



Image: Street art *No Putin, No War*. Via Rajatonvimma, Wikimedia Commons.

Russia and the Rogue Intellectuals

One must think twice before legitimizing a criminal invasion
by Filip Kostelka



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I wrote the original version of this article in response to a lecture on the war in Ukraine by John Mearsheimer, Professor of International Relations at the University of Chicago. Mearshimer delivered the lecture on June 16 at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, Italy, and as of this writing in October, it has been viewed nearly 2.2 million times on YouTube. It was also shared by Russian authorities on social media. The EUI issued its invitation to Mearsheimer in late 2021, well before Russia invaded Ukraine. While he would not have been invited once the invasion began, the invitation was not withdrawn. As a matter of principle, the EUI – I believe rightly – does not censor academics.

Mearsheimer's talk was not a serious academic analysis of the events from a "realist" perspective. Rather, it was a disingenuous defence of the Kremlin's narrative. As a scholar whose work focuses on central and eastern Europe and who grew up in that region, I felt compelled to respond.

Mearshimer is one of several prominent Western intellectuals who blame the United States and NATO as much as Russia for Ukraine's suffering, if not more. These include the linguist Noam Chomsky and the economist Jeffrey D. Sachs; Mearsheimer is the most outspoken among them. At a panel during the American Political Science Association convention in Montreal in September, his views were much contested by the audience and the other panellists.

At the EUI, Mearsheimer was given the opportunity to present his argument in full. His lecture was deeply problematic on factual, scientific and moral grounds. Here I address the validity of Mearsheimer's central claim, the quality of the evidence he

presented and the lecture's broader implications.

Mearshimer's explanation of the war in Ukraine, like those of Chomsky and Sachs, is intellectually unsatisfactory and rests on shaky empirical foundations. This is no mere "academic" matter. These "rogue" intellectuals legitimize Russia's propaganda and falsehoods and flout the fundamental values of social responsibility that all intellectuals should respect.

For the rogue intellectuals, the United States and its allies are to blame for Russia's invasion since they allegedly pushed for Ukraine's NATO membership, the prospect of which is an existential threat for Russia. According to Jeffrey Sachs, "the Russian invasion in 2022 would likely have been averted had Biden agreed with Putin's demand to end NATO's eastward enlargement." Similarly, Noam Chomsky said in a March interview that the invasion occurred because the "U.S. contemptuously rejected Russian security concerns."

There are a number of reasons why this account is wanting.

It ignores the fact that Ukrainians – like other eastern Europeans – have been actively seeking NATO membership to protect themselves from the Russian threat. They did not need to be pushed: they desperately wanted to join. They first officially applied for membership in 2008 and repeatedly declared it a policy priority after 2014. Ascribing to them a uniquely passive role turns the blame game on its head, condescendingly writing off central and eastern Europeans as clueless pawns in a geopolitical game played by the "great" powers.

Assuming, as the rogue intellectuals do, that Russia's invasion was

a response to Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership, can the current leaders of Ukraine be blamed for the war? In reality, the desire of Ukrainians and other eastern Europeans to join NATO is an expression of their fear of Russian nationalism and imperialism. This fear draws on historical memories and tragic events such as the Holodomor, the Great Famine orchestrated by Soviet authorities in Ukraine in the early 1930s; the Red Army's criminal behaviour upon "liberation" in many central and eastern European countries; and the interventions by the Soviets and their allies in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979).

Russia's war against Georgia (2008) and the current invasion of Ukraine are just the recent manifestations of a pattern underlying this fear. Were there any real change in Russia's foreign policy mindset, it would have taken the form of a profound reform of its political institutions. Only then might the neighbouring nations have reconsidered seeking to join NATO.

In addition, the rogue intellectuals' account is at least partially incomplete since, in isolation, it cannot satisfactorily explain the timing of the invasion or why other pro-Western countries in Russia's immediate neighbourhood have avoided a similar fate. When Russia's invasion started, it still appeared extremely unlikely that Ukraine would join NATO in the foreseeable future. What is more, the prospect that NATO, in the implausible scenario of Ukrainian membership, would launch an attack against a nuclear power is absurd. Indeed, Ukraine joining NATO would hardly be a credible military threat to Russia and, as long as Crimea remained in Russian hands, Russia's

key strategic interests would be largely preserved.

