

Is Putin's decency inviting a world war? Comments on a new article by Paul Craig Roberts

Description

by Gilbert Doctorow via [Gilbert Doctorow](#)

Four years ago, I published an article in which I roundly criticized Vladimir Putin for being too gentlemanly, too civilized for his and our good, so that his every effort to avoid aggravating the stand-off between Russia and the United States was perversely enhancing the likelihood of a nuclear war.

See https://original.antiwar.com/gilbert_doctorow/2019/02/01/vladimir-putin-to-the-west-we-will-bury-you/

The position I set out in this piece ran against 'group think' among Putin and Russia cheerleaders on the one hand and Putin and Russia detractors, on the other hand. But it was obviously a position largely shared by the contrarian thinker Paul Craig Roberts. Over the years since 2019, Roberts has occasionally directed his large web readership to my articles, for which I am grateful. He has also published his own essays in which he makes similar points about the risks inherent in Putin's throwing pearls to swine. The swine in question are, of course, the leaders of the United States and its European allies.

I offer today some thoughts on Roberts' latest essay in this vein published online two days ago:

For those unfamiliar with Roberts, you will find most everything you need to know in his Wikipedia entry. His university degrees were earned in economics and this was the realm of his government service. Under Ronald Reagan, Roberts was Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Economic Policy. His academic career before and after serving in the federal government was also made in this discipline.

As you see, Paul Craig Roberts is not a professional Russia expert. However, I contend that his understanding of Russian society is more profound than most academics and journalists who are considered to be experts, including, if I may shock politically correct critics of America's Russia policies, my once friend and admired comrade in arms on the peace front, Professor Steve Cohen (RIP).

I will expand on the last point in a moment, but first things first.

Paul Craig Roberts faults Putin for being much too cautious today as he was for the eight years when the Minsk Accords were patently being ignored, when 15,000 Russian-speaking civilians in the Donbas were being murdered by indiscriminate artillery fire from Ukrainian army units across the line of demarcation; when Kiev was being armed and prepared for NATO entry. As he sees it, Putin was 'taken for a ride.' Now the situation is repeating itself. Putin stands by and does virtually nothing while the Israel-Hamas war threatens at any moment to precipitate a regional war that in turn could become a world war in an instant.

I share Roberts' disappointment with Russia's tolerating the Ukrainian atrocities in Donbas for so long. However, there are others who question why Russians ever entered into the Minsk Accords to begin with, saying that they should have struck Kiev hard in 2014, while the Ukrainian military was in total disarray. They should not only have seized the Donbas then but overthrown the neo-Nazi regime that the United States had installed in Kiev.

Regrettably all of these criticisms of Russian restraint in 2014 to 2022 fail to consider what must have been crystal clear to Vladimir Putin: namely that until 2022 Russia did not have the economic strength to resist the kind of 'sanctions from hell' that Washington eventually imposed after the start of the Special Military Operation but could have just as easily imposed in 2014 or at any later date of its choosing. Russia also did not begin to have the strategic superiority that it reached only in 2018 when its new, world-beating armaments were tested and ready for serial production. In a word, it was not only Ukraine and its Western backers who bought time thanks to the Minsk Accords, but Putin's Russia as well.

As regards the present situation in the Middle East and what Russia can and should do to prevent its spinning out of control, Paul Craig Roberts notes that there are reports in the Indian press that Russian-Iranian relations are being codified in an enhanced but unspecified military cooperation. Yet, there is no declaration of a mutual defense pact which alone could stop further adventurism in the region by the United States. Here I agree completely with Paul Craig Roberts. I remind readers that panelists and the presenter of Russia's leading talk show *Evening with Vladimir Solovyov* have for more than a couple of weeks insisted that a mutual defense pact between Russia, Iran, North Korea and China should be rolled out here and now to stop further U.S. and Western aggression in the several global hot spots of the moment. To be sure, Xi is at least as hesitant to confront the USA directly with threats as Putin is, but that is no problem for Iran and North Korea, so the three should not wait any longer in declaring "one for all and all for one."

Roberts also points to other current contradictions in Russia's policies that look like weakness to Western officialdom. He mentions Russia's failure to protect Syria against Israeli air and missile attacks.

Yes, these failures are hard to fathom and do point to excessive caution by Putin and his immediate entourage, including and especially in the Foreign Affairs Ministry. Sergei Lavrov may be a scholar and a gentleman, but he is not a street brawler, which is the quality Russia needs most right now. His ministry is itself full of contradictions. Lavrov's press spokeswoman Maria Zakharova exemplifies precisely the 'softly, softly' approach that Roberts is criticizing. After every humiliation that Washington has imposed on Russia, Zakharova just whines and asks rhetorically: "Can you imagine..?"

In the month before Trump's inauguration in 2016, Russian consular property in the States was seized by the feds, and all we heard from Zakharova was "Can you imagine?" In the spring of 2022, Belgium,

acting in cahoots with the USA, froze 285 billion dollars of Russian state assets on deposit there. All we have heard from Russian officials since then is “Can you imagine...?”

Yes, we can imagine that the bastards are true to form and we ask where is the Russian response, preferably the symmetrical one, the old ‘eye for an eye.’

At the same time, within the Russian Foreign Ministry there are tough chaps like Deputy Minister Sergey Ryabkov, who came to our attention back in December 2021 when he said in essence to NATO: either withdraw to your 1996 borders or we will push you back to them. As we know, the Special Military Operation followed less than a month later. This is the fellow whom Russia needs at the helm of its foreign policy if not as Putin’s successor. I say this not for Russia’s sake but for ours; it is only this kind of shock therapy that can puncture the bubble in Washington and bring American political elites to their senses lest we stumble into a nuclear Armageddon.

Of course, among Kremlin insiders a hard and realistic line towards the West is now being pronounced by former president and current deputy head of the Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev. However, in the West Medvedev made a name for himself as a patsy during his presidency. Today he is viewed as just a loose cannon on the deck and no one takes him seriously.

Paul Craig Roberts has tucked into the middle of his essay the following paragraph which merits repetition here:

From my experience with the liberal Russian intelligentsia, I would say that their program is surrender to Washington. They would rather be invited as visiting professors to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, and to serve as consultants to American corporations than to be in conflict with the West. As Putin seems to believe toleration of subversion is a sign of democracy, he could have been prevented from required action by pressure to prove that he is not, as the entirety of the West proclaims, a dictator. Putin would have saved many lives by ignoring the propaganda of his enemies and being more forceful in Russia’s defense.

The lives that could have been saved are not just the 400,000 Ukrainians towards whom Putin bears no responsibility but the 50,000 Russians who are estimated to have lost their lives in action since February 2022. That corresponds to a lot of widows and it cannot be compensated by showing on state television how the president takes his New Year’s Day dinner with widows and orphans.

I remind readers that Paul Craig Roberts is a dyed in the wool conservative. His understanding of the pernicious influence of the ‘liberal Russian intelligentsia’ is entirely correct *from my experience*. Their influence on Putin goes back a long way, to his first years in government when he was a deputy to mayor of St Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak responsible for attracting foreign investment to the city. These liberals were present in large numbers in Putin’s presidential administration until the start of the Ukraine war, when many packed their bags and left the country.

Of course these liberal Russian *intelligenty* have always been treated with great indulgence by American experts on Russia, and not only by those experts who are viscerally anti-Putin. They were the friends and sources of information for otherwise Russia-friendly Steve Cohen, for example. But then again, almost none of our experts could be considered to be conservative on a par with Paul Craig Roberts in the traditional sense, without a ‘neo’ prefix.