

ARTICLES

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WHO IS RIGHT IN THE 2014/2022 RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT, JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER OR THE LIBERALS?

In the anarchic world of international politics,
it is better to be Godzilla than Bambi.

John J. Mearsheimer

ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to show the views of the founder of offensive realism, John J. Mearsheimer, on the issue of Ukrainian security from the 1990s to 2022 and to present which of them were criticized by liberal researchers. The research problem is which realist and liberal assumptions have been empirically verified.

The most important conclusion from the article is that Mearsheimer diagnosed the issue of Ukrainian nuclear deterrence accurately. At the same time, his theses regarding the causes of Russia's aggression in 2014 and 2022 are not relevant to the strategic situation, and the liberals were right in this regard. To address the posed research problem, the authors carry out comparative analysis based mainly on the methods of content analysis and process tracing.

Key words

Mearsheimer, offensive realism, liberalism, Russia, Ukraine

John Mearsheimer is one of the best-known structural-realist theorists. According to the Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey, he is the fifth most influential international relations (IR) scholar of the past 20 years and the only offensive realist to be included in that list (Pashakhanlou, 2017). As Gideon Rose (2014), the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, stated: "John [Mearsheimer]... is not just a leading IR theorist, but also a noted controversialist who always follows his extremely agile mind wherever it goes and says whatever he is thinking, which makes him a notorious bull in a china shop". This is also the case with Mearsheimer's views on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and Russia's actions in Eastern Europe. His 1993 article "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent" (Mearsheimer, 1993), denying the need for Ukraine to surrender nuclear weapons, provoked criticism (Chafetz, 1993; Feaver, 1997; Miller, 1993). Similarly, the text "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin" (Mearsheimer, 2014) met with cool reception since its author argues that it was the policies of the United States and the North Atlantic Alliance that led to Putin's occupation of Crimea (McFaul, 2014; Sestanovich, 2014). After Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, both Mearsheimer's speech "The causes and consequences of the Ukraine war" (2022) and his interview for the *New Yorker* (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022) again received bitter criticism (Person & McFaul, 2022; Roberts, 2022).

The following text aims at discussing Mearsheimer's views on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict that began in 2014 and turned into a full-scale war in 2022, and at scrutinizing the assumptions made by the founder of offensive realism which received harsh criticism from researchers who follow the approach formulated by the liberal school of thought. The research problem of the article is to

identify which realist as well as liberal assumptions about the issues crucial for Ukrainian security were subject to empirical verification after 24 February 2022, the day Russian troops entered the Ukrainian territory.

To address the posed research problem, the authors carry out comparative analysis based mainly on the methods of content analysis and process tracing. The article begins with a presentation of Mearsheimer's views on Ukraine's denuclearization in the 1990s, the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 as well as its military aggression against Ukraine in 2022, and is followed by examples of liberal criticism against these views. Adopting the process tracing method, in its main body the text empirically verifies the presented opinions, and next it moves on to conclusions where it answers the central question of the article: whether Mearsheimer accurately diagnosed the issue of Ukrainian nuclear deterrence, while the theses made by him regarding the causes of Russia's aggression in 2014 and 2022 are not relevant in a strategic situation and the liberals were right in this regard.

In majority, the works on Mearsheimer's views present and analyze his assumptions formulated in the theory of structural realism – offensive realism. Peter Toft (2005) in the article “John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics and Power” outlines Mearsheimer's views on aggressive state strategies, structural alliance, and the role of power and geography in world politics. Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou (2014) in the article “Waltz, Mearsheimer, and the Post-Cold War World: The Rise of America and the Fall of Structural Realism” says that Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory has consequently had no explanatory power since the end of the Cold War. There are no studies analyzing Mearsheimer's articles on Central and Eastern Europe in the literature on the subject as the existing studies only present reviews of his books and lack a due critical analysis of his scientific achievements. Examples of such texts include Joel Kovel's (2009) “Mearsheimer and Walt Revisited”, which reviews Mearsheimer and Walt's book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, and Jerome Slater's (2009) “The Two Books of Mearsheimer and Walt”. A book which collects the work of a group of Ukrainian researchers – *Ukraine's Nuclear History A Non-Proliferation Perspective*, edited by Polina Sinovets (2022), analyzes Ukraine's nuclear disarmament process in a larger international political context. The causes and course of the conflict in Ukraine are discussed in the books *Roots of Russia's war in Ukraine* (Wood et al., 2015); *Ukraine crisis: What it means for the West* (Wilson, 2014), and *The War in Ukraine's Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future* (Marples, 2021). On the other hand, there is

also a study on Putin's foreign policy in *Russia and the World in the Putin Era: From Theory to Reality in Russian Global Strategy* (Kanet & Moulioukova, 2021).

