

# The pandemic as a challenge and new thinking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

A PRESENTATION BY THE GORBACHEV FOUNDATION

## MIKHAIL GORBACHEV

Former president of the Soviet Union until 1991 | Received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 for his decisive role in the disarmament negotiations with the USA and thus the end of the Cold War

*Mikhail Gorbachev (Head of the author group), Pavel Palazhchenko, Vasily Zharkov, Olga Zdravomyslova, Karen Karagezyan, Vladimir Polyakov, Andrey Ryabov*

The pandemic that has infected and killed hundreds of thousands of people is a new challenge threatening modern civilisation. It exacerbates existing problems between states while at the same time being a product of them. The response must be comprehensive and all-encompassing. Humanity must develop this response together in order to move to a new level of international cooperation and create a more reliable global security system. What is unique about the current crisis is that the disaster it has caused is unfolding 'here and now' and affects all social groups. We cannot take half measures or implement merely technical solutions: the new threat demands a complete revision of international politics.

Any state may claim that a call to comply with international obligations constitutes interference in its internal affairs, thereby essentially blocking the effect of international law wherever it contradicts that state's understanding of its rights and interests. This is the paradox of today's system of international relations. The second half of the 1980s brought the realisation that the foundations of international politics needed to be revised urgently. The concept of new political thinking that was developed during the Perestroika era proceeds from the premise that states and peoples should, while respecting each other's independence and refraining from interference in each other's affairs, at the same time recognise their common responsibility for the survival of humankind. The new thinking proposed a project to reshape the world in accordance with universal human values, in particular respect for human life and the freedom and security of each and every individual.

The 2020 pandemic once again presents a need for a speedy transition from confrontation to partnership. Clearly, the fight against the pandemic and the consequences of the crisis it has caused require

urgent collective action to save people and prevent an even greater disaster. The ideas of new thinking must return to the global political agenda, since the world is once again at a crossroads: we can either continue to primarily follow instincts born of national self-interest, or realise that civilisation has reached the point where the interrelation and interconnection of states necessitates a new global policy. The future of humanity depends on this choice.

## NEW POLITICAL THINKING AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Three decades ago, new political thinking gave fresh hope for the progress of democratisation and the development of a more equitable system of international relations. In the second half of the 1980s, the policy of new thinking made it possible to put an end to the Cold War. The breakup of the USSR and the revision of the outcome of the Cold War resulted in a progressive exacerbation of the global situation and the emergence of new challenges: the need for a new model of globalisation; the growth of conflict in the world; the counteroffensive of authoritarianism; and the threat to the future of democracy. The current model of globalisation has demonstrated its vulnerability to the crisis caused by the pandemic. After the pandemic ends, restrictions on person-to-person contact and movement across borders will continue for a while. However, modern economies will not be able to develop within national boundaries. This means that the problems in the functioning of the global economy and 'mega-society' will have to be addressed in parallel with efforts to ensure the biological and medical security of the international community. Deadly viruses emerge in poor 'third-world' countries (like the Ebola virus in West Africa), or in countries with major imbalances in their development, such as China. Since viruses know no borders, wealthy developed countries will have to revise their policies

towards developing states and introduce new forms of cooperation. The problem of providing effective aid to the countries on the global periphery is becoming relevant again. The only way that we can develop and launch a new globalisation project that is more equitable than the neoliberal model is if the countries that form the 'core' of the modern global system come up with a new policy aimed at eliminating inequality and limiting the commercialisation of all areas of life. The pandemic has become a factor in rising global discord. Tensions between the United States and China are growing. The European Union is struggling to define the path of its future development. Developed states are grappling with the need to restrict migration, which, in turn, aggravates conflicts both along the north-south axis and within the global periphery. New steps for maintaining global security will be required, and the leading world powers will have to be the first to amend their policies.

The fact that the wave of democratisation in many countries has given way to a counteroffensive on the part of authoritarianism is a major hindrance to implementing the principles of the new thinking. Support for authoritarianism has increased during the pandemic. Freedom House reports that the coronavirus has resulted in a 'dramatic democratic breakdown' in the twenty-nine 'nations in transit'.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has made citizens more vulnerable to violations of their rights, including in countries with established democratic traditions. The threat of ubiquitous electronic surveillance is becoming more and more obvious. It is not enough to rely on legal constraints in this area. A counterbalance is needed; specifically, authorities need to be made more accountable and there needs to be greater public control over their activities at all levels. Consequently, expanding direct democracy and making greater use of e-democracy instruments is very important.

