



## Expert Comment

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet at Schloss Meseberg palace in August 2018. (Credit: Steffen Kugler/Bundesregierung via Getty Images/Getty Images News)

# Europe and Russia 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: Hopes, chances, failures

Andrey Grachev (2019)

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# 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall: Building new alliances for peace

**Andrey Grachev**

Thank you very much for this invitation. It is certainly a privilege to have the occasion to come to Berlin because if there is a place to be during these days and weeks, then it is certainly Berlin, with all its symbolism of past, present, and hopefully future.

Time goes quickly and it has already been thirty years since the momentous events that occurred not only in Berlin but across the rest of the world too.

## **Anniversaries of hope and concern**

The last time I was here, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Gorbachev was present in Berlin and was received by the Chancellor, and he also had opportunity to meet former Foreign Minister Genscher.

Five years further on, I would say the great paradox of our history since the fall of the wall is that with every anniversary, we discover that there are fewer hopes and more concerns.

If we go back 30 years from now and recall the euphoria that marked that time, we should remember that those events had seemed unbelievable, unthinkable. The disappearance of the wall, which had become a kind of eternal feature of the European landscape, was imagined by very few as something that might occur in their lifetime.

Chancellor Kohl had been in Poland at the time meeting with Lech Wałęsa, and they were certainly discussing prospects for European development. This was 1989 and numerous important events had already occurred in Eastern Europe, but as I recall, Kohl

told Wałęsa that he wasn't expecting to see the reunification of Germany and the fall of the wall in his lifetime. But then of course he had to fly back to Berlin urgently!

Amazingly, even the person who was at the origin of this earthquake, Mikhail Gorbachev, was also not informed in advance, at least so he claims, and only discovered the event after it had taken place.

### **Where did the euphoria go?**

At present, we are living in a very different world to this euphoric atmosphere of 1989. I had the chance to speak with Gorbachev a few weeks ago in Moscow and he is very concerned. He hasn't hesitated to evoke a very worrying example in recent interviews. Every year, the US *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* publishes a symbolic image of the Doomsday Clock with the minute hand showing a certain number of minutes to midnight. Recently, the picture was of the minute hand at two minutes to midnight, implying that we are that close to a third world war. The reality of a nuclear war would mean not just a third world war but a 'final' world war. The last time the clock was in this position was 1953, the year of Stalin's death and all the surrounding uncertainties, with the Korean War going on. So the real question when we think about these three intervening decades is what has gone wrong?

Look at what is happening currently: Formally, there are important celebrations planned in Berlin right now to commemorate the fall of the Berlin Wall. But there will be no equivalent celebration of the event in Moscow.

If the Scorpion music group from Germany hadn't come to Moscow to greet Gorbachev and stage a concert under the title 'thank you Gorbi' with their song 'Wind of Change', there would have been no celebration at all. This is because numerous people, including those at the official level, don't see this event as something to celebrate, with many citing Putin in his definition of the collapse of the Soviet Union as one of the biggest geopolitical catastrophes of the 20th century.

Gorbachev is seen – and blamed – by many as being the one who, whether intentionally or not, sold out the results of World War Two to the West and to the new Western enemies of present-day Russia. He is seen as being, at the very least, too naïve to have believed their promises.

But this is on the Russian side, where you can find a lot of explanations related to Russia's particular situation. But what about the Western side? Is the West, particularly western Europe, as euphoric as it was thirty years ago?

### **A troubled West**

Numerous voices around Europe today say that the enlargement that followed the fall of the wall was a worrying and badly prepared event that, even today, is endangering the initial project. This is because the eastward enlargement, with NATO and European Union structures integrating an important portion of Eastern Europe, may have consequences completely opposing the expectations of thirty years ago.

Those expectations were based on the assumption that the progressive spread of the Western mode of European life would gradually integrate the rest of Europe – at least up to the Russian border – and would spread models of democracy, human rights, and European values to the East.

But what are we seeing now? We can see a Europe that is split along many lines. We can see Vladimir Putin meeting Victor Orbán in Hungary, who is a champion of what is called 'illiberal democracy'. And we could be witnessing the danger of the Balkanisation of Europe, which would rather spread from East to West and hold dangerous problems and challenges for the European scene and influence or even endanger the European project.

Obviously Brexit is still currently on the agenda but we are also seeing a big delay to future plans for further enlargement of the European Union. Some of the founders, like

France for example, are energetically opposing future enlargement plans. The idea of integrating a country like Turkey has obviously been completely abandoned.

