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The Stopping Power of Sources

Implied Causal Mechanisms and Historical Interpretations in (Mearsheimer's) Arguments on the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Abstract: The article analyzes arguments, made by John J. Mearsheimer and others, that the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was largely caused by Western policy. It finds that these arguments rely on a partially false and incomplete reading of history. To do so, the article identifies a range of premises that are both foundational to Mearsheimer's claims and based on implied or explicit historical interpretations. This includes the varying policies of Ukraine toward NATO and the EU as well as the changing Russian perceptions thereof; the political upheavals in Ukraine in early 2014 that were immediately succeeded by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass; and the supposed absence of Russian 'imperialism' toward Ukraine prior to 2014. Finding that these interpretations do not hold up in light of relevant and available data, the article qualifies and contextualizes the validity of Mearsheimer's arguments, points to superior ones, and highlights the need for case-specific expertise when using explanatory theory to make sense of politically salient ongoing events.

Keywords: realism, Russia, Ukraine, international relations theory, offensive realism, revolution of dignity, NATO-Russia relations

1 Introduction

In his writings on the various stages of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2014, renowned scholar and political commentator John J. Mearsheimer has taken aim at the "prevailing wisdom in the West" that "the Ukraine crisis can be blamed almost entirely on Russian aggression" (Mearsheimer 2014, 1). Mearsheimer is arguably one of the most prominent and visible critics of Western policy over Ukraine and Russia in the West. One of his lecture recordings ('Why is Ukraine

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the West's Fault?'), posted in 2015, has since garnered 28 million views on YouTube (The University of Chicago 2015). In debates over the war, various forms and shades of Mearsheimer's arguments recur frequently, though not everybody is aware of these connections. Mearsheimer's prominence is probably due to his influence in international relations theory, specifically in realism, as well as his participation in previous controversies, for example, debates over the US invasion of Iraq (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003) and over lobby groups pushing for US support of hardline Israeli politics (Mearsheimer and Walt 2007).

This article focuses on key empirical claims underlying Mearsheimer's arguments, specifically those that relate to larger historical patterns in Ukrainian, Russian, and Western policymaking. Few scholars contest that, when used in broader arguments, facts and empirical claims do not speak for themselves—they need to claim or imply causal connections with other facts. This is indeed the view of Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013) as well as of one of his intellectual parents, Kenneth Waltz (Wæver 2009). Any arguments on explaining the past, forecasting the future, or providing policy advice for it, necessarily advance causal claims. Consequently, the more an analysis explicates these causal claims, the better its validity and utility can be examined (cf. Gleditsch 2022; Lustick 2022)

However, Mearsheimer has not provided a single, thorough, well-sourced and explicitly theory-based study of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict (though Mearsheimer (2022a) comes closest). Instead of scholarly articles, his arguments on the conflict have either appeared as shorter, sometimes unsourced pieces in outlets that address policymakers and the wider public (e.g. McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer 2014; Mearsheimer 2014, 2022a, 2022b) or they appear as tangents and sidenotes in academic publications that are focusing on different, broader arguments (e.g. Mearsheimer 2018, 2019).

To be sure, Mearsheimer's recent writings on Ukraine are full of distinctly Mearsheimerian theoretical tropes, like the "false promise of international institutions" (Mearsheimer 1994), a distinctively pessimistic take on realist theory and great power politics (Mearsheimer 2001), the emphasis on nationalism as a significant force in domestic and international politics (Mearsheimer 2018), the sweeping condemnation of liberal theories of international relations as well as their role in US decision making (Mearsheimer 2001, 2018, 2019), and a political preference for a US grand strategy of 'offshore balancing' that keeps out of most international and domestic conflicts for both moral and strategic reasons while focusing on China as an emerging great power rival (Mearsheimer 2021; Mearsheimer and Walt 2016).

Scholars have since provided critiques of Mearsheimer's arguments and pointed to various ways in which realist theory can contribute to a better understanding of the conflict (e.g. Driedger 2023a; Edinger 2022). A key focus has been the reconstruction of the underlying theoretical assumptions Mearsheimer employs

and how they fit into realist theorizing. This article focuses on the opposite side of the coin: to what extent Mearsheimer, implicitly or explicitly, stipulates specific facts and causal relations that are relevant for his overall argument (be they 'realist' or not), and to what extent the data actually support these factual propositions.

The article finds that Mearsheimer's arguments rely on a partially incomplete and false reading of history, specifically the often-underappreciated history of Russian-Ukrainian relations. It identifies a range of premises that are both foundational to Mearsheimer's arguments and based on implied or explicit historical interpretations. The article analyzes to what extent the interpretations given by Mearsheimer (and others espousing similar views) hold up in the light of the relevant and available data. Where necessary, the article explicates the causal mechanisms implied in Mearsheimer's arguments.

