



Munk Debate on Russia – commentary by Steve Paikin

It's been almost a quarter century since the world watched in astonishment, as the old hammer and sickle red flag of the Soviet Union descended from the Kremlin's flagpole and was replaced by the Russian tricolor.

For awhile, it appeared as if the West and Russia might establish a new, unprecedented cooperative relationship.

Times, as they always do in international affairs, have changed dramatically. We seem to be in the midst of a new Cold War with Russia, all of which made for important fodder for the latest Munk Debate at Roy Thomson Hall last Friday night.

It was the fifteenth Munk Debate in which moderator Rudyard Griffiths brings together “the brightest minds and sharpest thinkers.” His participants this time: former Soviet broadcaster Vladimir Pozner and NYU Russian studies professor Stephen F. Cohen arguing that *more engagement* with Russia will ensure a more secure West, with former chess champion Garry Kasparov and author/journalist Anne Applebaum urging *more isolation* and a tougher line against a rogue dictator in Vladimir Putin.

“Isolating any country is dangerous, especially if the country is as powerful as Russia,” warned Pozner, who seemed to blame a lack of recognition and engagement by the West for the Soviet system's developing as it did, starving millions of Ukrainians, and a Soviet occupation of eastern Europe.

“If your policy hadn't been aimed at humbling a nation of proud people, Russia would be a different country today,” Pozner insisted, to the astonishment of his debate opponents.

“Russia's current leaders *own the nation*,” countered Applebaum. “They control everything through theft and graft and money laundering; 110 people control 35% of the country's wealth. It's a mafia state. We must make Putin pay a high price so he doesn't invade another neighbour.”

Stephen F. Cohen admonished his opponents by quoting former New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan: “You're entitled to your own opinions, but you're not entitled to your own facts.”

“These are the facts,” Cohen proceeded. “It's impossible to isolate Russia. It's too big and too rich.” Even with the West's deteriorating relationship with Russia, Cohen noted Putin has signed more economic, political, and military agreements with the rest of the world than America has. “Isolating Russia hasn't made them more compliant, it's made them turn elsewhere,” he said. “A further destabilized Russia will be worse.”

Kasparov, who lives “in exile” in Manhattan, spoke of his “dream coming true” in 1991, when the Soviet Union died, without any of the bloodshed seen in the Balkans with the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia.

“The West invested billions of dollars in Russia. And then Putin came in, restored the old Soviet national anthem and turned it into a one-man dictatorship,” he said. Kasparov tried his hand at politics, but found the deck completely stacked against his opposition forces, who were denied access to media and fundraising.

“In chess, we have fixed rules and an unpredictable result,” he said. “In Putin's Russia, it's the opposite.”

“Henry Kissinger wrote in 2004 that the demonizing of Putin is not a policy,” argued Cohen.

Applebaum countered that the West tried engagement and it hasn't worked. “Presidents Clinton and Bush invited Russia to join the G8 and the Council of Europe,” she said. “We did engage and invite Russia into our institutions. Their response was to invade Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine.”

Kasparov wanted to come back to an earlier point.

“Engagement in the 1920s could have stopped Stalin's terror?” he asked incredulously. “Lenin called the West 'useful idiots.' He said he'd sell the West the rope he would hang them with.”

Like most Munk Debates, there were also moments of comedy even though the topic was deadly serious. As Kasparov's temperature rose and he became more and more animated, Pozner asked, “Why are you yelling at me?”

“He always talks that way,” said Applebaum. “He's Russian.”

Comic relief aside, Applebaum went on to describe Russia as a virulently anti-American country, thanks to a non-stop bombardment of anti-American propaganda in the Russian media.

Cohen wasn't buying: “I read ten Russian newspapers every day and what you say is true for three of them. But not in the other seven.”

“How many Ukrainian newspapers do you read?” Applebaum shot back.

“I read ten Russian newspapers every day,” was all Cohen could muster, before turning to another point.

“We expanded NATO towards their borders,” Cohen continued. “We were warned not to do that. Even Liberals warned you're pushing too far.”

“Central Europeans wanted to be in NATO,” said Applebaum. “The US reluctantly agreed and the result is, 110 million people are now making the transition to democracy. It's been unbelievably successful. There's not one U.S. tank left in Europe.”

But Cohen insisted those moves to include central or eastern European countries in NATO violated an agreement America made with the former Soviet Union.

“Former Secretary of State James Baker said 'If you take down the Berlin Wall, we won't move NATO one inch closer to the East.'” Cohen said the wall, indeed, came down, then America abrogated the agreement by admitting Poland and the Czech Republic into NATO, claiming that agreement was with the Soviet Union, not Russia.

Pozner concluded the night with a David Letterman-style Top Ten List of reasons not to isolate Russia, including it would only embolden the chauvinists, turn Russia towards the East including China, make Russia more unpredictable, and lead to a new generation of Russians hostile to the West.

As with all Munk Debates, the audience of 3000 is invited to vote twice: once at the beginning of the night, then again, after hearing the competing arguments.

As the night began, 58% agreed more engagement, less isolation of Russia was the way to go, while 42% disagreed. After a spirited debate, only 48% wanted more engagement, while 52% urged more isolation. The NO side moved more votes, and thus carried another fascinating night at Thomson Hall.

Steve Paikin is anchor of The Agenda with Steve Paikin on TVO.

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

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