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THE ORIGIN OF THE UKRAINE WAR IN LIGHT OF A MARKET-ANARCHIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

ABSTRACT

The article undertakes two major tasks. First, the position labeled here as a market-anarchist theory of international relations (MATIR) is reconstructed. Second, the conception is applied to international politics in Central-Eastern Europe with special regard to the Ukraine war. The overarching aim of this endeavor is to highlight MATIR's explanatory power. The central question posed in the article is: Who, in light of MATIR and some fairly uncontroversial facts, bears the main responsibility for the outbreak of the war? This research problem breaks down into two further questions: (1) How likely is it that the Ukraine war has been triggered chiefly by the West's eastward expansion? (2) Were policies adopted by parties to the conflict reasonable given the circumstances? The upshot of the inquiry is that (1) on MATIR, Russia would have been quite likely to invade Ukraine even in the absence of the latter's pro-NATO foreign policy, and (2) that while Ukraine was conducting a textbook (albeit risky) policy of defensive balancing, Russia is guilty of a greatly overdone response to an exaggerated threat. Thus, according to John Mearsheimer and some leading proponents of MATIR such as Walter Block and Hans-Hermann Hoppe to the contrary notwithstanding, it is Russia that should be blamed for the present war. An original contribution of the article, then, lies also in putting the libertarian discourse on the Ukraine war on the right track. In terms of methodology, the paper offers purely theoretical investigations based on a rational reconstruction of the theory under discussion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Market anarchism is a relatively new, burgeoning current of political theory. It envisages a society organized on a purely free-market basis, with all essential functions of government such as law-giving, adjudication, and security production being subject to privatization (Barnett, 2014; Benson, 2021; Friedman, 2014; Huemer, 2013; Rothbard, 2016). As an orientation in political thought, it represents an extreme wing of libertarianism. In the paradigmatic variant, it derives the postulated political order from the precepts of a justice theory centered around the notions of self-ownership and private property in external holdings arising from acts of original acquisition and voluntary exchange (Juruś, 2012, p. 10; Kinsella, 2009; Rothbard, 2006, pp. 27–44). The theory has been proposed and elaborated on by the Austrian School economist and libertarian philosopher Murray N. Rothbard (1926–1995), although not all market-anarchist libertarians can be regarded as his followers.[1]

To the best of my knowledge, no attempts at applying market anarchism to the present war in Ukraine have thus far been made in academic literature. There are, however, libertarian political commentaries, in which most (though certainly not all [Krapelka, 2022]) authors writing on the topic (e.g., Bandow, 2023; Block, 2022; 2023; Carpenter, 2022; McMacken, 2022a; 2022b; Hoppe, 2022a; 2022b; 2023; Paul, 2022; Rockwell, 2022) subscribe to the explanation famously set forth by the leading realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer (2014, 2018, 2022). On this view, Russia has been provoked to overrun Ukraine by the US-led eastward expansion of NATO. It is therefore not Russia but the US and NATO that should be considered the principal culprits in the conflict.

In what follows, I will try to furnish a more nuanced picture of the current war, based on what can be called a market-anarchist theory of international relations (hereinafter: MATIR).[2] The purpose of this enterprise is twofold. First, the market-anarchist approach is to be presented as a theory of international politics in its own right, distinct from, albeit in some ways congruent with, the major IR paradigms such realism, liberalism, Marxism, or constructivism.[3] In this regard, little originality is claimed. I succinctly reconstruct

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[1] Of the authors cited above, Michael Huemer and David Friedman definitely do not fall into the Rothbardian group. The former thinker professes ethical intuitionism (in contrast to Rothbard's natural law theory) and draws on mainstream (rather than Austrian) economics. Friedman, in turn, following in the footsteps of his father, Milton, is a Chicago School economist and ethical utilitarian.

[2] Essentially, the theory could just as well be termed a *libertarian IR theory*. The MATIR label is nonetheless preferable for the purposes of this study. In contrast to *libertarianism*, it draws attention not so much to the prescriptive claims as to the analytic input of the inquiry into the nature of markets and the state.

[3] Stated more precisely, the focus of this article is exclusively the part of MATIR concerned with interstate armed conflicts. It is by no means the only item in its store, though. Germane to the field of international relations are also other claims set forth by market-anarchist theorists, e.g., their sharp criticism of the public goods theory (calling into question the notion of security as a homogeneous good to be provided by government [Block, 1983, 2003; Hoppe, 2006, pp. 3–32), the idea of private production of defense (Hoppe, 2003; Rothbard, 2009, pp. 1047–1056; Tannehill, 2009), or multifarious arguments for the peaceability of stateless orders (Barnett, 2014; Benson, 2021, pp. 349–274; Friedman, 2014, pp. 105–160; Rothbard, 2006; Huemer, 2013), to name only the most seminal contributions.

and synthesize the contributions already made by foremost libertarian thinkers such us Murray N. Rothbard (2000, pp. 115–132; 2006, pp. 320–370), Hans-Hermann Hoppe (2003; 2006, pp. 77–116; 2021, pp. 227–244), and, most recently, Michael Huemer (2013, pp. 198–204, 288–320). Second, and more important, what I intend to show is how the said theory can add to our understanding of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the above cited anarcho-capitalist critics of the US, NATO, and Ukraine will be challenged on their own terms. More specifically, it shall be demonstrated how with respect to the present war, they fail to consistently apply the very same theory they themselves propound. The main question to be answered in this study is then: Who, in light of MATIR and some fairly uncontroversial facts, bears the main responsibility for the outbreak of the war? The verdict reads that it is Russia.

