

LEADERS, STATES AND WAR IN UKRAINE: BACK TO THE OLD SCHOOL OF REALISM?

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Abstract. *Nowadays, the promises of a universal neoliberal order seem to have been hijacked by tendencies of illiberalism, authoritarianism and militarism all across the world, including in some Western societies. The complex crisis the current international system is facing, covering aspects from climate change to pandemics, and from political and financial instability to conflict and war, are picturing a grim reality. Does the grand old theory of realism coming back? Did we bury it too soon, academically speaking? The events in Ukraine, since 2014 and more sharply since 24 February 2022, prove that at least some realist and neorealist assumptions had survived and are still shaping the world. Russia under president Putin seems to lead a crusade of old Real-Politik practices deemed to topple not only Ukraine as an independent nation but also the foundations of the global neoliberal order.*

Keywords: *Real-Politik, power, hegemony, rationality, Russia, NATO*

Introduction

When this paper was written the Doomsday Clock released by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists showed 90 seconds until midnight. To have a worthy comparison to take into account, during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis the clock showed seven minutes to midnight. This illustrates the unprecedented risks our global society is facing, from climate change (and crisis according to some), pandemics, economic and financial crises, to political instability and international conflicts. However, the most disturbing fact is that the major powers of the world have lost the ability to settle their disputes peacefully or simply to communicate, negotiate and compromise especially now when global issues are becoming existential threats. There is a remarkable lack of leadership which indicate that the American century is driving to an end and nobody else is filling the place of the reluctant hegemon. The situation is as risky as the one happening right before the starting of the Second World War.

The events in Ukraine, whether one speaks about the annexation of Crimea in 2014, or the current war which was launched by Vladimir Putin in 24 February 2022, but also the most recent conflict in the Near East, involving Hamas and Israel, are both a consequence of the facts already emphasised in the previous paragraph and are consequential for the future of global politics. For this author they are an indication that anti-status quo powers are groping the ground left unchecked by the Western powers, the supporters of the current global neoliberal order. The West is loosing confidence in its ability to lead the world, while the „rest” (following the expression coined by Kishore Mahbubani and rebranded by Niall Ferguson) is growing confident.

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Today, Russia and China seem to lead an insurgency of the global South against the global North. Paradoxically, this autocratic resurgence has been made possible by the sharpening disputes eroding liberal democracy from within during the last years¹. The current Western political elites have been unable to solve them or simply capitulated in the name of financial shortages or other priorities on their agenda.

Notwithstanding, major political events, such as the war of aggression launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine (prefaced by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass in 2014), are still of major concern for the field of international relations. However, the academic agenda is even furthered from reality than the political agenda, especially in Western societies. Political science has been either seduced by political activism or continued to be dominated by research formalism and political correctness. Ideological reasoning has replaced pragmatic reasoning. Unfortunately, the IR field seems increasingly alienated from the practice of international politics.

One can recall an interesting question asked almost obsessively by US citizens and broadcasted by TV by during the 9/11 attack on the WTC: “Why do they hate us?” This is a question without an obvious answer which still resonates today. President Bush has once answered to it in his address to the American nation: “They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. (...) We have seen their kind before. They're the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.”². Of course, this speech was about terrorism, which at that time was represented by Al Qaeda, and how to fight it involving every available resource the US government used to have. Later, the same Presidency argued about the existence of an „axis of evil” in his first State of the Union address after 9/11, comprising not only terrorist organizations but rogue nations of the world such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.³ Beyond and very close to it laid countries like Cuba, Lybia, and Syria. The 'axis' was a reminder of the interwar “Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis” which became a leitmotif in American foreign policy for authoritarian regimes poised to challenge the international order.

What is the relevance of these apparently begotten ideas of the early 2000s for the present time? After September 11, 2001, the aggressive response of America left the impression that the world lived its unipolar moment. It was the bold response of a

¹ The Capitol Hill insurrection at the end of Trump presidency (January 6, 2021) is an example, alongside the political crisis of the past 4 years (2018-2022), which left Israel vulnerable to its enemies, most notably to Hamas and Iran, but events such as these are happening ordinarily in Western societies especially in the post-pandemic years.

² “President Bush Addresses the Nation”, September 20, 2001, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html (accessed in September 25, 2023).

