



Anne Applebaum

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

Democracy | Markets | Development
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To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020, CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa on important questions on democracy, business, markets and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This is the 41st event in the series. This publication provides a short summary of the discussion.

Ann Bernstein: Anne Applebaum is a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and senior fellow at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, author of many acclaimed books and one of the world's most well-known journalists.

We last worked together over a decade ago, looking at the prospects for a democratic alternative from the South, with a focus on India, Brazil, and South Africa.

From Soviet history to the threat of modern autocracies, can you tell us about the trajectory of your career and your interests over the last couple of decades?

Anne Applebaum: I remember our project fondly. It made me think anew about the challenges of creating democracies in large, multi-ethnic, developing societies. It has turned out, though, that a lot of what we talked about then is now applicable to the United States.

My career began with the study of Soviet history. I worked for almost 10 years on my book, *Gulag: A History*. Next, I published *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944-1956*, followed by *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*. Around 2014 or 2015, I noticed that several themes and behaviours analysed in my history books were re-emerging.

The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 was a turning point for me. As I watched the invasion of Crimea, I knew exactly what was happening because Russia was using the same playbook the Red Army had used when it advanced through Poland, Hungary and eastern Germany in 1944 and 1945.

Since then, I have followed the rise of new autocracies very closely. Recently, I wrote *Autocracy, Inc.*, which examines how autocracies such as Russia, China, North Korea and Iran work together. Over the last year and a half, most of my energy has focused on explaining the Trump administration, how this term differs from his first, and how his administration has learned from illiberal leaders around the world.

Instead of writing about history, I am now writing about current affairs, but the themes are very similar. I bring both a European and American perspective to my writing, partly because I live in both places and very often see the world from those two standpoints.

Ann Bernstein: One of your central arguments is that today's autocrats are not bound by ideology such as communism or fascism as in the past. Rather, they share an interest in power, wealth, and impunity, coupled with a shared hostility to human rights and accountability. Do you think this lack of ideology makes them stronger, weaker, more likely to stick together?

Anne Applebaum: When I refer to autocracies, I mean repressive regimes that arrest citizens for opposing them. There are many middle states that fall somewhere between democracy and autocracy, but my analysis applies to wholly autocratic countries. Some of them use ideologies, like Iran's vision of its role in building the Islamic

world and spreading the Islamic Revolution. The Chinese also promote an ideology, although it is a little peculiar. Its leaders use Marxist language, but the focus is really on advancing Chinese nationalism and power.

My point is that ideology does not connect these regimes. Russia and China do not cooperate because both are members of the Communist International, as they might have been in the 1930s. Rather, shared interests connect the two countries, and this largely strengthens their bond because they seldom need to agree on ultimate aims, let alone have a common vision of the world.

In essence, these are relationships of convenience, which means they will split once the relationships cease to be mutually beneficial. We witnessed how quickly Russia ditched Venezuela, which was its closest ally in Latin America, after the United States intervened and captured the Venezuelan President Maduro.

There are different forms of cooperation. They share policing and surveillance information, for example. Not every country is as effective as China at controlling what citizens say online, but they all watch how China does it. Autocrats have learned from each other how to control large crowds, respond to mass movements, and use online smear campaigns against political enemies.

Another area involves manipulating the international financial system. Autocracies are learning to exploit offshore opportunities and tax havens and to use shell companies to move, steal, and conceal money. That world barely existed 30 years ago. It was a tiny fraction of the world economy and now, depending on which estimates you believe, 10% or even more of the world's money is in this shadow economy. These criminal practices have become an ordinary way of doing business.

Autocracies also all recognise that the language of transparency, accountability, the rule of law, independent courts, independent media, and legal political opposition directly threaten their hold on power. My book describes how the Russians used online influence campaigns to undermine democracies and to promote extreme parties on both the far left and the far right.

In Russia over the past decade, the Navalny movement emerged as the most powerful opposition movement in the country. It campaigned against corruption and demanded transparency and economic equality. Putin recognised it as a mortal threat to his power, which is why he crushed it and had Alexei Navalny killed.

Ann Bernstein: Let's turn to Hungary. Does the overthrow of Viktor Orbán's illiberal government make you more optimistic about the future of democracy? Who was Viktor Orbán and what did he represent?

Anne Applebaum: Viktor Orbán was legally elected as the Prime Minister of Hungary in 2010. Once in power he changed procurement rules to favour companies close to him. He boycotted media outlets, not through censorship, but by ensuring they would lose money if they were seen to oppose him. When these independent media outlets would end up in economic trouble, companies friendly to him bought them out.

Through targeted measures, he made it very difficult for anyone to challenge him. The judiciary, media and opposition parties were weakened, making his removal from power unlikely. One of the reasons he lost the election was that he assumed the safeguards he had put in place were strong enough to keep him in power. He did not expect the election landslide that gave the opposition party a constitutional majority, enabling it to amend the constitution and reform the political system.