In his article "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent", published in 1993, Professor Mearsheimer discusses in detail the issue of Ukraine's possession of nuclear weapons. In the opening paragraphs of the publication, he formulates accusations of flawed reasoning against Western leaders, including the then US President Bill Clinton, who supported a proposal to deny Ukraine a nuclear deterrent in exchange for security guarantees from Western powers. Mearsheimer pointed out that Ukraine's maintenance of its nuclear status after the collapse of the Soviet Union was fundamental to the shape of the country's future relations with the Russian Federation. Supporting his thesis, he referred to the process of mutual deterrence between nuclear-armed states, which determines the necessity of working out an agreement between the conflicting parties without the possibility of using the argument of military force (Mearsheimer, 1993). Mearsheimer predicted that a possible armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine could lead to dangerous consequences for the regional security system in Europe. In addition to many civilian casualties and a wave of migration to the neighboring countries, he indicated the risk of Eastern European countries, such as Belarus and Poland, being involved in the war (Mearsheimer, 1993).

As a representative of the realist paradigm in international relations, Mearsheimer recognizes in the abovementioned article the possibility of a conflict between Moscow and Kyiv. Referring to the main realist principles of rivalry between states, he regards the long border separating the two states as a risk factor. According to his words, such a geostrategic situation causes tension, especially when in the past one of the states was a sphere of influence of a neighboring power. Another example confirming the risk of confrontation is the complex history between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. According to Mearsheimer, there is a risk of social processes that are part of a nationalist movement. The situation in which the society of one country assumes that other nations are inferior for many reasons can lead to tragic events, as amply demonstrated by history. Mearsheimer emphasizes that although Ukrainian-Russian relations at the level of societies were correct after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the problematic history shared by the two states may determine conflicts in the future. In this context, it is essential to recall, among other things, the crimes and atrocities suffered by Ukrainians at the hands of Stalin and his regime. Mearsheimer cites the findings of research conducted ahead of the article's publication, which indicated that part of the Russian population did not

regard Ukraine as an independent state with full rights in the world system. Considering the then existing disputes about the borders of Ukraine and the issues of ruling over Crimea, this caused, according to the American researcher, a high probability of a crisis (Mearsheimer, 1993).

Mearsheimer maintains that Ukraine has no chance against the Russian Federation without a nuclear deterrent. In the article, he lists the elements that prove the superiority of the Russian military: numerical superiority of the army, superiority in conventional weapons, higher GDP, etc. He also mentions nuclear blackmail, which could be used against a defenseless Ukraine. The American does not foresee a possibility in which the West could realistically extend nuclear security guarantees to Ukraine. According to him, it is theoretically possible, but referring to the experience of the Cold War and the example of Germany, it is an unlikely scenario. He also refers to the political situation in Europe, which clearly indicates that NATO would not risk interfering in a sensitive security environment such as Ukraine at that time (Mearsheimer, 1993).

The American researcher believes that Ukraine should maintain nuclear deterrence. He justifies this with the high probability of a future conflict, while the nuclear capabilities can reduce tensions (Mearsheimer, 1993). He also expresses his opposition to US policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He indicates that the US diplomatic service should take all possible steps to maintain Ukraine's status as a nuclear state. In his view, faced with the geostrategic situation prevailing in 1993, it was in the US' national interest to accept Ukraine as a nuclear state, even against the opinion of its Western allies (Mearsheimer, 1993).