³ “President Bush’s State of the Union Address”, January 29, 2002, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?525425-13/axis-evil> (accessed in September 25, 2023).

global hegemon, the United States, against its purported enemy of that time: global terrorism. With all its mistakes and flaws, the US could not be challenged at that moment by any revisionist Great Power. It seemed that the end of history, predicted by Fukuyama, was finally taking place, with liberal democracy becoming the only game in the global village. The moment soon passed as the US and coalition's troops had bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting insurgencies encouraged by the Western indecisiveness and mismanagement. This has paved the way for the counterattack of authoritarian, even autocratic regimes, such as the regime established by Vladimir Putin in Russia. The "axis of evil" – from the point of view of the international neoliberal order – reemerged stronger and more dangerous. Following the Israeli invasion of Gaza, Iranian commentators have even proposed the name of "axis of resistance" reminding of Hamas⁴.

Theories of international relations have produced, so far, perfectible analytical tools, yet necessary for the development of international relations as a discipline, that can help the understanding of some of the likely causes and consequences of actions, such as the launch of the "special operation" against Ukraine by Russian President Vladimir Putin, but cannot cover, at least today, all the hidden aspects. The "fog of war", invoked by Carl von Clausewitz in his masterpiece *On War*, is thicker today than ever, since the manipulation of information has reached fantastic levels in the world of digitalization. In an atmosphere dominated by propaganda and fake news, it is increasingly difficult to reconstruct truth. But we must recognize that a battle between different and almost irreconcilable narratives is unfolding in the world, and the tragedy of a Ukraine caught in the claws of Moscow is a concrete example of that.

This paper is not suggesting that realism and its apparently old-fashioned form, political realism, are theories without defects. Most IR theories pretended to have discovered flaws in the realist theoretical framework. One can agree that realism as an academic theory has failed because it was not able to advance the initial aim of international relations, to prevent future wars and assist the peaceful change of the international system. Instead, realism and its most recent avatar, structural realism, have persevered in describing the game as it is, not attempting to change it into something else. However, the post-pandemic world appears now to be dominated by an agenda set by major state and non-state actors. Interstate and intergroup violence and war have reemerged from the cracks of the neoliberal order which are now exploited by new-revisionist major powers, such as Russia and China. Just like in the 1930s, authoritarian revisionist states are attacking the international neoliberal order from various platforms: military, political, economic, technological, informational, even geopolitical. One of the reasons may lie in the failure or inability of neoliberalism to react to these new challenges and retain, at the same time, its advantages. Globalization and interdependence are now at risk. Can we still hope to learn some of the lessons of grand old theory of realism? What is certain is that Great Power politics and competition are now driven back by assertive emerging powers seeking to destabilize the current international system and recreate it based on their own designs.

This paper is an attempt to re-evaluate the validity or more exactly the practicality of realism in the context of the Russian aggression on Ukraine or Ukraine's war of independence which started in 2014 and amplified in 2022. This paper assumes

⁴ Hamas is the acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement).

that the motivations of the conflict have been driven by Vladimir Putin's purported realist assumptions about international politics. This is not an analysis of this war in all its complexity, but instead is focused on its causes, intentions, expectations, and motivations of the parties involved – most particularly the Russians. It acknowledges its inevitable limits: without having access to classified information, we will not be ultimately certain about the true intentions and expectations of Vladimir Putin and his regime in Ukraine, even what really happens at ground zero, the battleground area. We can assume a general picture of these events as seen from a glass darkly. However, sharp contrasts appear when we look upon the Western response to the Ukraine conflict. Another question would be if realism may also be the answer to the puzzle. We are not sure, too. The same fog of war precludes us from making positive or negative predictions. However, if there is any wisdom in the past of international relations is this one: power can only be mitigating with power not with weakness. Unfortunately, many people in the 'West' are forgetting what is at stake. The support against authoritarianism is decreasing because people are getting weary of thinking about the long term in a society obsessed with living the present. The West has dematerialized notions of 'good' and 'evil' as obsoleted or unscientific concepts, replacing them with tones of grey. The 'others' have tried to relativize this in a totally different direction, trying to engage the West as an evil, decadent society (this can be easily identified in the public discourse of countries like Russia or Iran). Our society seems increasingly unable to see beyond the "banality of evil" (Arendt, 1963), trying to justify any human action as a normal affair.

Certainly, this paper does not aim to contribute to an ethical dimension of the study of politics and international politics but is reminding that moral judgements are the cornerstones of the current international law and order. In our international system, war is considered unlawful if it is violating "the prohibition of force contained in the United Nations Charter and the peremptory norm of general international law prohibiting aggression" (Haque, 2022). This makes the case of the war in Ukraine from the point of liberalism which dominates the formal political arena. However, realism may continue to dominate the informal political arena. Even so, political realism as a theory does not support a world void of moral principles as one might think.

