

Not to forget history, not to be blinded by it either

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In the sixth month of Barak Obama's Presidency twenty two former politicians and intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe addressed an open letter to the new Administration. The signatories are worried of emerging trends of 'pragmatism' and 'realism' in Washington's foreign policy. It is rather symptomatic that no worries were expressed in these circles when George W. Bush was in the White House and American prestige was falling around the world.

The letter is a direct result of President Obama's visit to Moscow and small and cautious steps towards what has become fashionable to call 'resetting' the relations between Washington and Moscow (though 'upgrading', not going back to either Soviet or Yeltsin years, is what is really needed). The authors of the open letter 'want to ensure that too narrow an understanding of Western interest does not lead to the wrong concessions to Russia'. They don't have any doubts that perhaps it may be their own perception of Western (as well as their peoples') interests that may be narrow and even parochial. They worry that in their countries a new generation of leaders may emerge that don't share old memories and that would follow more 'realistic' policies. But isn't this exactly what is needed? New leaders (be it in Russia, in Eastern Europe or in America), not burdened by the stereotypes of the past era, would be better equipped to tackle 21st century challenges. Even the revolutionaries of the 1980s such as Mikhail Gorbachev, Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel (the last two are signatories of the letter) - notwithstanding all their great contribution to the advancement of freedom in their own countries as well as in the world as a whole - can hardly be leaders in a 21st century world. It is only in military dictatorships that those who carry out coups also keep ruling long after coming to power (if not overthrown by another coup). Usually it is that 'la révolution devore ses enfants' though not necessarily in the literal sense as in France of 1789 or in Russia of 1917.

The signatories who write that they are 'Atlanticist voices within NATO and the EU' seem to speak mainly on behalf of what the former Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called 'the new Europe' in contradistinction to the 'old', i.e. Western, Europe. However, what may have been

praiseworthy and new from the point of view of Messrs Bush, Cheney or Rumsfeld was not necessarily true even then. Today, at least with hindsight, we see that in many cases it was 'the old Europe' that was more prescient (e.g., on WMD and the war in Iraq generally) than 'the new Europe', which thankfully yet blindly always followed Washington's lead.

As the world is becoming more and more globalised, many Eastern Europeans are more prone than most Westerners to see the world as Euro- or rather as Atlanto-centric. During the Soviet domination of this part of Europe these peoples indeed rightly saw the West, and especially the United States, as the only force that could help them become part of a prosperous and free world (in Estonia, for example, it was the dream of 'the white ship' coming to free us). Therefore their Atlanto-centrism may be explicable but this doesn't mean that it is a right approach, or that it reflects new realities. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall a vision of the world as divided into 'us', i.e. Euro-Atlantists and 'them', i.e. the rest including Islamic countries, China and the Eastern Europeans closest neighbour and former hegemonic power - Russia, is a twentieth century image of the world that is based on an ideological and confrontational vision of international relations.

Eastern European nations have joined Western Europe at a time when more and more people in the West understand that the world is not anymore Euro- or even Atlanto-centric. Contrary to the Bush Administration's simplistic vision of the world - 'those who are not with us are against us' (or even: those who are not like us are - at least potentially - against us) the current American leadership seems to understand that the world is much more complicated.

Today, we see that many in those countries that have only recently joined the Western club of nations are much more ideologically minded than the 'old' West, or for that matter even the former ideological, *par definition*, powers Russia and China. In that respect they are more akin to the neocons of the George W Bush era. The signatories of the letter more than once warn against 'realism' and 'pragmatism' in the foreign policy of the West, i.e. they emphasise the need of ideologically based foreign policy.

