

A case of deafness at the Atlantic Council

by Edward Spannaus

For the second time in less than a year, the old-line establishment Atlantic Council of the United States has sponsored a visit and speech by Alexei Arbatov, a Deputy in the Russian State Duma (Parliament) of the Yabloko bloc, and the deputy chairman of the Duma Defense Committee. The reaction—or lack of it—to his comments is revealing as to the inability of many in the United States to recognize the heavy responsibility which the United States and the West have for the ominous turn of events within Russia.

Last April, Arbatov, hardly an anti-Western hard-liner, had spoken in quite dramatic terms about the crisis in U.S.-Russian relations which had erupted as a consequence of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and he had described in some detail, how anti-Americanism was sweeping Russia.

Speaking again on Jan. 7 in Washington, Arbatov said that what is going on in Russia today should not come as a surprise. This situation has been building up for several years, he said, citing two factors in particular.

First, is the “failed economic reform.” Russia’s effort to get out of its economic crisis is aggravated by its dependence on foreign financial aid, which has very stringent conditions which sometimes contradict Russia’s attempts to get out of its crisis, Arbatov pointed out.

Second, he said, there are external events which have had a big influence. Some people had been warning their American colleagues, that things that were done by the United States and the West might affect Russian developments in a negative way. “The double shock of NATO extension and NATO’s war in the Balkans certainly marked a turning point, in both Russian domestic affairs, and the Russian attitudes toward the United States and the West.”

Arbatov said that the shock of the Balkan war is not forgotten in Russia, and that the ongoing war in Chechnya “is directly related to the war in the Balkans.” The methods being used by Russia are an attempt to emulate what NATO did in Kosovo, and the lessons that Russia drew from NATO’s actions in Kosovo are now being applied in Chechnya.

These lessons are: 1) that NATO’s actions removed the taboo in Russia, since the end of the first Chechen war, on the use of force in such situations; 2) that the end justifies the means; 3) that military force is an efficient problem-solver, if applied massively and decisively; 4) that negotiations are a too long and controversial means to resolve political issues and ethnic conflict; 5) that the legality of an action is of sec-

ondary importance, when national interests are at stake; and 6) that humanitarian consequences are simply collateral damage which can be tolerated, and that to cut losses among your own troops, you may inflict excessive damage and devastation on the property and peaceful population of the other side.

“The opinion of the West, about what Russia is doing, is as of little importance, as was Russian opinion, about what NATO was doing in the Balkans in Spring and Summer of this year,” Arbatov noted. “The slogan which has common support in Russia now, is that if NATO assumes a self-proclaimed right to use force against a sovereign state in such situations, then Russia all the more has the right to use force in its domestic affairs.” Arbatov pointed out that the Dec. 19 elections in Russia took place in a situation of war hysteria, and with strong memories of what the West did in Kosovo. The war was the primary issue in the Parliamentary elections, and it certainly will be the primary issue in the forthcoming Presidential elections, he predicted.

Rebuttal of Arbatov

Following Arbatov’s presentation, former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow (1981-87) Arthur Hartman, presented a commentary, in which he either disputed or ignored much of what Arbatov had said. “What we see going on in Russia is not caused by Kosovo,” Hartman declared. “There’s a 100-year history behind what is happening in Chechnya. Unfortunately, Russia is dealing with its Manifest Destiny problems about a hundred years too late—if you think about how we dealt with them in the 19th century.”

Regarding NATO expansion, Hartman said that he initially opposed it, but then accepted it, and disagreed with Arbatov that this has had any great effect on Russia.

Hartman further said he does not agree that the reforms were a total failure, for the following reason: “My investment fund is an example that that is not the case. We have backed small and medium-sized entrepreneurs who are very successful—more successful today after the failure of the economic policy last August when the ruble fell, because we have less foreign competition.”

It might seem that Hartman represents an extreme case, but the same phenomenon has been noticeable at other think-tank events in Washington since the Duma elections. These discussions are dominated by attempts by Russia specialists to analyze the recent events from the standpoint of internal Russian factors, while ignoring the adverse changes that have taken place in Russia as a consequence of Western policies, such as the free-market economic “reforms” (which opened up Russia for looting by foreigners and Russia’s new tycoons), NATO expansion, the bombing of Yugoslavia, and the Caspian Sea pipeline deal. As a result of such wrong-headed policies and actions, many Russians believe—with good reason—that the West is out to humiliate and break up Russia, and internal Russian policy developments are shifting accordingly.