In the autumn of 2014, a few months after the start of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, Mearsheimer published another article that was discussed worldwide by scholars. In the text "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault", he diagnosed the problematic security situation in Central and Eastern Europe as the result of negligence by the U S and other important states of the Euro-Atlantic security system. With this statement, he went against the opinion widespread among experts who blamed the outbreak of war at the gates of Europe on Vladimir Putin, striving to restore the Russian Federation to the status of a superpower that the Soviet Union held (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Looking for "the West's fault", Mearsheimer points to the ongoing attempts since the 1990s to draw Ukraine into the orbit of influence of the Atlantic states. He also mentions that in the last thirty years, the structures of the NATO Alliance expanded three times until 2014 – in 1999, 2004, and 2009. In his opinion, NATO moving closer to the border of the Russian Federation was a strategic

mistake because it was known that Moscow would interpret this as a threat to the state and would try to counter it. According to the American scholar, the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was the last sign that Vladimir Putin would not allow any further attempts to Europeanize the countries that used to be part of the structures of the Soviet Union. President Saakashvili, who was trying at all costs to bring his country into the systems of the North Atlantic Alliance, was striving for internal unification within the country. The Russian invasion came in order to support the separatists and maintain Georgia's status of a country plunged into internal chaos. Mearsheimer notes that even these dramatic events did not stop American and European politicians from trying to stretch their sphere of influence close to Russia and its allies. His article also mentions the role of the European Union, which, as an international organization, has attempted to spread its values to the eastern edge of Europe and cooperate with the newly independent states there (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Mearsheimer claims that the distinctly hostile attitude of the Russian Federation expressed in the country's foreign policy is a justified reaction to the actions of international organizations in the security field. In his opinion, on the side of the Western world lies the need to understand what the Russians are suggesting – they cannot allow a situation in which a buffer state (because this is the role of Ukraine) is directly or indirectly taken over by other powers, who will use this territory to pursue their interests. The crucial element determining tension or escalation in the Ukraine's issue is that it is up to the Russian Federation to make the final assessment of what action is a threat to the security of the state. The argument echoed by the United States about not moving weapons systems closer to the Russian border is irrelevant to the issue because the assessment of actions and the scale of reaction is in the hands of Russian politicians. Mearsheimer traces the origins of the fundamental lack of understanding by liberals of realistic policies that affect the processes of international relations to the presidency of Bill Clinton. He accuses the officials of that time of wishful thinking, according to which the United States should not be perceived in Moscow as a force that threatens its existence but as a hegemon that, with the help of liberal democracy, spreads ideals and builds strategic networks. Based on this, Mearsheimer concludes that the Ukraine crisis was triggered by the clash of two paradigms prevailing in relations between states – realism in the Russian version versus American liberalism (Mearsheimer, 2014).

On the security of Ukraine, Mearsheimer emphasizes the weakness of international organizations, which manifests itself in the inability to use force due to poor preparation and lack of compliance in such a risky undertaking. Given

this, the most severe consequence of Russian actions in the east of Ukraine are economical and personal sanctions, which will not affect the model of conducting state policy. As an answer to a problematic strategic situation, he proposes a solution in which Ukraine will not be a close ally of Russia or the West. According to the American researcher, neutrality, which the government would ensure in Kyiv, is the only optimal solution for a state over which the most significant powers in the world are competing. In his conclusions, Mearsheimer also recommends discontinuing the push for NATO's expansion toward Georgia and Ukraine. In his analysis, he allows for the possibility of rejecting the will of Ukrainians to participate in the Euro-Atlantic security system in favor of stabilizing relations between the West and the Russian Federation. He considers a neutral Ukraine a win-win for all sides involved and the only chance to save the country from the consequences of superpower rivalry (Mearsheimer, 2014). The American scholar has repeatedly reproduced the above theses in his article "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order" (Mearsheimer, 2019).

On 24 February 2022, the world faced a new geopolitical reality. The Russian Federation, contrary to the belief of many experts, decided to declare war on Ukraine. The attack came from several operational directions, surprising the Ukrainians and all participants in the international system. As we are working on this text in June 2022, it is clear that the armed conflict continues. The Russians and Ukrainians have suffered heavy losses. Everything points to a scenario in which the war will continue until strategic stocks are exhausted. The army of the Russian Federation did not meet the requirements of the modern battlefield in the first phase of the conflict. The characteristics of Ukraine's location and terrain conditions prevented an attack from many directions, which could not continue without logistical supplies.

