FT Magazine War in Ukraine

Why I should have listened to Garry Kasparov about Putin

The chess grandmaster was dismissed when he warned about Russia. But he was right

Gillian Tett MARCH 16 2022

A few years ago, the exalted Russian chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov came to dinner at my house in New York. It was a memorably intense evening. As we dug into our desserts, Kasparov regaled the assembled group of American policymakers and financiers with his views on Russia, a country he had fled in 2013 after challenging President Vladimir Putin. Kasparov warned that Putin was becoming increasingly authoritarian, isolated from the west and, as a result, likely to lash out at neighbours such as Ukraine in a dangerous way.

When the rest of the table rowdily dismissed his catastrophising, Kasparov became heated and, as the wine flowed, the conversation grew so animated that I started to worry that guests would walk out. So, despite sharing many of Kasparov's fears, I decided to keep the peace by changing the subject to chess instead.

It was one of several occasions when I saw Kasparov correctly predict impending disaster only to be rebuffed. When we caught up by phone last week, he recalled that night, lamenting, "I was stunned by the unwillingness of people [in the west] to hear these warnings, because I grew up in the Soviet Union and knew all about the historical events of the 20th century. I knew that you could have stopped Hitler in 1935 and 1936 and 1937 and didn't. But I had so much outright rejection of what I have been saying."

Why were westerners so dismissive of Kasparov's analysis? It is an important question given that many observers have reacted with complete shock to events in Ukraine. Among the biggest culprits have been the western elites with businesses in Russia. "Nobody I knew expected Putin would actually invade!" I was told last weekend by an expatriate former director of a Russian commodities company, who has now resigned. "We are all just in disbelief."

Kasparov thinks the issue is a tendency to presume that everyone else shares your innate world view. The key here is western ideas of motive and rationality. Western culture is soaked in a capitalist ethos, underpinned by a widespread assumption that the profit motive rules supreme in terms of shaping political calculations, and that it's "the economy, stupid" that drives decision-making in Russia and elsewhere. The

collapse of the USSR reinforced this view, since it seemed that market principles and global business interests had triumphed.

As a consequence, western leaders and business groups generally turned a blind eye when Putin gave speeches that clearly demonstrated his nationalist, expansionist agenda and then annexed Crimea. Worse, they failed to appreciate how isolated Putin had become. Instead, as Russian oligarchs became a fixture of global business, Putin was seen as an extrapolation of this group. The idea that he might be so hell-bent on the destruction of democracy and the expansion of Russia that he would be willing to accept deep economic pain wasn't taken seriously.

"It's not like his actions were done in the darkness; it all happened in plain sight," Kasparov tells me. "But after the end of the cold war there was some kind of allergy for any warnings about repetition of events. There was this assumption that Putin would never destroy business because it seemed irrational for him to do that."

Given Kasparov's acuity in predicting current events, I ask what he thinks might happen next. He believes Putin has "already lost" the battle, in the sense that his key objective of swiftly annexing Ukraine has failed. "I don't think that a Ukrainian leader can accept anything less than the return of land [in Crimea]. This war will end with the Ukrainian flag on Sevastopol."

But he points out that "what price the Ukrainians will pay for this is unclear", since it would be foolish to expect Putin to back down quickly merely because of economic pain. The one tool that might force a rapid positive conclusion, he thinks, is Nato backing a "no-fly" zone or getting directly involved. "Putin only respects strength."

Could a coup be another ending? Kasparov does not expect this right now, but pressure is building. "From history we know that one [of the] most important ingredients [for a coup] is geopolitical military defeat. That would send a powerful message to all layers of Russian society that the big boss has failed, and the mafia boss can afford many things except showing he is weak and lost."

But a fear of looking weak could also cause Putin to lash out. Thus, argues Kasparov, one of the biggest questions now is "whether Russian officials would actually carry out the orders" if Putin tried to conduct a nuclear strike. He doubts it. "The moment one Russian warship fires a tactical nuclear missile, Nato will respond, and there is unlikely to be the same fanaticism for Putin as there was in Germany with Hitler. I don't believe that we have kamikaze Russian pilots."

Is this reassuring? Not necessarily: a stalemate threatens yet more suffering and

destruction in Ukraine. Either way, as the tragedy unfolds, it is a powerful rebuke to the west on the perils of blinkered thinking and assuming that everyone looks at the world through the prism of a balance sheet. The next time an unpopular idea sparks a row at my dinner table, I will let it run. Sometimes, there are more important things at stake than being polite.

Follow Gillian on Twitter @gilliantett and email her at gillian.tett@ft.com

Follow @FTMag on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first