Clearly, any serious explanation of the invasion needs to consider additional factors such as Russia's domestic political situation, the ideological and symbolic threat a democratic and prosperous Ukraine would represent to Russia's incumbent political regime, and the potential desire of an aging dictator to achieve immortality through territorial expansion. Without considering these factors and assessing them against solid empirical evidence, we will never understand what triggered the invasion.

This brings us to the underlying logic of the rogue intellectuals' explanation, which draws more or less explicitly on Mearsheimer's version of the realist theory of international relations, "offensive realism." This theory holds that great powers such as Russia cannot tolerate perceived security threats in their neighbourhoods. However, here, as in many other cases, offensive realism fails on empirical grounds. The breakup of the Soviet bloc, the post-Cold War military weakness of Germany and the establishment of lasting peace among major European powers are examples of its failure. Even if Russia really considered the prospect of Ukraine's accession to NATO an *existential* threat, which is far from clear despite official Russian rhetoric, there was absolutely no certainty that it would react in the way it did to Ukraine's seeking to join the alliance.

In fact, as has been reported, the invasion took many members of Russia's political establishment by surprise. Kremlin officials claimed to be in shock when Russia's army assaulted Ukraine. Given the variety of alternative scenarios that could unfold, placing the blame for

the war on the United States, on NATO or even on Ukraine for its supposed active pursuit of NATO membership is not only morally wrong (wars are started by those who pull the trigger, not those who join a defensive military alliance) but also intellectually dishonest.

While one would expect such a controversial thesis to be supported by strong empirical evidence, the evidence presented largely boils down to an uncritical reading of selected official statements made by the Russian leadership. When asked why one should believe what Russia's leaders say, Mearsheimer responded, "Because Putin rarely lies to foreign audiences."

To back up his claim, he referred to a book he had authored on lying in international politics, finding that political leaders lie to other countries much less often than we think. He failed to mention that the book is not based on systematic research and that such lying is rare particularly for democracies – Russia is not a democracy. During his talk, Mearsheimer simply ignored Russia's numerous lies on the public record, including Putin's original denial of any involvement in Crimea in 2014, which was followed by his open boasting about the annexation a few months later. The U.S. State Department even went so far as to officially publish two 10-item lists of documented Russian falsehoods on Ukraine in 2014.

Mearsheimer is willing to take at face value selected statements by Putin on the existential threat Russia faces, but not assertions that Russia could have imperial ambitions and that the invasion's objective could be territorial. This, he asserted, required proof that Putin "thought it was a desirable goal, ... a feasible goal, ... (and) that he

intended to pursue that goal.”

It is hard to imagine what kind of evidence Mearsheimer would like to see, as Putin was quite clear in his repeated preinvasion statements, denying the legitimacy and even the very existence of an independent Ukrainian state. On the eve of the invasion, Putin explicitly argued that Ukraine never had “real statehood,” and said it was an integral part of Russia’s “own history, culture, spiritual space.” After the invasion, he went on to compare himself to the 18th-century Czar Peter the Great and to declare that Russia was simply reclaiming its territory.

In response to criticism, Mearsheimer admitted that Putin’s objectives escalated during the invasion into imperial ambitions, but he insisted that Russia originally did not want to annex territory. This was proven by the fact that “there were only 190,000 soldiers in Russia’s invading army, which is far too small a force to vanquish and occupy Ukraine.” Yet again, this argument does not hold much water when we remember that Russia clearly targeted Kyiv from the first day of the invasion and that it suffered terrible military losses.

A key factor was poor intelligence: all available evidence points to a disastrous miscalculation by the Kremlin of the effectiveness of its military and of the popular support for Russia within Ukraine. Its military operations were supposed to be backed by a network of Ukrainian collaborators, most of whom apparently existed only in reports prepared by Russia’s security officials. A statement by Ukrainian official sources, which certainly needs to be interpreted carefully in wartime, reported that Putin discovered that his secret services may have embezzled \$5 billion allocated from the Russian

budget for subversive operations in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022. Moreover, denying the plausibility of Russia's imperial objectives contradicts the core tenets of Mearsheimer's own theory and a large amount of circumstantial evidence from central and eastern Europe. Offensive realism argues that great powers aim to maximize their material capabilities. If Russian intelligence reports suggested that Ukrainians would not resist their invaders, why wouldn't Putin want to annex Ukraine's territory? And why would his plans escalate from intervention to annexation only when the invasion did not go as planned, as Mearsheimer claims? On the contrary, such escalation would have made much more sense if the invasion had proceeded smoothly.

