

[The end of the *Pax Europaea*: IR theory and narratives on Russia's aggression in Ukraine

An analysis around blame, scholarship and policymaking

Lucas P. M. Santos]

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of Master of Arts in Transnational Governance of the European University Institute

Florence, [15 May 2022]

European University Institute
School of Transnational Governance

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ABSTRACT

Russia's full-fledged military attack on Ukraine has completely reshaped the European security scene. An event of such magnitude invariably calls for discussions on blame and has intensified and mainstreamed a debate on the West's potential principal responsibility for this latest escalation on Putin's part. This work tackles this proposition, evaluating whether the theory on which it stands holds ground when critically scrutinised and confronted with facts and other relevant factors and alternative explanations. This work also seeks to inquire into the interplay between theory, that is, scholarly work, policymaking, and public opinion, considering its effects in the real world. Its analysis is based on the deductive methodological approach of process tracing.

Key words: Ukraine, offensive realism, NATO, Russia's invasion, blame, Mearsheimer

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INTRODUCTION

On February 24 of the current year, 2022, that which had been hotly speculated about for weeks on end effectively took place, and it changed everything. Russia's full-fledged military attack on Ukraine has completely reshaped the European security scene. After 200 years of neutrality, Sweden opted for NATO membership, alongside Finland; Switzerland, likely the one single country most people across the world connect with impartiality, joined the group of nations imposing sanctions on Russia; and, in perhaps the most remarkable change in policy caused by Russia's aggression, Germany, in certain ways still under the shadow of the third Reich, opted to abandon its long-standing policy of not sending weapons to conflict zones and, beyond, decided to boost its military capabilities and preparedness, assigning an additional 100 billion euros on top of its defence budget for the modernisation and strengthening of its armed forces, the *Bundeswehr*.

These changes point to the pivotal nature of the situation, for Europe, for West-Russia relations, and for global geopolitics in general. Within mere minutes after Putin's speech announcing what he euphemistically called a "special military operation" and while the first reports started to pour in confirming that the Russian army had crossed the Ukrainian border *en masse*, a dedicated Wikipedia article titled "2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine" was already springing to life, written collaboratively by now hundreds of authors. Within days, one could already find online comments and opinion pieces on the event - still very much in an initial phase of fast-paced developments on the ground - claiming it effectively marked the end of the *Pax Europaea*, and, further, even the beginning of the end of the post-Cold War unipolarity under American supremacy.

An event of such magnitude and significance, bringing with it so much devastation and human suffering, invariably calls for discussions on blame. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified and mainstreamed a debate on the West's potential principal responsibility for this latest escalation on Putin's part. That is the view held by certain scholars from the realist school of international relations, most notably by American political scientist John Mearsheimer, who places the blame for the developments in Ukraine squarely on American foreign policy and on the expansion of the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

(NATO), which is moving ever closer to the Russian “sphere of influence” and national borders.

The main objective of this work is to tackle this proposition, the blame question, evaluating whether the theory on which it stands holds ground when critically scrutinised and confronted with facts and other relevant factors and alternative explanations. This work also seeks to inquire into the interplay between theory, that is, scholarly work, and policymaking and public opinion, considering its effects in the real world. The questions at hand are not only current, very much so, but also generally relevant, understanding how (geo)political developments are framed and thought about as best as possible is very important, above all for decision- and policymaking in the main political centres involved, as one should aim at the highest possible level of objectivity. The topic touches on the important values of democracy, liberty and peace. Further, the fact that the question at hand touches on responsibility and, given the unquantifiable human suffering involved, also on blame and moral responsibility, makes it even more poignant.

It will approach the topic and question in the following manner. Firstly, realist theoretical assumptions will be presented, with a focus on Mearsheimer’s take on it. Subsequently, both the general conceptual framework of the theory and its resulting claim about who is to blame for the situation in Ukraine will be critically discussed and evaluated based on the deductive methodological approach of process tracing. Subsequently, the aspect of information war will be discussed. Consideration around the question “why does it all matter?” will follow. And lastly, a final conclusion will be drawn.

METHODOLOGY

This work seeks to analyse not the empirical reality of geopolitics as a mode to reach generalisable observations, but to test the validity of a particular IR theory to explain observable developments. As such, its approach can be understood as being a “within-case” one. It also addresses and considers the way theories relate to and shape reality by affecting modes of thinking and prisms through which people in general and, more consequentially, policymakers understand and evaluate the real world.

This work's assessment of the theoretical framework at hand, (offensive) realism, and the claim based on it, the West's fault in Ukraine, is grounded on *longue durée* analysis and the method of process tracing, used here for deductive, hence theory-testing, purposes. Being theory-focused, this work deals principally with secondary sources, that is, scholarly writings, different interpretations, and possible alternative explanations, but also draws from factual events for their contrasting and validating potential vis-à-vis theoretical assumptions.

