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## WALLS

**On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall**

Alexander Kiossev

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Almost 35 years ago, an event of epochal significance occurred – the fall of the Berlin Wall. For several generations, it was a life-defining watershed, not only politically and historically but also biographically. This was true not just for Berliners and Germans, but for all Eastern Europeans, Ukrainians, Russians, Georgians, Kazakhs... in fact, for the whole world. At that time, the fall of the Wall was unequivocally perceived as an explosion of freedom and sovereignty (Wir sind das Volk!), having the energy to internally dismantle any form of non-freedom and provoke implosion in any tyranny. The fact that from then on, it was fated for walls to only fall, and for totalitarian and authoritarian regimes to “fall silently like houses of cards” (Havel), was evident. Everyone hoped for a time when borders would be abolished and an unlimited movement of people, ideas, aesthetics, and capital would ensue. This faith gave birth to songs, films, stories, rock operas, and legends, and even sold pieces of the wall as freedom souvenirs.

Riding high on the ecstasy of the “velvet revolutions,” liberal democracy, human rights, and the free market seemed to be the only alternative back then. Ideas for a different political future seemed exhausted, which led Francis Fukuyama to declare “the end of history.” Nationalisms seemed like attributes of the past, while enthusiastic multiculturalists celebrated the free creative melting pot of peoples – as if it had already happened. And indeed, back then, it didn’t seem like utopia; on the contrary, it seemed to be materializing: the Schengen Area had already been created within the European Union (1995), a space without border controls, and cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and New York appeared to have actually become multicultural megacities where cultures and religions were in productive and peaceful contact.

However, even then, the champions of freedom ideologies were countered by other, more conservative, often more realistic and cynical ideologies. They presciently argued that now, it was not freedom that needed to be defended but security, and despite the enthusiasm, it wasn’t bad if each country guarded its borders. They were unconcerned with ideals and values,

instead emphasizing cold realpolitik, geopolitical, and geo-cultural arguments – which seemed extremely unsympathetic at that time. Perhaps the most reviled was Samuel Huntington, who apocalyptically foresaw a possible “clash of civilizations,” which he thought of as impenetrable worlds with different but equally firm cultural-religious identities, allowing for no mixing. According to him, they could coexist only in a conflictual regime, hence requiring not liberal freedoms but a new world order with a clear hegemon to safeguard the achievements of Christian civilization. Thus, by the early 1990s, there were already clashes along the borderlines between the liberal and conservative camps, and the conceptual conflict was quietly escalating.

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After 2014, things departed from theory. Breaking away from the common space of free economic exchange, the neo-imperialist Putin annexed Crimea, which wasn't enclosed by walls. Almost simultaneously, the president of the “most free nation,” Donald Trump, began the construction of a new Great Wall along its borders. It was meant to fence off the USA from Mexico and prevent illegal migration, human trafficking, and smuggling; so far, 732 kilometers of the eight-meter high wall have been constructed. At that point, many remembered that the construction of walls actually had precedents before Trump. After the Second Intifada, Israel had started building another wall, 708 kilometers long, to fence off the West Bank. Israelis declared it a temporary security structure, but Palestinians saw it as a durable fortress of apartheid. Meanwhile, the sudden influx of immigrants prompted the Schengen Area to guard its external borders well and consider any expansions much more carefully. In 2016, even border states of the EU, like Bulgaria, dreaming of Schengen, began constructing enormous wire fences along the southeastern borders of Fortress Europe. The purpose of these structures was to prevent illegal immigrant flows from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Africa; meanwhile, Italy and Greece attempted to fence off the Mediterranean Sea, using their naval forces instead of wire fences; Hungary, for its part, closed its borders.

What happened to the Walls between 1989 and 2014–17? Were the most significant symbol of our time capable of being rethought?

And what happened during that time and a little later was so much that it cannot even be enumerated in a brief exposition. The disintegration of Yugoslavia began, accompanied by bloody wars, followed by NATO attacks, then the two Gulf Wars... Immediately after the fall of the Twin Towers, the tallest walls in the sky, history erupted in events that were previously

unimaginable: the Arab Spring culminated in the fanatical Islamic State, the 2008 financial crisis, accompanied by the crisis of the middle class, desecularization, increasing inequalities, and the rise of right-wing populism. Meanwhile, the war in Syria erupted, and US forces withdrew from Afghanistan. Geopolitical dreams were revived in the north, and the extravagant ideas of a purely “русский мир” (“Russian world”) with a Eurasian continental sphere of “vital interests” followed, resulting in the wars in Crimea and Ukraine. Tensions between communist China and the USA escalated, Africa simmered, and within it, according to unconfirmed reports, there were around 60 million people displaced from their native places – people capable of passing through any barrier. Then erupted the war between Hamas and Israel when Hamas bulldozers swept away the wire barriers in the Gaza Strip and started killing civilians.