Although we, Estonians, are generally quite pragmatic people, it seems to me there is too much ideology in our society. The Soviet Union, from which we 18 years ago broke free, was an ideological empire. The rejection of the Soviet ideology may take two main forms: jumping into the folds of an opposite ideology, i.e. from the leftist to the rightist, from a totalitarian to a ultra-libertarian, or becoming critical of any ideology. I belong to the latter category and already in the summer of 1991, before 20 August when Estonia regained its independence, when Juri Luik (then the Head of the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry and later Minister) and I

worked on foreign policy concept of a future independent Estonia, he favoured an ideological concept while I was for a pragmatic approach. Today I am even more convinced that not only foreign policy but politics generally as well as economics and other social spheres are in need of pragmatic approaches. This does not mean that one has to reject ideas, even radical, bold and big ideas. There are times for them too. While ideas are usually forward looking, ideology is tied to the past. Neither does pragmatism necessitate one to give up one's values. The *Economist* speaking of Margaret Thatcher, who is usually thought of as a free market ideologue *par excellance*, writes that 'She was much more of a pragmatist than is often credited; it was when she ditched that approach to pursue the Platonic ideal of Thatcherism that she was undone'.¹⁷³ It was pragmatist Thatcher who succeeded in turning around ailing British economy and it was ideological Thatcherite Thatcher who failed as politician. To put it otherwise, if there is a conflict between ideology and facts, for an ideologue these are the facts that have to give way.

There is a dangerous tendency, especially in some former Soviet bloc states, to support any entity, any action, to endorse any statement that is seen as directed against Russia. The clearest example was their reaction to the war between Georgia and Russia that started almost exactly a year ago. In order to better illustrate this attitude of political elites of some Eastern European states to the August 2008 military conflict in the Caucasus let us compare it with some reactions to another conflict in a different part of the world and at a different period.

In the 1980s Soviet Union, there lived and worked a man called Marklen Ivanovich Lazarev. In the spring of 1982, at the beginning of the Falklands war between Argentina and Great Britain, the then Deputy Director of the Institute for Latin America Studies and Professor of international law in Moscow wrote in one of the leading Soviet newspapers that although it was obvious that Argentina had used military force first, it should be nevertheless absolutely clear for every person of good will who was the aggressor, i.e. it axiomatically should have been the 'perfidious Albion' - an 'imperialist ally' of the 'hegemonic United States'. This is the best example of an attitude driven by ideology. Such an approach was widespread in all communist countries. In such cases, one's perceptions and actions are guided not by facts but exclusively by preconceived ideas, concepts and stereotypes, i.e. by ideology. In the case of Marklen Ivanovich Lazarev this was the communist ideology that was instinctively anti-American and anti-Western. In the case of the reaction of political elites in some Eastern European countries to the last August war between Georgia and Russia it was the fear and hatred of Russia that served as a distorting lens through which they saw all the developments in the Caucasus. No doubt, there are many negative

¹⁷³ The *Economist*, 22 August 2009, p. 27.

facts and tendencies in the external and, in my opinion, even more so in internal politics of Russia, some of which may justifiably worry and concern other peoples and governments as well. However, this does not mean that Russia was the main culprit of the last year's military conflict between Georgia and Russia. Today it has become more and more widely recognised in the West that it was Georgian President Saakashvili that initiated the conflict.¹⁷⁴

Such a reaction was due to a combination of what I would call three d's: dislike, dread and for some even disappointment. Dislike, because Russia, or the Soviet Union for that matter, had in the past indeed all too often behaved like a big bully (though she is not the only one, nor even the first in this category); dread because, as we saw in the case of Russia's forceful and disproportionate response to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia in August 2008, suddenly this 'colossus with clay feet' or 'Upper Volta with missiles', as some may have thought of her, was, once again, like the Phoenix, rising from the ashes; disappointment since notwithstanding 'the 1990s promises' she still refuses to become a 'normal' country and toe the line drawn in Washington.

Fear and hatred are the worst guides in politics and ideological approaches that subordinate facts to preconceived ideas are recipes for disaster. President (then still Senator) Obama wrote that while 'values are faithfully applied to facts before us, ideology overrides whatever facts call

1

theory into question'. We in Estonia, and I believe people, in other Baltic countries as well as in Eastern and Central Europe live in the post-Soviet space. In geographical terms this is an incontestable fact. We were occupied by the Soviet Union or like Poland, Hungary and other Eastern and Central European nations were made satellite states of the USSR. However, in my opinion, there is also too much post-Soviet mentality in some of our societies. Using the proverbial fox and hedgehog analogy¹⁷⁵, we concentrate on one big thing - our past grievances and we see today's world as well as future tendencies coloured by this spectrum. Here we were closely following neocons in the Bush Administration.