One of the limitations of process tracing as a method is the problem of infinite regress, especially when the subject matter of a given study is a historical development, whose series of relevant events can go back decades, centuries, or even millennia in a never-ending circle of events preconditioned by earlier events and so on and so on. For the purpose of this work, the concerned timespan starts with the fall of the Soviet Union, which is justifiable both because it marks a considerable reset in West-Russia relations and because this is also the timespan based on which the theory and case study at hand are themselves concerned with.

This work looks at the past to understand the present, but does not in any way attempt to predict short-term or future developments of the war nor its potential conclusion, whether explicitly or indirectly through the logic of its underlying argumentation. It is also worth noting that, although a critical assessment of the precepts and the theoretical framework postulated by Mearsheimer and other scholars subscribing to the same logic, this work does intend to place fault on any side, it merely scrutinises narratives based on their own merit. One acknowledges the philosophical difficulty in attributing (moral) blame in any case, such an undertaking would be beyond the scope of this work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant literature on which the claim of Western responsibility in Ukraine relies is that pertaining to the realist school of international relations theory.

The theoretical framework on which realism relies consists of a few core assumptions:

- a) Anarchy: the international political system is devoid of any supranational authority that can enforce any given rules;
- b) State-centrism: the actors in the international system are states, taken as the unit of analysis, and not individual leaders or other forms of human organisation;
- c) Self-interest / egoism: states are primarily concerned with their own survival in an insecure international system;
- d) Security-maximisation: states seek to maximise security so as to ensure their survival;
- e) Rationality: in the pursuit of that goal, states act rationally, they are rational actors.

At the centre of the debate on Western blame in Ukraine is John Mearsheimer, its biggest advocate. Mearsheimer is one of IR's most prominent and divisive scholars, a proponent of great-power politics, of *Realpolitik*. McFaul (2014, p. 167) describes him as "one of the most consistent and persuasive theorists in the realist school of international relations." His seminal work on Ukraine is the article "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," published in *Foreign Affairs* a number of months after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. The following year, in 2015, Mearsheimer gave a famous and widely-watched recorded lecture titled "Why is Ukraine the West's Fault?".

Central to his theory and consequently to his view of the situation in Ukraine is the rational actor assumption. In his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer states that:

"[G]reat powers are rational actors. They are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider that preferences of other states and how their own behavior is likely to affect the behavior of those other states, and how the behavior of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival. Moreover, states pay attention to the long term as well as the immediate consequences of their actions." (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31).

It is inherent to Mearsheimer's theory that great powers will protect their "sphere of influence" no matter what. He points out that no US president would ever tolerate Mexico or

Canada joining a military alliance led by another great power, for instance (Mearsheimer, 2015). For him, the position to resort to military means is not political: one should not expect any power to behave differently. For him, in the international system the maxim “might makes right” applies. Hence, he criticises the US and NATO, considering the latter expansion a big mistake.

NATO’s first Secretary-General famously stated that the purpose of the alliance was to “keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down.” When the Cold War ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO counted 16 member countries. In the aftermath of that, many were convinced that Russia lacked both the capability and the will to be a threat to the newly independent Eastern and Central European states. So convinced of Russia not becoming a threat were US officials in the Clinton administration, that, in addition to advocating NATO expansion, they encouraged the Belarussians, Ukrainians, etc., to hand the Soviet nuclear arsenal remaining on their territories over to Russia. At the time, Mearsheimer (1993) made the case for keeping a nuclear Ukraine in order to ensure stability between it and Russia, arguing that it would increase European security overall, not decrease it.

NATO did expand. In 1999, the alliance welcomed three new members states: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. In 2004, a further seven countries joined, these were: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Four years later, in 2008, the final declaration of the NATO Summit in Bucharest asserted that both Ukraine and Georgia would join the alliance in the future. In 2009, Albania and Croatia joined. In 2017 it was Montenegro’s turn, and in 2020 North Macedonia became NATO’s newest member. Now in 2022, after and as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine, Sweden and Finland have both officially applied to become NATO members.

According to Mandelbaum, who shares Mearsheimer’s views, claims back in the 1990s by NATO enlargement proponents that it would foster and consolidate democracy in the new members were wrong. When it comes to the criteria for joining, states wanting to join NATO must:

- Uphold the values of democracy and diversity;
- Be advancing toward a market economy;
- Have their military firmly under civilian control;
- Be good neighbors, respecting the sovereignty of other states; and
- Work to achieve interoperability with NATO forces.

In the post-Cold War context, Central and Eastern European states once behind the Iron Curtain did not have civilian control over their militaries, for instance. The effects of the process of NATO accession on transparency and accountability when it comes to militaries was very substantial and more direct. The effects on solidifying democracy, however, are much more difficult to assess, given the amount of variables involved, but, seeing the examples of Poland and Hungary, one can say that the debate on NATO enlargement at the time, which quickly hailed its merits as given denotes the difficulty and problem in academia of predicting the future.