I shall begin by citing briefly the major theoretical interpretations of the Ukrainian conflict. Next, the basic claims of MATIR will be concisely outlined. Against this backdrop, I will flesh out what I consider to be the correct market-anarchist position toward the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with an eye on which elements of the two pictures adumbrated at the outset dovetail with the market-anarchist outlook and which do not.

In doing so, I deal solely with the question of the war's explanation. What is not addressed are policy recommendations[4] or the perennial problem of just and unjust wars.[5] Likewise, the distribution of guilt for the war is conceived here in epistemic and causal rather than moral terms. Hence, two auxiliary questions raised in the article can be framed as follows: First, how likely is it that the Ukraine war has been triggered chiefly by the West expanding eastward? And second: Were policies adopted by parties to the conflict pragmatically reasonable given the circumstances?

The former question actually amounts to a counterfactual: Had the policy of westernizing Ukraine been abandoned, i.e., if the country had adopted the neutrality policy suggested by some market-anarchists, would Russia, per MATIR, have been likely to invade it anyway (in February 2022 or on another occasion in the foreseeable future), or not? For, in the absence of experimentation (one cannot go back in time and rearrange variables anew), questions of causality are in historical interpretation nothing other than counterfactuals: Had it not been for A, would B have happened (Nye, 2007, pp. 51–52)?[6] Needless to say, this conjectural endeavor has its limits. One criterion any fruitful counterfactual must meet is that it correspond to a plausible theory (p. 53). The task of the present inquiry is precisely to examine hypothetical events against the standards of such a conception.

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[4] This means that I also refrain from any assessment of the current (as of fall 2024) situation on the battlefield or the prospects for ending the conflict. Perhaps, even though Ukraine and its Western patrons are not to blame for starting the war, they should now sit at the negotiating table with the Russians (or should have sat at some point over the last two and a half years). This article is just not about that.

[5] Which translates into whether and under what conditions Ukraine as a state has the right to defend itself against foreign aggression by means of war. Libertarians, while accepting violence in self-defense, are divided on whether that right applies to states. See Tesón, 2022.

[6] As Nye pointedly argues (p. 54), "some historians are purists who say counterfactuals that ask what might have been are not real history. Real history is what actually happened. Imagining what might have happened is not important. But such purists miss the point that we try to understand not just what happened, but why it happened. To do that, we need to know what else might have happened, and that brings us back to counterfactuals."

The paper is then an exercise in applied IR theory. It commences with a rational reconstruction of the market-anarchist approach. That is, it recounts the major claims thereof, at the same time pinpointing its internal inconsistencies when necessary (Linsbichler, 2017). It thereafter employs the theory to explain known and fairly uncontested facts.

2. CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

On the genesis of Russia's assault on Ukraine, there are in political science and popular discourse essentially two rival narratives. According to the first of them, Russia is an expansive, predatory power. To bear this contention out, some point to the deep-seated traits of Russia's political culture (Nowak, 2022; Plokhy, 2017). Others underscore its authoritarian political system (Gomza, 2022; Person & McFaul, 2022). Still others emphasize that after the collapse of the USSR, and particularly since Vladimir Putin's coming to power, Russia's state apparatus has been stealthily hijacked by a power elite concerted by, and consisting largely of, KGB and FSB officers. As an undemocratic regime, contemporary Russia is then predisposed to pursue not the interest of its citizenry (which lies in peace) but one of the ruling clique (Adomeit, 2016; Markus, 2017). At any rate, it is claimed, the Russian Federation has embarked on an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in order to prevent it from extirpating itself from Russia's tutelage and winning full sovereignty. Theoretically speaking, the explanations offered by the first picture fall broadly within the liberal (the democratic peace theory has it that liberal democracies live in peace at least with one another, whereas autocracies are warlike) and constructivist (by foregrounding the role of imperialist narratives in shaping Russia's foreign policy) outlooks on international politics.

The second interpretation has been expounded on most fully by the dean of the modern neorealist school in international relations John J. Mearsheimer (2014, 2018, 2022). It is also to varying degrees shared by another prominent realist Stephen Walt (2018, 2022) and numerous libertarian authors. On this view, Russia – largely because of its economic and demographic weakness – is now a declining and thereby defensive great power. Instead of seeking to enlarge its dominion, it is bent on securing its present state of possession from the interference of foreign mights. For it is in the vital interest of all great powers to keep secondary players in the region in their sphere of influence. Otherwise, a competing distant power could be in a position to form an alliance with a resilient neighbor, potentially using its territory as a base for attack (Mearsheimer, 2001, chap. 2). Russia has found itself in just such an uncomfortable situation, pushed further and further east by the US and NATO. With the successive NATO enlargements, it has lost control of East Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Baltic states. Finally, in recent years, the threat of incorporating Ukraine into the western, US-led security structures started looming large. This, per Mearsheimer, is on a par with the predicament of the Kennedy administration in the face of the deployment of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba in 1962, or Wilson's response to the Zimmermann telegram in 1917. To avoid the current war, therefore, it was necessary that the West back off on security cooperation with Ukraine, instead accepting for it the status of a neutral buffer state between NATO and Russia. Since the West did otherwise, it is it that is to blame for the war (Mearsheimer, 2014, 2018, chap. 6., 2022).