¹⁷⁴ See, e.g., D. Bandow, 'Tbilisi's Baggage', *The National Interest Online*, 31 December, 2008; The German *Spiegel* wrote as early as in November 2008: 'One thing was already clear to the officers at NATO headquarters in Brussels: They thought that the Georgians had started the conflict and that their actions were more calculated than pure self-defense or a response to Russian provocation. In fact, the NATO officers believed that the Georgian attack was a calculated offensive against South Ossetian positions to create the facts on the ground, and they coolly treated the exchanges of fire in the preceding days as minor events. Even more clearly, NATO officials believed, looking back, that by no means could these skirmishes be seen as justification for Georgian war preparations' ('Did Saakashvili Lie? The West Begins to Doubt Georgian Leader', *Spiegel International Online*, 15 November, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ B. Obama, *The Audacity of Hope. Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Canongate, 2006, p. 59.

¹⁷⁶ The dilemma of the fox, who knows many things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing, raised by ancient Greek poet Archilochus and made famous by Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin in his book on Leo Tolstoi 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' is still with us.

Last autumn *Washington Post's* editorial showed its ideological bias in such a way: 'When Vladimir Putin seeks to extend Russia's influence, he doesn't just want more people watching Russian movies or buying Russian MiGs. He wants to replicate among his neighbors the kind of one-party rule he has imposed on his own country'.¹⁷⁷ This is a clear example of an ideologically driven approach to politics, an illustration of how Russia can be misperceived when facts and evidence are not taken account of. Today's Russia, or China for that matter, is not trying to turn liberal democracies into autocratic capitalists, or communists for that matter. Even the ideologically rigid Soviet Union could co-exist and cooperate, say, with capitalist and democratic Finland benefiting, like Finland did, from such cooperation (though it is necessary to emphasize that this was rather an exception than a rule). Today Russia's foreign policy is quite pragmatic (some may say, too pragmatic when accusing it, for example, of selling arms to unsavoury regimes). In contrast to Mao's China and the former Soviet Union, today's China and Russia are not trying to export their values even when they support pro-Chinese or pro-Russian regimes abroad. What matters is not the ideology of such regimes but their attitude towards Russia (not what they are but what they do). Attempts to expand Russian values (and it is not clear even to most Russians what those values are and to what extent they differ from Western values) to other countries are not among the sins attributable to the Kremlin. Such misperceptions of Russia have their roots in recent history and do not take account of changing realities. I agree with Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry who write that 'The democratic states should orient themselves to pragmatically address real and shared problems rather than focusing on ideological differences. Looking for alignments based on interests rather than regime type will further foreclose the unlikely coalescence of an antiliberal autocratic bloc'.¹⁷⁸ It is not only that all states cannot become, at least for some time, liberal democracies; there are common challenges that can be met only when different states closely cooperate; divisions of states into 'us' and 'them', into 'leagues of democracies' and 'pariah states' are counterproductive. Take one of the current hot spots - Afghanistan. *The International Herald Tribune* put it well: 'Obama's Afghan challenge will be more diplomatic than military. To save Afghanistan, he will need to mold a strategic partnership that includes parties as disparate as Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian states. This will not be an easy task. But the alternative is endless war in Afghanistan'.¹⁷⁹ The agreement on Afghanistan signed between America and Russia during the recent visit of President Obama to Moscow is a small but very significant step in the right direction. Without some kind of diplomatic

¹⁷⁷' 'The Freedom Challenge', *Washington Post*, Editorial, 24 November, 2008.

¹⁷⁸' D. Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, 'The Myth of the Autocratic Revival. Why Liberal Democracy Will Prevail', *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2009.

¹⁷⁹. 'Obama's Afghan Challenge: Build a New Alliance', *International Herald Tribune*, 6 January 2009.

and political alliance between Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and the Central Asian states, and probably other actors as well (even if *ad hoc*) NATO's Afghan mission will suffer the same fate the Soviet incursion of 1979-1988 or the nineteenth century British invasions of this country did.

