

## FROM WWI TO WWW. – PUTIN NEXT DOOR

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On 28<sup>th</sup> July exactly 100 years ago, Central Europe declared a war to Eastern Europe, an event that marked the official outbreak of World War I. This was a turning point which finally fractured a fragile equilibrium of *La Belle Époque*, and set the Old Continent and the whole world with it into the series of motions that lasted for almost a century, before docking us to our post-modern societies. From WWI to www. Too smooth and too good to be true? Let us use this occasion and briefly examine our post-modernity and some fallacies surrounding it.

In the (Brave New) world of [www](http://www). where, irrespectively from your current location on the planet, at least 20 intelligence agencies are notifying the incoming call before your phone even rings up, how is it possible to lose jumbo-jet for good? The two huge aviation tragedies affecting same country – Malaysia, are yet another powerful reminders that we are obsessed with a control via confrontation, not at all with the prosperity through human safety. Proof? Look at the WWI-like blame-game over the downing of the plane – a perfect way to derail our most important debate: Which kind of future do we want? Who seats in our cockpit and why do we stubbornly insist on inadequate civilizational navigation?! Consequently, Ukraine today is a far bigger crash site, which is – regrettably enough – well beyond an ill-fated MH 17.

### **Why in the [www](http://www). world our media still bears the WWI-like rhetorics?**

The ongoing demonization of President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin in the so-called mainstream media actually serves as a *confrontational nostalgia* call on the side of West. Hence, this main-scream seems aiming not to alienate, but to invite the current Russian leadership to finally accept confrontation as a *modus operandi* after a 25 years of pause.

The conclusion these media leaves us with, is somewhat puzzling: the West has *democratically* decided that the CC + CC has no alternative (more Carbons and Confrontation e.g. in Ukraine, besides and despite the planetary Climate Change). President Putin *autocratically* still hesitates, and does not rush into the CC. Does it mean that Russia is more democratic and more progressive than it is reported to us, or that the West is more militaristic and more conservative than it loves to portray itself? Neither or either, all or none?

## How about our post-modern cooperation?

Which kind of neighborhood the European Union and United States have supported around Russia for the last 25 years, that same sort of Russia we are trying to see today. I would even dare say that Russia today is far better than the West (and its past acting) deserves to have. The same attribution would most probably apply to the Arab world. The way Atlantic-Central Europe and the US interacted with the MENA (Middle East–North Africa), and the sort of Islam they supported there yesterday, is the sort of Islam we are getting today in the Christian Europe as well as in the Christian neighborhoods of Iraq.

For the sake of quick Atlantic-Central Europe penetrations into the body and soul of East, all important debates such as that of Slavism, identity, secularism and antifascism have been advised to Eastern Europe to abandon. By doing so, all the vital merits were simply handed over to Russia to solely deal with it. Why then our sudden shock that once recuperated, Russia returns with a (reloaded) identity which champions antifascism and (pan-)Slavism? After all, the rich but egalitarian, democratic, transparent, antifascist, a non-nation-state determined and secular US has supported everything opposite in Eastern Europe (in the MENA, too). For far too long, in the pretext of fighting the legacies of communism, Americans have tolerated *Über*-economic, political and socio-demographic neo-Nazism as well as the clerical ethno-fascism in the core sectors of Europe. It is now time to pay for letting the unchecked happen.

*The winner takes it all* is a Swedish song, not a Swedish table. Clearly, there is no winning without a full share of responsibility.

## Europe of Sarajevo 100 years later

The end of the Cold War came abruptly, overnight. Many in the West dream about it, but nobody really saw it coming. The Warsaw Pact, Red Army in DDR, Berlin Wall, Soviet Union, one after the other, vanished rapidly, unexpectedly. There was no ceasefire, no peace conference, no formal treaty and guaranties, no expression of interests and settlement. Only the wonderer-boy face expression of that time Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze who circled around and unconvincingly repeated: “we now better understand each other”. In his luminary work ‘The New Asian Hemisphere’, Mahbubani accurately concludes that Mikhail Gorbachev – *not understanding the real success of Western strength and power, handed over the Soviet empire and got nothing in return.*<sup>1</sup> Does our history only appear overheated, but is essentially calmly predetermined? Is it directional or conceivable, dialectic and eclectic or cyclical, and therefore cynical?

