

# Old Thinking for Our Country and the World

*Fyodor A. Lukyanov*

**Fyodor A. Lukyanov**

*Russia in Global Affairs*

Editor-in-Chief;

National Research University–Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs

Research Professor

SPIN RSCI: 4139-3941

ORCID: 0000-0003-1364-4094

ResearcherID: N-3527-2016

Scopus AuthorID: 24481505000

E-mail: editor@globalaffairs.ru

Tel.: (+7) 495 9807353

Address: Office 112, 29 Malaya Ordynka Str., Moscow 115184, Russia

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2022-20-1-5-10

*“A dangerous gap has emerged between the realities of the nuclear age and the understanding of the challenges facing the world. A fundamental revision and a decisive rejection of outdated philosophies and obsolete doctrines is the primary and vital necessity... New economic, scientific and technological factors are forming an integral interdependent world, in which reality imposes more stringent demands on the leaders of each state and requires utmost responsibility in behavior and decision-making.”*

From the report by CPSU Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev  
at the 27th Party Congress on February 25, 1986

February 2022 marked the end of international order created by the a large-scale historical experiment aimed to test the hypothesis that Russia may be included in the leading Western powers without its participation but providing certain room for its development in

accordance with the rules established by the leaders of this order. The result is negative.

Neither the obsession with the West as a priority—and seemingly superior—partner, nor the sharp dissociation from it is anything new to Russian history. For centuries, Russian intellectuals have been discussing whether the country belongs to Europe or not, following pretty much the same pattern. The period of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, however, had an important distinction. For the first time, the notion of belonging or not belonging to Europe acquired an institutional framework. Europe has turned from a cultural and historical phenomenon into a set of structures that emerged out of Cold War-era homogeneity, that is, Western homogeneity. In order to participate in these structures, one must meet the prescribed criteria, and this is what the “European choice” is all about.

The Russian Federation tried to make this choice in 1992 when it emerged on the international stage in a somewhat schizophrenic capacity as the inheritor and successor of the Soviet Union but strongly rejecting its heritage and identity. In parallel with post-Soviet Russia, the European Union, just transformed from the Community, entered the world stage as the

embodiment and apotheosis of institutionalized Europe.

For about fifteen years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia genuinely sought to become part of the European order created by the United States and its allies. It tried to do this on grounds that would not be standard (Moscow was never ready to stand in the queue of candidates to Euro-Atlantic institutions), but at the same time would not imply radical changes in the Western scheme of things. The effort did not work out. In his February 21 televised address, President Vladimir Putin deliberately mentioned an old conversation with Bill Clinton about Russia’s possible admission to NATO and the U.S. leader’s basically negative reaction. The disappointment about the fact that such an option was envisioned by Moscow, but was rejected by the Western club, left a mark on the Russian political consciousness.

Could the West have acted differently? Theoretically, yes, if it had tried to build a new world order encompassing Russia and other post-Soviet countries instead of mechanically spreading its own Cold War-era institutions. In practical terms this was hardly feasible. The balance of power twenty to twenty-five years ago and the degree of ideological and political dominance of the United States and its allies in

the international arena did not imply any deviation from the existing schemes for considering the interests of the defeated enemy.

Could Russia have behaved differently, come to terms with its subordinate role and started to rearrange the niche assigned to it within the Western-centric order? This question is more complicated. Those who think that Russia is inherently inclined towards great powerness claim that the revival of its full-fledged power and desire for special significance was inevitable. I daresay at that time Russia had the potential to “get used” to the status of a non-leading element of a certain system. But for this to happen, firm confidence was needed that the system was powerful, strong and lasting, and that those in charge were in full control. Put it simply, this meant that American hegemony had to be unquestionable. But this is precisely what raised doubts in the early 21st century.

By 2022, Russia had been deeply integrated in the web of international political and economic interconnectedness. However, a) Moscow was not satisfied with the amount of dividends it received, b) the world system as a whole and its key elements (leading countries) were in decline, and c) the erosion of governance institutions seemed to be beyond repair, since the principles

of the 20th and 21st centuries that got intertwined within it in many ways contradicted each other. This combination of factors provided the basis for the following conclusion: sharp moves to overcome the inertia of the previous order will give an advantage for creating its new version, one in which Russia will no longer be bound by conventions arising from the desire to belong to the Western community, and this community itself will stop dominating the world stage.

The current special military operation in Ukraine has essentially canceled thirty years of Russia’s post-Soviet development (or transition, as it was habitually called some fifteen years ago) both in terms of numerous geopolitical concessions made in those years, and in terms of most of the conveniences, including consumer ones, gained as part of the Western-centric system. Russia seems to have returned to the crossroads it passed at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s to choose another road. The fierce intellectual discussion about the road to the future, which started during *perestroika* but was never finished due to the collapse of the USSR, apparently has a chance to recommence and produce a certain conclusion. As a matter of fact, no choice was made after the events of the early 1990s. Instead, Russia was

picked up by the historical stream and carried away.

