

## EUROPE – 30 YEARS FOLLOWING THE COMMUNIST ERA: QUO VADIS?

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### Abstract

This article refers to some of the most important moments that characterize the changes which took place in the last three decades in Central and Southeast Europe, based especially on my memories from the times I worked as counsellor to the first and last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev (1987-1991), counsellor of the first president of the independent Republic of Moldova, Mircea Snegur (1992-1994), member of the government of the Republic of Moldova, Minister of Privatization and State Property Administration (1994-1997), Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and later Ambassador of Moldova to the United States of America (1998-2002), and finally professor at Virginia State University, USA, starting from 2004 and up to the present. The article focuses on some significant issues that plagued and still continue to plague our society.

**Keywords:** *Europe, communist era, change, society.*

### 1. HOW DID THE 1989 REVOLUTIONS START?

The 45 days between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Romanian Revolution (November 9 – December 25, 1989) represented the beginning of a new era in European and mankind history: the triumph of democracy and of human freedom. They also represented the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the Third Wave of Democracy, according to Samuel Huntington. On a personal level, these very important and challenging events changed my destiny, the destiny of my family as well as the destiny of millions of people from this European region. This article represents an opportunity to remember those turbulent days which took place 30 years ago. Back then I was one of the young counsellors of the president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, whom I assisted as translator in almost every official or informal meeting with the Romanian president of that time, Nicolae Ceausescu, as well as with the new Romanian

president following the 1989 Revolution, Ion Iliescu.

In this context, I would refer to professor John Lewis Gaddis, from the Yell University in America. He mentioned that the 1989 revolutions were the first in which no blood was shed. "There were no guillotines, no heads on spears, there was no mass genocide... The goals and the means of these revolutions led to the triumph of hope. This appeared especially because Mikhail Gorbachev decided not to intervene..." Never before had millions of people from Central and Eastern Europe ever benefited from the triumph of liberty and the revolutions did not take place so quickly and without casualties, or the implications of armed fanatics .... with only one exception – that of Romania. The present articles aims at presenting some personal thoughts or impressions about the 1989 Revolution, which started at the same time with the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I found out about the fall of the Wall on the morning of November 10, the same as my former boss, Mikhail Gorbachev. According to the Soviet president's spokesperson, Andrei Graciov, Gorbachev had "a hidden dream": to wake up one morning and to find out that the Wall fell, without the need for his intervention. And this is exactly how it happened. Although the event was expected to take place, it represented "a big surprise" for the leaders of the Soviet Union and for its citizens, as they perceived the event as a huge humiliation for a great power. According to the more orthodox ones, and they were major in the party elites, the fall of the Wall and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Germany represented nothing else than the defeat of the Soviet Union 44 years after its victory in World War II. Moreover, ruining the myth regarding "the historical superiority of socialism over capitalism" and "the domino effect" of the crash

of the communist regimes in Europe inevitably represented the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, “of the empire gathered drop by drop for a thousand years”, according to Vitalii Vorotnikov, the leader of the Soviet Communist Party delegation at the last congress – the 14<sup>th</sup> congress of the Romanian communist party, at a private dinner in Bucharest.

I remember that the event – the fall of the Berlin Wall – took place only a month after the celebration of the 40 years jubilee of the German Democrat Republic, with Gorbachev’s participation. In the summer of 1989, he visited the Federal Republic of Germany. At a press conference with German chancellor Helmut Kohl, when asked about the possibility of reuniting Germany, both leaders said that that issue was to be addressed over the course of history, sometimes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it happened only a few months after that meeting.

In October 1987, the American president Ronald Reagan, in a meeting near the Wall in West Berlin uttered the famous phrase: “*Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!*”. Frank Carlucci, his help on matters of national security commented: “it is a strong statement, but this will never happen” ... it happened only two years later. Other western leaders of that time were also no more cautious and they were not at all enthusiastic about this event. According to a French journalist, Francois Mitterand “loved Germany so much that he wanted it divided into two states for ever”. The British Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher, categorically rejected the possibility of unifying Germany, regarding it as “the most stupid idea that she had ever heard”.

A first conclusion could be drawn here: the new political thinking of president Gorbachev represented an inalienable element of the “*perestroika i glasnost*” politics (restructuring and openness, transparency), generated historical changes in the destiny of the Central and Eastern European countries, where the people of these countries became the main subject of the 1989 Revolutions.