When it comes to communication between US officials and various Soviet and subsequently Russian officials, Mandelbaum points out that the promise by the former to the latter that NATO would not expand was broken. He mentions that the defence against this accusation boils down to the assertion that this promise was never written down. Mearsheimer argues that through NATO's ultimate and considerable expansion, the West has been in effect provoking Russia for many years, and that the latter's actions in Ukraine, past and present, were predictable and reasonable steps according to his theory. This view is shared by other scholars, among which is Professor Alessandro Orsini, whose frequent presence on Italian television and fierce critique of NATO as well as Biden's foreign policy concerning the conflict, have made him a controversial celebrity, subject of both praise and criticism, as well as satire, across Italian media outlets and the internet. The underlying logic is in line with the Russian claim that NATO expansion amounts to an aggressive behaviour and constitutes a threat to Russia's national security.

As Motyl (2014) points out, such realist argumentation is very controversial when it declares Russia's invasion of Ukraine to be a reasonable response to a Western attempt to switch Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence to its own, and, consequentially, places the blame for

the current Russian hostilities entirely on the West: more precisely on the United States and the American-led NATO. As McFaul notices, even though realism's unit of analysis is the state, Mearsheimer, in his explanation of Ukraine, considers individual leaders, and has hailed Putin as a "first-class strategist" with the appropriate analytic framework at hand (Mearsheimer apud McFaul, 2014).

There seems to be missing factors to properly address the question at hand.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Mearsheimer's explanation has been gaining force lately among certain people because his predictions turned out to take place. However, the issue of causality is more complex, just because a given theory can potentially explain a factual event, it does not mean the latter came to be precisely or exclusively because of the reasons laid out by the that theory. There are perhaps deeper factors that could potentially account for Russia's position and actions vis-à-vis Ukraine. This analysis will contrast theory with facts, further factors and alternative explanations in order to test its limits.

Firstly, one may pick on the rational actor assumption. It stands to reason that a rational actor will base its response to any situation based on an assessment of concrete facts. The now (in)famous - given the current debate - 2008 Bucharest Declaration, which asserted Ukraine and Georgia's future NATO membership, might seem very significant, but without accompanying steps and concrete actions towards that end, its words are just that, words, and in themselves do not pose a threat. Overall, in the years since that summit, there have been no substantial steps towards a Ukrainian accession to NATO.

In any case, however, the ongoing armed insurgency in the Donbas coupled with the Russian annexation of Crimea were sufficient to prevent Ukraine joining NATO. The alliance could never welcome a new member with an open armed conflict, especially not one with Russia. Full-scale war against Ukraine was hence not necessary if the goal was to ensure it remained as a buffer state.

Another factor to take into account is the lack of a proportional Western response to Russia's previous crime of aggression in 2014. Until February this year, the annexation of Crimea was the most serious breach of borders and territorial integrity in Europe since the Second World War. However, the EU did not follow up with the introduction of broad and substantial economic sanctions against Russia, nor did it target high-level officials involved in the decision-making and implementation process. All in all, Crimea did not become a "game-changer" in EU-Russia relations, rather, it was the provocative event at the start of sequential brazen violations on the part of the Russian regime. As Kruk (2019) postulates, one could argue that back then, the chaotic nature and sequence of events in Kyiv and Crimea led to unclarity while they were unfolding. This, however, was definitely not the case a few years later when Russia fired at and seized Ukrainian naval vessels in the Kerch Strait in a blatantly open show of aggression. Yet, the European Union did not recognise the event for what it was and took nearly three months to react with sanctions against directly involved individuals (Kruk, 2019).

Before the full-scale invasion this past February, it was already clear that the then-existing sanctions did not make a dent on Russia's position on Ukraine. This is even more evident now, after the invasion. If anything, the soft, almost lenient response of the West was certainly interpreted by Russia as a very small price to pay when assessing the cost-benefits of its planned actions in Ukraine.

Moreover, the US failure, under the Obama administration, to act decidedly against the Syrian regime, its inaction faced with the violation of its own determined "red line" by that regime, and the resulting power vacuum, were certainly perceived, and exploited, by Russia as a show of weakness on the American side, enabling Russia to secure a presence on the ground, which in effect limited the scope of possible Western actions in Syria, keeping the situation unresolved ever since.

