsions. Russia seems to be walking in circles, returning from time to time to Soviet symbols and rhetoric. But this phantom of the past cannot give anything new; it only blocks a vision of the future and impedes the search for understanding.