

The Berlin Wall anniversary – a reminder of the ‘wall’ that still exists

☒ The fall of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9, 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the East German regime and communism in Europe. The Wall gates were opened and, for all intents and purposes, East Germany “ceased to exist.” Perhaps, only a few at the time realized what was about to happen; surely, one of the most surprised individuals was Günter Schabowski, an official of the Democratic Republic of Germany (GDR), who, mistakenly, during a historic press conference, announced the lifting of the restrictive rules for foreign travel of citizens of the DDR. This misunderstanding opened the way for the fall of the Wall and the whole Eastern Bloc with it. The anniversary of this episode is a time of remembrance of the barbarism of dictatorships; it should also serve as a symbol, projecting the future of planning and political action directed to the maintenance and expansion of freedom, social justice and respect for human dignity that communism professed – but failed – to achieve.

At the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin’s most enduring landmark, 25 years later, there are echoes of the crowds of people who celebrated and partied all night in the euphoria that came after they knocked down the very Berlin Wall that President Reagan had asked Gorbachev to tear down just a few years earlier. Nobody could have foreseen how soon that demand would be fulfilled. Now, the excitement has been replaced by a quieter mood of people celebrating solemnly their personal memories of the single event and their reflection of a historical fact, whose symbolism still reverberates around the world. But the story is not over: even those Europeans who were born after the demolition of the Berlin Wall must continue to struggle to defend and promote the development of

a democracy that includes every member of the political community. No society has achieved this goal yet.

The Soviet Union, 'Communism Central', would collapse just three years later. Ideologically, many western observers interpreted the event in prematurely exultant tones; most famously, political scientist Francis Fukuyama, captured that feeling when he coined the phrase "the end of history" to describe and the triumph of the West and of capitalist society in the perennial East-West confrontation. Indeed, history continued unabated and unconcerned while the tensions that fueled the conflict never truly subsided as demonstrated by the conflicts in Europe of the last twenty years and the ongoing civil war in Ukraine. Many in the West were too quick to rejoice in the inglorious death of what President Ronald Reagan famously described as the 'Evil Empire'. Yet the victorious proclamations and the belief that the world would somehow become freer, more just and richer turned out to be, in hindsight, wildly premature. Fukuyama's notion has clashed with the reality and critical realism, even if it has dominated the field of international relations until the present. The Warsaw Pact melted like "snow in the sun and it not a single tank was destroyed in combat," said Fukuyama. This was certainly true. The problem lies in the explanation, which is to be sought less in a moral victory of capitalism over communism and more in a shift of legitimacy, resulting in a disruption of power in the Soviet bloc. President Mikhail Gorbachev guided that disruption skillfully to soften the blow to the citizens of the former Soviet Union and its satellites, but its disruptive effects are still being felt today.

The end of the Soviet Empire still represents, for all the peoples of the world, the end of a myth, a pretext, and a different model for life in geopolitical terms. No event of the 20th century – with due respect for so many other cataclysmic episodes from the evils of Nazism to the atomic bomb, none have had such lasting repercussions and generated

so much controversy as the end of Soviet communism, symbolized by the hammers that smashed the Berlin wall to pieces 25 years ago. The fall of the Berlin Wall inaugurated a long period of unchallenged domination of by the United States as the world shifted from the bipolarism of the Cold War to American unipolarity. However, the “peace and prosperity”, as theorized by Fukuyama and many neo-liberal thinkers has failed to materialize. The Middle Class in the West, in relative terms, has been weakened and transformed, while power and wealth have shifted to an ever smaller global elite that includes many citizens of former Soviet states. Fear of communism prompted governments in the 1960’s and 70’s to adopt very progressive social mechanisms that raised standards of living to unprecedented levels in the West. Communism’s demise has facilitated the rise a ‘binge’ capitalism, or what commentator Edward Luttwak has called ‘turbo-capitalism’ that has done nothing to abate inequality. It has also failed to stop the many conflicts that have ignited amid the ashes of the Soviet Bloc from the war in Yugoslavia to the wars in Iraq and the stillborn ‘Arab Spring’. The latest example is the ongoing civil war in Ukraine. This is, in fact, the latest but surely not last post-Soviet conflict.

After an initial phase in which the United States has “enjoyed” the victory with a ‘Quisling’ or puppet like president in the Kremlin during the 90’s, Boris Yeltsin, in recent years, the clash between The West and Russia, continues as Moscow has grown weary of NATO’s expansion of influence towards the borders Federation, placing it, in fact, in a state of siege. A nationalist Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, has serious created difficulties for US administrations. The world is not yet witnessing a resumption of the old East-West dynamic – history happens once – but the pattern has an eerie familiarity and it mocks the triumphalism of 25 years ago. The fall of the Berlin Wall was indeed the end of the USSR and all that he stood for, but it was not the death of the confrontation between East and West. Mikhail Gorbachev, who

addressed the symposium dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall, encouraged the kind of dialogue that is missing today even as he launched serious accusations against the West, blaming the USA for ignoring Russian interests, warning the world that it is "on the brink of a new cold war".

After 25 years, the international relations theory has not yet adequately explained what happened in November 1989 and what process it set in motion. The Economic crisis and the end of the Asian reverence towards western hegemony has been compounded by the anti-Western Islamic awakening. Far from the 'end of history', today there is a continuous shift in the levels of legitimacy as liberal democracy is no longer able to meet the needs of the people and geopolitical, economic and social inequalities have evolved, rather than gone away, fueling a high degree of unpredictability of international phenomena.