A very relevant consideration when it comes to assessing NATO's aggressiveness as claimed by Russia is the chronic lack of commitment from European member states to fulfil its treaty obligations, above all the requirement that each NATO member must invest at least 2% of its GDP in defence. This seeming "freeriding" of several European countries counting entirely on the United States for their security was the target of recurrent critique by Trump,

whose negative views on NATO went as far as to lead him to discuss withdrawing the United States from its own military alliance (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). This was reported by The New York Times in 2019. Later that year, at an interview with The Economist, French president Emmanuel Macron famously declared that NATO was becoming “brain dead,” taking aim at Trump and what he regarded as a waning commitment to collective defence on the part of the United States, the alliance’s main guarantor and *conditio sine qua non*.

President Biden, on account of his very apparent age, and in spite of his unofficial standing as “the most powerful man in the world,” does not project an image of particular strength, on the contrary, and especially when compared to his predecessor. It is easier to conceive of Trump wanting to start a war than Biden. Trump, however, has in many ways and instances praised Putin, even after February 24, and seemed thus more like an admirer of Putin, and hence an asset for Russia, than a threat to that country during his term in office. Indeed, one can easily argue that Trump’s actions weakened the unity of American society and politics domestically, as well as diminished America’s prestige, and thus also power, internationally, comparatively strengthening Russia’s.

The disastrous withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan under the Biden administration, whose images of chaos and desperation dominated the media, together with the immediate and total collapse of the American-trained Afghan Armed Forces, which led to a swift victory and return to power of the Taliban, cannot be considered anything other than an absolute failure. As with Syria, it came across as denoting weakness on the part of the US. The events in Afghanistan resonated badly both domestically with the American people, who footed a titanic bill of 2 trillion US dollars over the course of two decades, and internationally, where the US rightfully came across as an interventionist state whose cluelessness achieved little, nothing, or perhaps even made things worse, all while wasting a sum of money many times higher than the estimated price to end world hunger.

Another variable one should add to the equation concerns the economy. It is worth noting the current economic circumstances of Europe and the timing of Russia’s aggression. After two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, European economies are still rallying from the costly effects of lockdowns and border closures. One can add to this suboptimal economic

situation the fact of Europe's heavy reliance on Russia for its energy needs in form of coal, oil, and above all, natural gas. With the European Union's plans to drastically reduce its use of fossil fuels in the not-too-distant future, meaning that Russia would lose not only its leverage on several European countries but also a very significant, and hence crucial, part of the key market on which its economy is grounded, it comes as no surprise that Russia might have regarded this particular moment as a propitious one. The Russian leadership might well have thought along the lines of "it's now or never" to act in Ukraine, while believing its energy leverage and the sensitive state of Europe's economy would act as an effective deterrence for it to, once again, get away with its crimes.

Finally, there is yet another consideration to be made, which pertains to the very core of the transatlantic military alliance, its famous Article 5, the *un pour tous, tous pour un* defence pledge ubiquitous in any discussion about NATO, Russia and European security. Even though one often hears or reads the phrase "an attack on one is an attack on all," mostly coming from high-ranking US officials and presidents as an emphatic reaffirmation of the alliance's commitment, the integral wording of Article 5, whence this maxim comes, leaves remarkably much space for interpretation:

"The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. [...]"

The strategic ambiguity of the article, which does not explicitly bind the member countries, individually as well as collectively, to a declaration of war against the aggressor of any of them, likely achieves the purpose of deterrence. And one can see why a strong-worded rhetoric is a necessary and recurrent complement to it. However, given that the article speaks of assistance, that it leaves it up to the remaining member countries to decide what actions to

take, including, but not imperatively, the use of armed force, one cannot but speculate about what would happen were, for instance, one of the small Baltic states to be invaded by Russia, and cast doubt on NATO's response. Would the United States and other larger countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, or France, really declare war on Russia and, as a consequence, almost certainly unleash a nuclear war that would annihilate entire cities in their territories, if not their very capitals? These are considerations Russia would take in case its imperial fancy were to lead it to ponder on such an attack.

Given all of the above, it would be fair to claim that Russia, taken as a rational actor, would not have perceived the West, particularly in the form of NATO, as a threat to its national security and survival, let alone as such a threat as to justify a full-fledged invasion and annexation of part of Ukraine. Even if one considers the apparent initial belief, of both sides actually, that Kyiv would fall within days, meaning that Russia expected swift success in Ukraine at very limited costs, the added gains of such an accomplishment relate more to other factors, such as territorial, and hence strategic, economic and demographic, gains, than to preventing what was already out of the question, Ukraine's potential NATO membership, as well as to increasing its own security when the West posed no actual threat.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism postulates that states will behave aggressively and seize chances to maximise their power, and hence their security, even when not directly threatened at any given moment. According to him,

“great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.” (Mearsheimer & Alterman, 2001, p. 35).