Political realism and power politics

Realism is one of the oldest and most enduring theories of international politics though it has been criticized by nearly everybody except for (most) realists. In its academic form, it developed in the interwar period, as a reaction to liberal internationalism (utopianism) or, more precisely, to its assumed failures: the League of Nations' system and the liberal economic system that dominated the world affairs after the First World War and ended in the misery of the 1930s.

The assumptions of classical or political realism (as it labeled itself) are related to the importance of power in international politics, in the context of a world composed of sovereign nation-states existing in the condition of systemic anarchy. According to Morgenthau, statesmen are concerned with the national interest, defined in terms of power (Morgenthau, 1985:5), as most realists would agree. Implicitly, the international political arena is dominated by power politics, which often takes the form of a precarious balance of power, which states strive at least to maintain, if not to destabilize in their own benefit.

Starting from a pessimistic view of human nature, which emphasizes selfishness and “the perpetual and insatiable desire for power after power, a desire that ceaseth only in death” (Hobbes, 1651: 70), realism conceives of international politics as a zero-sum game. Moreover, this is also the result of international anarchy, which, coupled with distrust between states and especially between their leaders, induces the security dilemma. John Herz was the first who coined the concept of ‘security dilemma’: “Groups or individuals living in such a constellation must be, and usually are, concerned about their security from being attacked, subjected, dominated, or annihilated by other groups and individuals. Striving to attain security from such attack, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the impact of the power of others. This, in turn, renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on (Herz, 1950: 157).

Realists have always been skeptical about the intentions and morality of states. They assume that states will likely act in their own self-interest without caring too much about ethical dimensions or the common goal of humanity. Nevertheless, even Hans Morgenthau acknowledged that “Political realism is aware of the moral significance of political action” (Morgenthau, 1985: 12) but “universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation but they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place” (Morgenthau, 1985: 12). He also maintained that “Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe (...) To know that nations are subject to the moral law and to pretend to know with certainty what is good and evil in the relations among nations is quite another” (5th principle) ((Morgenthau, 1985: 13). In other words, realists do not fully reject morality. What they reject is false morality or the pretense that one’s own truth is universal truth. This can be applied both to Western universalistic aspirations or to the moral claims of President Putin when justifying his military invasion of Ukraine.

Edward Carr, considered by many realists as a utopian realist, used a rational approach to politics, consistent with the pragmatism of realism. He attacked what he termed ‘pure realism’ or ‘consistent realism’, rejecting Machiavellian cynicism, arguing that international order could not be based on power alone, and that it was an ‘unreal kind of realism’ which ignored the element of morality in any world order (Booth, 1991: 531). With his version of political realism, Carr anticipated the English school and defensive realism. One can argue that exhibiting a Machiavellian realist approach today is a political suicide, just like attacking a wasp nest without protecting gear: this may turn international politics almost in a state of chaos if the others will join the pack or worse - if the others will outcast the culprit from the international society and decide to punish him for upsetting the rules of the game. In fact, Carr emphasized that “pure realism can offer nothing but a naked struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible” (Carr, 1981: 93). In fact, Carr believed that “any sound political thinking must be based on both utopian and realistic elements” (Carr, 1981: 93). So, political realism is not equivalent to the Machiavellian doctrine “that anything is justified by reason of state” (Bull, 1995: 189).

Realism is simply a pragmatic approach to international politics, not without purpose, not with cynical superiority or bluster, but based on the intelligent affirmation of the doctrine of national interest defined in terms of power. Moreover, although

frequently accused of favoring conflict, realism promotes peace rather than some alternative approaches, even if it is a peace with a gun at its foot, but at least it is not an illusory peace. *Si vis pacem para bellum*, the maxim attributed to Vegetius, may not be accepted by today's pacifists, but one must notice the fact that the most dangerous situations for democracy came when revisionist and militarist powers preyed on its weaknesses and lack of preparedness.