The key success factor of these cardinal transformations was the firm conviction and intention of president Gorbachev not to use force and not to suppress the democratic and national

rebirth aspirations of the people of East Germany and of the other states from the region. “The Brezhnev Doctrine” of a “limited sovereignty” and mixture in the affairs of other countries was used in 1953 in Berlin, 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Imagine for a moment the alternative suggested by Gorbachev’s opponents from the leadership structures: to use force in order to prevent the unification of Germany and to “save communism in East Germany”, where 380000 Soviet soldiers, armed elite troops, were dislocated. I believe that the success of these revolutions did not represent a historical accident.

## **2. WHAT WAS THE PERCEPTION OF GORBACHEV’S NEW POLITICAL THINKING AND OF THE «PERESTROIKA» POLITICS IN THE FORMER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES, MEMBER OF THE WARSAW PACT AND ESPECIALLY OF THEIR LEADERSHIP?**

I was tracking this subject very carefully back then, presenting analysis and conclusions for president Gorbachev. In these countries there was a vivid interest on behalf of the population for the events in URSS. In Romania, the term *perestroika* is paraphrased by the population as “window”, although access to information regarding the transformations from the Soviet Union was strictly restricted. For example, information about one of Gorbachev’s most important speeches, in the plenary of the central committee of the communist party of the Soviet Union from January 1987 appeared in an abstract of only a few lines three days after the event took place. The explanation presented by our Romanian partners to us working at the headquarters of the international department of *Staraya Ploschad’*, was that: “it was difficult to translate the words of the Soviet general secretary into Romanian” ... “*Habet tempus, habet vitam* (we shall live and we shall see), states a classical sentence. I believe that the radio and television from the Republic of Moldova represented back then that “window” regarding the new politics and thinking of the Soviet leader and the events which took place during those times in URSS. We note that although people were genuinely interested in Gorbachev’s reforms, including in

Romania, the attitude of most leaders from these countries was reluctant, because *perestroika* basically represented a test and a challenge. We notice a clear distancing on their part when it comes to the concept and the practice of reforms, a desperate attempt to prevent “the indoctrination” of the society with this unknown and dangerous “political virus” which came from the East, from Gorbachev.

I shall refer to my personal perceptions, as well as to those of my colleagues, regarding Romania. In the first stage of this politics, 1985-1987, the general secretary of the Romanian Communist Party (RCP), Nicolae Ceausescu, considered that his country did not require any reform and transformation because “they had already taken place and they were no longer up to date for Romania”. I remember the unofficial meetings between the two leaders and their wives at the private dinners from Gorbachev’s residence in Moscow, *Novo-Ogar’ovo* (October 1987) and from Ceausescu’s residence – “*Primavara*”, from Lake Herestrau (July 1989), where I also participate as translator for the Soviet leader. “The self-labour administration and the revolutionary democracy, achieved through a set of administrative and territorial reforms, according to Ceausescu, changed “the image of the country”, “solved the housing problem for every family” and “freed the country from debt even before the due date”. All these transformations could never have taken place without “the leadership role of the party”, they took place without any kind of painful “shock therapy” for the population”. This was a clear allusion to Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy.

Ceausescu suggested to his interlocutor: “The Soviet Union and the communist party would only benefit if its general secretary dealt more with the internal economic affairs, leaving the historical and external ones aside, such as Stalin’s defamation”. I also remember the words of Elena Ceausescu from one of these unofficial dinners, who jokingly or maybe not stated the following: “Romania is too small of a country for such a huge leader as you, Nicolae”. Gorbachev’s response was not very pleasant for Ceausescu. I want to add that in their last meeting from December 4, 1989, Gorbachev mentioned that neither Honnecker, the former leader of

Democratic Germany, nor Yakesh – that of Czechoslovakia, did not take advantage of the opportunities that history has offered them: to promote the democratic and economic reforms so long awaited by the population of their countries. They missed the chance. This basically was a reply also directed towards Ceausescu. Nicolae Ceausescu arrived in Moscow with some completely unexpected propositions: to establish a conference of the communist and labour parties in order to “address the challenges of the times”, “to establish new instructions and ways of saving socialism and the communist parties”, according to him, “exactly like Lenin did in 1903 when he raised the flag of socialism and revolution”.