On 1 March 2022, *newyorker.com* published an interview with Mearsheimer (2022) entitled "Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine". According to the introduction, the interview was conducted to contrast the views of the American scholar presented in his 2014 article with the strategic reality of 2022. Also, Mearsheimer presented similar theses during a lecture organized in June 2022 by the European University Institute. Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies (Mearshmeier, 2022).

In a telephone conversation with a journalist, Mearsheimer maintains his view that the origins of the crisis in Ukraine should be sought in the expansive policy of international organizations, primarily NATO. He believes that a critical moment was the North Atlantic Alliance summit in Bucharest in 2008, when

talks were held regarding the potential membership of Georgia and Ukraine (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

As a representative of the realist paradigm, Mearsheimer reiterates in the interview his conviction that attempts by Western powers to create a liberal democracy in Ukraine will escalate the conflict with Russia. He rejects the journalist's accusations of imperialist views. Mearsheimer stresses that Ukraine, because of its unique location in the neighborhood of a superpower, must condition its foreign policy on the security environment in which it operates. At the time, this environment was Russian-dominated (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

In the following part of the interview, the American researcher explains his view on the functioning of international relations and the participation of great powers in this game. He refers to the so-called unipolar moment – the time of US supremacy in the world system. He believes that the process of spreading liberal democracy has not been successful precisely because hard interests and not ideals guide countries. He gives as an example the Middle East and the failure of diplomatic efforts understood by Mearsheimer as part of the so-called Bush Doctrine (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

On the outbreak of the conflict in eastern Ukraine in February 2014, Mearsheimer maintained his view that Vladimir Putin was not to blame for initiating military action. He believes that portraying the Russians as guilty is a fabricated story to exonerate Western countries, with the United States in the first instance. He says Russia was provoked and has since acted to defend its own security and interests in the region. Mearsheimer notes that Vladimir Putin's goal is not to restore Russia to the borders and power of the Soviet Union, which is why he believes messages about the Kremlin pursuing an aggressive policy are wrong. At the time of the interview, the American did not allow for the possibility that Russia's expansion could extend into Central and Eastern Europe. He supposes that Vladimir Putin is interested in detaching the country's eastern regions from Ukraine. He goes on to argue that the goal of the Russian Federation is not to occupy Kyiv in a military sense. The idea is to install and maintain a pro-Russian government in the Ukrainian capital to ensure that Moscow's interests are realized or create political neutrality for the state. Mearsheimer considers the idea of conquering the entire territory of Ukraine to be misguided and unnecessary to achieve political goals (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

Mearsheimer argues his thesis on the economic weakness of the Russian Federation. He gives the example that due to its low GDP, Russia cannot maintain a loyal and well-equipped army. Only such an armed force is capable of launching a land invasion and occupation of other countries in Europe. He believes that

the occupation scenario is also unlikely in the case of Ukraine, as it is a great effort and burden. He also recalls that the Baltic states and other countries threatened by Russian influence are members of NATO and are covered by Article 5 guarantees (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

At the end of the interview, Mearsheimer gives his opinion on the US policy model regarding the war in Ukraine. He believes the US should focus on China as the most severe threat. He also advocates creating partnership relations with Russia as this could be an essential factor in the competition with China for hegemony in the world. He argues that irresponsible policies on Ukraine and the region could cause the Chinese to seize the opportunity to form an alliance with the Russians (Chotiner & Mearsheimer, 2022).

Mearsheimer's article "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent", published in 1993, caused a reaction in the scientific world. Steven E. Miller (1993) – a professor at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and the Editor-in-Chief of *International Security* – refers to it in the article "The Case Against a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent", where he is against the "neoptimists in nuclear proliferation" represented by Mearsheimer (Feaver, 1997). According to Miller (1993), "Ukraine should not become a nuclear power... The benefits provided by nuclear weapons are less certain and more conditional than the proponents of nuclear proliferation believe" (pp. 67–68).