War leaders and the war in Ukraine

The realist perspective can be easily identified in the Russian narrative of the conflict in Ukraine, as evidenced by the myriad of speeches, statements and social media messages issued by the Russian leadership to the entire world since the starting of the war on Ukraine. One of the most important examples, though not the first, is Vladimir Putin's speech on February 24, 2022 referring to the ordered "special military operation" in Ukraine (a subterfuge for invasion):

*"It is a fact that over the past 30 years we have been patiently trying to come to an agreement with the leading NATO countries regarding the principles of equal and indivisible security in Europe. In response to our proposals, we invariably faced either cynical deception and lies or attempts at pressure and blackmail, while the North Atlantic alliance continued to expand despite our protests and concerns. Its military machine is moving and, as I said, is approaching our very border."*⁵

Upon trying to justify the "special operation", Putin paints a dark picture, dominated by a negative view of human nature that he projects over the 'West', a traditional Russian way of referring to the danger of Russia's encirclement and isolation by power-hungry Western elites, ever since the Soviet times. Of course, episodes from the past, such as the two world wars or the Western attempt to oppose Bolshevism by supporting the White army during the Civil War, are frequently used in support of such narrative.

Another element that emerges is Moscow's obsessive need for spheres of influence, present both in Russian political discourse and Russian political action. Russia claims to have reacted to NATO Eastern enlargement which eventually reached Ukraine, as well as to a regime it considers 'Nazi', established in Kyiv after the so-called coup against President Yanukovich. What Putin forgets to specify is what is the true legitimacy of the 'special operation', much less its legality, since Ukraine is a sovereign state, a UN member, not merely a satellite of Moscow whose treason must be punished or a territorial sub-division of the Russian Federation.

Paradoxically, if many would consider Putin a classical follower of Real-Politik, the operation ordered by the Russian President on February 24, 2022, partially questions the validity of this assessment. Realists would not invoke historical rights as evidence justifying the present action. This is not a realist, pragmatic argument, but an emotional one. It is true that nationalism can be a catalyst for rallying the nation behind the flag, but it must be carried out following an objective assessment of the reaction of other major players of the system (the external element) and most notably of Ukraine's resilience. A true realist would not show an obsessive-compulsive need to justify his actions through a mystified history, or to compare to Peter the Great. However, Putin

⁵ Address by the President of the Russian Federation, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (accessed in September 3, 2023).

has systematically repeated this mistake since 2014 with a stubbornness characterizing a dogmatic leader - which he never seemed before - or a leader with recent cognitive problems, which is certainly doubtful. Even the Westerners had assumed that even though he is following in the footsteps of his Soviet predecessors, Putin is a reasonable leader. Brzezinski wrote about him these flattery words: "In rebuilding a Russia "which commands respect in the world," Putin's good tactical sense dictates that outright hostility to the West is to be avoided" (Brzezinski, 2000: 33). Of course, Brzezinski took note about Putin's early attempts to destroy the Western solidarity by using anti-American propaganda in Western Europe (Brzezinski, 2000: 33).

In his article published in 2021, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"⁶, Putin builds upon a pseudo-historical narrative beginning with Kievan Russia ('Rus'), reviews the entire medieval history of Russia, touching also on the confessional element (Orthodox Christian tradition), invoking even Polish and later Austro-Hungarian schemes to speculate on the "Ukrainian question" in their favor, traversing the history of the civil war from the years of the Bolshevik revolution, the interwar and post-war years to reach the period of Ukrainian independence after the collapse of the USSR. Then, he resumes the line of external intervention in support of Ukrainian identity on behalf of NATO and the EU. The article is an outright invitation for Ukrainians to return to the basic Russian matrix, from which, according to Putin, they have been separated by elites serving foreign interests. He resumes the leitmotif of the Polish-Austrian ideologues who wanted to create an anti-Moscow Russia. He made an appeal to the Russian-Ukrainian brotherhood using the Soviet propaganda myth of the 'great patriotic war'⁷ and the friendship of the two 'artificially' separated peoples, to finally close his arguments with the thesis of 'neo-Nazism' of the regime in Kyiv, only to close emphatically:

"I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.

Today, these words may be perceived by some people with hostility. They can be interpreted in many possible ways. Yet, many people will hear me. And I will say one thing – Russia has never been and will never be "anti-Ukraine". And what Ukraine will be – it is up to its citizens to decide."⁸

Putin's article is more important, in our opinion, than the speech announcing the "special operation". Why? Because it reminds us, once again, about Putin's deep obsession with rebuilding the Russian empire and with a seemingly spotless Russian history. But this article was addressed to a different audience: the people of Ukraine.

⁶ Vladimir V. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (accessed in September 4, 2023).

⁷ This is the Russian appellative for the Second World War developed by Soviet propaganda (originated in an article published by Yemelyan Yaroslavsky in *Pravda* on June 23, 1941).

