

“Unfreedom”: Fifty Years Later

Freedom of debate is not only a democratic right. It is also a vital mechanism for formulating and evaluating political alternatives

By [Prof. Yakov M. Rabkin](#)

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Nearly fifty years ago I emigrated from the Soviet Union. My only reason for leaving all that was known to me was a deep longing for freedom of expression. I resented restrictions on foreign publications and deplored the practice of jamming foreign radio stations like the BCC World Service or Radio Canada International. It was as if the media were just obediently regurgitating the party line, with no room for real discussion or debate. Sure, the authorities weren't as oppressive as they were during Stalin's reign, but a lingering fear remained. It cast a shadow over political discussions, confining them to a small circle of trusted friends. Expressing our true thoughts and opinions felt like walking a tightrope.

I left behind my native city of Leningrad (now Saint-Petersburg), my friends, my brother, the tombs of my parents and grandparents. It was risky to apply for emigration since one would almost always lose employment and find oneself socially ostracized while remaining uncertain if Soviet authorities would grant the exit visa. I was lucky. Within a few months, in May 1973 I was stripped of Soviet citizenship and allowed to purchase a one-way ticket to Vienna. My dream of freedom was fulfilled. The first thing I bought in Vienna was a copy of The International Herald Tribune.

In November 1973 I joined the University of Montreal, my professional home ever since. Beyond teaching and research, I eagerly followed political debates about the Vietnam War, the CIA-organized overthrow of the Allende government in Chile, the fallout from the October War in Israel. Debates raged about the U.S. overtures to China, and, of course, about the relations with my former country. Some praised the Brezhnev-Nixon détente, others worried about its pitfalls.

What impressed me most was the variety of opinions that found their way into newspaper pages and TV screens. Op-ed articles and letters to the editor offered a broad gamut of views, some of them not only criticizing policies but offering viable alternatives. Soon I began to voice my opinion, first in letters to the editor, later in op-ed articles. It was

inebriating to assume my civic and intellectual responsibility partaking in free political debate.

Today, this freedom is being eroded with respect to several foreign policy issues.

One is Israel. Journalists and politicians think twice before criticizing it. They fear to be accused of antisemitism. In the early 1970s, Abba Eban, the eloquent South Africa-born Israeli foreign minister, developed a strategy to stifle criticism of his country by accusing critics of antisemitism. This strategy has since triumphed: today, qualifying Israel's treatment of the Palestinians as apartheid, or even peaceful boycott of Israeli products in the supermarket, are officially banned as antisemitic in many Western countries. This makes Israel exceptional and shields it from rational debate.

Another even more important issue that has disappeared from rational public debate is Western policy towards Russia. This issue is more important not only because Russia is bigger, but because it involves a potential nuclear annihilation of life on Earth.

Well before February 2022, most NATO countries (as well as Ukraine before them) curtailed access to Russian media, something that never happened in the West during the Cold War. Just as Soviet authorities justified jamming of Western radio broadcasts as a measure against "imperialist subversion", a panoply of NATO and national agencies now protect citizens in Europe and North America from "Russian disinformation".

Prominent Western scholars such as Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University and John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago have been marginalized and disappeared from mainstream media. Their questioning of Western policies towards Russia is dismissed as "Kremlin's talking points". The war in Ukraine has morphed into a moral issue. Questioning the West's position on the Russia-Ukraine war is simply out of the question.

Moreover, the few attempts to examine Western policies in Eastern Europe come against insurmountable obstacles. For example, when the *association Montréal pour la paix* (Montreal for Peace) attempted to organize a debate involving well-known experts on international relations and Canada's foreign policy, it promised to present "facts that you have never read or heard from our media and the offices of Justin Trudeau and Mélanie Joly" (Canada's prime minister and minister of Global Affairs, respectively). The institution that initially agreed to rent its space succumbed to pressure from, as it put it, "Ukrainian neighbours", and cancelled the rental. Another one accepted to rent its space but promptly reneged lest it "offend its regular clients".

Faced with these setbacks the event had to be moved to a nearby park. There were three speakers, a few dozen middle-aged, mostly grey-haired people who came to listen to them and about the same number of young vigorous protesters brandishing Ukrainian flags and anti-Russia posters. They tried to drown out the speakers in noise and loud songs. Police was brought in to separate the two groups and prevent violence. But there transpired something peculiar in the behaviour of the demonstrators. When one of the speakers, Yves Engler, an author known for his incisive books on Canadian foreign policy, said that Ukrainians have the right to resist Russian troops, the rowdy protesters started chanting "Shame of you!"

The entire event took place in French, but it became clear that most of the demonstrators did not know any French. The object of their anger could therefore not be the content of

what was being said. They were protesting the very freedom to discuss the war in Ukraine. This was just one instance of how suppression of debate on Russia and Ukraine spans the whole gamut of venues – from grassroots events to university campuses to the media.

Freedom of debate is not only a democratic right. It is also a vital mechanism for formulating and evaluating political alternatives. When a conflict is transformed into an epic struggle between Good and Evil, self-righteousness undermines the potential for diplomacy under the guise of moral rectitude. The late Chief Rabbi of Britain Jonathan Sachs astutely observed that “righteousness and self-righteousness are mutually exclusive”. Indeed, this ostensibly moral suppression of debate increases the chances of a nuclear war and its corollary, which U.S. strategists aptly defined in 1962 as MAD, Mutually Assured Destruction.

The current climate of unfreedom not only undermines our core values. It poses an existential threat for humankind.

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Yakov M. Rabkin is Professor Emeritus of History at the Université de Montréal. His publications include over 300 articles and a few books: Science between Superpowers, A Threat from Within: a Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism, What is Modern Israel?, Demodernization: A Future in the Past and Judaïsme, islam et modernité. He acting as a consultant for, inter alia, the OECD, NATO, UNESCO and the World Bank. E-mail: yakov.rabkin@umontreal.ca. Website: www.yakovrabkin.ca.

He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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