Miller points out that there are three issues playing a significant role here. These are the false assumptions of the realists Mearsheimer represents. The first misconception is that nuclear weapons bring about peace. Miller notes that the realists simplify the situation because during the Cold War not only nuclear weapons were a stabilizing factor. According to the liberal, the bipolar international order and the interdependence of the United States and the USSR were also important. Miller (1993) concludes: "most of the factors working for peace in Soviet-American relations are absent from the Russian-Ukrainian context. Nuclear weapons may have contributed to peace during the Cold War, but that is no guarantee that they will have the same effect in dramatically different settings and conditions" (p. 70). Miller claims that the second erroneous assumption of the realists is that states with nuclear weapons feel safe and secure. Moreover, having nuclear weapons, they continue to spend enormous financial resources on conventional armaments. In his opinion, this is demonstrated by the course of the Cold War and the arms race between the United States and Russia. The third issue concerns several points that need to be considered. They weaken and undermine the argument that Ukraine's possession of nuclear weapons will increase its security and lead to international stability. Many of these concerns

have to do with the risks and dangers associated with the transition to nuclear status (Miller, 1993).

The professor first points out that Russia is the rightful owner of the warheads, which are only located in Ukraine. Kyiv does not have adequate experience in nuclear weapons management and multi-year nuclear development programs with appropriate organizations and procedures. It also lacks educated staff. With nuclear weapons, Ukraine would become an “instant” nuclear power. In the researcher’s opinion, realists do not notice that Ukraine cannot ensure security with the warheads located on its territory. Unauthorized use of weapons or seizures by terrorists may occur, which is possible because Ukraine is not a stable country. He also points out that serious questions about the stability of the nuclear relationship between Russia and Ukraine exist. As he notes, Russia knows more about the locations, capabilities, and vulnerabilities of those weapons than Kyiv. The author also notes that “Ukraine is in the midst of a dramatic political transformation” (Miller, 1993, p. 74).

According to Miller, Ukraine is an independent and sovereign state, which will be intensely aware of the need to defend its sovereignty. First, Kyiv must consider whether the costs of nuclear acquisition outweigh the security benefits provided to Ukraine. The researcher indicates several issues as the costs of purchasing and owning nuclear weapons. One of the most serious is the risk of a military intervention by Russia, which will defend its nuclear resources. Miller states that the fact that Ukraine takes control of warheads on its territory will mean that other nuclear states will perceive Kyiv as a potential target, including the United States, on whose territory the warheads in Ukraine are aimed.

Moreover, Kyiv will inherit only incoherent fragments of a meaningful nuclear weapons capability from Russia. Ukraine’s nuclear force will be deterred by Russia under most circumstances. As possessing nuclear weapons is expensive, Ukraine will not be able to afford conventional weapons and will not be able to defend itself. Miller (1993) also draws attention to the limitations in Ukraine’s foreign policy and the deterioration of relations with the United States and Western countries: “Going nuclear will increase the risk of isolation... there would be real, meaningful, unavoidable political, economic and military costs to Ukraine if it exercises the nuclear option” (p. 79). He ends the text with the statement, “Fortunately, Ukraine has already opted for the non-nuclear path” (Miller, 1993, p. 79).

Another text about Ukraine by Mearsheimer (2014), “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault”, also provoked criticism from the liberals. The debate about the Ukraine crisis appearing in *Foreign Affairs* between John Mearsheimer,

Michael McFaul, and Stephen Sestanovich shows the divide among Western scholars and policymakers over how to interpret Russian foreign policy. McFaul and Sestanovich, echoing the prevailing Western view of the crisis, blamed Russia. In their view, Russia's foreign policy has taken an aggressive new turn as an increasingly authoritarian Vladimir Putin attempts to legitimize his rule through military operations abroad. For liberal professors, Russian aggressiveness emerges from a toxic mix of nationalism and authoritarianism (Van Herpen, 2015).