Much the same view is voiced by some libertarians, most elaborately by Hoppe (2022b). This author, while acknowledging the "thuggish" nature of Russia, sees its demands that

Ukraine be neutralized and demilitarized as "eminently reasonable." For incorporating Ukraine into NATO would put the very existence of Russia in jeopardy. Up to this point, Hoppe is essentially on the same page with the realists, save for the moral judgments he makes (in his view, the present war is nothing but two "gangs" fighting over "turf"). Nonetheless, Hoppe stresses two points usually absent in Mearsheimer and other realists. First, whereas the realists tend not to ascribe any responsibility to the Ukrainians themselves, Hoppe does not hesitate to pin the blame on them, which he does in highly demeaning language (he, for example, refers to Volodymyr Zelensky as a "clown" and American "lapdog"). Second, Hoppe appreciates the ethnic dimension of the conflict. To his mind, Ukraine could have secured peace had it become a federation or simply recognized the independence of the Donbas republics. At a minimum, the Ukraine government should have kept in force all rights of the Russian-speaking population, abridged by the policy of Ukrainization. Finally, Hoppe (2022a) sets forth a piece of advice for all states that are not powers: when confronting a neighboring power, do not align with its enemies. Instead, embrace neutrality. Even though this will not render foreign invasion impossible, it will at least help avoid one occasioned by the adjacent power's diffidence.

Other eminent libertarian writers go even further than Hoppe in blaming the USA, NATO, and Ukraine itself. According to Walter Block (2022, 2023), Russia is actually acting in Ukraine in self-defense, securing itself against the schemes of NATO – a "mischievous, nasty, and malicious organization (2022)." In the same vein, Lew Rockwell (2022) opines: "Putin is nobody's fool, and he has decided to act decisively to free Russia from encirclement."

3. A MARKET-ANARCHIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: AN EXPOSITION

MATIR comprises four fundamental claims regarding the roots of war. The first three of them are logically interrelated in that they all point to the differences in the incentive structures created by the market and the state. The fourth thesis is of a different nature: it emphasizes how politics is determined by ideas.

1) The theory starts out with certain elementary insights concerning the nature of the state as opposed to the free market. Along Weberian lines, Hoppe (2021, p. 190) points out: "The state is an agency that exercises a territorial monopoly of ultimate decision-making […]. Second, the state is an agency that exercises a territorial monopoly of taxation. That is, it is an agency that unilaterally fixes the price that private citizens must pay for the state's service as ultimate judge and enforcer of law and order." States are therefore not demand-responsive enterprises that provide goods and services for willing consumers. Rather, they acquire revenue in contradiction to demand, through confiscation and monopolization. In other words, states are predatory toward their own populations, i.e., *internally* (Rothbard, 2006; 2016b, pp. 161–200; Hoppe, 2006, pp. 49–52).
2) Unlike private companies, whose size is constrained by the consumers' willingness to patronize them, states, as legal monopolists, are confronted with a different sort of limitation, created by the very presence of other states. In effect, states display a constant

tendency toward *external* expansion and aggression (Rothbard, 2000, pp. 115–132; Hoppe, 2021, pp. 227–229). This is the case because to conquer or, at a minimum, subjugate other states offers them at least two benefits: a) It allows for enlarging their tax base by absorbing additional resources of capital, land, and labor; b) it removes the external constraint on the exploitation of their own population. For as long as other territorial monopolists exist, the problem of people voting with their feet always looms large. In other words, the existence of multiple states sets in motion a process of competition that leads to the decrement in revenue and the diminishment of coercive powers accruing to each government. The grand purpose of states is to free themselves from those boundaries. The more successful they are, the fewer competitors remain in operation and the greater their own profit and license (Hoppe, 2006, pp. 96–99).

3) Relative to private individuals, states not only have stronger incentives for conquest and aggression but they also encounter weaker barriers for warlike conduct (Hoppe, 2006, pp. 99–101; Huemer, 2013, pp. 252–253). First off, equipped with the right to tax, they are capable of commanding resources far vaster than what any private company or gang could ever afford. Moreover, when war comes, the state can set out for the regimentation of the entire economy, which, as was the case with Western powers during both world wars, includes price controls, production quotas, rationing of goods, mandatory deliveries, or even outright nationalization of businesses and industries (Higgs, 1987). Worse still, states' economic capacities are further aggrandized by the control over the printing press, which allows for financing war effort through inflation. Additionally, by means of universal conscription, the state can turn every citizen into a soldier. Last but not least, in contradistinction to criminal gangs, states are able to garner mass approval for their military actions thanks to the ideologies responsible for states' legitimation. In most cases, crooks and racketeers cannot appeal to the patriotic feelings of their victims; statesmen can. Furthermore, by controlling the educational system and, especially in wartime, not infrequently also mass media, states are capable of inculcating and sustaining powerful prowar sentiments.
4) Thus, in the background of interstate wars lies ideology (in the Marxist-like sense of the term). On the one hand, initiation of violence on a massive scale – be it internal or external – needs justification. On the other, ideology is the second – apart from the competitive pressure from other states – constraint on the politics of exploitation. If libertarian or pacifistic beliefs are widespread in a society, it may refuse to obey the authority (Hoppe, 2006, pp. 53–53; Rothbard, 2000, pp. 61–62). After all, as brought home for social science by Etienne de la Boetie (1975) and David Hume (1971), the world is ruled by opinion, and those in power are always in the minority, facing the menace of rebellion. Hence, in order to ensure the stability of their rule as well as to gain acceptance for the policies of expansion, rulers must reign not only by force but also through convictions. In a word, they have to seek legitimacy. The importance of ideology entails that states, while hardwired to war by the very nature of statism, will likely differ from one another insofar as the degree of belligerence is concerned, depending on the warlikeness of the dominant ideology (Huemer, 2013, pp. 303–305).