### **The fathers of success**

So there is uncertainty in the West as well and we can establish that perfectly well without using the name of Donald Trump. You can imagine what tone of unpredictability the mention of his name would introduce into our debate but let us stick to our quieter part of the world. By this I don't just mean Europe. Even Russia is now seen by many as a pole of stability in a very unstable world, in contrast to the source of instability, the US.

If we go back to 1989 and try to define who the fathers of the fall of the Berlin Wall were, as we know, success often has many fathers.

If you ask the Poles, they would say it was the *Solidarność* movement that destroyed the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. If you ask the Hungarians, they would say 'no, we were the first to open to Iron Curtain; we cut the barbed wire on the border with Austria'. One amusing fact from the time was that this initial opening almost passed unnoticed, and my friend Gyula Horn, who was then the Hungarian foreign minister, agreed with his Austrian counterpart to rebuild this portion of the border and to then invite the media so that they could film the cutting of the barbed wire.

So the Hungarians certainly have their role, not only in hinting at this episode of the wall, but also in allowing movements of East Germans westward.

But then what about the citizens of the GDR? Gorbachev himself says – with his typical modesty – that it was the citizens of the GDR that played the key role. It was they who went out onto the streets of Leipzig and Berlin and challenged the regime to stop them.

But I think Gorbachev cannot be totally freed from responsibility because the whole process – and the fall of the wall definitely occurred as the culmination of a process – would

not have been possible without the landslide programme of reforms he had launched in the Soviet Union.

Gorbachev's speech several months earlier at the UN was significant. He declared the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine and said that the military force of the USSR would no longer be involved in the internal affairs of other countries, including – and this was the phrase immediately heard by everyone, especially many people in Eastern Europe – those with related social systems.

That was the end of the Brezhnev Doctrine of limited sovereignty, and that was a signal to the whole of the Eastern group, an assurance that there would be no repetition of Budapest 1956, Prague 1968, or certainly of Berlin 1953.

So Gorbachev was certainly at the origins of this, through what he said and also by providing an example within his own country, with the first free elections that took place in the spring of 1989, which had been unforeseen in the Soviet Union since the time of Lenin and Stalin, and also by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, which was also completed by the spring of 1989.

All this created a new climate of change emerging from Moscow that the world could hardly resist.

Having said that, nothing was guaranteed.

In June of 1989, there was Tiananmen, when the Chinese regime used bullets and tanks to repress the student uprisings in Beijing. This uprising had been inspired by the example of Perestroika in the Soviet Union.

So the options were there for history to unfold in different ways. As far as I know from various memoirs, Honecker was quite enthusiastic about the way the Chinese dealt with the opposition in their country. The future had certainly not been pre-determined.

When Gorbachev came to Berlin in October that year, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the GDR, he made it quite clear to all the members of the politburo when he said that

those who are late for the meeting with history are often punished by it. Several days after he left, the whole succession of events took place that led to the fall of the wall.

## **A new Germany**

Then came the beginning of the big surprise.

Many people at the time had been surprised, including the French and the British, who were not happy at all. The Americans were surprised as well. These three countries were not very enthusiastic about Germany showing its determination to become a totally independent player on the global scene. This would undermine their special role as the victorious powers of World War Two and as the occupying forces in Germany.

Many of the details from the time are well known, for example about Prime Minister Thatcher, not only being shocked but furious about the fact that the Germans had chosen such a path.

But I can certainly tell you, going back to some of the anecdotes of the time, that Gorbachev was also astonished by the ten-point plan from Helmut Kohl. Although it is difficult to imagine now, Helmut Kohl's ten points from November 1989, if you read them attentively, were announcing the coexistence of two German states, not the immediate prospect of reunification as that was only planned after a period of parallel development.

## **Broken promises**

What came after this? It was then that what I would call the 'differences in interpretation' of what the wall's disappearance would mean began, with particular respect to the reunification of Germany and the appearance of this giant in the middle of Europe, but also of course to the removal of the Iron Curtain across the whole continent.

What would this mean for the global landscape and global politics in general? At the time, I can tell you that Gorbachev was less worried about this unexpected prospect of

German unification than the Americans, French, or British, because he thought his country would only gain from rebuilding closer relations with the new Germany and also from the fact that Germany would receive the keys to its unification from Moscow.