Michael McFaul, an American political scientist, who was once called by Coit D. Blacker "the leading scholar of his generation, maybe the leading scholar, on post-Communist Russia" (Meredith, 2001), was appointed the United States Ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014. McFaul in his paper "Moscow's Choice" states that "Mearsheimer's brand of realism... as a policy prescription... can be irrational and dangerous – as Russian President Vladimir Putin's embrace of it demonstrates" (p. 167). In McFaul's view, Mearsheimer's single variable of NATO expansion cannot explain two issues. First is the question of why Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014, more than a decade after NATO began its eastward enlargement process in 1999. According to the researcher, this is because Russia did not perceive the enlargement of the North Atlantic Alliance as a matter worthy of starting a conflict. The former Ambassador notes, "I cannot recall a single major statement from a senior Russian official warning about the dangerous consequences of NATO expansion" (McFaul, 2014, p. 169). The researcher also notes that if NATO's expansion were a flashpoint, Russia would have attacked Ukraine earlier, especially since it had the necessary military resources that Moscow showed during the wars in Chechnya. The second issue is to reset US-Russian relations under Presidents Obama and Medvedev. According to the Ambassador, if Russia had felt threatened by the actions of the United States and NATO enlargement, such a reset in relations between states would not have taken place. He also points to other examples of cooperation between Washington and Moscow.

According to McFaul, it was not the actions of the United States and the expansion of NATO that influenced Moscow's actions. The only factor was the change in Russian domestic policy. The researcher notes that the election fraud of the government in Russia was exposed on a significant scale, leading to demonstrations and general "discontent with Putin's return to the Kremlin" (McFaul, 2014, p. 170). In response, "Putin recast the United States as an enemy" to "mobilize his electoral base and discredit the opposition" (McFaul, 2014, p. 170). Consequently, Putin chose to reintroduce the Cold War rhetoric and

hostility towards the US to strengthen his position at home, not in response to NATO expansionism. McFaul states that Putin is constrained by his analytic framework and therefore he acted “in a way that he believed tilted the balance of power in his favor” (McFaul, 2014, p. 170).

In the Ambassador’s opinion, the seizure of Crimea by Russia did not bring Putin any profit. On the contrary, it resulted in the strengthening of a pro-Western identity among Ukrainians; the anxiety of Belarus and Kazakhstan for their future in the Eurasian Economic Union; the strengthening of NATO; the weakening of the Russian economy and finances; and the undermining of the international reputation of Moscow as a champion of sovereignty and non-interference (McFaul, 2014).

“How the West Has Won” (2014) is the second open letter of Stephen Sestanovich, Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a Professor at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs and U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for the Former Soviet Union in 1997–2001, The letter mocks Mearsheimer’s theories and claims that the realist scholar has contradicted himself several times when arguing that Russia’s “hypernationalism” would have been disruptive, but now he maintains that the West is responsible for the Russian aggression. Sestanovich (2014) emphasizes that “today’s aggressive Russian policy was in place long before the mistaken Western policies” (p. 171). According to the professor, Putin forced NATO to put Ukrainian membership on its agenda because of his actions in Crimea. He points out that in 2008, virtually no one was interested in Ukraine’s membership in NATO – neither the Ukrainian politicians themselves, nor the Ukrainian society, nor NATO member states. Even the fall of Yanukovich did not cause the revival of the slogans related to Ukraine’s membership in NATO (Sestanovich, 2014, p. 172). For the former ambassador, Putin is to blame entirely. In fact, after calling openly “fascist” the – democratic – forces that removed Ukrainian president Yanukovych, he admits that the leader needed to overcome the “political humiliation” to “[r]ecover from [Russian] egregious mistakes” (Sestanovich, 2014, p. 172). Thus Putin is described as a leader who puts his desires first, which is precisely the opposite of what an entirely rational leader, “a first-class strategist”, is supposed to do. Sestanovich states: “But the Ukraine crisis has revealed a different style of decision-making. Putin made impulsive decisions that subordinated Russia’s national interest to his own personal political motives. He has not acted like a sober realist” (p. 172).

Mearsheimer’s statements after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022, as well as the 2014 article, are widely commented on, for instance, in an article by Robert Person and Michael McFaul “What Putin Fears Most”,

published in the *Journal of Democracy*. Michael McFaul, as indicated earlier, is a former ambassador and professor, while Robert Person is an associate professor of international relations at the U.S. Military Academy. They disagree with Mearsheimer's basic assumption that the cause of Russian aggression against Ukraine is the offer of NATO membership to the latter. They propose: "take membership off the table for Ukraine, so the argument goes, and war will be prevented" (Person & McFaul, 2022). They note that the argument that NATO enlargement is responsible for the entry of Russian troops into Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 challenges two issues, one related to history and the other to Putin's thinking. First, NATO expansion has not been a constant source of tension between Russia and the West but a variable. The professors emphasize that examples of substantive Russia-NATO cooperation undermine the argument that NATO expansion has always been the driver of Russia's confrontation with the West over the last thirty years. In the opinion of the researchers, the second issue is that the primary threat to Putin and his autocratic regime is a democracy, not NATO, and the threat would not magically disappear with a moratorium on NATO expansion. They say that "[t]here should be no illusions about Putin's long-term strategic goal of stopping democratic expansion in Ukraine and the rest of the region" (Person & McFaul, 2022).

