

Globe and Mail - OPINION

At some point soon, Ovechkin and his hockey-playing countrymen will have to pick a side

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The hottest new trend in sports is the shameless flip-flop. Everyone's doing it.

We're not talking eventually changing your mind and calling it something else. We're talking saying you'll do one thing and then hours later, begging forgiveness and doing the total opposite.

FIFA started it. Its first thought on punishing Russia was more uniform nagging. Change the country name again. Make its anthem the "SpongeBob SquarePants" theme song. Really give it to Russia this time.

That lasted less than a day. After several countries said they would no longer play Russia under any circumstances, FIFA tossed it out of international soccer. No hearing. No appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Just disappeared from the family photo.

The International Paralympic Committee tried the same thing and got the same result. One day it was all about the Olympic charter and being bound by legality. The next day, Russia was out on its ear.

Among the many things we're getting used to right now, one is rediscovering that a bunch of legal guardrails are removed soon after the guided missiles start flying.

With that in mind, the people who control sports are not running the Ukraine file. They're reacting to it. The early inclination has been quick action. Do something, release a statement, anything.

Then you wait to see how money and labour respond to that action. If either of them is unhappy, you immediately reverse yourself. The end result is a purge of Russia, Russians and Russian interests. This is no longer an administrative process. It's a series of reflexes leading to one outcome.

While the Premier League, Formula One and both major tennis associations are in fits trying to disentangle themselves from their Russia connections, the NHL has one advantage. It's that no one outside Canada cares that much about the NHL.

You're not going to hear enraged Brits or Californians calling on hockey to purge itself of Putin collaborators.

But give it a little time. Xenophobia is back in style. If events keep on rolling in the same direction, everyone's going to get their turn.

The NHL survived the first wave by sticking Alexander Ovechkin out in front quickly. He negotiated a careful neither/nor stance – neither condemning Putin nor embracing war. Most important, he did all this before opinions had fully formed.

So every open-hearted observer found something in Ovechkin's comments to latch on to or project onto him – he's afraid for his family back home; he says no to war; he has Ukrainian friends.

Ovechkin's Instagram avatar continues to be a portrait of himself with Vladimir Putin. So who's the fool here? Ovechkin or everyone who wants to cut him the benefit of the doubt? It's time to stop making excuses for people who wouldn't do us the same favour.

The league followed up with a statement. It lamented the war, said it had stopped doing business with Russia (though there was hardly any business to begin with) and had a bit tacked on the end about how hard this is for Russian players.

It was all the same neither-nor'ism that has served the NHL well through many crises: It's time for action, but let's remember ...; Things must change, but in the interim ...

That would work if this was six weeks ago. It won't work now.

This isn't the usual sporting crisis. It doesn't go away once someone scores a hat trick or the Leafs get blown out by a peewee team. In this situation, calling attention to yourself only makes it worse.

Attention means questions. Questions mean being asked about the war. Next time, the same shifty answer will not elicit the same response. Opinions have hardened now – Russia is bad. Worse than bad, dangerous. And not just to some distant peoples. To us.

As soon as the word “nuclear” started getting tossed around, this got real for average North Americans in a way no conflict has since the Cold War.

You can't have it both ways any more. Thanks to Russia, we have re-entered the Manichaeian political world we hoped we'd left behind. It's with-us or against-us time again.

That means that at some point soon, Ovechkin and his hockey-playing countrymen will have to pick a side. Eventually, all the Russian NHLers who have not publicly broken ties with the Russian regime will have to go away.

Not all at once. This won't be the overnight purge that commentators such as Dominik Hasek have called for. Contracts and relationships made inside organizations still count for something.

But there is no world in which Russia is invading Moldova and the two Russians on your roster aren't expected to talk about it. The last thing any NHL team wants to see is its own logo on CNN or Fox News alongside burnt corpses and flattened apartment blocks.

The NHL version of the Russian clear-out will be an attritional process. The first exits will be self-selecting. Guys who don't return after the summer break. Guys who retire or move home to play (though the cratering ruble is turning a KHL career into charity work).

Then there will be the moderately talented guys whose contracts expire and aren't picked up. Why hire a Russian when you can get a Swede who is nearly as good, costs about the same and comes with none of the baggage? At a point in the very near future, GMs will have to defend those choices.

Then there will be the flame-outs. Guys who cannot help themselves but lash out. Ovechkin is a prime candidate.

Clearly, via that Instagram page, he is itching for some sort of confrontation. Sooner or later, he'll get it. Then it will become impossible for the Washington Capitals to keep him.

If very recent history is our guide, the legalities of contracts will be a big problem and then, all of a sudden, they won't be a problem at all. Not when the Capitals' sponsors and Ovechkin's fellow pros turn on him.

Once a star of Ovechkin's calibre is put through this wringer, it's open season on everyone else.

There is an ironic Marxist twist to all this – management has limited power over how this goes; labour has a great deal.

Nothing about what happens next is certain. But the more people feel that this “situation” – Ovechkin's word for war – is threatening their own security, the less they will be inclined to be reasonable about it.

Eventually, the only Russians left will be the ones who've very publicly crossed over the line to our side. Even then, the taking of loyalty oaths may not be enough to prevent the NHL from once again becoming a “friends of democracy-only” league.