

Opinion – (Un)Sustainable World Order

Written by Natalia Slobodian

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NATALIA SLOBODIAN, NOV 4 2024

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of a New World Order emerged, emphasizing multilateral diplomacy, democratic principles, and human rights. The United States and the European Union collaborated to establish an economic framework centered on open markets, global trade, a climate-friendly economy, and enhanced cooperation. Heightened awareness of climate change posed immediate threats to global well-being and integration into the concept of the New World Order. The official ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2015 symbolized a pivotal step towards implementing new regulations in both the economic and political spheres, rooted in the core tenets of sustainable development.

The inclusion of countries like China and Russia into the global economy at the beginning of the XXI century was viewed as mutually beneficial for both the Western nations and the newcomers, with the assumption that these countries would eventually adopt political reforms, market economies, and democratic values.

However, Russia and China perceived themselves as losers rather than winners in the forthcoming New Sustainable World Order[1]. They viewed the shift in the World Order as disproportionately favouring Western powers, leading to fears of being marginalised or losing influence on the global stage. Furthermore, both Russia and China have economic systems that do not fully align with the principles of sustainable development, and as a result, they view these changes as a threat to their economic interests and growth potential. Historical tensions and geopolitical rivalries between Russia and China, on one side, and Western powers, on the other, have hindered a shift in mindset, as they interpreted these changes as a strategy for maintaining dominance rather than fostering genuine global cooperation. Additionally, they perceived the integration of the global climate agenda and the protection of human rights as infringements on their sovereignty or interference in their internal affairs, all under the guise of promoting sustainable and democratic values. Lastly, with technological advancements often regarded as a driving force in the New Sustainable World Order, both China and, particularly, Russia saw themselves at a disadvantage compared to Western countries in terms of innovation and competitiveness.

This sentiment was aggravated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which served as a test of the strength of the existing World Order. It is obvious that Russia's intentions were not so much to annex Ukrainian territories, but above all to reshape the World Order and fix Russian leadership in it that based on power, fossil fuels, and strategic geopolitical competitiveness.

This was first articulated by Putin in his notorious speech at the Munich Security Summit in 2007. In this address, Putin spoke of Russia's thousand-year history, emphasizing its longstanding privilege of pursuing an independent foreign policy. He firmly asserted Russia's prominent role in the New World Order that emerged after the collapse of the USSR and vowed to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO. The subsequent aggression against Georgia in 2008, and the events that took place six years later, involving the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, signified concrete actions carried out in accordance with Putin's earlier pronouncements.

In a resolute and united manner, the European Union has embarked on a decarbonisation journey driven by shared principles of sustainability and resilience to climate change. Their determined pursuit of green objectives includes a firm commitment to deny the use of fossil fuels, notably coal, oil, and gas. Furthermore, the EU has implemented trade tax barriers, such as the Carbon Board Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). This unwavering stance of Europeans

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has served as a catalyst, inspiring other economies, particularly the United States, to implement transformative changes in energy, heavy industry, transportation, and bolster investments in innovative research and development.

Nonetheless, these ground-breaking shifts have presented powerful existential dilemma for the Russian elite. Specifically, the EU's decision to refuse using fossil fuels beyond the 2040 has directly threatened the economic and political stability of the Kremlin since the state budget was filled by the export of raw materials including gas and oil or semi-finished products that are heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Additionally, the fortunes of Russian oligarchs, who provide significant support for the current political regime, are closely tied to the export of these valuable resources.

Furthermore, the Russian regime has become accustomed to living in a state of perpetual war over the past few decades. From the Russian-Afghan conflict in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to the Russian-Chechen wars in the 1990s, next the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the initial stages of the conflict with Ukraine in 2014, and the ongoing full-scale war with Ukraine since 2022, state involvement in armed conflicts has become the norm for Russian society. They viewed war as an opportunity to provide geopolitical impact, achieve economic advantages by manipulating global markets, or bolster their own economies by seizing and occupying the resources of other nations. Consequently, the request to act has emerged within countries but the Russian political elite has known no other method than to act in a weaponized way.

For Russia, turning itself into a nation that is in the first rank geopolitically and economically is fundamental but using military force to achieve this has not proven effective. So, Russia has offered an alternative vision of a New World Order that is rooted in fear, instability, a return to an arms race, and the power of weaponry. On the contrary, the Western world advocates for the construction of a New World Order based on democratic values, respect for the rule of law, sustainable development, and climate protection. In this proposed order, there is not the ownership of natural resources that will determine a country's standing within the global community, but rather its commitment to democracy, human rights, environmental protection, and sustainable development. Interests based on profit will no longer rule; instead, the collective welfare including climate protection, and the defense of democracy worldwide will take priority.

If Europeans and the Western world as a whole have been shaping the new global order based on human rights values and environmental protection, implementing the ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) agenda through regulatory requirements, and changing societal and business behavior models, then Ukrainians today are defending their values on the battlefield. Despite a full-scale war, the Ukrainian government is implementing a series of reforms to integrate sustainable development into all processes at the state level, including political, economic, and social aspects. The Ukrainian business elite is transitioning towards a values-driven strategy, where environmental protection, resource-efficient consumption, employee well-being, inclusivity, and diversity are top priorities. This shift is crucial not only for Ukraine but also for the establishment of a New Sustainable World Order, where these values and actions will play a significant role in shaping a more prosperous and equitable future for all.

Notes

[1] The "New Sustainable World Order" refers to a global paradigm shift focused on creating a balance between economic development, environmental protection, and social equity. This concept envisions international cooperation to address pressing global issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and inequality, by promoting sustainable practices and policies. It aims to prioritize sustainable development goals, ensuring long-term ecological health, economic prosperity, and social well-being for current and future generations.

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