In summary, MATIR is a distinct theory of international relations in general and interstate war in particular, although it can be shown to betray certain affinities with other schools of thought. It rests upon a fairly uncontroversial assumption regarding the nature of man: among human urges, there are drives for power and parasitic gain. Politicians are

not only not free of these propensities but also exhibit them to an extraordinary degree by virtue of the very essence of their job. This brings us to the institutional – statist – structure within which statesmen operate. It is this structure – not the anarchy of international politics underscored by structural realists (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979; 2018) – that, from the market-anarchist vantage point, preeminently accounts for the incidence of war. Thus, foreign policy, as the market-anarchist sees it, is a continuation of domestic policy in that it helps preserve and further develop exploitative practices originally established at home. In this respect, the market-anarchist approach is akin to Marxism.[7] Also, again similarly to Marxists, market-anarchist authors often underline the state's being instrumentalized by politically-connected fractions of private business (called *crony-capitalists* or *cronies*) in reaping the fruits of redistribution (Hoppe, 2006, pp. 130–133; Long, 2018). This extends to foreign policy analyses, whereby the behind-the-scenes machinations of the industrial-military complex or the banking sector are frequently invoked as a key driver (Rothbard, 2011). The market-anarchist theory is then, again unlike realism, but similarly to both Marxism and IR liberalism, naturally inclined to look at the internal settings of a state when explaining its bellicosity (Waltz, 2018, pp. 80–158).[8] Still, market anarchism and realism should not be viewed as polar opposites. At the end of the day, both camps find interstate wars inevitable. Hence, market anarchists can learn a great deal from the literature on power politics that has long been developed in the realist tradition.[9] Finally, market anarchism shares the constructivist emphasis on how international politics is shaped by ideas.

4. POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

Let us now return to the war in Ukraine. Taking MATIR to be true, can one agree with Mearsheimer, Block, and Hoppe that Ukraine would have secured peace had it remained a neutral state, a buffer zone between Moscow and the West? Not necessarily.

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[7] Not surprisingly so, given that prior to Marx, a theory of class struggle had been laid out by classical liberals, the predecessors of modern-day libertarian anarchists (Raico, 1993). On the affinities between Marxism and libertarianism and the role played by the notion of class conflict in the latter, see also Hoppe, 2006, pp. 117–138; Long, 2018.

[8] In the market-anarchists literature, there is no agreement as to which forms of government facilitate peace, and which produce bellicosity. Michael Huemer (2013, pp. 303–305), for instance, embraces the standard democratic peace theory. By contrast, Hoppe holds that since expansion requires material resources, states that are most liberal internally simultaneously tend to prove most efficient at fighting wars. For owing to the relatively moderate exploitation of their own populations, they, *ceteris paribus*, have at their disposal the most thriving economies. And because military conflict offers them better prospects of success, it is also relatively liberal states that are more likely to wage wars (Hoppe, 2006, pp. 102–103). Which side of this dispute is correct (if any), cannot be decided here because of space limitations. Still, it is worth pointing out that Hoppe's liberal imperialism thesis clearly undergirds his uncompromising criticism of US foreign policy and the relative soft spot for Russia he displays. Tellingly, Hoppe (2022b) emphasizes that to launch a truly imperialist project, Russia is "too much of an economic lightweight."

[9] A humble attempt at such learning is to be found in the following sections, especially the penultimate one, where Stephen Walt's theory of alliances is employed as an explanation of Ukraine's pro-Western foreign policy.

On the one hand, as Mearsheimer (2001, chap. 2) points out, great powers do not go to war exclusively for the purpose of expanding their dominion; they do so also in order to preempt a potential attack of an opponent. Mearsheimer (2018, chap. 6) and other realists are also perhaps correct in insisting that the West's failure to keep the promises given to Gorbachev, stipulating that NATO would not incorporate any countries east of united Germany, could sow the seeds of mistrust between NATO and Russia by undermining the latter's belief in the relations remaining amiable. Putting an end to the West's military cooperation with Ukraine could have arguably removed from the Russians' calculations at least this motive. Admittedly, Putin's own public pronouncements, made since the famous Munich speech (2007), have been consistent in making clear that Ukraine in NATO was seen by the Kremlin as an existential threat (Putin, 2022a; 2022b). The same view has been expressed on sundry occasions by Russian pro-Kremlin foreign policy pundits, e.g., Sergey Karaganov (2022), who long served as an advisor to both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. In addition, Kyiv's implementation of the Minsk agreements, which provide for, among other things, the federalization of Ukraine and the maintenance of the status of Russian as one of the country's official languages, would have depleted the ideological resources available to the Putin government. If the Minsk agreements had been implemented, it would have become more difficult to lend credibility to the narrative about Ukraine as an anti-Russia whose regime seeks to violently eradicate any evidence of the country's ties to Russian culture (Putin, 2021; 2022a).