But the dispute over what exactly was to be done was only part of that unfinished discussion. Its main goal was to figure out “what heritage we renounce.” *Glasnost*-era panelists gladly used this quote by Lenin. Having come full circle, we are back to square one.

The Russian President’s lengthy speech on February 21, 2022, which set off a series of breathtaking developments, does not just draw a line under the post-Soviet era. It recalls the fate of the country throughout the 20th century. The underlying historical motif is the illegal and reckless, from the President’s point of view, actions of the communist authorities from Vladimir Lenin to the last Soviet-era leaders who lost the country. The speech reveals the quintessential element of the new approach—applying simultaneously two concepts to the neighboring country: ‘decommunization’ (“We are ready to show you what real decommunization means for Ukraine”) and ‘denazification.’ In other words, the speech intertwines references to the two most tragic upheavals that shook the country in the last century and prompts that the current developments may be interpreted as an attempt to draw a line under that time—a line

that, based on this logic, was not drawn thirty years ago when the wanderers chose the wrong road at the historical crossroads. The present Russian leadership is determined to correct that mistake. Contrary to the firm belief of many observers, it is by no means missing the Soviet Union but seems to regard the distance traveled from Lenin to Gorbachev as an anomaly of Russian life: “It is a great pity that the vile, utopian fantasies, inspired by the revolution, but absolutely destructive for a normal country, were not promptly removed from the basic, formally legal foundations on which our entire statehood was built” (from the Russian President’s televised address on February 21, 2022).

The contemporary political history of the world began thirty-six years ago, on February 25, 1986, when CPSU Central Committee Secretary-General Mikhail Gorbachev first used the phrase “new political thinking” in his report delivered at the 27th Party Congress. Eighteen months later, this concept was detailed in the book *Perestroika. New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. Its key postulates were as follows: rejecting class values in favor of universal human ones; stopping confrontation and the division of the world into blocs; and resolving conflicts not by military, but by political methods, that is,

building international relations on the basis of the balance of interests and mutual benefit rather than the balance of power.

Gorbachev predated Fukuyama and eliminated the ideological obstacle to globalization. The rapid collapse of the socialist camp and eventually the Soviet Union was a direct consequence of the “new political thinking,” and so was the establishment of a “liberal world order,” which rethought Gorbachev’s principles in its own way and, most importantly, without Moscow. However, the momentum Russia gained from *perestroika* lasted for a very long time, taking the form of the above-mentioned attempts to build a Western-centric world. Three and a half decades later, Russia took a drastic and irreversible step to do away with the inertia.

It immediately transpired, though, that the degree of Russia’s inclusion in the world, in other words, dependence on external counterparties, is even greater than was generally believed and that an almost instant termination of ties entails avalanche-like changes. But the whole world is living through a similar experience. An attempt to exclude the world’s biggest country from international life affects all spheres of human activity, although Russia’s modest share in the world economy could hardly have been

expected to cause such a tsunami. But there is more to it than the economy. By abolishing globalization for itself, Russia is making a crucial contribution to its abolition for all.

Moscow has made a very big bet. Russia can successfully get out of this predicament only if the current crisis really puts an end to the previous world order. In other words, this means that instead of pushing Russia out of the system, the system itself must cease to exist so that a new one could begin to form on entirely new conditions, different from those of the previous three decades. And yet, there is an echo of the previous turmoil. Despite internal problems, the Soviet Union remained one of the (two) structural pillars of world politics almost to the very end. The successor state lost that status and failed to regain it. In other words, rebuilding the potential and regaining the position of one of the leading world powers (both goals achieved) has not made Russia a systemic pillar of the international order. And so the only way to attain this status is to demolish the latter.

February 2022 also marked the beginning of another experiment, no less ambitious in scale and design. Russia is making efforts to reverse the course of political development and bring back the *old political thinking* (call it traditional) to itself and the whole world. Its principles

are at odds with the declared principles of the new one: value pluralism (instead of universality), reliance on the balance of power (not interests), and finally, classical military conflict as a way to solve problems if other methods do not work. These postulates were in effect for most of human history. But over the past thirty-odd years, everybody came to believe in “everlasting peace” after the “end of history” so much that the reversal causes a deep shock.

Let us emphasize that the current crisis of the world order was not provoked by the special military operation in Ukraine. It was spawned long ago by the stubborn unwillingness of the liberal order leaders to give up the privileges they gained after the Cold War. The collapse per se began on February 24th. And there is no going back

either for Russia or for anyone else. But it will take time for the world to grasp the consequences.

Once again, for the fourth time in slightly more than a hundred years, Russia selflessly takes on the role—and the burden—of the key global change agent. Are we not tired yet? “But we can say that in some way we are an exceptional nation. We are one of those nations that do not seem to form an integral part of humanity, but that exist only to teach the world some great lesson. The lesson we are called upon to give will certainly not be lost; but who knows when we will find ourselves belonging in humanity, and how much misfortune we will experience before our predestination is fulfilled?” (Pyotr Chaadaev. Philosophical Letter. *Telescope Journal*, 1836).