

Putin and Gorbachev on Same Side of Berlin Wall

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Germany commemorated the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on Sunday. Russian President Vladimir Putin was busy with more important matters in the Far East and did not attend the celebrations, but former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev did go, and he promised to explain the political position of the Russian president to the Europeans. It is difficult to imagine a more absurd ambassador for Putin, and yet Gorbachev and Putin share some surprising similarities.

Putin clearly has no desire to emulate Gorbachev, the person he blames for the collapse of the Soviet Union — an event that Putin once referred to as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." And Gorbachev, who has outlived by 20 years the country he attempted to reform, is clearly not the figure whose personal authority would illuminate the political horizon of Putin's Russia.

Gorbachev, who had every chance of bolstering his image with an appearance at the Berlin Wall, said in an interview that, while he does not share Putin's views on domestic policy, he

does understand his foreign policy approach, and saw in the Russian president's speech two weeks ago at the Valdai Discussion Club an attempt to restart a dialogue with the West.

Apparently, Gorbachev has not learned in the 23 years since he resigned from public office that domestic and foreign policies are inextricably linked. What's more, nobody understands that better than the man for whom Gorbachev would play ambassador: Putin knows perfectly well that it was his hard-fisted foreign policy that generated the current groundswell of public support in Russia. And it is that support that will enable the Putin administration to simply ignore Russia's falling socio-economic indicators for some time to come.

Another reason Gorbachev's mission to decipher the signals Putin is supposedly sending the West seems strange is that the current political leadership, including the president, is composed of the very people who stripped Gorbachev of his post and his country. It is commonly held that the events in Moscow in 1991 were a democratic revolution somewhat similar to previous changes in power in Central and Eastern European countries.

But if that were the case, would Russia's relations with the West have soured so terribly? In fact, the main driving force behind the events of 1991 was the desire by a "second tier" of Soviet bureaucrats to gain control over as many resources as possible. Although Putin did not play a significant role in that process, his political career would never have materialized without that bureaucratic revolution.

And yet despite their almost genetic dissimilarity, Gorbachev and Putin share some traits in common.

Without Gorbachev, the Berlin Wall really would not have fallen — at least not in 1989. Without his involvement, it is impossible to imagine how events would have unfolded otherwise, and even what did happen proved incredibly difficult for Germany. Uniting two countries by "executive order" was impossible, despite the euphoria that prevailed on that November evening when East German Politburo member Günter Schabowski announced the new rules for crossing the border between East and West Germany. Even now, after a unified Germany has endured for more than half the number of years that it previously spent divided, the country still feels the consequences of that division.

According to the freely available parts of his biography and his own interviews, Putin played a role as functionary at that time such that, without his participation, Germany's reunification might have been far more dramatic and possibly even bloodier.

But aside from that superficial parallel, what really unites these two politicians from two different generations is that, paradoxically, both fail to understand that no wall or other barrier will hold back people who have lost faith in the social model offered them by leaders on "this side of the wall." Gorbachev probably agreed to the elimination of the Berlin Wall as a goodwill gesture within the framework of his proposed policies of new thinking.

As a leader, Gorbachev was in more desperate straits in 1989 than Putin is today: At home, he had to deal with a country whose socio-economic development lagged far behind the West's and that had overextended itself economically in an arms race. To get some breathing space on the domestic front, Gorbachev had to end the confrontation with the West.

And despite the fact that Gorbachev's understanding of global politics really was groundbreaking after decades of Cold War, he offered his consent to the unification of Germany much as a supremely confident poker player might lay his trump card on the table in a high stakes game. But if he had realized how totally unattractive the Soviet people found the system he was trying to reform, he probably would have undertaken very different reforms.

Similarly, Russia might have adopted a very different policy toward Ukraine if Moscow leaders had taken a moment to consider the unattractiveness of the system they were offering Kiev. In effect, Russia's categorical refusal to recognize the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics means that the Berlin Wall still exists, but has shifted several hundred kilometers to the east — a fact that deeply angers Russia's politicians.

And the fact that Gorbachev shares that thinking enough to be able to reiterate it in more comprehensible form to the West means that, oddly enough, the wall continues to exist in his consciousness as well — and its movement several hundred kilometers to the east angers the author of the "new political thinking" just as much as it does Putin.

In fact, the political consciousness of the West also maintains a new Berlin Wall several hundred kilometers to the east — and apparently would have no problem with it moving even further. Thus, it seems that the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall actually commemorates its perpetuation in the thinking of today's leaders — in the East and West.

As almost always happens in history, there remains a chance to more thoroughly demolish the wall. Ironically, Putin's domestic policies are moving closer to those once pursued by Gorbachev — that is, toward the very course the president would least like to follow.

He is confronted with a situation requiring drastic changes. He has surrounded himself with conservatives who oppose change. Meanwhile, today's "second tier" of bureaucrats is waiting in the wings for their chance. And as happened in 1991, the president of the country moves either reluctantly or else in response to inexorable circumstance.

The way events unfold now, and whether we will see a repeat of the same finale, depends on whether those who retain the wall in their heads and hearts are able to rid themselves of that concrete burden once and for all.

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