⁸ "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (accessed in September 4, 2023).

At the same time, it's an indication that the "special operation" was very likely premeditated since the article precedes its start by many months. It indicates Putin's illusory expectation that Ukrainians will riot against the 'Nazi' regime and overthrow it by themselves or at least will not react to the coming attempt to eliminate it, because they feel and think Russian and are ready to join Putin's imagined concept of a "Russian World".

These are illusions of imperial grandeur, not signs of a reasonable practitioner of Real-Politik. In fact, Putin does not seem to understand reality that does not overlap with his imaginary project, which is specific to a dictator's thinking. In this respect, Putin is reminiscent of Adolf Hitler. Thus, he can only be classified, at least since February 24, 2022, in the category of what Carr named pure ('Machiavellian') realists, but most likely among political adventurers who gamble everything on a single card.

Certainly, the actions of Vladimir Putin could still be considered as based on Real-Politik and *raison d'état* if compared with those of historical figures like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great or Friedrich the Great of Prussia, but these leaders were living in a totally different world. They were 'Enlightened' monarchs acting in an age of almost constant warfare among the Great Powers, in which preying on the weak was business as usual. Today, the rules of international society are quite different. Acting cynically to defy the international order may not be considered as a realistic policy in today's terms. A supporter of *Real-Politik*, late Henry Kissinger illustrates how realists are beginning to perceive the war in Ukraine. After he opposed Ukraine's bid for NATO membership for years and maintained for many months that Ukraine must sign a ceasefire with Russia, with the latter getting some territorial gains, in one of his latest public appearances (in a virtual conference with the World Economic Forum in Davos), Kissinger said that NATO membership may be an "appropriate outcome" for Ukraine, adding that "the idea of a neutral Ukraine under these conditions is no longer meaningful."⁹

Of course, a realist approach may also be found in the Ukrainian war narrative. The Ukrainian political regime, led by President Zelensky, is motivated by the perfectly legitimate national interest to maintain its sovereignty, and recover its territorial integrity lost after 2014. Ukraine rightly invokes self-defence and presents the Russian side using harsh appellatives such as 'invaders' or 'occupiers'. Ever since February 24, 2022, President Zelensky has been very active in pursuing the wartime objectives of Ukraine and advertise them to the world. This speech delivered online to the British MPs on March 8, 2022 is exemplary for his speaker's abilities, echoing one of the most successful British leaders of the 20th century, Prime Minister Winston Churchill¹⁰, a clear supporter of Real-Politik: "We will not surrender, we will not lose,

⁹ AFP (2023, January 17), "Henry Kissinger Says Russia War Validates Ukraine's NATO Bid", <https://www.rferl.org/a/kissinger-russia-war-validate-ukraine-nato-bid/32227746.html> (accessed on November 25, 2023).

¹⁰ One of the most important wartime speeches by Winston Churchill was in June 4, 1940, the "Finest Hour": "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in

we will go to the end (...) We will fight at sea, we will fight in the air, we will protect our land.

"We will fight everywhere... and we will not surrender."¹¹ Of course, such an endeavour would be unrealistic without the support of the international community. Ukraine lacks the means to fight a long-termed attrition war with Russia. The lack of capabilities combined with the lack of allies would mean that Zelenski would have defied the first two principles of political realism described by Morgenthau.

It is true that Ukrainian leader has managed to push the EU out of the Russian influence or contributed to this aim. Zelenski has also managed to get help from the EU and its Member-States, from the US, the UK, and other major donors of the world. The Ukrainian narrative is supported today by a greater number of states and IGOs, even by the Vatican, than the Russian narrative. However, the 241.5 Bn USD in aid received from the donors¹² did not suffice for Ukraine to recover its entire territorial losses from the hands of the Russian invaders.

In December 2023, after the failure of Ukrainian Summer counter-offensive, Russia still occupies in Ukraine about half the territories it managed to invade in 2022 (Bailey, Evans, Wolkov, Hird and Kagan, 2023).¹³ It seems that the new Ukrainian leadership resulting from the Maidan revolution had overestimated its own position and underestimated that Russia may respond violently to the detachment of Ukraine from the Kremlin. Ukraine had certainly hoped for stronger Western help even in 2014. Thucydides would assess this as an unrealistic policy, like the Melians' response to the Athenian delegation negotiating the surrendering of Melos. Russia would use the response given by the Athenians that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Thucydides, 2009: 302)¹⁴, but this expression would be considered by today's Western standards as an abomination. The Western world rejects the Darwinian principles applied to social relations. The Western norm is opposite: it defends the rights of the disadvantaged people, including states. In this regard, the Zelenski regime has shown much more apprehension of Western values. One can say it's more realistic to be idealistic in a neoliberal international order.