In questioning Russia's imperial ambitions, rogue intellectuals turn a blind eye to the nostalgia for the Soviet empire in Russian public opinion, the persistence of a hierarchical and imperial worldview among Russian elites and the Russian media, and Russia's meddling in the politics of central European countries. We need to remember that in the months leading up to the invasion, in addition to a Ukrainian pledge not to join NATO, Russia insisted on a NATO pledge to withdraw all troops from the territories of its post-1990 members in central and eastern Europe. Clearly, Russia's ambitions do not stop with Ukraine. This is what one would expect according to offensive realism, but it runs counter to rogue intellectuals' current thesis, which implies that if the United States did not push for Ukraine's NATO membership, there would be no "crisis."

Rogue intellectuals' determined promotion of their controversial views is hard to understand and probably draws on a variety of motivations.

For some of them, it may be a mixture of academic ambition and taste for media attention. For others, it is an ideologically motivated, left-wing opposition to U.S. “imperialist” foreign policy – an opposition amounting to at least indirect support of Russia’s imperialism and crimes. In any case, rogue intellectuals’ account has limited explanatory power and is not supported by empirical evidence.

In Mearsheimer’s sophisticated but theoretically inconsistent version, it relies on cherry-picking from official statements made by a serial liar, sets double standards when assessing available evidence and uses rhetorical gymnastics to disregard unfavourable new realities. Though enrobed in a scientific cloak, it is punditry, except with far too serious real-life consequences. It plays into the hands of Russian propaganda, which the Kremlin does not hesitate to instrumentalize.

While the right to express unpopular ideas needs to be defended, the authors of those ideas are responsible for their consequences. They should always weigh the strength of the evidence supporting those ideas, their potential benefits to society and the likely repercussions of expressing them outside private circles. When the evidence is weak, societal benefits low and possible repercussions disastrous, intellectuals have a duty to think more than twice before legitimizing a criminal invasion.

Endnotes

1. **The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War: A Lecture by John J. Mearsheimer**, Youtube.
2. Jeffrey D. Sachs, **The Great Game in Ukraine is Spinning Out of Control**,

- September 28, 2022; C.J. Polychroniou, [Noam Chomsky: US Military Escalation Against Russia Would Have No Victors](#), Truthout, March 1, 2022.
3. See Arthur Milner, [Lessons from the Holodomor](#), elsewhere in this issue.
 4. Even today, Western countries' support for Ukraine's accession to NATO remains lukewarm. Ukraine responded to the recently declared annexation of four of its regions by Russia by announcing a fast-tracked bid to join the alliance. While the bid received support from NATO's eastern European members, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. officials are much less enthusiastic.
 5. See John J. Mearsheimer, [The Tragedy of Great Power Politics](#) (Updated edition; New York: W W Norton, 2014).
 6. Bill Bostock, [Kremlin Staff Didn't Expect Putin to Invade Ukraine and Were Shocked by the Severity of Western Sanctions, Report Says](#), Business Insider, March 4, 2022.
 7. Carl Schreck, [From 'Not Us' To 'Why Hide It?': How Russia Denied Its Crimea Invasion, Then Admitted It](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Feb 26, 2019.
 8. Violetta Orlova, [\\$5 mlrd v nikuda: Putin hochet razobratsya pochemu prov-alilas podryvnaya deyatelnost v Ukraine](#), Unian, March 7, 2022.
 9. Jacob Poushter, [Many Russians Agree That it is Natural for Them to Have an Empire](#), Pew Research Center, March 4, 2014; Kevork K. Oskanian, [A Very Ambiguous Empire: Russia's Hybrid Exceptionalism](#), Europe-Asia Studies, Jan 2, 2018; Filip Kostelka and Eva Krejcova. [The Kremlin Strikes Back in Central and Eastern Europe](#), Inroads, Summer/Fall 2017.