The following section (*Section* 2) deals with Mearsheimer's claims that, especially prior to 2014, Russia had not engaged in 'imperialism', thus giving no strategic reason to Ukraine and NATO to align with each other. Contrary to Mearsheimer's depiction, however, there is indeed evidence of such behavior. Furthermore, prominent analysts had, before 2014, identified and warned of Russian actions toward Ukraine that could reasonably be read as imperialistic behavior. This is evident both in matters of territorial control, specifically Crimea, and in other matters unrelated to Ukraine's Western policy.

The subsequent section (*Section* 3) discusses Mearsheimer's interpretations of Ukraine's domestic politics. In Mearsheimer's description, the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, or Maidan Revolution, in early 2014 was a fascistic, western-sponsored, illegitimate coup. Mearsheimer also suggests that the annexation of Crimea and the anti-Kyiv movements in Eastern Ukraine had organic and extensive popular support behind them, further depicting the war in Donbass as a Ukrainian civil war. If true, these events would advance Mearsheimer's overall contention that Russia had many objective and legitimate reasons to see the unfolding events as a direct threat to the Russian state's security. However, the section finds all of these claims on Ukraine's domestic politics to be insufficiently corroborated or directly belied by various facts that do not appear in Mearsheimer's analysis.

The penultimate section (*Section* 4) synthesizes the preceding ones and deals with the connection of Western policy and Russian threat perceptions, which goes to the heart of Mearsheimer's arguments on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Contrary to Mearsheimer's narrative, there were some security-driven or 'realist' considerations underlying strengthening Ukraine-NATO alignment prior to 2014. Mearsheimer also suggests that Western policy toward Ukraine was much more unified, concerted, and intentional than various key data points allow for. Thus, Mearsheimer understates non-violent and diplomatic alternatives that would have been open to Russia. The section also points out that Mearsheimer at times

suggests that Western policy drives Russian perceptions, and at others that Russian perceptions are only loosely connected to actual Western policy.

Some caveats are in order: First, the three issue areas above were selected because they are instrumental for Mearsheimer's overall argument, but there are other problems (and merits) left to be engaged with. Second, while this article focuses on empirical and conceptual shortcomings in Mearsheimer's writings, it does acknowledge that Mearsheimer insists on a number of facts that seem to have been underappreciated in the Western debate (see *conclusion*). Third, while this article identifies various problems with Mearsheimer's realism-based arguments on Ukraine, it would be false to infer that, therefore this school of scholarship has nothing to contribute to a better understanding of Russo-Ukrainian relations. Indeed, there are various realist contributions to this issue that are transparent in their theoretical assumptions and empirical strategies (cf. Götz 2016; Edinger 2022; Driedger 2023a). Fourth, this study does not claim to have the final word on the historically appropriate interpretation of any of these issue areas, nor does it seek to conduct a comprehensive survey of all primary sources that could be relevant for such an undertaking. The point of this study is merely to identify and critically engage some of the causal mechanisms and factual claims in Mearsheimer's arguments on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

2 Russian Restraint?

One of Mearsheimer's core arguments, largely made by implication, is that Russia had not used its superior capabilities to threaten Ukraine or coerce concessions prior to 2014. For example, Mearsheimer contends that "hardly anyone made the argument that Putin had imperial ambitions from […] 2000 until the Ukraine crisis first broke out on February 22, 2014" (Mearsheimer 2022a). Mearsheimer does not clearly define what 'imperial ambitions' would consist of. However, context and various passages in his writings discussed further below indicate that they can be read as the use of coercive measures to forcefully make gains at the expense of other states, specifically Ukraine.

This assumption of an absence of Russian imperialism is foundational for Mearsheimer's overarching arguments that the West or Ukraine could have avoided the crisis by not aligning with the respective other. A key proposition in realist theorizing is that to ensure their own security states will strengthen their military forces and seek international allies if nearby states represent actual or potential threats to them (cf. Waltz 1979; Walt 1987; Mearsheimer 2001; Parent and Rosato 2015). If Ukraine had been subject to Russian coercion and threats even in the

absence of strengthening ties with NATO, Ukraine would have had clear security-based or 'realist' incentives to seek exactly such a NATO alignment in order to protect itself against Russian pressure, seeing that Russia behaved aggressively anyway (cf. Driedger 2023a). Similarly, such Russian pressure against Ukraine would have served as a signal to NATO that the security of member states with a similar structural position to that of Ukraine was precarious, warranting aggressive balancing measures. Just like Ukraine, Norway, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland all share land borders with Russia, while their respective armed forces are dwarfed by those under Moscow's command (cf. International Institute for Strategic Studies 2006, 2012). Just like Ukraine, neither of these states has nuclear weapons. Just like Ukraine, albeit less intensely so, these states are also historically and socioeconomically entangled with Russia.