On the other hand, MATIR strongly suggests that those steps might not have been enough. For one thing, the Kremlin would still have had reasons to overrun Ukraine. Regardless of Kyiv's foreign policy, any reform efforts to modernize Ukraine by quelling its old scourges such as oligarchy and corruption could have incentivized Moscow to launch an attack. For a growing Ukraine could, over time, become an attractive emigration destination for Russians and Russian business, and inspire liberal and/or democratic tendencies within Russia itself.[10] As Person and McFaul (2022) point out, it is the latter problem that may presumably constitute Putin's grave foreboding. Tellingly, the Kremlin's most fervent protests against NATO expansion coincided not with the 1999 and 2004 rounds of enlargement (which Moscow eventually acquiesced to) but with the so-called color revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004, 2013–2014). Focusing on the threats to the regime's stability more than those to national security also helps explain the fact that Russia's most pugnacious prewar maneuvers, that is, the seizure of Crimea and stirring the Donbas conflict in 2014, did not follow any western gestures towards Ukraine in the security dimension. Instead, all this was preceded by Barack Obama's reset in American-Russian relations, marked, among other things, by the decision to refrain from deploying in Central-Eastern Europe the American anti-missile shield, which the Russians had vehemently condemned, and which they later inadvertently resurrected through their own actions against Ukraine.

The interpretation of Person and McFaul resonates with MATIR in that, unlike the realist narrative, it places weight on the interests of the Russian power elite rather than on the

[10] Whether such an eventuality was probable is another question. In light of the independent Ukraine's extremely meager economic record and its failure to introduce any major reform whatsoever (also after 2014), the chances did not look optimistic. All the same, if Russia's regime is so prone to overreact to military threats, then it may be safely assumed that it responds to the systemic and ideological ones in the same oversensitive way. Besides, even being an economic basket case, Ukraine still could pose a threat to the Kremlin as an example of a successful regime overthrow.

more fuzzy notion of national interest. True, the realist perspective, too, invokes the West's efforts to democratize Ukraine as what Russian leaders fear, yet the emphasis is always on the NATO expansion problem. The question of democratization, if mentioned, is in turn alluded to largely as an instrument of bringing Ukraine into NATO (Mearsheimer, 2018, chap. 6). Of course, the realist can stand his ground by submitting that Moscow opposed the color revolutions mainly on security premises. The Kremlin believed, it might be argued, that all the upheavals had come to pass at the initiative of the West and its proxies in the post-Soviet republics. In the last analysis, they were aimed at expanding the Western sphere of military influence. As regards the acquiescence in the previous enlargements, it could be held that Russia was at the time too weak to defy, and countries like Poland or the Baltic states do not matter as much geopolitically to Moscow as Ukraine does.

To this reply, the following rebuttal can be formulated: until the archives are open, it is simply impossible to ascertain which of the two motives – the internal stability of the regime or its external security – was decisive in the case in dispute. All scholars can do is interpret the sparse data in light of the theories (realist, liberal, libertarian, etc.) they already subscribe to on other grounds. Realists will then point to security issues, liberals – to the perils of autocratic regimes. Under MATIR, both explanations are *prima facie* acceptable. Still, ignorance actually proves our point. For if the Ukrainian leaders did not know the intentions of their Russian counterparts either, then they were in no position to assume that succumbing to Russia's demands would solve the problem.[11] Other, equally plausible reasons for Russia to attack would have remained intact. And if those reasons had turned out to be true, Ukrainians would have been left powerless. For now that the war has been raging on for almost three years, it should be fairly obvious that Ukraine would not have been able to repel the invaders had it not been for the Western support. In particular, accepting Russia's demands that Ukraine be not only neutral but also demilitarized would have precluded any successful resistance on the part of Ukrainians.

Furthermore, the Russian Federation, like all states, but particularly because of the extraordinarily high level of politicization in Russia's economy (Markus, 2017), has a deep-seated interest in propping up its own rent-seekers vis-à-vis foreign competitors. Especially for the proponents of MATIR, it should not come as a surprise that Russia capitalizes on its preponderance in the large parts of the post-Soviet area by letting politically connected business people reap the benefits of exploitation. As Adomeit (2016, p. 1072) writes: "[…] The tentacles of the octopus with its head in Moscow extend far into the post-Soviet space. Its prey are the political structures and economic resources in what it considers to be its own, exclusive, hunting ground. Significant assets there are often acquired in the neigh-

[11] Interestingly enough, uncertainty regarding the intentions of other actors is a crucial building block of Mearsheimer's offensive realism. As he writes (2001, chap. 2, f. 8): "My theory ultimately argues that great powers behave offensively toward each other because that is the best way for them to guarantee their security in an anarchic world. The assumption here, however, is that there are many reasons besides security for why a state might behave aggressively toward another state. In fact, it is uncertainty about whether those non-security causes of war are at play, or might come into play, that pushes great powers to worry about their survival and thus act offensively. Security concerns alone cannot cause great powers to act aggressively. The possibility that at least one state might be motivated by non-security calculations is a necessary condition for offensive realism, as well as for any other structural theory of international politics that predicts security competition."

bouring countries by means of so-called 'debt for equity' swaps: using energy dependency and accumulated debt as a consequence of their neighbours' inefficient economic systems, the Russian state bureaucrats turned oligarchs take over large chunks of the infrastructure." Needless to say, vanquishing Ukraine would bring about yet another sizable portion of spoils for the Russian cronies.