What worried Gorbachev was how this would be interpreted inside the Soviet Union, at home, how to protect his project of democratic reforms against domestic conservative forces, and how to defend his policy of new cooperation with the West against accusations that he was going to surrender his country, which was, after all the big winner of World War Two, to the West. Wouldn't this mean the capitulation of the Soviet Union? This would certainly create important political tensions behind his back.

It was this concern that lay behind Gorbachev's apparent hesitancy in this period. For example, he was not excited about the prospect of a united Germany joining NATO because the Warsaw Pact was still alive at the time. He was playing with the idea of having two Germany's in two separate pacts. Or the idea of having a united Germany proclaim its neutral status, like Austria for example, which in 1955 had obtained the possibility of becoming an independent country with the withdrawal of occupying troops, Americans and Soviets, in exchange for its status as a neutral country.

Gorbachev received promises and engagement from the West, first of all from American Secretary of State Jim Baker, on behalf of George H. W. Bush, but then confirmed by Kohl, by Mitterrand, and by Major from the UK, about the fact that the structures of NATO would not move eastward, in the case that a united Germany formally joined the alliance.

This promise was made orally, because Gorbachev could not suggest to his Western partners – at a time when the Warsaw Pact still existed – that they make a promise to him that depended on the Warsaw Pact ceasing to exist. But this was the political engagement taken by the West and it was clear to everybody.

What made Gorbachev finally accept the entry of the future Germany into NATO was the action of the people of the GDR. The elections in March 1990 clearly showed that the

GDR population was not going to wait, but they wanted reunification of the two Germanys. So even the careful programme of Kohl, which envisaged a period of coexistence and transition, had to be abandoned under pressure from the East Germans who wanted reunification immediately.

It is important to detail this period of historical actions because without this it is difficult to explain the uneasy and worrisome relationship between Vladimir Putin's present-day Russia with Europe, the US, and the West in general.

Gorbachev's agreement with idea of Germany joining NATO was conditioned by two facts: firstly, the creation and building up of a collective system of security in Europe, which would replace the confrontation between the two military blocs at that time.

That was present in the spirit, and also the wording, of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, which was signed in November 1990.

And second, a very important element, that Russia would be integrated into the European structures, under the framework of the 'common European home'. For Gorbachev, this was a fundamental factor, not only of security – at that time he wasn't afraid of invasion by Western troops – but because he wanted to use the integration of Russia with Europe as a means of democratisation, and of modernisation, for Russia, i.e., for the 'Europeanisation' of Russia.

This was contrary to traditional Russian policy under Brezhnev. You may remember that at the time, we heard about Western fears of the 'Finlandisation' of Europe by the Soviet Union.

So these are the two basic elements that, for Gorbachev, represented the fundamental conditions with which he accepted this – inevitable, after all – event.

## **NATO in Eastern Europe**

The problem was and of course remains that none of these promises were kept. Certainly not the promise not to extend NATO to the east. After the resignation of Gorbachev and the fall of the Soviet Union, we witnessed – instead of the Finlandisation of Europe by the Soviet Union – the hasty NATO-isation of Eastern Europe.

What explains this? There was no more Soviet threat, no more communist ideology representing a danger to the West, just a ‘strategic vacuum to be filled’ – this was the explanation behind this speedy NATO-isation of Eastern Europe, which brought the military borders of the West up to the borders of the post-Soviet Russia.

A second element is important to mention: there was of course no Russian entry within the common European home. The large European home wouldn't have been possible without the fall of the Berlin Wall and without the action of Gorbachev. But there was no place for Russia in this European home.

With the enlargement of the European Union structure to the east and with the integration of some of the former Soviet republics and former members of the Warsaw Pact in NATO, and then with the prospect of the integration of republics like Georgia and Ukraine, also within NATO and the European Union, can you believe that all this kind of expansion of the West eastward would not create, inside post-Soviet Russia, the feeling of frustration, deception, and the feeling of broken promises? In the case of the new leaders of Russia, who are certainly very different to Gorbachev, first Yeltsin but then Putin, it fostered a sense of threat.

Europe and the West started to represent a threat, not a threat in the military or strategic sense – I don't think anybody believed in a military confrontation, although we still don't have guarantees against accidents – but the threat of a West that could behave inspired by the projects of ‘regime change’ behind the new lines of the East-West divide.

The Cold War was a story of the containment of the Soviet Union by the West and NATO. But who was now going to contain the West?