States, balance of power and the war in Ukraine

Another dimension that political realism would invoke in understanding the war in Ukraine is balance of power. Realists disagree on its definition but agree that it is an important driver of power behavior. States counterbalance each other to avoid the risk of being destroyed by stronger enemies. Some states are disruptors of it, which for

the hills; we shall never surrender", <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/we-shall-fight-on-the-beaches/> (accessed on November 23, 2023).

¹¹ BBC (2022, March 8), "Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelensky invokes Winston Churchill as he appeals to MPs", <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-60667964> (accessed on November 23, 2023)

¹² Kiel Institute (2023), *Ukraine Support Tracker*, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/> (accessed on December 7, 2023).

¹³ "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", December 6, 2023. Online: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-6-2023> (accessed on December 8, 2023).

¹⁴ In the translation of Martin Hammond published in 2009 by Oxford University the exact phrase was: "in terms of practicality the dominant exact what they can and the weak concede what they must".

classical realists is almost anathema. This is because balance of power is equivalent to one of the best ways in which peace can be preserved, especially among Great Powers. They thought balance of power or better said a balanced system is a wise international system.

The Russian narrative on Ukraine emphasizes the role of NATO, the EU, and particularly the U.S. in trying to use Ukraine to weaken Russia or counter its influence. What is illogical in the reasoning is precisely the fact that this approach gives the impression that Russia is openly looking for power and influence, therefore willing to destabilize the balance of power created after the collapse of the USSR. From this point of view, the Western actions to sanction Russia and strengthen Ukraine's defense capacity seem the only realistic ones, while Russia's actions are universalistic or imperialistic. Of course, the Russian arguments stand up rather badly, since the previous enlargements of the EU and NATO did not geo-strategically weakened the Russian Federation, nor did they restrict in any way its capacity or autonomy of decision-making and self-defense, much less did they lead to the destruction of Russia. However, the only apparent argument Russia can use as a realist excuse is NATO's anti-ballistic missile shield hosted by Romania and Poland, but this have not been likely designed to upset the nuclear balance between the two sides, which were supposed to be partners anyway, NATO and Russia. But this is rather related to the security dilemma.

The security dilemma is frequently used by neorealists and particularly by offensive realists as an explanatory variable for state's behavior. According to John Mearsheimer who builds on the John Herz's concept of security dilemma, "the best way for a state to survive in anarchy is to take advantage of other states and gain power at their expense" and "The best defense is a good offense" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 36). Russia did protest NATO and EU enlargements which, according to the Kremlin, have fundamentally threatened the security of the Russian Federation. Ukrainian alignment with the West may be perceived as a red line that justified the annexation of Crimea, the initiation of the war in Donbass, the build-up of Russia's countermeasures in the occupied territories. Moscow believed that these offensive actions would bring more security to Russia as Ukraine will be prevented from joining NATO and the EU. Moscow has also repeatedly denounced the anti-ballistic shield developed by the US in Romania and Poland and the deployment of NATO infrastructure at the Russian borders as a major threat to the Russian national security and defense. In fact, the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2021) mentions "the buildup of the military infrastructure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization near Russian borders".¹⁵

The truth is that Russia has had the initiative to change the geopolitical reality in Eastern Europe and especially the ex-Soviet space. Its investments in defense, its alliances built with Central Asia (the Collective Security Treaty Organization), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the BRICS partnership, its military actions in

¹⁵ Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated 02.07.2021 No. 400, *On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, https://paulofilho.net.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Russia.pdf or the official version in Russian: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001?index=1> (accessed on December 8, 2023).

Georgia, Syria, or Ukraine changed the climate in the Eurasian space from one based on cooperation to one of confrontation. It's a rollback of the situation of the 1990s. NATO's armies, with the notable exception of the US, have suffered major underfunding over the past 30 years, with Europe still relying heavily on the Americans just like during the Cold War. Europe reflects military weakness rather than strength relative to Russia, while the latter has been developing hypersonic cruise missiles and has become the largest nuclear power by number of warheads in the current period¹⁶.