One of the effects of illiberalism is that it makes people poorer. Over the 16 years Viktor Orbán was in power, Hungary became one of the poorest countries in Europe, following a relatively successful transition period that started in the 1990s. The loss of transparency and growing dominance of Orbán linked companies made the system profoundly corrupt and stagnant, and ordinary Hungarians suffered the consequences.

Young people started leaving the country, public services deteriorated, including healthcare and education. Meanwhile, the regime pushed propaganda that closely resembled the messages going out at the end of Soviet communism. The leadership projected a narrative about success and heroism, while people could plainly see that the system was in decline and that many of their neighbours were performing much better.

Fidesz, Orbán's political party, controlled 90% of the media, but its propaganda became extreme and ludicrous, ensuring that people stopped believing it. The election campaign then highlighted the contradictions between government's lies and reality.

Ann Bernstein: Could his defeat be a forerunner for other countries?

Anne Applebaum: Hungary's opposition leader, Péter Magyar's campaign could inspire others. In a world where everybody seems to be getting their information online and people feel distant from politicians, Magyar spent a year and a half going around the country, visiting small towns and villages. He stayed away from what in America we call 'culture war issues' and campaigned on fixing the economy and promoting transparency and the rule of law. His message set out to unify people on the centre-left and the centre-right.

Ann Bernstein: Why, in your view, did Putin invade Ukraine? And why is the war going on for so long?

Anne Applebaum: Putin invaded Ukraine for two reasons. One relates to his conception of the greater Russian Empire, which he deems is his historical duty to rebuild. In a sense, this is a war of imperial conquest intended to recreate an empire. Second, the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014, which led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich and the end of a Kremlin friendly government in Ukraine, triggered Putin's fears about democracy. He was determined to demonstrate that such a revolution cannot succeed and that nobody really cares about human rights and accountability anymore.

Putin underestimated the Ukrainians. He expected the war to last three weeks and believed that Ukrainians wouldn't fight back. Instead, the Ukrainians fought back strongly and a global coalition emerged to first supply them with weapons and financial assistance to manufacture their own weapons.

In the last year, Ukraine has reinvented modern warfare. Its creative class of computer technologists and scientists developed new ways to resist. They are fighting an almost entirely asymmetric war, relying on drones and electronic warfare.

Ann Bernstein: Why do you think that the coalition supporting Ukraine failed to get support for its opposition to the invasion from many countries in the Global South?

Anne Applebaum: Despite the reality that Russia is clearly the imperial aggressor, Russia managed to portray itself as somehow fighting Western colonialism, and some countries bought into that.

This is linked to a narrative of 'NATO aggression'. In fact, for 30 years NATO expanded with Russian participation and acknowledgement, initially through the NATO-Russia Founding Act. NATO made concerted efforts to signal

its role as a defensive alliance and was wholly committed to creating a zone of peace and security, rather than adopting an offensive posture towards Russia. Putin accepted this for a long time. Recently released documents from the 1990s show that he raised no concerns about NATO expansion during that time. He only developed that argument when he needed a *casus belli* for invading Ukraine.

It is also important to recognise that Ukraine is not the same country as Russia. It has its own language, traditions and customs. Even the way that Ukrainians think about the state differs. It is famously known for its grassroots movements but has struggled to build effective state institutions, partly because they never really needed them, having been part of somebody else's empire for a long time. Unlike Poland and other countries, after the First World War, it failed to gain independence.

That had to wait until the 1990s, and Russians have resented this ever since. But the idea that invading Ukraine would somehow prevent NATO expansion is absurd, particularly since the invasion has created more anxiety, rearmament, and a strengthening of NATO. The war has altered the understanding of defence in Europe. Everybody recognises that if Russia can invade Ukraine, then Russia could also invade the Baltic States, or Poland, or even Germany.

Ann Bernstein: Some people say that Russia has a hold over American President Trump, and that's why he's so reluctant to criticise Putin. Why does Trump have this strange relationship with Russia?

Anne Applebaum: The relationship stems from business relations that go back to the 1980s and Trump's ongoing interest in doing business in Russia. He also has real admiration for political leaders who project strength and don't have to worry about a free press or opposing views. Trump admires Putin's model of absolute power.

He also doesn't understand Russia or Putin particularly well. He seemed to genuinely believe that his friendship with Putin would enable him to end the war and was surprised to discover that the Russians pursued interests different than his own.

I don't think Putin was ever seriously interested in ending the war. He has shown no inclination to accept a ceasefire or anything close to it, at least not so far. Trump's miscalculation was unfortunate.

If Trump had come to power and pledged to support Ukraine, then the war might have ended by now. This war will only end when the Russians understand that they cannot win, that Ukraine will not become a Russian colony, and that continuing to fight is futile.

Ann Bernstein: In one of your articles, you quote Trump as saying, if Europe is under attack, we will never come to help them. Does he mean this? Does he even remember saying this?

Anne Applebaum: Previous American presidents regarded European countries as long-term allies and maintained stable trade relations and security cooperation, which was seen as mutually beneficial in the long term.