There are at least three problems with Mearsheimer's arguments on Russian restraint. First, Mearsheimer's thesis of Russian non-imperialism in the absence of strengthening Ukraine-NATO ties prior to 2014 is unconvincing. This is, in part, because he does not corroborate this view systematically. Furthermore, there are various readily available datapoints that speak against his view. In the 1990s, Russia put economic sanctions and tacit military threats against Ukraine to flank negotiations relating to Ukraine's nuclear stockpile, basing rights on Crimea, and issues of Crimean sovereignty. This included disruptions of energy supplies to Ukraine in the Winter of 1993/1994, a military standoff between Ukrainian and Russian military forces over ownership of a Black Sea Fleet ship in 1994, and Russian fighter jets claiming airspace violations and forcing a Ukrainian warplane to land. The Russian sanctions against Ukraine from 1993 to 1997 were estimated to have cost Ukraine about seven percent of its annual gross domestic product (Driedger 2018). Russia massively interfered in the 2004/2005 Presidential Election in Ukraine, using illicit party and campaign finding, covert operations, and public support for its preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovych (Driedger 2021b). Well before the NATO Summit of Bucharest (see below), Russia used energy sanctions against Ukraine to achieve political concessions (Driedger 2018).

Second, Mearsheimer's contention that, prior to 2014, there is no evidence of Russia trying to gain control of Ukrainian territory, does not advance his overall arguments on Russian restraint. As shown above, Russia did use some 'imperialist' policies toward Ukraine, that is, coercive tactics to forcefully make gains at Ukraine's expense. As even 'imperialism' not aimed at annexation would give grounds for legitimate Ukrainian security concerns, Mearsheimer's does not gain much by contending there were no territorial designs by Russia on Ukraine prior to 2014. Furthermore, while we might grant Mearsheimer that there was no clear-cut evidence of Russian territorial ambitions prior to 2014, there are examples of Russian behavior that could well have been motivated by actual irredentism

or could at least be reasonably read as such, giving further reasons for security concerns. Contrary to Mearsheimer's narrative, Russian President Yeltsin, at times, made irredentist noises regarding Crimean ownership in the 1990s, likely due to domestic pressures. Resurgent communists in the Russian parliament blamed the country's problems on the disintegration of the Soviet Union, while fascistic nationalists around Vladimir Zhirinovsky demanded Russia adopt chauvinist positions in its new 'Near Abroad,' as many Russians and Russophones lived there (Wilson 2011, 172–73; Vanderhill 2013, 41–96). In 2003, Russia started to build a dam from Russian territory toward Tuzla, an island set in the Kerch strait that was contested between Ukraine and Russia, and whose ownership was linked to that of Crimea. After a diplomatic spat, Russia halted construction of the dam (Woronowycz 2003). When speaking to Ukrainian security experts in Kyiv in 2017, I was told that Ukrainians had long viewed the Tuzla incident as an early sign of Russian territorial designs on Ukraine.

Third, Mearsheimer's contestation that 'hardly anyone' warned of Russian imperial ambitions before 2014 (Mearsheimer 2022a) is belied by a key example (among others). A prominent and sufficient voice was Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter, who, until his passing in 2017, had been an influential policy expert whose media appearances reached vast audiences. Although usually considered somewhat of a hawk on Russia in the US foreign policy establishment, Brzezinski was hardly an obscure or extreme representative. Thus, Mearsheimer's implied claim that there were no concerns among the US foreign policy elite on Russian 'imperial' behavior fails to convince. Already in 1994, Brzezinski gave voice to these worries, calling Russian foreign policy goals "at the very least proto-imperial", if not "openly imperial" (Brzezinski 1994, 76), and related this specifically to Ukraine. He did so in *Foreign Affairs*, the flagship publication of the Council of Foreign Relations, arguably one of the United States' most influential think tanks:

> Most ominous, given Ukraine's size and geostrategic importance, has been the intensification of Moscow's economic and military pressure on Kiev, in keeping with the widespread feeling in Moscow that Ukrainian independence is an abnormality as well as a threat to Russia's standing as a global power. (The inclination of some leading Russian politicians to speak openly of Ukraine as 'a transitional entity' or 'a Russian sphere of influence' is symptomatic.) The Russian military has enforced a partition of Crimea and asserted unilateral control over most of the disputed Black Sea fleet. Making matters even worse has been the open assertion of Russian territorial claims to portions of Ukraine. At the same time, economic leverage has been applied through reductions and periodic cutoffs in the delivery of vital energy sources to Ukrainian industry, presumably in the hope of destabilizing the country to the point that a sizable portion of the population will begin to clamor for a closer connection with Moscow. (Brzezinski 1994, 74)

Commenting in *The National Interest* on the new Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Cabinet in late-2000, Brzezinski stated that, to the new Russian power elite, "the appearance of a dozen or so newly independent states following the Soviet Union's collapse is a historical aberration that should be gradually corrected as Russia recovers its power". While stating that Putin and his peers might find a single imperial state unattainable, Brzezinski attributed to them the goals of "the gradual subordination of the post-Soviet states within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States in a way that limits their practical sovereignty in the key areas of security and external economic relations" (Brzezinski 2000, 9). Brezinski updated his views on Russia in line with unfolding political events, but continued to warn of Russian assertiveness towards its neighbors, speaking of "Russian lingering imperial ambitions" in 2009 (Brzezinski 2009) and counted Ukraine as one of the eight most geopolitically endangered states in the world in 2012 (Brzezinski 2012, 94–96).

