

Thirty Years after 1989 Revolutions: Roles Reversed?

Ghia Nodia

When I was thinking how I could summarize the experience of the former Communist countries during the last thirty years, the first thing that crossed my mind was that this period can be more or less equally divided into two parts, roughly fifteen years each. These two periods are obviously different from each other; However, in various areas of this region, these two periods are different in different ways. Therefore, I also distinguished three different parts of it. One is the western part, those countries who in 1989 were in the Communist bloc but outside the Soviet Union, plus Baltic states. The second one is Russia that is *sui generis*. And the third includes the so-called in-between countries like Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova. This region happens to be especially important for me personally, but being between Russia and EU both in geographically, but it displays interesting trends. To be sure, there still other post-Communist countries, but in this talk I don't mean to encompass everything.

Starting from the western part, their first fifteen years may be described as years of great success based on general clarity about purpose, about values, and about narrative. Everybody agreed that 1989 was an year of liberation, to be more precise, of double liberation: from tyranny of the Communist system, but also from geopolitical tyranny of Russia (we should remember that these nations used to be called "captive nations"). On a positive side, this meant a "return to Europe", or to the West; it was also recognized once could only return to Europe by becoming democratic. This clarity of purpose and action brought success: these countries became liberal democracies, and their new identities were consolidated through their membership of EU and NATO. These processes were mainly deemed complete by 2004.

This clarity was matched by relative clarity within the West in a traditional sense. The underlying consensus that had actually formed since the end of the WW2 naturally continued in the post-Cold War era. Here, I cannot avoid recollecting Fukuyama's idea of the End of History once more. Many people disagreed with the formulation and actually made fun of the wording, but most people agreed with the essence of this formula. In particular, it was presumed that within the West, there was now full consensus that liberal democracy was the best regime, and that it was also the only game in the western village. There was also cautious optimism that eventually, democracy would gradually become dominant outside the West as well, and the West had to assist this process to go faster and smoother.

There were problems of course, but they were seen as largely residual. Ethnic conflict, like in Balkans, was considered the main one. But there was a fair amount of consensus on what this was about, and how to deal with it. Most people presumed that this was some kind of an atavistic problem, stemming from peculiarities of the Communist nationalities policy, or demagoguery of power-hungry tyrants like Milosevic, but it could be dealt with the concerted effort of the West. And ultimately, it was dealt with reasonable success: Nothing was perfect, but the principal problem was removed.

Then came 9/11. But while this was recognized as a huge problem, initially it did not seem to undermine the basic consensus: People agreed that it was a kind of atavistic expression of barbarity, and a forceful response, like American-led operation in Afghanistan was generally recognized as legitimate.

Russia was not considered a real problem, more a continuous nuisance, a difficult partner one still could deal with. Fundamentally, it was presumed to be a declining power, so one had to respect its sensitivities, but not take it into account too much. Yes, Russia objected to NATO enlargement, and it claimed to have some privileged position in the solution of Balkan problems, but so what? The discrepancy in power between Russia and the West was too big to be concerned.

But if we move to the two other parts, there was no clarity and certainty of any kind. In Russia, the brief period of enthusiasm for democracy and friendship with the West notable for early Yeltsin years soon changed with growing resentment at the West that allegedly took advantage of Russia's period of weakness. The mentioned NATO enlargement, solving Balkans without consulting Russia, as well as trying to "meddle" in Russia's backyard like Caucasus or Ukraine were resented especially strongly. But grumblingly, Russia did accept the new status quo, even though trying to preserve its zone of privileged interests in its "near abroad". The War on Terror actually resuscitated Russia's hopes that it would gain new and more equal partnership with the US, that the West would after all, give Russia her due.

The mentioned in-between countries had no clarity of purpose and vision as well. 1990s was largely a lost decade for them as they just to survive, being confronted by territorial conflicts, endemic corruption, and deep crisis of statehood. It was not clear at whether they aimed at eventually becoming democratic European nations, or were to constitute some uncertain entities in Russia's backyard. There were some young leaders who wanted European future for these countries: for instance, in 1999 Zurab Zhvania, a young speaker of Georgian Parliament, coined a phrase "I am Georgian, therefore I am European". But was it just a peculiar sound bite, or there was some real meaning behind it. In 2002, Georgia's president Shevardnadze formally made a bid for his country to join NATO, but provided he was presiding over a failed state, his bid wasn't perceived seriously.

Thus, there was relative clarity of purpose and normative consensus in the West, and none of it in the East. But in the second fifteen years, this all but reversed. The West started to lose its way. The indicators are well known and broadly discussed, here I will summarize this by saying that nothing that used to be clear is clear anymore. Europe is questioned, NATO is questioned, democracy assistance is questioned, the liberal international order is questioned. There is even no clarity about the very idea of liberal democracy, though some people rather mistrust the liberal component of it and others are no longer sure about the democratic part of it. It appears we are no longer sure where we are going, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys.

There are theories about why this happened, I will not into this discussion, but one impression is that complacency caused by the success of the mentioned fifteen years was part of the problem. I might call it soft power triumphalism. With double NATO and EU enlargements, the checklist was largely ticked off, but there was no new vision. The post-1989 momentum of clarity of purpose and values expired, and nothing came to replace it. "Resilience" became the new key-word, as coined by Federica Mogherini's office. It gives an impression that Europe (or the West in general) is primarily focused on maintaining what it has; but the lack of vision invites the sense of decline and confusion.

However, there is much higher level of clarity in the East. Having given up on the project of being appreciated by the West, Russia acquired – or thought it acquired – a new sense of clarity of narrative and of purpose. Its new platform is to openly resisting the West and the idea of liberalism as such. Russia reinvented itself as the leader of the global resistance movement against the West.

Arguably, Russia is not a real leader there: but also measurable criteria, China, not Russia, is a rising new superpower capable to challenge American/western hegemony. However, China does this quietly and incrementally, while Russia confronts the West in a demonstrative, in-your-face manner. Its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014 respectively directly challenged the liberal international order protected by the West; the latter could do nothing, and now the very idea of this order is openly questioned within the West itself. From the Russian perspective, this is a great success. Summing up the year of 2016, Russian strategist Sergei Karaganov opined that Russia is winning (in a competition with the Est), and it is doing because it is “on the right side of history” vis-à-vis the decadent liberal West. This is exact reversal of the Fukuyamian “End of History” narrative.

In this second period, the three in-between countries also started to find their voices and identity. There were Colour Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, than EuroMaidan in Ukraine again. Moldovans rejected the dominance of the Communist party in favor of coalition professing pro-European course. The aftermath of those changes were not terribly successful: these countries continue to be internally divided, semi-autocratic, and largely corrupt. However, they are increasingly defining themselves as European countries. This year, there have been democratic changes of government in Ukraine and Moldova, and as I talk a plutocratic rule of Bidzina Ivanishvili is being challenged by mostly young protesters. Here, the western-style liberal democracy continues to be the guiding light. This changes, however, put these countries – especially Georgia and Ukraine – on a collision course with Russia. They are looking for support of the West – but this is not 1990s anymore, the West is in crisis itself. They receive some support, but this is far cry from what they really need.

In the end, one is expected to say something about the future, and what to hope for. But it is obviously hard to say something definite. The best hope may be that the sense of crisis in the West becomes acute enough so that the sense of urgency and of purpose is recaptured.