



Munk Debate on Russia – commentary by Edward Greenspon

Russia has long perplexed the North Atlantic alliance, not to mention its neighbours. To hear Vladimir Pozner tell it, the current angst in the West over whether and how to isolate Vladimir Putin's Russia for its Ukrainian transgressions is not only wrong-headed but part of a continuum of wrong-headedness dating to at least the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which was followed by failed western military expeditions against the newborn communist state.

The issue of whether the West has been too antagonistic toward Russia, or too accommodating, was one of several lively debates within the greater Munk Debate on Friday April 10 at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall. The question put to the debaters - Cold War-era commentator Pozner and U.S. academic Stephen Cohen on the pro and journalist Anne Applebaum and dissident chess great Garry Kasparov on the con – was "be it resolved the West should engage not isolate Russia." The fact the live audience of 3,000 ended the evening split 48-52 speaks to the complexity of the riddle of what to do about Russia.

The debates-within-the-debate variously touched upon who, if anyone, should be isolated, Putin or Russia; is the West actually doing more to harm its own national security interests by treating Russia as a pariah rather than a partner in bigger struggles, such as against Islamic extremists; did the West bring this upon itself through aggressive NATO expansion and should it have been guided, as it was, by the security wishes of the sovereign nations of the former East bloc or the traditional sphere of influence claimed by Russia.

For Cohen and Pozner, the issue very much boiled down to 'Who lost Russia' – their answer being successive U.S. Administrations. By disrespecting its former

Cold War adversary in the years following the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union, the U.S., in particular, created the conditions for Putinism. The trick for them is to stop making the same mistake. They argued that a) Russia cannot be isolated in today's globalized world, and b) it would be folly to turn against a front-line partner in the fight against greater threats. "The demonization of Putin is not a policy," Cohen declared. "The demonization of Putin is an excuse to abandon analysis."

Kasparov and Applebaum thoroughly rejected the assertion the West humiliated and excluded 1990s Russia, observing it invited its former nemesis into such elite councils as the G8, WTO and Council of Europe. For the cons, the issue at hand is very much Putin, who they characterized as a Mafia-like figure operating a corrupt kleptocracy that leans on anti-American propaganda to shore up its domestic political position. (Bertolt Brecht's anti-Nazi satire, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, comes to mind.) Kasparov argued Putin has no policy other than maintaining power. "Chess has fixed rules and unpredictable results," he said. "Putin's Russia is the opposite."

The Ukrainian crisis was nothing more than a reaction against a movement that, in the words of Applebaum, was "fighting oligarchs, corruption and Putinism." It was not, as Cohen and Pozner contend, the natural by-product of a Russia feeling threatened by NATO expansion and now basking in its re-assertion as a power to reckon with.

Both sides agreed the issues at hand have splintered the Western alliance. Cohen excoriated Western policy for fixating on Putin rather than pursuing its own broader interests. Applebaum blamed the divisions on the corrupting effect of Putin being allowed to pour his ill-gotten financial gains into European politics.

Kasparov, famous for an aggressive, free-wheeling approach to chess, set himself up for the greatest comeuppance of the evening, demanding of Pozner "when was the last time you were in Kyiv?" Pozner looked up and curtly replied he's been there two years ago to accept an award as Ukraine's Man of the Year. In case anyone missed it, Cohen stuck the knife in further. "I hope you noticed the

chessmaster just got checkmated."

Kasparov seemed to withdraw from the field of combat for a time. Perhaps he needed time to examine the board and contemplate the moves open to him. Soon enough he was back in the mix, retorting belatedly but effectively that two years previously, the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych had presided over the Ukraine that made Pozner its Man of the Year.

As the debate went into its late innings, Cohen kept returning to the themes that the U.S. had misjudged Putin (he was on his knees pleading to be part of the West) and U.S. policy shouldn't be about punishing Putin but serving its own national interest. Striking the pose of the classic realist, he mocked Applebaum for her fairy tales. The U.S. and its allies, he said, had created a situation today more dangerous than during the Cold War, when at least there were protocols about how the superpowers interacted, including the famed hot line between the Kremlin and White House.

Now it was time for Applebaum to turn the tables on the self-styled realists, accusing them of pining for the good old days of Cold War Russia, when they could simply divide up their bi-polar world. Engagement with whom, she challenged, cutting to the crux of the dilemma embedded in the phrase "Putin's Russia." Is Western policy to isolate Putin? Or Russia? Can the two be separated, as sanctions, weak though they are, attempt? Can one be defeated without the other? Is Putin's Russia a unique creature, as the cons would have it, or the natural extension of the Czar's Russia, Stalin's Russia, Breshnev Russia?

The big elephant in the room was barely addressed by the debaters: how could Western leaders use statecraft to discourage Putin from further territorial incursions and what to do if he were to take his Ukraine playbook to the Baltics, which are NATO members and therefore protected in law by the famous Article 5 that says an armed attack against one member is an attack against all. Answers were not readily forthcoming.

If you are on the side of using isolation as a lever, it is particularly incumbent upon

you to identify policies that will be effective and can win support across a divided alliance. Perhaps that's why the con side won the most audience applause by far but barely prevailed with 52 percent of the vote (up ten points from pre-debate).

By the same token, if you favour engagement, what's your strategy in face of blatant and repeated assaults on sovereign nations?

I spent the years 1988-91 covering the collapse of the Soviet empire and the restoration of independence among its client states in central and eastern Europe. On my first visit to Russia with a university group in 1985, several of us met a couple of fellow students in Leningrad who invited us back to their place to listen to underground music and talk about our differing worlds. Gorbachev had recently been named General Secretary and we had a *Time* magazine with his face on the cover. Our hosts initially could not believe the strawberry blotch on his forehead hadn't been air brushed in by Western propagandists rather than air brushed out by their own.

It happened to be my birthday and I can easily recall the poignancy of the night as one of the Russian students sadly explained how he wanted to be a graphic artist but the state had determined a different course for him. He was clearly also struggling with his sexual identity and the conversation carried a sub-text about the impossibility of being a gay man in Soviet Russia (a theme recurring in Putin's Russia.).

In my time covering political change in Poland, Romania, East Germany, Hungary, Ukraine and Russia, I was reminded over and over of the universality of the urge for personal freedom.

With all that in mind, I was struck by a plaintive comment from Kasparov in the late stages of the debate. He was still in his 20s when the Soviet Union collapsed. He commented on how he remembered when he didn't have freedom and the feeling when freedom arrived. Now freedom was slipping away again in Putin's Russia. "I want to see my country free and strong," he said.

Whatever the failures in policy, therein lies the real tragedy of the situation.

*Journalist **Edward Greenspon** has reported from Russia and Ukraine during his career and was most recently in Moscow in February.*

<http://munkdebates.com/debates/The-West-vs-Russia>

© Munk Debates – April 13, 2015