In the ideological dimension, even while remaining militarily neutral, Ukraine could have always been portrayed by Russian propaganda as a traitor to the "Russian world" as long as it did not take the path of utter subservience to the Kremlin. After all, the capital of Ukraine is Kyiv – according to Russian ideology, the cradle of Moscow's statehood (Plokhy, 2017). Correspondingly, the belief that Russians and Ukrainians essentially constitute "one people" has long been a pillar of Russia's identity politics and a view shared by the majority of Russian population (Bukkvoll, 2016, pp. 3–4; Plokhy, 2017, chap. 19) and Vladimir Putin (2021) alike. As Bukkvoll (2016, p. 2) notes, "the Russian acceptance of Ukrainian independence was in the post-Soviet period always qualified. Russia did not necessarily have an argument with the independent status of Ukraine as such. The formality of independence was largely accepted as long as the country was 'with Russia'." This is a crucial point: Hoppe's advice that Ukraine choose neutrality misses the mark, because real neutrality is practically off the table for that country. For Moscow, neutrality means subordination. Lastly, it should be borne in mind that the invasion of Ukraine is already being carried out under the completely fabricated pretext of genocide allegedly committed against the Russian-speaking population by the "Nazi" regime in Kyiv (Putin, 2022a).

The same is true of Russia's security concerns raised by NATO expanding eastward. One might grant that precisely because of the aggressive nature of the states emphasized by MATIR, the Russian fear of a western incursion cannot be dismissed as entirely imaginary. Even so, the prospect of a US invasion of Russia from the territory of Ukraine must be considered highly vague, given the powerful deterrents the Kremlin has at its disposal, particularly the world's largest nuclear arsenal. Note, however, that in light of MATIR, states do not *really* need to be in danger, or even *actually believe* that such a danger exists, to invade a neighbor. It is enough that they *create* such a conviction among the public.[12] Thus, Moscow could depict Ukraine as a threat irrespective of whether or not the country was making efforts to enter Western international structures. This would have been all the easier since in many parts of the Russian Federation where Internet access is severely limited the Kremlin holds an information monopoly.

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[12] I am not implying here that Russian leaders do not really believe in what they say about the Western threat. They probably do, given the consistent presence of the NATO expansion issue not only in the Kremlin's prewar statements but also in several abortive peace talks that took place during the war. The belief should not be taken at face value, though. The writings of leading libertarians are full of skepticism (often justified) with respect to national security narratives in the USA (apart from the commentaries on the present war cited in the introduction, see, e.g., Hoppe, 2007, 244; Rothbard, 2011). Why are the same standards not applied to Russia? Indeed, it seems that Moscow, with the largest territory, the greatest nuclear assets, and one of the most formidable armies on earth, exaggerates the NATO threat because (a) Russian leadership internalizes its own propaganda, (b) the propaganda is instrumental to the interest of the ruling class, and (c) the leaders are predisposed to sincerely fall for it themselves, which results from the dominance of military and intelligence people at the top of the political ladder in Russia. All these factors are perfectly accounted for by MATIR as presented above.

5. RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC ERRORS AND UKRAINE'S BALANCING

At this point, a distinctive feature of MATIR, absent especially from realist theories, comes into play. To wit, MATIR entails that states can sometimes go to war simply because they believe they can do so, provided that there is any fraction inside a country interested in the conflict and no other vested interests are influential enough to override it. For, at the end of the day, the cost will always be paid by the ruled. Rulers and their accomplices, on the other hand, have no skin in the game as long as the risk of their being toppled or killed in the wake of war is not significant enough. No external threat to a country's holistic national interest, be it in security or economic terms, is then needed to wage a war. Under MATIR, it is therefore hardly surprising that Vladimir Putin's policy toward Ukraine has displayed over the last few years a good deal of brinkmanship.

Firstly, a major war has been started on premises concerning extremely remote and fuzzy, if not downright exaggerated threats. For not only is Russia protected by its massive nuclear arsenal but also the process of integrating Ukraine into NATO has been essentially stalled with Ukraine being denied the Membership Action Plan already at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. True, the Ukraine military has been armed and trained by Americans since 2014, yet the cooperation followed Russia's seizure of Crimea and the protracted conflict over the Donbas region (Person & McFaul, 2022). Besides, even in its current, wartime form, the military support provided for Ukraine by the West is a far cry from anything resembling a Western invasion of Russia itself.