The request of the signatories of the letter that 'NATO must reconfirm its core function of collective defence even while we adapt to the new threats of the 21st century' is an attempt to drag NATO back into the Cold War era while what is needed is to continue the transformation of the Alliance into a genuine collective security body that would deal more successfully with those new security threats that cannot be effectively tackled if NATO reconfirms its core Cold War role. A 21st century NATO should be able to have strategic partnerships with countries that aren't necessarily its member-states or even with those that don't share its core values.

The world has changed since Yalta. In contradistinction to the Cold War rivalry between ideologically motivated blocks, today states, with a few exceptions, are not threats to each others' security and development (I am not an idealist who believes in a harmonious and conflict-free world; however today's contradictions are usually not due to ideological incompatibilities but they arise out of differences of concrete interests). On the contrary, only through co-operation among all countries and first of all among most powerful states, can be resolved the most acute contemporary threats such as spread of WMD, terrorism, the current economic and financial crisis, ecological problems and drug trafficking. Moreover, in today's world great power cooperation, and even their strategic partnerships, cannot take place through a division of the world into respective spheres of influence, at the expense of and sacrificing interests of small countries. At the same time, it is undeniable that all states have spheres of interest and the bigger and more powerful a state the further such spheres extend. For the US not only Latin and Central America but also the Middle and Far East are regions where Washington considers its interests to be vital and where its influence has to run supreme. For Russia the Caucasus is certainly a region of such interests. And no state is content with having hostile governments in power in neighbouring countries. However, recognizing if not legitimacy then at least inevitability of interests of all states, and especially of great powers, that transcend states' borders, doesn't mean that one should also agree that such powers have the right to special zones of influence. Robert Legvold in a recent article in *Foreign Affairs* writing about the American initiatives in Eastern Europe, observes that 'it is in the U.S. national interest - not least because it is in the interest of global stability - that as many states in the region as possible emerge as peaceful, stable, prosperous, and self-confident democratic societies. But it is also in the United States' long-term interest to avoid promoting this goal in ways that intentionally or unintentionally encourage these states to balance against Russia ...' (R. Legvold, 'The Russia File', *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2009,

pp. 92-93). Even more damaging is the encouragement of such balancing for smaller Russian neighbours, some of whom during the Bush Administration competed in their anti-Russian rhetoric. Rivalry and mutual suspicions (not the close cooperation, which was non-existent) between Russia and the United States have also contributed to the instability and crises in Georgia and Ukraine.

The nostalgia for Cold War clarity is seen in the attitude of the authors of the letter towards 'the thorniest issue' of the planned missile defence in Europe. They warn that 'abandoning the program entirely or involving Russia too deeply in it' can undermine the credibility of the United States. Such support for the controversial anti-missile shield, which would allegedly protect the West from missiles from 'rogue' states and which would have nothing to do with Russia, in a letter whose main (or even only) concern is about Washington 'resetting' the relations with Moscow at the expense of Russia's small neighbours and which does not even mention any of those 21st century security threats, shows that at least in the minds of these former leaders and intellectuals the missile shield was indeed all about Russia. Even if such a shield were not able to effectively protect the West from Russian missiles (the radar in the Czech Republic would certainly be able to cover a big part of the Russian territory and where there are 10 interceptors there may well soon be 20 and so on), it would in any case work as a factor that hinders the development more cooperative relations between America and Russia, and between the West and Russia.

Finally, though I would like to see Lech Walesa and other Poles visiting the United States without the need of queuing for visas (I hate that because I have had to queue for, say, Russian visas) and though I don't approve of the methods used by 'the French anti-globalization activist Jose Bove' (whose extreme views I don't share), who can use the visa free regime with the US, there is nothing incomprehensible in the fact that this French citizen does not need a visa if he wants to visit the US while Lech Walesa does. Visa regimes are waived for countries and not for individuals. Do the authors of the letter seriously believe that visa regimes should be dependent on the political views of individuals? Or maybe instead they would prefer a visa regime for 'the old Europe' where many may indeed 'too freely' voice their anti-American sentiments? Although admittedly, within the last six months these sentiments are on the wane and there are less worries about American foreign policy trends in the world.