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Not only in political, diplomatic, and military practice or solely in high political theory, but also in popular culture, the “falling of walls” has experienced adventures. Starting from Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* (1979), it had become a universal symbol of oppression. The symbol was extended from the West to the East – in the early ’90s, the song “Muri” by the Pole Jacek Kaczmarski appeared, and later “Bloody Bloody Border” by Manu Chao (1998), followed by the Bosnian cover version by Dubioza Kolektiv (“Cross the Line,” 2020); its symbol was toyed with by sculptors like Brad Spencer and street artists like Banksy.



The falling of walls promised the coming of a new world. At the same time, however, the very same people who were singing songs against walls not long ago were now watching the global series *Game of Thrones*. There, they admired the gigantic ice wall protecting them from savages, White Walkers, and the undead, actually a transparent allegory of migrant waves from Mexico, Africa, or Asia.



For many, their fears did not seem unfounded – the fanaticism of radical Islam was real, as was international terrorism, but there also were concerns, actual or imagined, about their own jobs, civilizational comfort, and the cleanliness of European cities.

In this context, more radical nationalist groups were already demanding security measures from their governments. In fact, they were dreaming of walls resembling semi-permeable membranes: “we” should cross them freely, but they should stop those who scare us, the barbarians. For many, liberal democracy lost its universality and now implied a fundamental boundary – between citizens and non-citizens. In practical terms, immigrant waves and terrorist attacks led to strict control of people’s movement at airports, ports, and train stations – some were dissatisfied with these measures, while others supported them, and no one wanted them to be revoked; meanwhile, procedures for obtaining political asylum or refugee status became increasingly complex. However, the new walls did not particularly hinder human traffickers, who secretly transported refugees through gaps in the fences into the countries, while at the same time, patrols were sending boats with illegal immigrants back to Africa. Public opinion was gradually divided, and populist ideologists were pushing it towards isolationism, new nationalism, xenophobia, and racism.

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The digital transition made the walls acquire a completely different dimension. Now, everyone on social media had their own “wall” in the social networks to write posts on and send universal messages as if to the global audience – but everyone could expel unwanted interlocutors from “their wall.” In fact, algorithms brutally restricted this universal communication and fenced in each personal wall with a bubble of like-minded people, peers, and compatriots; social networks fragmented and ceased to be a shared space: anyone could expel anyone from their wall. Once again, fears were not entirely baseless – even the most enthusiastic liberals had suffered hacker attacks, so they had no objection to limiting the free movement of information a bit and embedding an effective, constantly-updating Firewall in every personal computer. Cybersecurity experts were waging a real war against those who wanted to “break through” the new digital walls – i.e., the defenses of institutions, defense ministries, and banks.

In addition to all this, there was also the almost two-year-long lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic; many countries almost closed their borders, and among people, it was as if invisible walls had risen, which the mandatory masks only symbolized...

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In connection with all that has been said above, the Cultural Center of Sofia University offers its partners the joint organization of a conference and a series of public events. They should be in honor of the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but our intention is more ambitious: let’s ask ourselves if liberal values are the same, and whether we can celebrate this event in the old way. Or do we need to soberly assess the threats and possibilities facing liberal democracy and the world order based on universal human rights and somehow limit them, imposing new clear boundaries? How should we think today, after everything that has happened and continues to happen, about the dialectic between freedom and security? And do we want to push all walls, or should we keep some? From a realpolitik perspective, however, new questions follow. If we create such restricted and protected spaces of free liberal democracy (like Schengen, for example), aren’t we declaring those outside as “dangerous others,” “barbarians”? If, by fencing ourselves in again, we won’t betray the most important attribute of freedom, its universality and its foundational principle, human rights? Perhaps if we surrender too soberly to security measures and to a real but selfish and cynical geo-politics, there will be no value left in our lives worth defending...

To paraphrase Hamlet: what is more worthy for mankind today – to destroy walls or to raise walls?

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With such a multifaceted agenda, the conference is expected to gather an interdisciplinary team of scholars – political scientists, historians, geopoliticians, culturologists, sociologists, media specialists, economists, religion researchers, and others, who will be invited to contemplate the above-mentioned questions. Additionally, we wouldn't want it to be purely an academic event; therefore, we invite journalists, writers, artists, creators, and public intellectuals to contribute their insights.