Secondly, even taking the Russia regime's security concerns at face value, the response must be considered greatly overdone. Russia had been successfully keeping Ukraine out of NATO since 2014, and it could have simply continued to do so, if need be by galvanizing the conflict in the eastern parts of Ukraine. As noticed by Person and McFaul (2022): "[…] The tragic invasions and occupations of Georgia and Ukraine have secured Putin a de facto veto over their NATO aspirations, since the alliance would never admit a country under partial occupation by Russian forces […]."

To top it all off, the ways the invasion of Ukraine could backfire on Putin and Russia were manifold. By antagonizing the European member nations of NATO, Russia was compromising its own attempts at driving a wedge between Europe and the US and creating a Eurasian block based on economic cooperation. Especially waging a full-scale war with Ukraine could, as it in fact did, thwart Putin's earlier achievements in this area. Additionally, Russia's being too preoccupied with Ukraine to counterattack on other fronts could prompt the so far hesitant Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership, as it also actually did (see Kendall-Taylor & Kofman, 2022, pp. 22–24). That the likelihood of all these developments had been badly underestimated may be explained in MATIR's terms as recklessness characteristic of state leaders, usually putting not their own but somebody else's resources at stake.

With that in mind, Hoppe's (2022a) advice for small countries that, having found themselves on a collision course with a great power, they should not provoke it by aligning with rival players, choosing instead the path of neutrality, is rather implausible. It is for a reason that most states in history did the exact opposite: they competed with their neighbors and formed alliances with other states conflicted with them (Nye, 2007, pp. 65–67). This fact is well accounted for by Stephen Walt's (1990) classic balance of threat theory of alliance formation. In a nutshell, the explanation goes as follows: It is threat, not power alone, that

represents the core concern of states. A crucial ingredient of a threat is, in turn, geographical proximity: a proximate power creates, *ceteris paribus*, a greater danger than a distant one. There are two major types of policies states can undertake in response to this challenge: bandwagoning (an alliance with a proximate power) and balancing (forming a coalition, optionally including a remote power, to offset the powerful neighbor). Other things being equal, it is the latter approach that proves more conducive to states' interests. First, the choice of bandwagoning induces a ripple effect: the more states join the bully, the more vulnerable each of them gets and the lower the chances of successful resistance are. Eventually, with all neighbors having jumped on the bandwagon, there is no one left to oppose the aggressor and barriers for its expansion are removed. Balancing, on the other hand, gives a prospect of either deterring the aggressor or defeating him on the battlefield. Second, in a balancing coalition, each member's contribution is valuable, which renders its interests more likely to be paid heed to. Whereas in the bandwagoning scenario, the leading power is strong enough to treat the interests of junior partners as secondary or negligible. Now, balancing a threat is precisely what nations such as Poland and the Baltic states have done in the last three decades, allying against Russia with the US and NATO.

On the other hand, one must take account of the circumstances. The mentioned countries joined NATO at a time of Russia's extraordinary weakness after the collapse of the USSR, when it could be safely assumed that the Kremlin would not be capable of a resolute response. The 2008 invasion of Georgia showed that those times were over. By seeking to join NATO and strengthen bilateral ties with the US, Ukrainian leaders were therefore taking a risk: in trying to ensure Ukraine's security by integrating it into a powerful alliance network, they could expose it to a preventive attack, launched before Ukraine was covered by Western guarantees and precisely in order for such guarantees to never materialize. It may well be that Mearsheimer is correct in positing that this is exactly what happened. Still, on the balance of threat theory, policies of balancing are adopted precisely in order to contain a state viewed as a threat. Now, apart from geographical proximity, the perception of other states' intentions is another building block of foreign policy choices (Walt, 1990, pp. 25–26). As it happens, Russia, given its historical record of conquest, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, and particularly the present military involvement in Ukraine since 2014, gave Ukrainians sound reasons to fear. If, then, the Russians really felt "encircled," then the problem was at least partly self-inflicted.

The above observations indicate that Ukraine found itself in the antebellum years in a tremendously precarious predicament. Whatever course of action Ukraine would have taken, it could have brought Russia's aggression upon itself, provoking it either by weakness or by the strength of the allies it sought to join forces with. What is certain, however, is that if Russian security concerns about the westernization of Ukraine are as legitimate as Mearsheimer, Hoppe, or Block have it, then similar misgivings among Ukrainians triggered by the very presence of Russia across their eastern border were all the more so. Moreover, the measures adopted by the Ukrainians were indeed textbook ones. They consisted in a balancing strategy aimed at deterring an adjacent power that itself had done a great deal to appear dangerous. Finally, it should have been equally clear that Ukraine, even with the amount of Western aid it was receiving, would not have been able to threaten Russia itself in the foreseeable future.