It is true that the enlargement policy adopted by the EU and NATO can be seen as an expansionist policy for those that disregard several facts: the West was cautious and delayed many years the process because the input for enlargement had come from the candidate countries. The countries from the former Soviet bloc, as well as the Baltic states, did not want to join the European and Atlantic communities because they were pressed by the US or Western Europeans to humiliate Russia, but because it was their chance to become parts of a genuine security community and enjoy the benefits of freedom and democracy. Russia has mostly been a threat to them rather than a friend or ally.

Vladimir Putin's "military operation" in Ukraine resembles the attempt made by the House of Habsburg to crush Protestantism in Germany that led to the famous Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Of course, the topic is different, but universalistic/imperialistic aspirations are palpable in both situations. With Putin in charge Russia has clearly embarked on the quest to reestablish the Soviet Union in a different version than the one that imploded in 1991 or to restore Czarist Russia in its greatest frontiers. The concept of 'Russian World'¹⁷ is central to this. This is dangerous for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of many Eastern European countries. In this regard, the current Ukrainian leadership is right: Ukraine seems to be just a step for Russia in its quest for dominance in Eurasia.

Political realism would argue that Habsburg's Counter-Reform and war pushed the other major players in the 17th century Europe, like France or Sweden, on a collision course with Vienna. The result was disastrous for the Habsburgs but this was made possible because France was governed by one of the most important supporters of *raison d'état*, Cardinal de Richelieu. It is easy to note that this is much more difficult today when you deal with a Great Power capable to deploy nuclear weapons, an obvious thing for characters like the deputy head of Russian Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, who frequently sounds the Jericho trumpets of nuclear doomsday. This is an argument of force irrespective of the possibility to materialize it or not.

¹⁶ ICAN, "Nuclear arsenals by country", https://www.icanw.org/nuclear_arsenals?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAvdCrBhBREiwAX6-6Uh2-7crN6iiv6JquVybjuhibR1dJiHdrRkze3JGvPzjL_JKG6ajaEBoCVbIQAvD_BwE (accessed on December 8, 2023).

¹⁷ Russian World or *Russkiy Mir* in Russian is a concept and a political doctrine about the Russian sphere of political and cultural influence covering 258 million people in the world who speak Russian, out of which 146 million live in the Russian Federation and 112 million abroad. It is based on the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation established after a speech by President Putin in 2007. The concept is even mentioned in the *Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* (published in 31 March 2023), <https://russkiymir.ru/en/> (accessed on November 27, 2023).

A more reasonable argument for invading Ukraine is the significance of Ukraine in itself. The Kremlin's allies always point to the fact that even the Western experts have identified the geopolitical importance of Ukraine for the future of Russia. Zbigniew Brzezinski, frequently quoted by Russian commentators, was very adamant in his book *The Grand Chessboard* when stating: "Ukraine, a new and important space on the Eurasian chessboard, is a geopolitical pivot because its very existence as an independent country helps to transform Russia. Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire" (Brzezinski, 1998: 46). It has always been a tradition in Russia and former USSR to study with considerable suspicion Western publications that approached Russia, its sphere of influence or the general design of international politics. Russian experts frequently drew conclusions unfavorable to Russia in Western research and practice. They generally regard the West as an enemy conspiring against Russia's natural aspirations. One of these is the solving of the so-called 'anomaly' created by disappearance of Soviet Union: the establishment of Newly Independent States. They consider that the West tries to prevent Russia from retaking the control over its former empire, thus trying to weaken it to the point it is no longer a global power, but a regional actor. But by doing so, they make the same mistake as Vladimir Putin: they unravel the true nature of Russian foreign policy – not for the mutual benefit of all the players of the world stage but for the aggrandizement of Russia, a nation that still believes in its manifest destiny of dominating Eurasia and the world.

Alexander Dugin, the famous Eurasianist, who even though does not have direct ties with the Kremlin is frequently identified by media and experts in Russian foreign policy as Putin's brain (Barbashin and Thoburn, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2014), has constantly supported the Kremlin's geopolitical aspirations. He predicted in 1997 the Kremlin's policy on Ukraine: "Then there is the Ukrainian issue. Ukrainian sovereignty is such a negative phenomenon for Russian geopolitics that, in principle, it could easily provoke an armed conflict. Without the Black Sea coastline from Ismail to Kerch, Russia gets such a long coastal strip, effectively controlled by who knows who, that its very existence as a normal and independent state is called into question" (Dugin, 2020: 341). In his *Foundations of Geopolitics* he, in fact, mentions Ukraine 80 times!