Contrary to Mearsheimer's depiction, Russia did use its superior capabilities to, at times, coerce concessions out of Ukraine before 2014. Russian policy also exhibited signs of at least potential irredentism and territorial designs on Ukraine prior to 2014. As a consequence, many Ukrainians, and some observers in the West warned of potential Russian aggression. Thus, from a security-based or 'realist' standpoint, it was understandable, if not appropriate for Ukraine and NATO to engage in some balancing strategies toward Russia prior to 2014. The next section discusses the role of the political upheaval in Ukraine in early 2014 in Mearsheimer's arguments.

3 Ukraine's Domestic Politics

In Mearsheimer's narration, the ouster of Ukrainian President Yanukovych in early 2014, and the subsequent Maidan coalition had little organic support among Ukrainians, and those supporting it largely belonged to radical groups under the influence of Western actors. In this view, the events in early 2014 warranted strategic fear in Russia and a militarized response, as radical anti-Russian forces, sponsored by the West, had aggressively taken hold in Kyiv.

A key element of Mearsheimer's argument is the view that the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity, or Maidan Revolution, in early 2014 was actually a fascistic, western-sponsored, illegitimate coup. Indeed, if intentional Western policies had been instrumental in the upheaval, the 2014 events would corroborate Mearsheimer's narrative of needless concerted Western efforts at creating a Western 'bulwark' at Russia's doorsteps. This would, in turn, render more plausible Mearsheimer's contention that Russia's subsequent coercive actions against Ukraine were a strategically sound countermove to aggressive and unilateral

policies by NATO and its key members. If, however, the Maidan Revolution was actually a mass revolution and largely reflected unmanipulated societal sentiments of many, if not most Ukrainians, it becomes more difficult to accept Mearsheimer's depictions.

Mearsheimer repeatedly characterizes the 2014 events as an "illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president—which [Putin] rightly labeled a coup" (Mearsheimer 2014, 1; see also 2022a). However, despite the controversial and far-reaching nature of this claim, Mearsheimer does not provide structured evidence to support it. Instead, he describes the events as follows: "The spark came in November 2013, when Yanukovych rejected a major economic deal he had been negotiating with the EU and decided to accept a $15 billion Russian counteroffer instead. That decision gave rise to antigovernment demonstrations that escalated over the following three months and that by mid-February had led to the deaths of some one hundred protesters." (Mearsheimer 2014, 4)

This account, while not straight out false, is woefully incomplete at best and misleading at worst, especially in the context of Mearsheimer's arguments. For starters, it leaves out nearly all of Ukrainian domestic politics leading up to the Fall of 2013. The only exception is a brief mention of Yanukovych as the democratically elected president of Ukraine. This, of course, suggests the legitimacy of his rule in early 2014 (Mearsheimer 2014, 4). However, while Yanukovych had gained the presidency in 2010 in an election that was considered by international observers to be largely fair and free (*BBC News* 2012), he was quick to cement his personal power. With Russian aid, Yanukovych subverted Ukraine's already frail democratic institutions in a mirror image of Putin's 'Power Vertical' (Vanderhill 2013, 41–96). Yanukovych quickly weaponized the court system, including against his prime political rival at the time, Yulia Tymoshenko, who was jailed (*Reuters* 2012c). Her treatment was condemned by the United States, the EU, and the European Court of Human Rights (*Reuters* 2012a; *Reuters* 2012b). Furthermore, the 2012 Parliamentary Elections in Ukraine were condemned by the observing Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), bemoaning an abuse of administrative resources, untransparent campaign and party financing, and unbalanced media coverage. The OSCE spoke of a reversal of the democratic process in Ukraine (*BBC News* 2012).

Yanukovych's increasingly autocratic style of rule was actively supported by Russia, which struck favorable deals after his presidential victory and send an array of advisors to Kyiv that had been instrumental in cementing Putin's power in Moscow (Vanderhill 2013, 41–96). The perspective of the EU Association Agreement served to maintain some support for Yanukovych, but when he, abruptly and evidently pressured by Russia, cancelled the agreement, dissatisfactions reached new heights. After the sudden rejection of the EU offer, but before mass violence

occurred on the Maidan, Yanukovych's position had become precarious (cf. Interfax-Ukraine 2013). Reacting against the Ukrainian regime's move away from Westernization and its brutal crackdown on protesters, the Maidan movement gained traction, increasingly receiving mass support across Ukraine (cf. Reznik 2016; Wilson 2017). Meanwhile, Yanukovych's nation-wide approval rating was at 28 percent in the last poll before his ouster (*Gallup.Com* 2014).