### **3. WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF THE LEADER, “THE RIGHT MAN AT THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE”, IN THE 1989 REVOLUTIONS? WHO WAS “GORBACHEV OF ROMANIA”?**

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I wish to draw a second conclusion here: the role of the leader, as Americans say: “the right man at the right time and place”. The success of the “velvet revolutions” from the Central and East European countries can be appreciated to its full extent only taking into account the geopolitical context of that time and it is mainly due to a factor called Gorbachev. He was the most “civilised” and elevated leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev honestly wanted to rebuild the country of new grounds, to solve the economic, politic and social issues that have piled up over the years and “to save socialism”. In one of his interviews for American journal, “*The Nation*”, he mentioned: “If president Reagan and president Gorbachev had not signed the important disarmament and normalisation of the Soviet-American agreements between 1985-1988, subsequent events, including the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany and the end of the Cold War would have been unimaginable”.

At the same time, we should avoid extremes: overestimating the role of a single factor in the development of revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, even if this factor is Gorbachev. Every country had its own Gorbachev. During

those times, Ion Iliescu was “the Gorbachev of Romania”, according to the information that I possessed, especially from letter written by Romanians living abroad. The authors of these letters recommended the general secretary of the communist party of Soviet Union to “find a way to replace Ceausescu with Iliescu and to save Romania from tyranny”. From Ceausescu’s Romania we did not receive any letters for Gorbachev, which was understandable because of the complete censorship on behalf of the security. Even during the official visits of the Soviet delegates there was completely no direct contact with the ordinary people, as programs were especially developed so that they avoid any type of “*off the record*” contact (except for the official contacts). As Herta Muller noted in “*The Land of Green Plum*”, “everybody woke up in the morning with the fear that he/she might no longer exist at night”.

Here, a parenthesis is required. I was the person who accompanied president Iliescu from his arrival at the Vnukovo airport, on his first visit to Moscow (in April 1990), during all his meetings with president Gorbachev. I very well remember that his talks with president

Gorbachev were completely different from those of president Ceausescu. I was impressed by the honest dialogue between the two leaders, the profound understanding of president Iliescu regarding the situation in Romania and the atmosphere of that meeting in which the two leaders seemed as if they had known each other for a very long time. In fact, that was their first meeting.

A Russian saying states that no one is a prophet in his own country. My impression is that the role and contributions of “Romania’s Gorbachev” were not valued at fair value in his own country. It is true that Mikhail Gorbachev has the same fate in Russia: 58% of the people who recently took part in a survey consider that “he played a negative role in the history of Russia” (*Mikhail Gorbachev’s four main achievements in international arena*. By Oleg Yegorov. *Russia Beyond*, Nov 16, 2019), whereas 66% of the respondents regret the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev was harshly criticised in his own country for the failure of the economic and political reforms which led to the

disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and to the collapse of the Soviet state. All this led, according to a Russian publication, to an unprecedented national humiliation and extreme poverty for the people of Russia and of other Soviet states, as well as hundreds of thousands of lives lost in conflicts and the civil wars triggered by the disintegration of the Soviet Union (*Former Soviet Leader Mikhail Mikhail Gorbachev Reveals Who Was Responsible for Country’s Collapse*. Sputnik, November 11, 2019). The parenthesis stops here.

#### **4. WHAT IS THE SITUATION TODAY IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHEAST EUROPE? QUO VADIS EUROPA?**

The third conclusion that I would like to present concerns the lessons of the 1989 revolutions and the role of the Gorbachev factor in the present context of international relationships and of the danger of a new Cold War. We lately notice a continual decline of democracy. According to *Freedom House*, this is the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year in which democracy finds itself in global recession. The “excessive optimism” which dominated societies following the 1989 revolutions is nowadays substituted by a reflux of democracy, which replaced, according to Huntington, the democratic systems with new historical forms of authoritarianism. Therefore, during the last summit of the G-20 countries from June 2019 Russia’s president Vladimir Putin stated that “modern liberalism” has become “old-fashioned”. According to prime minister Victor Orban, in order for Hungary to preserve its competitiveness, it “has to abandon the liberal methods and principles of organising the society”. The same tendencies are characteristic to Poland, the Czech Republic and other states from our region. In recent month governments have changed in Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Moldova. We therefore speak about the appearance of a “liberal consensus”, of a major identity and demographic crisis, which today characterises this region and which, according to some experts, resides in the specific nature of the 1989 revolutions (*Eastern Europe’s Illiberal Revolution*. By Ivan Krastev. *Foreign Affairs*, 2018,

Vol. 97, Nr. 3, p. 49-50). In Vaclav Havel's words, "freedom becomes a burden".