Ukraine is just a part of Russia's foreign policy goals. It is essential for its resources, the most important one being its population. It may hold the key for Russia to reset its global position as a superpower. Vladimir Putin has unveiled a very important secret when he decided to invade Ukraine in February 24, 2022: Russia is not merely a state concerned with relative power gains. It is what John Mearsheimer describes as a state concerned with absolute power gains. According to Mearsheimer, "states that maximize relative power are concerned primarily with the distribution of material capabilities", while "States that maximize absolute power (...) care only about the size of their own gains, not those of other states" (Mearsheimer, 2001: 36). They do not care about the balance of power, though they might pretend to act in order to keep it. This may be the clue to understand Vladimir Putin's Russia as an offensive realist state, seeking absolute power in the world. In fact, Russian commentators and trolls frequently put this label over the United States, even quoting Mearsheimer. Certainly, the US has had so many opportunities to show its hegemonic ambitions since 1945, but they decided to temperate them. What about Russia?

According to Mearsheimer great powers are not mindless aggressors. He argues that "before great powers take offensive actions, they think carefully about the

balance of power and about how other states will react to their moves. They weigh the costs and risks of offense against the likely benefits” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 37). This idea contradicts the tendency of the absolute power maximizer to dismiss the balance of power. At this moment, what happens is that the other great powers will ensure that the aggressor will be tamed. What Russia needs to avoid being drawn towards a dangerous and unpredictable global conflict is to be reminded that the West is still holding the keys of the international system. When this occurred (one can remember here the Berlin or Cuban missile crises), Russia/Soviet Union backed down.

With all the schemes that Vladimir Putin seems to have developed for more than two decades, the only course of action (from the point of view of the West) that might work is a realist one. It is both in the interests of the US and of the Europe Union to find a way to counterbalance an evolving alliance between autocracies (namely Russia, Iran, Syria, North Korea, and probably China or Saudi Arabia). The way the war in Ukraine has evolved from the initial impression that Russia will easily subdue Ukraine to a stabilization of the front and the latest Ukrainian counterattack is due to the Western and particularly US help. However, the West is currently in a defensive position, if not cornered. Also, the West is less united than it should be. Domestic divisions are preventing it. The biggest domestic fault line is between progressives and conservatives. The coming elections of 2024 in Europe and the US will erode the Western response to Russia even further. Autocracies do not feel the same level of urgency. Yet, they started to work together for the benefit of Moscow.

Conclusions

Leaders, states, and war? Why do leaders like Putin act like they do? R.J. Rummel would say: Because they can¹⁸. These leaders, which are known as authoritarian, dictatorial or autocratic, have developed political regimes that function only for their benefit. They are surrounded by elites that are co-dependent with them. The problem is that they place regime survival on the top of everything else - before the welfare of their citizens or the peace of the world. But this also brings another issue here. Why is democracy now threatened by them?

One almost cynical argument that Russia would not verbally use but it is shown in practice is the following one: the assertive, even aggressive behavior demonstrated by Moscow in the last two decades is intended also to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the Western neoliberal order which cannot directly challenge its actions for fear of nuclear retaliation. The EU, the UN, and any other institutions or states cannot stop Russia if it decides to do something. Realism would agree that this assessment could be right. Russia is returning to the Soviet policy of following any opportunity to score against the West, trying to create doubt within the Western society and using propaganda and misinformation as much as possible. It may even have developed a counterintuitive complex of hegemonic power.

During the last three decades the West was pretty sure that democracy, rule of law, and market are closely related. Based on a rational assumption, countries

¹⁸ R.J. Rummel is Professor Emeritus of Political Science and the creator of the term ‘democide’. He posted his poem on his blogspot: Pray tell, my brother,/ Why do dictators kill/ and make war?/ Is it for glory; for things,/ for beliefs, for hatred,/ for power?/ Yes, but more,/ because they can. (<https://rudyrummel.blogspot.com/> accessed on December 2, 2023).

accepting the benefits of a free, liberal market will be easily brought closer and closer to democracy. It was a hope that systematically failed in the Middle East, Russia, or China. The Western markets embraced these entities bringing them into the global flows of globalization and interdependence. Most of the money earned from trade and investments by these autocracies is invested in weapons. To be sincere, they did it to counterbalance the huge military spending of the US, the only democratic powerhouse of the world, the only real threat for them. Practically, they reinvested in regime survival and reinvented Great Power politics. But this may not have become practical if the supporters of the current international order would have used at least some of the tools from the realist's toolbox.

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