

Vladislav Zubok: “The soviet collapse and its consequences for Russia”

On April 20th, we had the honor to host the Professor Vladislav Zubok for a Global Conversation. Professor Zubok is a real expert in his field having written books such as “A Failed Empire: the Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev” and “Zhivago’s Children: the Last Russian Intelligentsia”. He has received the Lionel Gelber Prize and the Marshall Shulman Prize of American Association for Advancement of Slavic Studies. Currently, Zubok is professor of international history at the London School of Economics.



The Global Conversation itself was not only focused on the history and collapse of the Soviet system, but also on the current situation in Russia and the various headlines we are so used to see on the media. The discussion was divided in two parts; firstly, the Professor focused on the collapse of Soviet Union and the formation of the current State of Russia. Then, moving on to second part of the conversation, he covered Russia’s current president Vladimir Putin.

Starting from the collapse of USSR in 1991, the Russian society suffered major consequences. The end of the regime not only created major economic and political problems, but, perhaps worst of all, it was the shock and humiliation of a failed system and the distraction of a dream many shared.

On a national level, the collapse of the system resulted in a new kind of political order, that in fact had little to do with the idea of order. Indeed, the society was left without a central system, and such a condition eventually resulted in crime and corruption. Nowadays, we can see the current Russian State emerging from anarchy and violence, and professor V. Zubok describes Russian President V. Putin as a mediator in this situation.

On the international level, the circumstances were not that better. Russian dreams of superiority, indeed, continued to be crushed. What was an ideological and political superpower

during the years of the Cold War, now turned into a complete failure. During the 90's, Russia was trying to recover from the collapse and its weakness was an opportunity for Western powers, such as US and Western Europe, to expand their influence. Despite Russia's constant objections, the NATO kept carrying on its expansion to Eastern and Central Europe, further decreasing the Russian zone of influence. The President at the time – Boris Yeltsen – defined such a policy as an actual isolation of the Russian power. Consequently, the Russian relationships with the West kept getting worse and worse, generating an anti-western society.

Professor Zubok then moved on to talk about Putin as the Russian leader.

According to him, Putin is the figure of a man who reinvented himself from the ashes of the KGB after the fall of Soviet Union. His primary goals were (and are) first, to rebuild the Russian state from its current state of violence and anarchy, and then to rebuild the Russian economy on neoliberal basis. Finally, he aimed at gaining richness and power for himself.

The Professor compared Putin persona to those in Dostoevskij's novel, *The Idiot*. Why? Because, much like Dostoevskij's characters, he was humiliated multiple times as a Russian: he grew up in a very poor zone of St. Petersburg, he had no career in the KGB (he was indeed stuck in low ranking positions for about 17 years), and was humiliated again in 1991. According to Professor Zubok, such a background is what motivated him to become powerful in the first place.

These peculiar traits make him the perfect "hybrid" leader to lead the "hybrid state" that Russia became. He was not, as the American President McCain once defined him, "a KGB man"; he was instead a new type of leader, capable to adapt to the current Russian condition.

During his first mandate, Putin had to deal with the then American President Bush, and the two of them quickly became friends, so much in fact that the Russian impression was that Putin "recruited" America.

The collaboration between the two nations was very strong on some levels, but also very fragile on some others. In 2002, the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty, that represented the new collaboration between Russia and the USA. From that point onwards, the two nations kept a

tense relationship that only got worse as time went on, as for when the US proposed the NATO membership to the ex Yugoslavian countries, or when Putin gave a harsh speech where he accused the US of having an agenda to create a unipolar power centered in Washington.

Finally, Professor Zubok addressed the security dilemma.

But what is that exactly? According to the Britannica, the security dilemma refers to "a situation in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which in turn lead to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state's security".

This problem peaked with the creation of the NATO-Russia Council, a political tool aimed to handle the issue of worldwide security, which then exploded because of the war in Georgia and the expulsion of two Russian delegates, as it was taken as a provocation by Russia. As the anti Russian rebellion rose in Georgia, Putin grew paranoid about the Western influence fueling these riots. The situation between the two superpowers escalated quickly, and it involved other countries, such as Ukraine.

Thanks to the political framework presented by the Professor, we can see how the relationship between US and Russia came to be what they are nowadays, but no prediction for the future can be made, as the current President of the US, Donald Trump, is considered to be highly unpredictable on this front.

This conversation was helpful to understand the current situation between the two superpowers, giving an insight to their development and offering a non-Western point of view.

In conclusion, we can understand that Professor Zubok, a neoliberal himself, does not agree with the current government in Russia, but at the same time he admitted that he currently sees no other option than Putin.

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