The world that existed for a privileged few (*la belle époque*) collapsed during the First World War. Since then, there have been no attempts to revive that kind of world order. Therefore, the projects of a future 'digital world' that essentially cater to the interests of a 'creative minority' cannot but cause concern. As a counterbalance to these projects, demand will emerge for new forms and institutions of international social solidarity and for a new social and environmental policy geared towards the majority. There is an emerging need for a new social democra-

tic project. This isn't just a demand of left-wing political movements and disempowered, underprivileged groups. Civilisation as a whole needs a project of this kind to balance the interests of various social and professional groups, the interests of the majority and the interests of the minority. The time has come to think of international organisations not so much as bodies of global governance, but primarily as bodies of global democratisation. Defining the 'main tenets of the new thinking' in 2019, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote: 'Democratisation of society and democratisation of international relations are two facets of a global trend. This means that each country should be free to choose its own path. Imposing a particular understanding of democracy, especially by force, is impermissible.'<sup>2</sup>

#### NEW THINKING AND ITS RELEVANCE IN LIGHT OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

The coronavirus crisis is international, cross-border and universal. It has brought to the foreground the issue of humanity's survival and the absolute priority that must be given to the life of every human being as a necessary condition for the survival of civilisation as a whole. Jürgen Habermas, one of the world's leading living philosophers, says that 'our complex societies constantly face an enormous deficit of security'. Today, however, 'existential uncertainty is spreading throughout the world' since all states and societies are confronting the danger of the pandemic and its 'entirely unpredictable economic and social consequences'.<sup>3</sup> Of particular relevance today is the principle of new thinking which states that in the modern world security is indivisible. Either everyone is equally secure, or no one is. In other words, we need the security of every state to be combined with the same level of security in all other members of the global community. This can only be achieved if international rivals are compelled to become partners and search for a path to universal security together. In today's world, no one can strive solely for their own security and welfare at the expense of others. The world is coming to realise this. In May, with the economic crisis unfolding and the unity of the European Union shaken by the pandemic, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron proposed issuing collective European bonds with a view to aiding the states that have suffered most during the pandemic. Macron called the French-German proposal 'a true change in ideology'. Mujtaba Rahman, chief European analyst for the Eurasia Group, said, 'It's a European revolution – if it goes through.'<sup>4</sup>

The indivisibility of security has become even more apparent as doctors and scientists, whose professions know no borders or differences of ethnicity, work at the forefront of the fight for security. As soon as a coronavirus vaccine is developed, it should be made available to every country equally, precisely because security can only be ensured if states and peoples act together. Adherence to the principle of indivisible security creates the preconditions for real equality between all states in the international community. This, in turn, requires greater trust between countries.

Until now, the stubborn refusal to follow the basic tenets of new thinking has resulted in the threats to the world growing constantly. Today, however, the situation has changed. Threats that were pushed off into the distant future in the late twentieth century have to be fought today. This is the essence of the new historical era we live in.

Will humanity be able to ensure its own survival in the twenty-first century? In April 2020, Mikhail

Gorbachev published an article in TIME magazine on the lessons and consequences of the pandemic, calling for 'nothing less than revising the entire global agenda'.<sup>5</sup> That was precisely the objective of the new political thinking thirty years ago. Both then and now, it is not about a 'new world order' but rather about the principles that should underpin relations among states and societies in the world today. In the twenty-first century, the new thinking rests on several interconnected principles, such as the need to revise the concept of security and to foster dialogue, trust and cooperation in the spheres of politics, economics and humanitarianism.

*This essay is an excerpt from the paper 'The Pandemic as a Challenge and New Thinking in the 21st Century', which has been prepared as part of the Expertise Round Table, a standing project of The Gorbachev Foundation. The team of contributors led by Mikhail Gorbachev includes Pavel Palazhchenko, Vasily Zharkov, Olga Zdravomyslova, Karen Karagezian, Vladimir Polyakov and Andrey Ryabov.*