Feeding into the narrative of an illegitimate coup that must have looked scary to any government in Moscow, Mearsheimer does mention that the "new government in Kiev was pro-Western and anti-Russian to the core, and it contained four high-ranking members who could legitimately be labeled neofascists" (Mearsheimer 2014, 4). Mearsheimer does not elaborate, but he is most likely referring to the four members of the Ukrainian far-right Svoboda party that held ministerial posts in the interim government. This, of course, suggests that a significant part of the Maidan coalition consisted of militant far-right radicals.

However, there are some problems with this suggestion of neofascists having a prominent role in the Maidan Revolution and the subsequent government (see also Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014; Likhachev 2015). First, it is debatable how much influence these ministers actually had. There were about twenty ministers in the cabinet. Three of the Svoboda-held posts were minor and largely unconnected to the Ukrainian state's coercive powers: Oleksandr Sych for Humanitarian Policy, Ihor Shvaika for Agrarian Policy and Food, and Andriy Mokhnyk for Ecology and Natural Resources (Interfax-Ukraine 2014). Svoboda member Ihor Tenyukh was appointed Defense Minister, but he handed in his resignation within less than a month. The reason for this—which does not fit well with a narrative of a fascistic, aggressive and reckless cabinet—was Tenyukh's indecisiveness in the face of the unfolding annexation of Crimea by covert Russian forces, to which the Ukrainian government chose not to respond with military escalation (*The Telegraph* 2014).

Second, despite the Russian annexation of Crimea and the unfolding war in Donbass, Ukrainians voted in droves *against* Svoboda as soon as they had the possibility to do so. Svoboda candidate Oleh Tiahnybok received a meagre 1.6 percent of the votes in the Ukrainian presidential elections on 25 May 2014. During the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2014, Svoboda lost 31 seats in the Ukrainian Rada (having gained most of them under the presidency of the supposedly pro-Russian Yanukovych), being reduced to a total of six. The far-right Right Sector party received only one seat (cf. The Central Election Commission of Ukraine 2018).

Third, despite Svoboda's past being deeply steeped in fascistic and national socialist ideology, Ukrainian chief Rabbi, Moshe Reuvem Azman, said there was no evidence of antisemitic backlash, either before or right after the revolution. His Synagogue was situated some hundred meters next to the Maidan and was untouched,

while no Jewish community in Ukraine had reported antisemitic incidents to him (Harding 2014).

Mearsheimer is also explicit in attributing the coup at least in part to Western, and specifically US machinations. In a section titled "Creating a Crisis", Mearsheimer states that "[the] West's triple package of policies—NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion—added fuel to a fire waiting to ignite" (Mearsheimer 2014, 4). As I lay out in the subsequent section, Mearsheimer fails to convincingly corroborate this claim.

Apart from raising suspicions about a supposed long-term triple policy, Mearsheimer does little to corroborate his only partially explicit claim that Western policy was instrumental for the revolution to occur. He does not discuss why Western states did not challenge the election of the obviously 'pro-Russian' Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych in 2010. Nor does Mearsheimer explain how his narrative of a supposed Western policy of aggressive regime change fits with Western attempts to secure a stabilization of the Maidan crisis by striking a deal with Ukrainian opposition leaders for scheduling re-elections and thereby allowing Yanukovych to stay in power for at least a few more months, which may have secured his position in the meantime. Mearsheimer does mention a leak of what is probably a snippet of a genuine phone conversation between US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and US Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, likely dated 25 January 2014, where they discuss contacts with Ukrainian opposition party leaders and US preferences for inclusion into an interim government (*BBC News* 2014). Mearsheimer does not elaborate how this corroborates his overall allegation, however. He also does not discuss the implications of Nuland stating that the leader of the Ukrainian far-right Svoboda party should not be part of an interim government in Ukraine (*BBC News* 2014).

At various points, Mearsheimer overstates, by word or by implication, the degree of support among Ukrainians in early 2014 for the idea that Ukraine should be part of Russia or that oblasts in Ukraine's south and east should have more independence from Kyiv. This applies, for example, to Mearsheimer's rendering of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Mearsheimer stated that most of the ethnic Russians who "compose roughly 60 percent of its population […] wanted out of Ukraine" (Mearsheimer 2014, 5). Of course, even if these numbers are to be trusted, this could still mean that a majority of Ukrainian citizens in Crimea did not want to secede. Remarkably, Mearsheimer nowhere reflects on how the Russian government used military force and systematic propaganda in the process of annexing Crimea, nor on how this directly violated the Ukrainian constitution and international law (cf. Allison 2014). This stands in sharp contrast to his repeated depiction of the Maidan Revolution as a western-sponsored coup.