In his 2009 article “Reckless States and Realism,” published on *International Relations*, Mearsheimer discusses the rational actor assumption in IR theory, especially within the realist tradition, as he examines the implications of Kenneth Waltz' decision to exclude “rationality” from his theory. There, he acknowledges the following:

“[G]reat powers are expected to act in strategically smart ways most of the time. For sure, there will be occasional cases where great powers behave foolishly, but not like in Waltz’s world where they often behave that way. For theorists who assume that states are rational agents, misguided policies are the exception, not the rule.” (Mearsheimer, 2009, 246).

A few pages further, he argues that whenever a given power starts showing signs of foolish behaviour in the international system, it would make sense for other states to take action to cheque the former’s reckless ambitions, including through the means of pre-emptive strikes, if any such action would prevent much larger damage further on. In line with this, Mearsheimer asserts that:

“Britain, France, and Russia (later the Soviet Union) were all committed to containing Germany before 1914 and again before 1939. But their efforts to form a tightly knit balancing coalition against Germany failed both times and the result was World Wars I and II.” (Mearsheimer, 2009, p. 252).

Hence, it seems that for Mearsheimer and other realist scholars that subscribe to this logic, the aggressor is never to blame, because one is to assume, always, that it will behave in such a manner. On the one hand, if one comes too close to its “sphere of influence,” one is provoking it and is thus responsible for the consequences. If, on the other hand, one fails to put up a convincing show of force to act as a deterrent, one is equally to blame for any and all devastating effects. Such a logic, one can argue, in a way normalises aggression, and it is hard not to regard this standpoint as the equivalent for state actors in the international system of the expurgatory popular saying “boys will be boys.”

Given the combination of events described above, which seem to denote a continuous weakening in Western assertiveness and power, one cannot but consider that it would be actually easier to argue that Russia, in line with offensive realism, exploited what it saw as a particularly auspicious moment to act, expand its territorial limits, and increase its power. That things did not go according to plan neither on the ground nor at the international level can be

regarded as a (huge) miscalculation, based not so much on imperfect information, seeing facts were in line with that assumed perception, as on a misconception of the other side, of its values, and what it takes to elicit a strong response.

There is also an issue with causation in Mearsheimer's logic. Russia might regard a greater integration between Ukraine and the West as a threat, but surely, Ukraine's wishes to move away from Russia are driven in considerable part by Russia's own aggressive and controlling behaviour in the first place. Were Russia to be a respectful, cooperative, and responsible neighbour, behaving accordingly, Ukraine would most likely not feel threatened and the need to turn to the West for support and protection. Having watched Russian brutality in Chechnya and South Ossetia, one can understand that Ukraine sought to obtain military assurances from the US and European powers; and to say that in doing so, in trying to protect itself, it acted irresponsibly is disturbing, as it in a way denies it the principle of self-determination. Also, Ukraine being a liberal democracy is not mutually exclusive to Russia's existence and security, a scenario in which both can thrive as cooperating fully independent states is not far-fetched, or would not have been far-fetched, before the initial aggression in 2014. All in all, one can argue the problem is Russia. A truly democratic Russia would not feel threatened by NATO expansion nor by an independent Ukraine, and the latter would equally not feel threatened by the former.

Moreover, Mearsheimer's single variable of NATO expansion being to blame surely cannot explain the fact that Russia's attitude towards the United States has not been exclusively antagonistic in the past decades, but both collaborative and aggressive at different moments.

It is especially difficult for the theory to account for the 2009-2012 reset of US-Russia relations period, which saw extensive cooperation between Russia and the US, then under the Obama administration. During that time, for instance, the two countries signed and ratified a new version of the old US-Soviet Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START); both governments voted together in the UN Security Council for a very large set of sanctions regarding Iran; the supply route for American soldiers in Afghanistan, which went partially through Russian territory, was vastly expanded; both nations worked together to get Russia into the WTO; a more liberal visa regime was established between the two; and a US-Russia

presidential commission was created to foster collaboration on many areas, ranging from counterterrorism to nuclear energy (McFaul, 2014).

It is particularly relevant to highlight that the Russian president during those years was Dmitry Medvedev, and not Vladimir Putin, which leads one to consider another theoretical weakness of the realist, particularly Mearsheimer's, take on Ukraine, the exclusion from the conceptual framework of other relevant, and mostly domestic, factors such as the role of nationalism, ideology, collective memory and nostalgia, the internal political landscape, and leaders' psychology, to name some. All contributing if not explanatory factors.

Overall, one can say that as a theory, Mearsheimer's realist take fails to paint a full picture of the dynamics between the West, Ukraine, and Russia, and hence to satisfactorily explain them beyond certain elements of these relationships in the past three decades. As a policy prescription, Mearsheimer's revisionist logic of attaining power through offensive means, as embraced by Putin, can be irrational and dangerous, as we clearly see today.