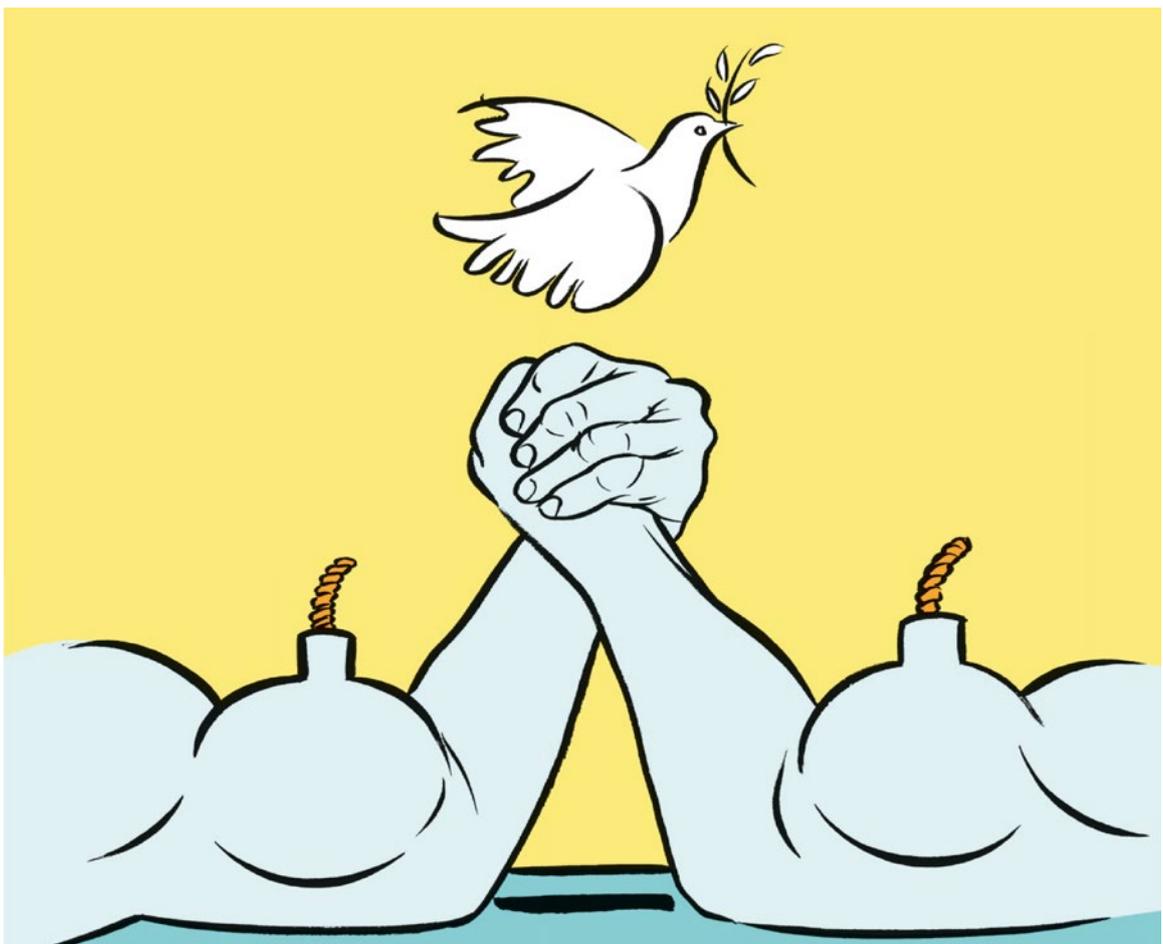
<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, 2020: Nations in Transit 2020 Finds Weakened Institutions in Europe and Eurasia as Politicians Flout Democratic Norms. Washingtons | [LINK](#)

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, 2019: What is At Stake Now: My Appeal for Peace and Freedom. Ves Mir Press (in Russian), Moscow

<sup>3</sup> Jürgen Habermas: So viel Wissen über unser Nichtwissen gab es noch nie. Frankfurter Rundschau, Frankfurt | [LINK](#)

<sup>4</sup> Steven Erlanger, 2020: Merkel, Breaking German 'Taboo', Backs Shared EU Debt to Tackle, The New York Times, 18 May 2020 | [LINK](#)

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Gorbachev, 2020: When the Pandemic is Over, the World Must Come Together, Time, 15 April 2020 | [LINK](#)





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Alfred Herrhausen Gesellschaft

Members of management: Dr. Anna Herrhausen and Daniela Kaiser

Unter den Linden 13-15

10117 Berlin

Tel. +49 (0)30 3407 5559

Fax. +49 (0)30 3407 4209

E-Mail: [info.ahg@db.com](mailto:info.ahg@db.com)

Commercial Register: Local Court of Charlottenburg, 116881B