By contrast, Trump's foreign policy is transactional. He is only concerned with whether he is winning or losing in the here and now. He shows little interest in historical alliances, and does not have a long term strategy, so it's pointless to remind him about the Second World War, or the fact that Europeans fought alongside the US in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When the Swiss delegation brought him a gold bar and a Rolex clock, he liked them. When Spain refused to allow him to use their air bases for the war in Iran, he retaliated. The fact that European countries are liberal democracies doesn't interest him.

Beyond Trump, a faction within the State Department and other parts of the U.S. government no longer sees the United States as the leader of an international democratic alliance. It sees itself as leading a deep political change in the United States that aims to restore an older, mostly white supremacist government. When they look for allies, they mainly find them among the European far right.

They believe that ideas of freedom have gone too far, courts have become too liberal, and culture has become too left-wing. This view is accompanied by anti-globalisation rhetoric and hostility towards regional integration and international institutions. This places the US at odds with the European Union, which is probably the most successful, regionally integrated organisation in the world.

Finally, tech companies close to the administration welcome US hostility towards the European Union because they would prefer to operate unregulated across the continent. These sources of hostility, it must be said, exist alongside continuing cooperation between the US and Europe in defence, intelligence and trade.

Ann Bernstein: How then do you see the future of Europe? Will they spend enough money on defence to really defend themselves without America? Can they handle the welfare cuts that this will entail in stagnant economies? Are you optimistic or pessimistic?

Anne Applebaum: Some days I see the glass half full and some days I see it as half empty.

I hear a lot of people inferring that defence spending could boost European economies and their technology sector. Sentiment in Germany has shifted, and similar changes are happening here in Poland and in other countries. Europeans are considering alternatives to American technology and investment.

I'm aware of ongoing defence cooperation projects between Europeans and the Ukrainians. European traditions of respect for independent academic research and upholding the rule of law are particularly important, as these traditions are weakening in the United States. If the EU completes its single market integration and creates capital markets at scale, it could become larger than the United States. Full integration could be a source of strength, as well as a weakness.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has talked about 'the weaponisation of integration' as their growing integration with the United States has left them in a precarious position. Europeans, to a lesser extent, hold the same view.

It is also important to recognise that Europe does not need a military as powerful as the United States nor the capacity to project naval power into the Pacific. While Europe does not want a war with Russia, it only needs defence capabilities that deter Russian aggression, defend its borders and detect and anticipate Russian sabotage.

Ann Bernstein: America invented the internet and a whole lot of the new technology, and then it seemed to go to sleep while its enemies used this technology against them and against the West. How did this happen?

Anne Applebaum: I think there were two phases. Initially, people didn't believe the internet would pose such a threat and weren't concerned about controlling content. There was enormous optimism about the internet and an assumption that widespread information would be beneficial. The expectation was that greater online activity would democratise the world. Attempts to control what appeared online happened later, and some of those backfired.

More recently, a different phenomenon has emerged. Part of the American political spectrum doesn't object to the anti-democratic, Russian, or sometimes Venezuelan, propaganda that appears online because they agree with it or because they find it useful. The goal of fighting false information and global sabotage online has therefore been diluted.

When thinking about regulating the internet, we must focus on what people hear, learn and understand about their own societies, how digital platforms and their algorithms present information, and whether information is distributed in a fair, equitable and reasonable way.

Ann Bernstein: Has any country been better than another at dealing with false information that's being used for political purposes? You've talked a lot about 'flooding the zone', as a strategy in what can be described as an 'information war'.

Anne Applebaum: Brazil tried to confront the problem. Whether it succeeded depends on your perspective and definition of success. Brazil has a law prohibiting the dissemination of falsehoods during elections. Its court system and investigators enforce these laws. Some argue these measures have gone too far.

The European Union has introduced legislation requiring internet platforms to operate more transparently. So far, I would describe its success as mixed. The objective is not censorship but to ensure compliance with the laws. Sometimes this can be useful, and other times not. I don't think anybody's been 100% successful in this area. A big concern is that a very small number of people control these platforms, and no one has yet found an effective way to reconcile that concentration of power with modern liberal democracy.

Ann Bernstein: As autocrats dismantle democratic institutions, are some institutions harder than others to break in your view? And what might be the most important institution to rebuild after an autocratic period?

Anne Applebaum: I'm currently in Poland, which recently had an illiberal government that tried to dismantle the country's institutions. It turns out that the judiciary is both the most important to dismantle and the most difficult to rebuild. Once the entire professional ethos and the independence of the judiciary are undermined, restoring them becomes extremely difficult. This isn't merely about laws; it involves changing a mindset. Important questions become: What does it mean to be a judge? What responsibilities do judges carry? What does judicial independence mean? Should judges take pride in defending the judiciary?

Ann Bernstein: Anne, thank you very much for your time. It has been great learning about what you're thinking and how you see the world from Poland and Washington.

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