Mearsheimer's conviction that the main culprit of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, which began in February 2014 and escalated in 2022, was the West, particularly the United States, is also challenged by an Oxford professor Adam Roberts. In his opinion, reducing the causes of Russia's invasion to the Bucharest declaration is simplistic and wrong (Roberts, 2022). He believes that Vladimir Putin started the crisis, and there is no doubt that he should be held accountable for it. For Roberts, it is also questionable whether Putin has the right to say that NATO is threatening Russia's sphere of influence. He notes that the concept of spheres of influence corresponds to the "offensive realism" school, whose founder and most important representative is Mearsheimer. The Oxford professor points out that the concept of "sphere of influence" is an ancient term that seems to be still alive. Many spheres of influence challenge the notion of national sovereignty and equality, but they have not entirely disappeared in international relations. In Roberts' opinion, there is no doubt that Putin wants to defend the Russian sphere of influence at all costs. Putin perceives the Russian sphere of influence as perceived by the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union considered Central and Eastern European countries as its sphere of influence.

Roberts believes that the current crisis in Ukraine can be explained by referring to the causes of the empire's collapse. In the post-1990s, the collapse of the Soviet and Yugoslav empires and the end of the European colonial empires seemed to push for decisions that would destabilize and reorganize nations. Defending the rights of the Russian minority in Georgia led to the separation of Ossetia and Abkhazia, and was also the formal cause of the Russian aggression against Crimea. In 2022, the defense of the rights of two pro-Russian separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk is an essential reason for Russian military intervention. The professor notes that the presence of nuclear weapons outside Russia (Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan) indicated the need for Western involvement in security matters to some extent. The issue of nuclear weapons was addressed by the Budapest Security Assurance Declaration dated 5 December 1994. Violation of it discredited Russia's promises, and Western security guarantees for Ukraine are in doubt as well. In Roberts' opinion, the color revolutions that have taken place in many post-Soviet countries over the past few decades are for Putin reminiscent of the 1989 Eastern European uprising that toppled one communist government after another. Roberts disagrees with Mearsheimer's opinion that such movements were used by Americans as foreign policy tools and that the primary American strategy is to overthrow dictators all over the world.

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Regarding Ukraine's withdrawal from nuclear weapons, the arguments put forward by the liberals have not been verified by the events. Following the processes that took place in relation to the possession of nuclear weapons by Ukraine, from the establishment of the independence of the Ukrainian state in 1991, through the abandonment of the existing nuclear arsenal in 1994, and the signing in 1995 of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances and joining to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's military aggression on the Ukrainian territory in 2022, it can be clearly stated that the liberals were wrong. One may wonder which element of the process has failed. Is it a question of the idea of nuclear containment and the renunciation of nuclear weapons, or is it rather the design and weakness of the Budapest Memorandum? As noted by the Ukrainian researcher Sinovets (2022), "Ukraine's experience makes it clear that moving toward a nuclear-weapon-free world demands solving the problem

of positive security guarantees, not just assurances” (p. 262). There is no doubt that the liberals did not diagnose the situation correctly.

Also, the arguments made by Miller failed when confronted with reality. His first point was that only wealthy nations can afford nuclear weapons, which turned out to be untrue when looking at the examples of Pakistan making the first nuclear test in 1998 and North Korea – in 2000 (Diehl & Moltz, 2002). Secondly, Miller maintained that Ukraine’s preservation of its nuclear arsenal would deter Russia from agreements guaranteeing peace in Eastern Europe, including the Open Skies Agreement and the Conventional Forces in Europe Agreement. The reality showed that even though Ukraine has abandoned its nuclear weapons, Russia has withdrawn from the agreements. In 2007, Russia suspended its participation in a key arms-control pact, the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) (Kingston, 2015), and in 2021, Moscow officially withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty (Hollis, 2021).