Building on the above, there are additional arguments which can be made against the assertion of Western blame. There are claims that Putin is mentally unwell, especially after his lengthy pandemic isolation, which arguably affected his mindset (Sanger & Troianovski, 2022). This however, we will likely never know, and overall, such claims can be at fault of oversimplification. In line with a line of reasoning that focus on the leader personally, which would not be in line with Mearsheimer overall theoretical framework, Sabbagh & Mason (2022) report that Western intelligence was sure of serious doubts on the part of high-ranking Russian officials as to the invasion of Ukraine just before it took place.

Deep causes of the issue may well originate in ideology related to the relations between Ukraine and Russia in themselves. The two countries have a long and troubled history, there is enough enmity and internal issues between these two states to generate armed conflict in itself, such as indeed the ownership of Crimea and other territories, Ukrainian and Russian minorities living in the other country, as well as Russia's denial of Ukraine's identity and even statehood, something which goes back a long time. Right in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Freeland (1993) reports, high-ranking Russian officials were referring to Ukrainian

independence as “transitional” while advising European countries not to create embassies in Kyiv because these would soon become mere consular offices under the jurisdiction of their Moscow embassies.

One should also consider that Russia’s objections to NATO expansion over the years have been uneven, from muted to emphatic, and this poses a logical problem for offensive realism. Surely the accession of the Baltic states to NATO should have, in that logic, represented a very substantial threat to Russia, whose historical capital and second main city, Saint Petersburg, is located not even 150km from the Estonian border. As McFaul (2014) points out, Mearsheimer fails to explain why Russia did not send its military into Ukraine before 2014, given that NATO began expanding 15 years prior, in 1999. The argument that Russia had not enough military capability to do so is weak, given that it fought two wars in Chechnya which demanded much more military power than the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (McFaul, 2014). One can hence say that Russia’s reaction in Ukraine could have been different. Its response was by no means an inevitability.

The expansion of NATO, that of the EU alike, is a question of shared values and not mere security considerations, as seen in the NATO accession criteria and policy discussions above. Whether membership in NATO effectively fosters democratisation or not is another question, as we have seen above, that its foundation and intents are linked to certain values is a fact. The values in question, freedom and democracy, are what Ukrainians want to preserve and are giving their lives for. These are the values of NATO and of the European Union. It would be a gross injustice to deny these to Ukraine because a state that does not subscribe to them wants to dominate its neighbour.

In any case, even if one would take the realist theoretical assumptions as absolute truth, Western powers still have the right to act, to say otherwise would equate to saying that one cannot but passively accept gross human rights and international law violations. Else, what would it mean to stand up for values and principles? And how would one go about creating a just and rule-based international system? It surely is no easy task devoid of risks and confrontation with those who want to prevent that.

A consideration on Russia's narrative(s)

Russia's publicised justification for its actions, given the circumstances, is not to be taken at face value. Putin's statements and speeches also serve political purposes. Leaders lie, so despite the consistency and recurrence of Putin's narrative against NATO, one should not take it at face value. But still, could Russia's narrative give us any insights into the real reasons for Russia's aggression in Ukraine and what its ultimate goals are?

Many of Russia's public claims, such as the ones on Ukraine's government being ruled by a (neo-)Nazi regime, on genocide being carried out against Russophones and ethnic Russians in the Donbas region, on Russia's military action being a pre-emptive strike against an allegedly imminent NATO invasion, etc., are just too absurd to represent actual beliefs of the Russian how it perceives the situation, unless all relevant members of the Russian regime have lost their minds and became delusional and paranoid. The Russian state has more than complete access to information in order to know the above is not the case, and hence, excluding the NATO discourse, one is left with the narrative that Ukraine is in fact not a nation, but a made-up state whose official territory includes at least in part, if not fully, historical Russian lands, and that its population, again at least in part, if not fully, consists of former subjects of the Russian Empire and hence of people who should be citizens of the Russian Federation. Such argument is a constant in the Russian discourse throughout the years.

A consideration on balance

There are many and varied arguments that fall on each side of the debate, with different scholars enumerating and emphasising diverse combinations of them. Debates on blame regarding large-scale armed conflicts have a long history, and many of them seem to follow a similar pattern. At first, the aggressor is unconditionally to blame (Germany in both World Wars, for instance), then the blaming shifts to the other side, the one which either somehow provoked or failed to prevent the actions of the former (one may think here of the humiliation imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I and the appeasement prior to World War II). Ultimately one arrives at a less black and white and more pondered assessment, one which acknowledges many different factors without making emphatic causal inferences, settling for at least some blame on each or all sides.

Assessing blame, especially in complex cases such as the multilevel one at hand, is an incredibly difficult task, if at all achievable. Responsibility at such levels of abstraction are often not attributable to any one party alone, and reminds one of the legal principle of comparable negligence, a tort rule for when both or all parties are at least partially responsible, to similar or diverging degrees.

