

Not to Burn Up in the Dense International Atmosphere

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The current year 2022 is seen today as a turning point amid unexpected radical events taking place before our eyes. But in historical retrospect, it will probably look like a link in a smoother process—the accumulation of global prerequisites for change and their implementation. Russia has once again set out as an inciter of such change. It is not doing this for the first time, especially if one remembers the 20th century.

A recent sad event—the death of Mikhail Gorbachev—is a good enough reason to recall his time.

In the second half of the 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev enjoyed incredible popularity worldwide, but not because people in different continents admired his plans to transform the USSR. The reason was that by the 1980s, the world as a whole had wandered into a dead end, and everybody wanted, consciously or intuitively, to get out of it.

The long-drawn-out Cold War confrontation had become a form of coexistence: the 1975 Helsinki Final Act recorded a holding game in Europe; and exhausting

“what-matters-is-not-victory-but-participation” skirmishes continued across the periphery from Latin America to the Middle East and Africa. The Old World was struggling with “Eurosclerosis”—an integration crisis. Leading countries were torn by internal problems, and the U.S. was recovering after Vietnam and Watergate. The global economic system was in stagnation, and it was decided to overcome it using neoliberal recipes—effective due to the shock effect, but socially destructive. Societies were disconcerted. Different but similar processes were taking place on the other side of the Iron Curtain. It was no longer possible to camouflage the dilapidation of the aging Soviet system, which was lacking an ideological core.

Gorbachev’s “new political thinking” opened up new horizons. The rapid easing of tension helped citizens get rid of frustration and promised them “peace dividends.” The neoliberal course steered by the Thatcherites and Reaganites suddenly turned from a means of draconian economic austerity into an inspirational quest for freedom. The “universal values,” which the recent Soviet opponent had recognized as correct, allowed the West to step over its ideological and political boundaries and go global. As a matter of fact, the supporters

of socialism were in high spirits at first too—indeed, the USSR has at last a capable leader. The Soviet bloc cheered up.

How it happened that the only country who did not take advantage of the situation was the one who had created it (the Soviet Union) is a question for a separate discussion. And this is the question, above all, for the Soviet government and society. When the world reached a new orbit, using the impetus generated in Moscow, the USSR acted as the first stage of this “rocket” and burned up in the dense layers of the international atmosphere.

The year 2022 is the antipode of that time. But the deadlock is similar. The international community has used up the development model and reached an impasse. This has been noticeable since the 2000s, since the global financial crisis, the consequences of which have not been overcome yet. Nobody really understood how to get out of it. Regional military or social upheavals were not enough. A universal green deal was an ambitious initiative, but it, too, lacked ideological fuel. The COVID-19 pandemic helped governments tap into new techniques of control, but only to a first approximation. Practically everybody was dissatisfied with the existing balance of power and opportunities on the world stage:



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both the hegemon (the West) that felt uncertain and contenders (rising powers), whose development began to be purposefully slowed down from the outside.

The Ukraine crisis may not turn the tables, but it allows everybody to start a new game. The former system of interdependence and, therefore, constraints is gone. It was difficult to just scrap it because it was too comfortable for many. But the global force majeure in military-political, energy, food, and other security spheres has lent a completely new meaning to the calls for self-reliance and the need to tighten the belts and make sacrifices. Democracies and autocracies alike are trying to use the situation to consolidate their power.

An external enemy helps (everyone chooses his own enemy), and the idea floating around that one can persevere only by starting mobilization (in different respects) paves the way for a much tougher policy, which was recently considered un-

acceptable. The pandemic was a rehearsal; now the forms of the execution of power outlined back then are being quickly enhanced.

For its own reasons, Russia initiated the transition from a latent but gradually ripening global military-political crisis to an open one. It was meant to solve the Ukrainian issue as a national security problem and at the same time restore historical justice violated, as Russian widespread view states, in 1991. As a result, it is now facing a complex confrontation with the strongest and most motivated part of the world, which intends to use the current situation for its own full reset. If Russia does not make a restart of its own, it may repeat the fate of its "first stage" in the "dense layers." Russia's main task in the near future is to focus on itself and increase its own resilience to any challenges. All the more so now that the world is becoming a source of risks, rather than opportunities, for years to come.