The Soviet Union was far more of a classic continental military empire (overtly brutal; rigid, authoritative, anti-individual, omnipresent, secretive), while the US was more a financial empire (covertly coercive; hierarchical, yet asocial, exploitive, pervasive, polarizing). *Bear* of permafrost vs.

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<sup>1</sup> Or, by the words of the senior UN diplomat who, contemplating with me over the question whether a middle-power foreign policy is adequate for a great power, recently told me in Geneva: “The difference between Russia and the Soviet Union is that the Federation desperately looks around for respect, but leaves the world responsibilities solely to the US. As known, admiration and respect is earned not given for free.” Clearly, the post-Soviet Russia avoids any strategic global competition with the US. Still, it feels rather insulted with the current strategic global partnership – as both the US and China treat Moscow as a junior partner. Is it possible to (re-)gain a universal respect without any ideological appeal? That could be debated, but one thing is certain; even the mid-size powers such as Brazil, Indonesia or Turkey have moved on from a bandwagoning, reactive, opportune and slow to an emancipating proactive, accurate and extensive foreign policy.

*Fish* of the warm seas. Athens vs. Sparta. Phoenicia vs. Rome... Consequently, the Soviets went bankrupt by mid 1980s – they cracked under its own weight, imperially overstretched. So did the Americans – the ‘white man burden’ fractured them already by the Vietnam war, with the *Nixon shock* only officializing it. However, the US imperium managed to survive and to outlive the Soviets. How? The United States managed its financial capital (or an illusion of it) insofar as to be(come) a debtor empire through the Wall Street guaranties.<sup>2</sup> Titanium-made *Sputnik* vs. gold mine of printed-paper... Nothing epitomizes this better than the words of the longest serving US Federal Reserve’s boss, Alan Greenspan, who famously said to then French President Jacques Chirac: “True, dollar is our currency, but your problem”.

### **Hegemony vs. hegemony.**

This very nature of power explains why the Americans have missed to take our mankind into completely other direction; towards the non-confrontational, decarbonized, de-monetized/de-financialized and de-psychologized, the self-realizing and green humankind. They had such a chance when, past the Gorbachev’s unconditional surrender of the Soviet bloc, the US – unconstrained as a ‘lonely superpower’ – solely dictated terms of reference.<sup>3</sup> Sadly enough, that was not the first missed opportunity for the US. The very epilogue of the WWII meant a full security guaranty for the US: Geo-economically – 54% of anything manufactured in the world was carrying the *Made in USA* label, and geostrategically – the US had uninterruptedly enjoyed nearly a decade of the ‘nuclear monopoly’. Up to this very day, the US scores the biggest number of N-tests conducted, the largest stockpile of nuclear weaponry, and it represents the only power ever deploying this ‘ultimate weapon’ on other nation. To complete the irony, Americans enjoy geographic advantage like no other empire ever. Save the US, as Ikenberry notes: “...every major power in the world lives in a crowded geopolitical neighborhood where shifts in power routinely provoke counterbalancing”. The US is blessed with neighboring oceans.

Why the lonely might, an *empire by invitation* did not evolve into **empire of relaxation**, a generator of harmony? One of the leading architects of the American foreign policy, Simon Serfaty laments: “The irony is plain for all to see. Ten years after the fiasco in Iraq, the global demand for American power has never been higher, but its credibility rarely lower and its reliability more in doubt...a preponderant power must be right...for its enemies it must be strong, it must inspire trust...” What are

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<sup>2</sup> How was a debtor empire born? One of the biggest (nearly schizophrenic) dilemmas of liberalism, ever since David Hume and Adam Smith, was an insight into reality; whether the world is essentially *Hobbesian* or *Kantian*. The state will rob you, but in absence of it, the pauperized masses will mob you. The *invisible hand* of Smith’s followers have found the satisfactory answer – sovereign debt. This ‘invention’ means: relatively strong government of the state, heavily indebted – firstly to local merchants, than to foreigners. With such a *mixed blessing*, no empire can easily demonetize its legitimacy.