NARRATIVES, FAKE NEWS AND INFORMATION WARFARE

The politics of blame games now goes beyond mere (public) statements by leaders and officials on both sides of this (as well as other) conflicts. Controlling public opinion and thus the narrative on any given event or development through the conscious selection, manipulation, and outright fabrication of information and news is increasingly becoming the newest frontier of unconventional warfare. After standing armies, heavy armament, high-tech weapons, and cyber warfare, it comes full circle in a way that, with espionage and deceit having been there from the earliest of times, now information is used at the broadest possible sphere, the public one. When one controls the narrative and global public opinion, the effects of it are very concrete, it's not merely about image but a very palpable soft power which can mean the increase, decrease or cutting-off of trade relations and access to much-needed foreign natural resources and goods, as well as the imposition or not of sanctions by different countries (India for instance has been very lenient towards Russia).

Hence, narrative is important to assigning blame and responsibility at the court of public opinion, but also as a weapon at the international arena. Regardless of where the actual blame lies, there is an information war going on between the West and Russia over the supremacy of narrative. It's worth noting that Russia's narrative seems to find resonance in poorer and developing countries, while outrage at Russia's action in Ukraine seems more prevalent in Western liberal democracies. Where US and European influence specifically is stronger and dependency is greater, whether over flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and autocracies, countries join in support of Ukraine, via votes at the UN for instance. Now, in the case of middle powers and countries where Russian economic and political influence is higher and or economic and security interests depend on relations with Russia, these are the biggest battlegrounds of the information war, as it such countries positions for or against one side add

or not to the West's goal of isolating Russia and crippling its economy on the one side, and can prevent Russia's economic collapse as well as represent political support, on the other side.

The annexation of Crimea most certainly caused indignation in many onlookers across the world, but it did not elicit the same categorical nor emotional response, that is, the same outrage, as did, and does, the current war. That is due not only to the scale and, above all, to the brutality of Russia's actions, but also to its overtness. One of the key elements of the Russian takeover in Crimea was the information operation. Russia had boots on the ground in Crimea, the so-called "green little men," basically Russian soldiers without identifying insignia. Yet, it dominated the information space as a strategy to blur the image of the unfolding events and hide the true nature of its unmarked soldiers, of the local movements, and of the referendum which led to Crimea "joining" Russia (Darczewska, 2014). Russia was so successful in creating a fog over the situation, that, even though evidence of direct Russian intervention was obvious from the start, it was only a few years later that the full picture of Russian actions was grasped, when Russian confidence in its impunity grew so much so as that they no longer hid the military's direct role (Kruk, 2019). This can somewhat explain why the US and European response back then was rather mild, in spite of the fact Russia thus violated international law through its breaching of provisions contained, for instance, in the United Nations Charter, in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, in the 1990 Paris Charter, in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, and in the 1997 Russia-Ukraine Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership.

Earlier this year, as the initial Russian expectations of victory in Ukraine crumbled nearly as swiftly as the Russian leadership believed Kyiv would fall, and the stakes of the initiated war grew by the hour together with the challenge to keep the Russian people in the dark about the scope and developments of the "special military operation," repression was increased and laws were passed in order for the narrative to be controlled. The effective ban on independent media, thus including the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, founded and led by the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and investigative journalist Dmitry Muratov, was a gigantic attack on freedom. So was the ban on global social media platforms. Further efforts towards a decoupling of Russia from the world wide net can lead to the effective creation of two parallel

realities in Europe. The situation is increasingly dystopian, as the mobile television sets streaming Kremlin propaganda in Mariupol showed.

Russia's current propaganda machine is at full speed, so as the crackdown on dissent within Russian society (restrictive laws, the outlawing of civil society organisations). Many fake news are being produced, some so ridiculous that it is difficult for citizens of open societies with access to extensive information and diverse opinions to conceive that anyone could possibly believe in them. They are meant directly at maintaining domestic public support and hence, given their conscious fabrication, they do not represent actual beliefs of the Russian state. One example is the claim that Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state (Zelensky is Jewish, that fact alone is a definitive rebuttal of the claim, though this is not to say that there no neo-Nazis in Ukraine, of course, just that they do not run the country in any way).

The US approach of open disclosure of information and some intelligence, as when it warned well in advance that Russia would attack as well as pre-empted the idea that Russia would use a false-flag event as justification for the war, can only be considered a good and smart strategy at combating Russian disinformation worldwide.

DISCUSSION - Why does it all matter?

Academic debates matter for policy processes. The influence of academia on policymakers and hence on concrete developments cannot be disregarded. One should only look at the considerations in the 1990s about Russia and NATO enlargement, etc., to see that oversimplification in academia is detrimental to the quality of scholarly work and hence potentially dangerous. This means that what experts and scholars write can ultimately manifest itself in the real world, establishing a feedback loop in which academic study and the reality it analyses affect and shape each other continuously. For instance, a lot of Russia specialists think that NATO expansion was/is an issue, not so much so for central/eastern Europe specialists, which speaks to the fact that academics might internalise certain biases of the people they research.