At no point does Mearsheimer acknowledge the very direct use of Russian proxy figures to rule the supposedly independent secessionist statelets in Eastern Ukraine, or the use of regular Russian troops in Ukraine's east between 2014 and early 2022. He comes closest in 2022, when stating that, from 2014 on, Russia "helped fuel a civil war between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government" (Mearsheimer 2022a). Nonetheless, he describes the anti-Kyiv fighters in east Ukraine as "pro-Russian separatists" (Mearsheimer 2022b) and continues to refer to the Donbass war as a "civil war" (Mearsheimer 2022a). In 2014, he simply asserted that there was Russian "support for the insurrection in eastern Ukraine" (Mearsheimer 2014, 9).

Mearsheimer's depiction of the Donbass war omits key facts that have been robustly established and that stand in direct opposition to some of his claims. For example, various studies have, early on into the conflict, used expert interviews, satellite images, and data from various fact-finding missions to establish that Russia built a military infrastructure at the Ukrainian borders, funneling military materiel and personnel into Ukraine on the side of anti-Kyiv fighters. At the time, Russian soldiers had been ordered by Russian military officials to remove identifying features from vehicles and uniforms to fight in eastern Ukraine. At various points during key offensives, Russia struck Ukrainian forces from Russian territory (cf. Czuperski et al. 2015). Furthermore, rather than actually believing in the trope of wide-spread Ukrainian sentiments against Russians and Russian speakers, the Kremlin covertly sought to actively create and augment such sentiments in sectors of Ukrainian society that it deemed susceptible to them. Kremlin agencies pushed the narrative of a Ukrainian civil war, while simultaneously being deeply involved in the governance of the supposedly independent and separatist 'People's Republics' (cf. Hosaka 2019; Driedger 2023b, 208–09). Also, poll data show that prior to the 2014 conflict pro-separatist sentiments were a minority opinion even among ethnic Russians in the Donbass (Giuliano 2018).

While empirical reality is, of course, complex and messy, the events in Kyiv in early 2014 are far more congruent with a mass revolution supported by large swaths of Ukrainian society all across the country, rather than the image suggested by Mearsheimer, where a small and far-right group of militants carried out a Western-directed coup. A closer look at the annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbass reveals far less pro-Russian support and more direct Russian involvement than Mearsheimer suggests. This weakens Mearsheimer's claims that Russia merely reacted to an objectively threatening advance of avowedly anti-Russian institutions and groups. The next section hence discusses the connection between Western and Ukrainian policy on the one hand, and Russian perceptions and actions on the other.

4 NATO and Western Policy

Mearsheimer's core argument is that a strategically unsound (or 'non-realist') Western policy gave Russia objective reasons to fear a worsening of its strategic position, which made it strategically sound for Russia to pursue aggressive policies toward Ukraine (cf. McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer 2014; Mearsheimer 2014, 2019, 2018, 171–79, 2022a, 2022b). However, various data points render this argument tenuous, as Western policy was far less concerted, unified, and intentional than Mearsheimer suggests, making it much more plausible that a different Russian regime might have perceived these Western actions differently.

Specifically, Mearsheimer has repeatedly claimed that "the taproot of the [Ukraine crisis since 2014] is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West" (Mearsheimer 2014, 1). As elaborated above, before 2014, Russia had put coercive pressure on Ukraine even in matters not clearly connected to any issue of heightened 'strategic' importance. This weakens Mearsheimer's claim that increasing Ukrainian-Western alignment was not strategically sound, as, through Moscow's 'imperialist' actions, Ukraine and various nearby EU and NATO member states had reasons to view Russia as a security threat.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer does not address a rather obvious counter to his narrative regarding strengthening Ukraine-NATO relations after the start of the first Ukraine crisis in 2014. While Mearsheimer notes these increasing ties and gives various examples of them (Mearsheimer 2022a), he does not address why, for Ukraine or the West, it was strategically unsound to have done so in the face of Russia annexing Crimea and conducting a semi-covert war in Ukraine's East. After all, Russia had blatantly violated the territorial integrity of a neighboring state and was continuing to conduct a limited, semi-covert war against it, giving plenty of reasons to its EU and NATO neighbors to rationally fear the same might happen to them. As a consequence, even traditionally reluctant, cautious and 'pro-Russian' member states of these institutions, such as Germany, adopted much firmer and securitized stances against Russia, even in the face of massive political upsets like the Brexit process (Driedger 2021a) and the Trump presidency (Driedger 2020). This was further reinforced by the 2022 invasion. When Russia was amassing troops near Ukrainian-held territory, Germany was hesitant to provide weapons to Ukraine for deterrence and defense and refrained from publicly threatening to cancel the Nord Stream 2 pipeline system with Russia if it attacked Ukraine (Driedger 2022a). However, the invasion led to a culmination of both domestic pressure within Germany and external pressure by the allies. Consequently, Germany adopted a more assertive and militarized approach toward Russia (Driedger 2022b).

A related problem with Mearsheimer's interpretations is that, over time, Western policy toward Russia was often ambivalent. Furthermore, Ukraine's attempts at aligning with the West came in ebbs and flows, the flows often driven by the experience of Russian pressure. Thus, it stands to reason that Russia had grounds to believe it might reach its supposed goal of a friendly and unaligned Ukraine through policies of mutually beneficial entanglement and bribes rather than through coercive pressure.