### **Where should Russia turn?**

In the Western press, we often hear significant questions and concerns about how far Putin will go, referring of course to Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria. But has anybody asked the question being asked back in Moscow: how far will NATO go in encircling the Russian space?

Russia's accumulation of feelings of frustration and of being threatened and rejected arose from this concern. And in Russia's case, being ejected from Europe means being pushed towards Asia.

Russia is a Eurasian country. It has always had a complicated history of relations with Europe, from the time of Peter the Great right up until Gorbachev, with Stalin and Brezhnev in between. This history has had its ups and downs. There has been a mixture of intentions, aiming to both imitate Europe and to intimidate and dominate Europe. Sometimes these intentions have operated in parallel.

Each generation makes its own imprint on the nature of Russian-European relations and I am afraid that what we are observing now is a very unfortunate possibility. Hopefully we are not yet at the point of no return but there is a developing feeling that Russia is to be separated from its European family.

You can read a lot in Russian papers about Russia being a kind of autonomous, self-sufficient world that should no longer take Europe as an example, which has been the Russian tradition in literary and cultural history, stretching right from Peter the Great's reforms to Gorbachev's reforms. But Europe is no longer seen as the horizon or the key model to be imitated, still less as something Russian should be integrated within.

## Zero-sum thinking

But if not Europe, then what? China?

If we talk in terms of strategic games, we are unfortunately at the point of what during the Cold War was called the ‘zero-sum’ game. This means that if your adversaries win, you lose, and vice-versa. There is no win-win. We are unfortunately back at this stage with a very dangerous possibility of a renewed arms race, with Donald Trump denouncing the INF Treaty. This means there is a chance of Euromissiles returning to Europe, both American and Russian.

When Gorbachev signed his side of the treaty with Reagan in 1987, he ran an enormous political risk at home because he was obliged to destroy twice as many Euromissiles (SS-20s) as the Americans. He accepted this in order to eliminate Euromissiles from Europe, as their only targets would have been European countries. They cannot fly over oceans – they were only to be applied in Europe, or in Asia.

What this apparently means now, from the position of US strategy, is that China could become a target of these intermediate-range missiles. This is another reason for Russia and China to move closer together in this zero-sum game. We should stress that this is a *game*. There are no real security concerns behind it, as in the Cold War, where there were genuine plans on either side for the destruction of the other and the movement of tanks across territories.

In the current climate, this is a political game. It is a game for the Americans, which Donald Trump is playing with the idea of protecting himself against impeachment. It is a game for Vladimir Putin too. It doesn’t mean he is afraid that American Euromissiles would be stationed in Poland but he is obliged to reply, because if your partner is making a move, as a good chess player you are obliged to make an opposing move. The great concern is that this draws us into a spiral of unpredictable evolution, over which those who started it could lose control.

## **A world in need of Euro-Russian cooperation**

For this reason, we are in a very precarious, uncertain, and worrying situation. Europe may discover itself squeezed between East and West. The new East-West conflict is not going to be between the Americans and the Russians, but between the Americans and the Chinese.

And in this new East-West conflict, both Europe and Russia, if they can't re-establish their relationship, are losers, because the Russians will be reduced the role of junior partners of the Chinese – as suppliers of raw materials, oil and gas, but also military equipment – and the Europeans to the role of junior partners of the Americans.

Recently Putin announced that Russia is ready to use its new anti-ballistic missile defence system to protect China. But this means that Russia is reduced to the role of a border guard for China. But Europe's position is no better. It no longer has a worldwide role. Thrown out of the Middle East and no longer independent and autonomous, neither in Syria, nor Iraq, nor Lebanon. And Europe is of little interest to its American partners and godfathers because Trump, being a truly pragmatic businessman, is not interested in investing in projects that are not economically justified.

Why should the US invest in NATO, or in European defence? To protect Europe against whom? Trump knows, better than many Eastern Europeans, the Baltics, the Poles and others, that Putin is not going to attack them. So why should the US invest in European defence if Europe isn't even investing in European defence itself? So the European role is to be reduced to that of a junior partner of the US with the unpredictable Trump in the White House.

What is clear in this situation is that the world is missing a logical basis of cooperation and entente between Europe and Russia. A European home that naturally reaches to the East, with Russia within this common European home, could extend to the Pacific. Sadly, with Russia joining China in confrontation with the West, Europe will discover a part of the

great wall of China on its eastern border that will replace the Berlin Wall that was destroyed thirty years ago.

**Andrey Grachev**

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