<sup>3</sup> One of the biggest ideological victories of the US is the fact that, only two decades after the Soviet collapse, Russia today has an economy dominated by oil-rich class of billionaires. The assets of this new *caste* are 20% of country’s GDP –by far the largest share held by the ultra-rich in any major economy. The second largest ideological victory for Americans is reported by the *New York Times*. It states that the outgoing Chinese President, leader of the country that officially still rests on ideology of oppressed working class, has allegedly accumulated family wealth of 1,7 billion in less than a decade of his rule (‘only’ 1 USD million every second day). Some in the US are not that happy about it, and are wondering – like Fukuyama in his luminary essay – “where is a counter-narrative?” To ease the pain for all balance-seekers: Even if the American ideological triumph might be a clear cut, geopolitically it remains undecided. While Russians were absorbing the shock of loss of their historical empire, the ‘lonely hyper-power’ did not quite know what to do with its colossal gain. The fact that there is no (yet) clear leader of the post-Western world, does not mean that the post-Christian and post-industrial West – as a place and as the geo-economic and ideological model – is unquestionably accepted as it was before.

we talking about here – the inadequate intensity of our confrontational push or about the false course of our civilizational direction?

Indeed, no successful and enduring empire does merely rely on coercion, be it abroad or at home. However, unable to escape its inner logics and deeply-rooted appeal of *confrontational nostalgia*, the prevailing archrival is only a winner, rarely a game-changer.<sup>4</sup> Hence, to the above asked question whether our history is dialectic or cyclical, the current Ukrainian events are like a bad-taste *déjà vu*.

*End of the Cold War* – such a buzzword, of a diametrically different meaning. East interprets it as the final end of confrontation – beginning of the age of a mutual respect, harmony and understanding. The Westerners have no such an illusion. To them it is the end of war, which only came after the unconditional surrender of East. Another powerful evidence to support our claim: Just 20 years ago, distance between Moscow and NATO troops stationed in Central Europe (e.g. Berlin) was over 1.600 km. Today, it is only 120 km from St. Petersburg.<sup>5</sup> Realities have dramatically changed for the Atlantic-Central Europe block and for Russia, while for Eastern Europe much remains the same—East still serves others as a strategic depth playground.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are many who would claim that the West was unable to capitalize on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that the real winner in the superpowers' playoff is actually the third. It is not only that Asia is resurfacing very self-confident. Deeper and structural, the issue is more subversive as well: One of the most remarkable achievements in the world history of capitalism is happening last 20 years under the leadership of the largest Communist party on this planet. (While one of the biggest collectivisations *à la* communism was taking place in the cradles of capitalism –the US and UK financial hubs.) At this point, let us recall what was the epilogue of a lasting ideological confrontation between Byzantium and Sassanid Persia and of their colossal geopolitical overextension? Clearly, it was an appearance of the Third Power Center on a geopolitical and ideological terrain, which was gradually prevailing from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Byzantium and Sassanids corroded and imploded.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the (formal) end of the Cold War, and contrary to all what we celebrate as a technological progress, our Gini coefficients' distances are far larger than they were two decades ago. Additionally, as the EU was getting closer to Eastern and Russophone Europe, the socio-economic inequalities and politico-cultural exclusions there, were growing wider. The contemporary world (believes it) has unprecedented wealth. Although over the last four decades the global working force has tripled from roughly 1 to 3 billion, the world today holds mass poverty – like never before, especially in underdeveloped Africa and de-industrialized East of Europe. The newly set 'economic system' in Eastern Europe in fact reproduces poverty, even among the fortunate ones – people with a job, victims of low wages and long hours. According to the World Bank, total global wealth was \$241 trillion in 2013 and is expected to rise to \$334 trillion by 2018. The WB defines the UN standard poverty line with a threshold of \$1,25/day. Lant Pritchett, a critical WB/IMF developmental economist, advocates a more reasonable bottom-line of \$10/day. If his calculations were applied, between 90 and 95% population in the East-Rusophone Europe would be well below dignified life, deep under the poverty line!

<sup>6</sup> Before too long, Washington will have to decide: either containment or accommodation – a viable truce with Moscow or unconditional backing of Russia's closest neighbours. If Putin finally abandons the non-confrontational course, and regularizes the play on a *confrontational nostalgia* card, the US-led West might award Moscow by returning Baltics, some central-southern portions of Eastern Europe, along with Central Asia and Caucasus to Russian sphere of influence. If the history of Russo-American confrontations is (noisy or) deep, wide and long, their ability to broker a deal is remarkably extensive, too. Or, as prof. W.R. Mead elaborates: "...In deciding how hard to press Russia over Ukraine, the White House cannot avoid calculating the impact on Russia's stance on the Syrian war or Iran's nuclear program." (Mead, W.R. (2014), *The Return of Geopolitics*, Foreign Affairs Magazine 93(3) 2014)