Indeed, even the frequently-mentioned 2008 NATO Bucharest summit was a less clear-cut commitment than Mearsheimer, the Russian elite, and various commentators in the West often suggest. As I was told in interviews with people involved on the US side in the Bucharest negotiations, the United States did not have a unified and clear-cut position on the issue of Ukrainian NATO membership right before the Summit. Right after the event, various participants, including the Russian side, were relieved that Ukraine had not been offered a Membership Action Plan. However, the declaration did state that Ukraine was to become a member of NATO, an unprecedented phrase that, with a little delay, caused major alarm among the Russian establishment.

Mearsheimer does rightfully point out that, after the NATO Bucharest Summit of 2008, in which Ukraine was granted membership perspective, "NATO never publicly abandoned its goal of bringing Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance" (Mearsheimer 2014, 3). This, however, is only at first glance a robust indicator for eventual membership. Turkey, for example, has been an official EU membership candidate since 1999, but, as it stands, no progress is being made and it seems warranted to assume that it will never become a member. Furthermore, Ukraine has, even to the day of writing, not been granted a Membership Action Plan.

Seeking to explain the 2022 invasion, Mearsheimer specifically points out various Ukraine-NATO efforts in 2021, but his interpretation of these events—that "Ukraine began moving rapidly toward joining NATO" (Mearsheimer 2022a)—is contestable. As the politics around the Bucharest summit as well as the recent NATO accession bids of Finland and Sweden show, the need for unanimity among NATO members to agree on accession requires a degree of cohesion that arguably would never have been reached over Ukraine (before the 2022 invasion, that is). One of the pieces of evidence Mearsheimer marshals is that "Ukraine's military also began participating in joint military exercises with NATO forces" (Mearsheimer 2022a), specifically naming the Ukrainian-American-hosted *Operation Sea Breeze* and the Ukrainian-led *Operation Rapid Trident 21*. Mearsheimer neglects to point out that these operations have long been conducted on an annual basis and that Ukraine had long been part of them—including under the supposedly pro-Russian and anti-NATO president Yanukovych.

Indeed, Mearsheimer himself is somewhat ambiguous about how unified the West actually was toward Russia. This, however, is important for his argument as he at various points states or implies that the West pursued a consistent and multi-layered strategy that gave Russia no strategic option but to lash out against Ukraine. Indeed, Mearsheimer variously writes of a Western "triple package of policies—NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion" (Mearsheimer 2014, 4; see also 2022a). He also states that other NATO members largely follow the lead of the United States (Mearsheimer 2022a).

However, various easily observable indicators complicate this image of a concerted and united Western policy. For example, Mearsheimer cites the EU Eastern Partnership initiative as the EU "marching eastward" (Mearsheimer 2014, 3). However, the EU Eastern Partnership, as well as the contentious Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement that Yanukovych rejected in 2013, are expressly not granting EU membership perspective and are often viewed as a substitute that the EU grants when it does not want to give a neighboring state the status of accession candidate. While Mearsheimer mentions at one point that France and Germany were opposed to granting Ukraine the perspective of NATO membership at the 2008 Bucharest Summit (Mearsheimer 2014, 2), he does not discuss whether or not this signified that Russia had diplomatic options at its disposal to deal with Ukraine.

While Mearsheimer quotes the leaked phone call that likely took place between Nuland and Pyatt (see above) to substantiate his arguments regarding US involvement in the unfolding Maidan events, he does not mention the rather unmistakable phrase 'fuck the EU'—likely uttered by Nuland—and the subsequent disparaging comments on the positions and strategies of EU leaders toward Ukraine (*BBC News* 2014). This piece of evidence was presumably available to Russia as well, seeing that the call was likely leaked by Russian operatives. Even the United States, supposedly the most consistent and powerful advocate for Ukrainian NATO accession, underwent various changes in how firmly, if at all, it committed to that goal. This specifically applies during the presidency of Donald J. Trump (Driedger 2020).

Mearsheimer is also ambiguous about the extent to which Western policy was intentionally aimed at containing or diminishing Russian influence. If this had been the case, it would have been more rational for Russia to react forcefully in the face of such hostile policies. At times, Mearsheimer seems to emphasize intentionality to reinforce his contention that Russian actions were strategically sound: "U.S. and European leaders blundered in attempting to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold on Russia's border" (Mearsheimer 2014, 2). In another passage, he declares that advocacy for Western values and democracy promotion in Ukraine and other post-Soviet states was a Western "tool for peeling Kiev away from Moscow" (Mearsheimer 2014, 3–4). However, in other instances, Mearsheimer also emphasizes that he does not see these Western policies as being driven by strategic

or 'realist' considerations, or in any direct way directed against Russia, but rather by a misguided belief among policymakers in simplified versions of liberal theories of international relations (Mearsheimer 2014, 6–7, 2022a, 2019, 23–24). If we are to follow the latter interpretation, it is much less clear why Western policy was perceived as hostile by the Russian elite. This weakens Mearsheimer's argument, as the connection between Western policy and Russian actions is central to it.