Towards the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Pew International Research Centre published a report entitled "Public European opinion: three decades after the fall of communism". With some exceptions, the results are depressant, especially to the East of Ukraine's border with the European countries, where there is still nostalgia regarding life safety from the communist times. Questioned whether or not they approve the shift towards multiparty systems and market economy Russian respondents present a clear negative majority (43%, 48%; 38%, 51%). This decline of the support for democratic changes and market reforms is also obvious in other countries in the region, especially due to the corruption of the elites, the increase of economic and social inequalities, the refugee crisis and of other internal and external turbulences. This is basically the illusion of millions of people from this region that the fall of communism will quickly and inevitably lead to standards of living similar to those in the West. This illusion is extremely painful for the population especially because it replaced another illusion: the false promises of communism.

## **5. WHAT IS THE PERSPECTIVE OF "THE COMMON EUROPEAN HOME" 30 YEARS AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM? WHAT HAPPENS WITH "THE EUROPEAN IDEA"?**

The last conclusion, but not the least important one: the new political thinking of Gorbachev incorporated both the universal human values, such as the edification of "The Common European Home", which would have led to the unification of the continent and not to its division, and nuclear disarmament. In December 1987, Gorbachev and Reagan signed the INF Treaty (*Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces*). This was the first time in history when the two great nuclear powers assumed obligations, aiming at the elimination of an entire class of medium and intermediate range missiles (500-5500 km), contributing to Europe's

security. In 1991, a few months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, its president and the president of America signed another very important document START- 1 (*Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty*), through which the two countries established a limit on the number of nuclear warheads (6000) and their carriers (1600 ballistic missiles and bombers). Both treaties were or are about to be abandoned and this represents the beginning of a very dangerous race of armament. I think that it is not accidental that the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* recently mentioned that "the risk of destroying the world with the newly created dangerous technologies" reached its highest level since 1953. Unlike the end of the '80s, nowadays there is no hope that the situation will soon improve and that tensions will go away (*From the hope of 1989 to a new Cold War*. By Katrina vanden Heuvel, Washington Post, November 12, 2019). Sorry to say but unfortunately, we do no longer have "a Gorbachev factor" that could prevent the outbreak of a new Cold War.

The European Union which represents, in my opinion, the most ambitious long-term experiment, a success case of the concentration of voluntary international efforts, is now going through a period of major turbulence, a fierce confrontation between the Eurosceptics, led by those in favour of Brexit and their right-wing populist and nationalist colleagues in France, Italy, Poland, Hungary, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the right-wing critics who consider that Europe has to move towards an "even more integrated union", a "super-state" with a common pan-European fiscal, social and ecological policy, in order to counteract the harsh effects of globalization and liberalization, limit the prerogatives of major corporations and defend human rights. In a recent article, speaking about the critical situation that Europe is confronted with, the Princeton professor, Andrew Moravcsik, mentions: "In an era in which historical memories, religious beliefs and national identities erode, what are the ideals that could revitalise public support for the European integration?" (*Andrew Moravcsik. Ever-Further Union. What Happened to European Idea? Foreign Affairs, January-February 2020, Vol 99, Nr. 1, p 159*).

## 6. WHAT IS AT STAKE? THE FUTURE OF HUMANITY

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I avoid ending this article in a negative manner. Therefore, I shall make another reference to Mikhail Gorbachev's recently published book *"What is at stake: The future of the Global World"* (Moscow Times, October 29, 2019). I quote some of the issues approached by the author related to human activity: "two dangers threaten humanity: that of a devastating

war using weapons of mass destruction and that of an ecological catastrophe".

In my opinion, three decades after the revolutions in Central and Southeast Europe, it is time for us to return to the political thinking of revitalising Gorbachev's vision of "The Common European Home". This represents the only alternative to the dangerous trend of the present-day international relationships.

**For bibliographical references please address the author.**