Theories and narratives interplay. The theoretical lenses condition the way we perceive reality and determines our actions. Academics relate and converse with the public in different ways, directly and indirectly, and should hence pay much attention to the impacts of their work. Such theories as offensive realism completely disregard several other levels of important human factors, such as values and beliefs, group identities, collective memory, ideology, personal psychological traits of leaders, etc. which, as discussed above, represents a theoretical weakness in as far as this excludes potentially major explanatory factors for any given political development.

In line with this exclusion of aspects outside the few strict theoretically relevant features, one very consequential problem of mainstreaming the rationalisation behind such theories can lead to a considerable number of people, both academics within and outside the field, as well as general citizens, apply the same logic and think at the same level, equally disregarding other factors, circumstances, as well as ethical and moral considerations. The paper by Johnson and Thayer (2006) comes to mind, in which they validated offensive realism and its key features as based on human behavioural evolution, and going as far as to claim that its overall logic can be applied to any domain in which humans contend over power. The authors acknowledge that this behavioural tendency does not bind humans to conflict, but state that even cooperation is ultimately underpinned by those features.

Perhaps the most important value left out of the equation in the discussions above is the will of the Ukrainian people and the right to self-determination of a sovereign nation, which is in fundamental contrast to it being abstractly handled as a trophy devoid of agency and will in the power games of stronger states. Concerning the so-called “existential threats,” it is not clear from whence a moral (or legal) right to a buffer zone comes. In fact, most nations in the world do not have a buffer zone, they have existential threats and they don’t attack their neighbours. Might should not make right.

In an opinion piece titled “Don’t Arm Ukraine,” published by the New York Times in early February 2015, Mearsheimer defended that:

“[t]o save Ukraine [from further costs] and eventually restore a working relationship with Moscow, the West should seek to make Ukraine a neutral buffer state between Russia and NATO. [...] Toward that end, the West should explicitly take European Union and NATO expansion off the table, and emphasize that its goal is a nonaligned Ukraine that does not threaten Russia. The United States and its allies should also work with Mr. Putin to rescue Ukraine’s economy, a goal that is clearly in everyone’s interest.” (Mearsheimer, 2015, n.p.)

This way of thinking hence shapes the way, the prism through which citizens in general perceive and think about political events and developments and thus about the political reality of the world they live in. This level of considering problems within the public sphere has a direct effect on shaping public opinion, both at the national and international level, and hence also on the politically all-important public support or not. The way a problem is framed can shift the focus of support 180° from the one side to the other. The effect of theory, like Mearsheimer’s, on the public can be very convincing, leading many people to think that Ukraine should be a buffer state, without any regard to the will of the Ukrainians. But we are talking about a clash between the primacy of great power policies versus democratic sovereignty of countries sandwiched in between them. Countries getting to choose who they align with is a value to be defended.

One can only hope that the current situation in Ukraine will not become even more dire nor escalate further to the point of expanding beyond its current territorial as well as abstract delimitation. and that it is hence not too late, in the sense that a large war in Europe is in the makings. One should not give in to alarmism, but it is equally irresponsible to disregard the current scenario entirely. Deep causes aside, the preliminary dynamics of both great wars of the past century were not too different in scale and scope from the current state of affairs, and if there’s something that needs no deeply rooted justifications but mere human stupidity, it is war.

Being evermore conscious of all the considerations above and taking them into account in the work of scholars, journalists, policymakers, and political leaders, is paramount to fostering more collaborative structures of governance and cooperation, thus boosting efficacy

and efficiency vis-à-vis human challenges, as well as increasing security and safeguarding peace in the global “arena,” or better, admittedly aspiringly, in the global *agora*.

CONCLUSION

Based on all the considerations above, one can conclude that of the three groups of arguments around the reasons for Russia’s behaviour, only one remains hard to refute. While a solid case can be made that Russia, taken as a rational actor, would not regard NATO as a threat to its security or survival, and, at the same time, one can disregard Russia’s absurd claims about a (neo-)Nazi Ukraine, genocide, etc., which are nothing but part of its propaganda. What remains is Russian nationalism and ideology, the denial of Ukraine’s formal statehood and identity. Yet, reality is complex, and factors interplay in different ways, one influencing the other.

Perhaps one of the most relevant “observations” to be made concerning the blame debate, is that it somehow assumes that bearing responsibility means that concessions should hence be made. Concessions about the territory and future of a sovereign state without any regard for the will of its people, hence reducing a whole nation to a disposable asset. Even if bearing some blame, this should not bind one’s actions in any one direction. It would be preposterous to claim that one should tolerate, and hence in a way condone, the barbarism of aggression.

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