All the points discussed above feed into a larger problem: Mearsheimer remains ambiguous about the extent to which he claims Russian threat perceptions to be an immediate response to objectively threatening Western policies, rather than a contingent product of how the Russian regime processes information, sets priorities, and constructs reality. If the latter is the case, the actual causal role of Western behavior in Russia's Ukraine policy becomes doubtful. To Mearsheimer's credit, he acknowledges various Western policies meant to assuage Russia's fear of NATO. However, he states that "it is the Russians, not the West, who ultimately get to decide what counts as a threat to them" (Mearsheimer 2014, 6). He does not, however, elaborate how Western states should then adjudicate between pursuing their own values and interests on the one hand and ameliorating seemingly unreasonable and excessive security concerns from Russia on the other.

5 Conclusions

The preceding analysis found that the force of Mearsheimer's arguments is significantly diminished when their underlying causal assumptions are explicated and tested with a closer reading of historical data. These results speak to various broader issues. First, they showcase how crucial it is for arguments on the Russo-Ukrainian war to take Ukrainian politics, agency, and history as serious as the long history of Western relations with Russia and the Soviet Union. In Mearsheimer's writings, these elements have only a small role to play (Mearsheimer 2014, 2022a, 2022b). To be sure, Mearsheimer does not deny Ukrainian rights or agency. After all, he did forcefully argue for Ukraine to maintain a nuclear deterrent in the early 1990s (Mearsheimer 1993). Nonetheless, in his writings on the current crisis, he has argued that, in line with his apparent realist convictions, focusing too much on Ukrainian aspects can lead to false analysis and dangerous policies in the context of great power relations (Mearsheimer 2014, 11). However, as the results confirm, even realist frameworks, with their analytical focus on great powers, can err if they neglect or misinterpret the role of less powerful states.

Second, the example of Mearsheimer's arguments illustrate the need for case-specific expertise when using explanatory theory to make sense of ongoing events. Third, the article demonstrates that scholars should provide well-sourced and

explicitly theory-based studies alongside their shorter policy commentaries to allow the debate to become more efficient, transparent, and less polemical. Of course, short policy articles need to use heuristic shortcuts to make their point in a concise and accessible way, but this entails the danger of warping the consistency and force of the underlying arguments (Driedger 2023a). Much work in this article has been done on reconstructing the largely implicit causal assumptions and mechanisms in Mearsheimer's arguments, as well as how they are suggested to interact with the data that Mearsheimer does (and does not) present. Mearsheimer's laudable willingness to insert himself into controversies about pressing issues would be better served if he did not leave these tasks to others.

Lastly, while this article focuses on empirical and conceptual shortcomings in Mearsheimer's writings, it does acknowledge that Mearsheimer insists on a number of facts that seem to have been underappreciated in the Western debate. For example, it is rarely acknowledged, let alone discussed that Russian leaders were opposed to NATO enlargement ever since the 1990s, well before Putin took power (Mearsheimer 2014, 1; Radchenko 2020). Mearsheimer, other than many other public analysts, has also repeatedly pointed out that Western leaders had long been aware of Russian concerns about NATO, irrespective of whether they found them warranted or legitimate (Mearsheimer 2022a). While his case for Russian restraint is overstated and problematic, Mearsheimer does point out, as newer studies have done systematically, that the Russian regime takes into account risks of international backlash, domestic unrest, and getting bogged down in conflicts when reaching decisions on military force (Driedger 2023b). Mearsheimer has also pointed out that dynamics within the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war could lead to inadvertent nuclear escalation, a position that is sometimes sidestepped without being discussed in the contemporary debate (Mearsheimer 2022a). It also serves leaders well to avoid projecting current views into the past and to heed Mearsheimer's consistent reminders that Western NATO enlargement was not so much driven by power politics, but rather by a set of "liberal" beliefs regarding the workings of international politics (Mearsheimer 2014, 6–8, 2022a). This view is actually compatible with Mearsheimer's writings on domestic lobby groups and on liberalism (Mearsheimer 2018, 2019). Mearsheimer does claim that most patterns of great power politics can be explained by structural realist factors, prominently the nature, position, and distribution of military power (Mearsheimer 2001). However, if a great power enjoys a steep advantage in military power and security over all other states, as the contemporary United States does, Mearsheimer has repeatedly stated that domestic factors can become more prominent, as structural pressures on the state in question diminish (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003).

With Mearsheimer's arguments found to be deficient in various ways, albeit with some of his contentions holding up in the ongoing debate about relations

between Ukraine, Russia, and the West, the results of this article serve as a reminder to take both history and theory seriously when seeking to tackle pressing political issues.

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