Mearsheimer’s views on Ukraine’s nuclear weapon presented in his 1993 article proved to be right. The removal of nuclear deterrence from Ukraine in 1994 conditioned Ukraine’s relations with Russia in the following decades. The nuclear security guarantees put forward by the Anglo-Saxons have not yet been tested, but from the point of view of Ukraine’s security, it was a strategically poor decision. A nuclear weapons arsenal, even a small and outdated one, implies the risk of its use in a crisis. In conducting its foreign policy toward Ukraine, the Russian Federation would always have to reckon with the impossibility of using nuclear blackmail. Then the region of Western Europe would become more stable than it is now because the issue of the crisis in Ukraine has consequences for Central and Eastern Europe.

In the case of Mearsheimer’s second view criticized by liberals, i.e. the reasons for the commencement of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, it should be said that Mearsheimer was wrong, and the liberals’ arguments were subject to empirical verification. The liberals were critical of Mearsheimer’s assumptions that the earlier actions of the United States and subsequent NATO enlargements to the East and, above all, the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, during which the possible membership of Ukraine and Georgia in the Alliance was discussed, were responsible for the Russian aggression.

According to the liberals, the Russian aggression was motivated by the domestic need to legitimate an increasingly authoritarian government in Russia. They believe authoritarianism and nationalism produced a recklessly hostile Russian foreign policy. As Aleprete (2017) aptly points out, the Liberals were not wrong because: “[s]ince these underlying conditions have not changed,

we should expect to see more Russian aggression” (pp. 71–72). When tracing the processes, it becomes visible that further Russian aggression has taken place. After the occupation and annexation of Crimea in 2014, an attack took place on the entire territory of Ukraine in 2022. The liberals also justly prove the lack of time coherence between Moscow’s actions in 2014 and the processes of NATO enlargement. The liberals must also be correct in that Moscow’s actions were counterproductive. For this, Russia has gained tenuous control over the territory of dubious economic and strategic value (Freedman, 2014, p. 28) and has provoked adverse reactions from other powers: In the broader regional context, the conflict in Ukraine has been used to legitimize the renewal of armed forces from Norway to Romania.

However, in seeking to explain Russian policy as a function of Russian domestic conditions, the liberal arguments ignore other important aspects of the issue. The process of tracing events in Ukraine since 2013 (in November, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich refuses to sign the European Union (EU) Association Agreement, and the Maidan protests begin) shows that the dynamics of events both in Russia and in Ukraine itself are important (Wood et al., 2015). Of particular significance are Russia’s “addiction to dangerous myths” (Wilson, 2014, p. vii) and the corruption rampant in Ukraine, with the “family” around President Yanukovich playing the critical role. In conclusion, the article aimed to present Mearsheimer’s views on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and to scrutinize the assumptions made by the founder of offensive realism which received harsh criticism from researchers who follow the approach formulated by the liberal school of thought. Mearsheimer believed that to ensure the security of Ukraine and the region of Central and Eastern Europe, Kyiv should not give up its nuclear arsenal on the territory of Ukraine because of the doctrine of nuclear containment. With regard to the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, the professor pointed to the processes of NATO enlargement to include other Eastern European states. Liberals were critical of Ukraine’s possession of nuclear weapons in the early 1990s. In their opinion, giving up the arsenal and obtaining assurance from Anglo-Saxon states and Russia was the right way to ensure the security of Ukraine and Eastern Europe. The second issue raised by Mearsheimer was the reasons for Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The professor blamed for that the West and the United States, responsible for the NATO enlargement processes. Liberals disagreed with Mearsheimer also on this point. In their opinion, Russian aggression resulted not from the processes of NATO enlargement but from the actions taken by Putin, who wants to strengthen his power..

By carrying out the empirical verification of the views of realist and liberal researchers, we conclude that Mearsheimer accurately diagnosed the issue of Ukrainian nuclear deterrence, while the theses made by him regarding the causes of Russia's aggression in 2014 and 2022 are not relevant in a strategic situation and the liberals were right in this regard.

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