



# Editorial

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It is an issue of debate as to which side did more to breathe new life into political realism within the menu of international relations theories: whether or not Putin's war has been effective against Ukraine, or John Mearsheimer's accusation that, since 2014 at the latest, 'the West' would be responsible for a war. Certainly, the Russian invasion in terms of its style, propaganda and accompanying drama looks as though its initiators tried to enact the most straightforward, brutal and simple form of realism, as depicted in any of the books by Thucydides or Clausewitz or Schmitt. But if we look a bit closer and take into account the historical and cultural context, the ongoing events seem less easy to explain, and the reasons and causes of the war become even more vague as the landscape leading to the war spreads out more fuzzily. Mearsheimer's analysis, which appears at first sight to be strikingly fitting to the brutal act, becomes less convincing upon closer inspection.

The inconsistencies begin in his so-called 'offensive realist' international relations theory and create doubts. His theory impresses us at first for its parsimoniousness, something scientifically advisable in any case, and particularly in its capability to match the official side of Putin's own declared logic. Great powers, according to Mearsheimer's variant of realism, try to achieve hegemony in their region. The pending expansion of NATO into Ukraine made it seem like an unavoidable necessity to start strategic activities against that expansion and so being unable to stop the Western encroachment into the East, Putin's only alternative was a war, or so the story goes.

Now, some observers are doubting whether or not the premise of this explanation can hold up, whether NATO was indeed a 'threat' for Russia, or whether its expansion was seen as a threat and whether this was the most important cause for the development. But even if the explanation would hold up, it leaves open the question as to why NATO did not move itself into Ukraine during the 1990s, at a time when Russia would have had little resistance to put up against it. And even more pertinent, why did the West pressure Ukraine to get rid of its Soviet nuclear weapons and send them back to Russia? Mearsheimer

himself recommended strongly to Ukraine, in 1993, to hang on fiercely to its nuclear arsenal. Such a piece of advice is consistent with an imperial logic. But the facts prove differently. NATO and the West showed a reserved and status-quo oriented politics for Ukraine, while always maintaining a compromising eye towards Russia.

Mearsheimer's theory has drawn fire from most of his colleagues in the IR community, especially along the lines of its being too simple, one-sidedly power-struck or psychologically and historically insensitive. The criticism along these lines also can be found in the articles of the present issue. To some extent this critique has been mitigated by the strength of Mearsheimer's long-term interest in the details of the Ukraine-Russian development and his thorough grasp of the historical genealogy of the conflict. In his June 16th lecture in Florence this year, he was able to trace the year-after-year descent into the present war-state—based largely on a series of historical facts and some crucial suppositions only, and not making direct use of his official realist theory, even if somehow looming in the background.

Among the suppositions in this lecture which range as outstandingly important the existence of an 'existential threat' for Russia through Ukraine's development, the reciprocal point that the Monroe Doctrine would never allow a comparable situation for a US neighborhood, as well as the '*de facto* NATO status' of Ukraine. But Mearsheimer's reliance on several of Putin's speeches, his acceptance of Putin as an outspoken, never ever prevaricating strategist, and his neglect of Russia's historical nationalism reopen his fact-based argument to criticism as well, not because of being an overblown theory but more due to his treatment of the historic detail.

Somehow Mearsheimer seems to do the job of representing the Kremlin more rationally than the Kremlin itself. Besides his persistent objection to quite a number of acclaimed 'truths' within Western politics he especially—although largely non-intentionally—directs attention to a more deeply-seated political conflict, the one between the Western democracies and the Russian autocracy. Both are struggling over the democratic transformation of Ukraine. Russia, in this real and theoretical function is also a placeholder for a larger number of autocratic states, especially that of China looming on the horizon. So, one might say, alas, the present struggle is a sort of real-life experiment throwing light on how democratic and autocratic states will arrange themselves in the future—whether or not and how they will clash, or whether or not and how they may find a kind of world order that is beneficial to both sides. The earlier capitalism/socialism competition seems to be playing itself out once again, if only now more so on the level of political instead of economic systems. Will the democracies be able to make good the completion of Fukuyama's bold 1989–92 claim that democracies will win such

contests, since they can offer the most extensive form of ‘social recognition’ to its people? Or instead, will this claim be defeated, and the events following the war will endanger even the democratic systems at home? In any case the history of this war and its consequences are of enormous importance for our Western democracies.

These are the points of interest for a philosophical journal like *Analyse & Kritik*, which has its focus on meta-theoretical and normative aspects within ambiguous social and political developments. We have to bypass the myriad of details of the ongoing war and its pre-history, world-wide militaristic, economic and social consequences. Instead, we will concentrate on the more principled teachings or lessons to be learned from the war, its most basic forces, internal conflicts, and transferrable logics. Merging into this field of expertise is the inherent normative message of political realism, its—certainly contestant—suggestion of political relations being seen as unavoidably ‘tragic’ burdens. Political realism through its historical representatives like Niebuhr, Morgenthau and most recently Mearsheimer underscores the message of tragedy which humans as such must learn to live with. Not least of all this philosophical, and partly theological, background realism shifts into the focus of not only specialists for international relations, but into that of the more general theorists and readers of human affairs. The pros and cons over political realism should be of significance for the conditions of life which humans have to live, in their social and political circumstances.

*Analyse & Kritik* began offering perspectives on the war against Ukraine in the last issue with a contribution by *Richard Lebow*. Lebow opposes political realism, and a structural realism shorn of any domestic politics on the occasion of the war in a wholesale manner, suggesting instead an explanation based on an anthropological psychology of recognition, introduced long ago by the classical Greeks. The contributions to this issue also focus in a different scope and depth on realism, and especially on Mearsheimer’s brand of it. All of them contrast the narrow approach by Mearsheimer with their more versatile tradition of so-called ‘classical realism’, represented by the writings of Hans Morgenthau.

Perhaps the most affirmative type of classical foreign-policy realism, while at one and the same time highly critical of neorealism, in this issue is that of *Robert Schuett*, who self-identifies as a political realist, albeit coming out of the intellectual context of ‘open society’ ideals. To him, nothing is ever all over in world politics, no Utopia is in sight, and so what we are left with is to make uneasy political and moral choices. The strongest opposition to realism in this selection of articles comes from *Matthew Specter*. According to him realism offers either under- or overdetermined explanations, so seeing this as an unavoidable

problem of applied science. What remains possible in the face of something like a war is—much more modestly—a historical elucidation, not an explanation. The better end is to make the contingency visible, instead of fruitlessly trying to prove the necessity of a country's specific behavior.

The Editors