On a more general note, MATIR's belonging to either picture outlined at the beginning is hard to establish in an unequivocal manner. This is the case primarily because MATIR covers a relatively huge number of war-inducing factors: the security competition between power-monopolists (states), the configuration of economic interests within their ruling elites, the content of dominant ideologies as well as sheer foolhardiness on the part of statesmen.[13] However, the realist emphasis on the Russia regime security concerns ought not to be downplayed. All in all, in order to expand, apparatuses of coercion must first secure their very survival, which is where the market-anarchist approach and the realist insights into the nature of sphere of influence politics meet. Yet, market-anarchists would be well-advised to stop just repeating the realist security interests talk, as they have a theory of their own to seek wisdom in. As is known, on the structural-realist account, security concerns are, somewhat paradoxically, the ultimate reason behind most aggressive ventures of states. In the anarchic world, so the argument goes, you had better be at least powerful enough to deter your adversaries if you want to survive (Waltz's defensive realism), or, better yet, you should become the hegemon (Mearsheimer's offensive realism). It is then little wonder that having so assumed, all realists find when looking at Russia's invasion are security issues. It goes without saying that this line of reasoning cannot be espoused by market anarchists, since as they keep arguing, anarchy has a great potential for producing cooperation and peace rather than strife and war. Now, if libertarian thinkers are correct in contending that states are immanently aggressive and warlike, then one must at least inspect other possible explanations of Russia's misconduct than its feeling threatened. As has been seen, such explanations, offered by MATIR itself, readily come to mind in the face of the current war: the regime's fear of overthrow, an imperialist ideology, and poor decision-making by state leaders. Oddly enough, some proponents of MATIR, convinced of the predatory nature of the state and always vigilant in keeping it in check, with respect to Russia all of a sudden seem to posit that all it wants is safety.

More important still, that the question of what caused the war leaves some room for speculation does not mean that the war guilt cannot be determined either. It is plain that Vladimir Putin's decision to overrun Ukraine was a strategic blunder. If the call was really made to forestall Ukraine's entering Western alliances, then it was aimed at averting a highly remote threat by means likely to exacerbate this very threat at present and inflicting upon Russia other immense damage one could see coming. Ukrainian and American decision-makers, for their part, were right in reckoning that the Kremlin had plenty of reasons apart from security concerns to assault Ukraine. They also knew that accepting Russia's demands, while offering only a chance for placating its leaders, would have simultane-

[13] Although this might be seen by some as MATIR's drawback, it is worth noting that in the Austrian school methodology, generally representative of the antinaturalist position in philosophy of the social sciences, forecasting and falsification of hypotheses are not the primary task of science; understanding (*Verstehen*) is (Hoppe, 2007; Mises, 2011; Smith, 1994). Now, a theory that trades simplicity for comprehensiveness will, as a matter of logic, generate propositions characterized by lower predictive power and a lesser degree of falsifiability. For the more variables are regarded as relevant, the harder it becomes to make a prediction. And when a prediction is made and fails, more ways are available to explain the failure without jettisoning the theory itself. This, however, while highly problematic for social science empiricists, need not be troubling for market-anarchists, or at least those of them who draw on the ideas of the Austrian School.

ously left Ukraine defenseless. And given the enormous risk for Russia involved, they could reasonably hope that the deterrent would prove sufficient.[14]

6. CONCLUSION

Two chief tasks have been undertaken in this paper. First, a position labeled here a market-anarchist theory of international relations (MATIR) was reconstructed. Second, the concept, supplemented with several realist insights, especially the balance of threat alliance formation theory, was applied to international politics in Central-Eastern Europe in general and the Ukraine war in particular.

The upshot of the analysis is that prior to the 2022 war, Ukraine, while taking the risk of Russia's preventive strike, carried out a standard balancing policy in the face of the Russian threat. Neither Ukraine nor the US and NATO, which provided assistance, are mainly responsible for the occurrence of the war. Russia is. For since 2008, it conducted a bellicose foreign policy consisting in the invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea, as well as further military interference with Ukraine's territorial integrity in Donbas. Finally, in February 2022, Russian leaders embarked on an unprovoked, high-risk invasion of the Ukrainian neighbor.

As it turns out, even though some of the leading advocates of MATIR went wrong in their assessment of the Ukraine war, the theory itself has much to offer in explaining interstate conflict. First of all, it provides a multi-faceted description of the root causes of states' aggressive behavior which encompasses questions of security competition, pecuniary profits from war and international dominance, and the ideological background. It thus integrates contributions made by other IR paradigms into one intellectual picture. Second of all, by investigating the corruptive incentive structure within which policymakers operate, it furnishes an account of those cases of states' belligerence that, under rival theories, may seem objectless. Where men use and put at risk resources that do not belong to them, a good, albeit certainly incomplete answer to the question "Why did they do that?" may sometimes be "Well, because they could."

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[14] It should be remembered that the purpose of balancing policies is foremost to safeguard independence, not necessarily peace (see Kissinger 1994, 21). If peace is desired at all costs, the quickest way to achieve it is through surrender. A libertarian hardliner committed to the prohibition of all modern state war, as proclaimed by Rothbard (1998, chap. 25; 2000a, 116–130; 2006, 329–370), may therefore object that the Ukrainian government is still guilty of the outbreak of war, as it chose independence over peace (which would have been preserved by succumbing to Russian domination). Two points are worth making to forestall this charge. First, recall that at the beginning of this article, I explicitly defined its purview so as to leave all moral considerations on the cutting-room floor. In doing so, I simply follow the libertarian detractors of Ukraine and the West, who also purport to reconstruct the logic of "gang war over turf" (Hoppe, 2022b) or "Realpolitik" (Block, 2018, 63). Second, one salient contention repeatedly made by libertarians with regard to IR which is not discussed in this paper is that decentralization is precious. In the international arena, this is supposed to be accomplished through as many polities as possible retaining their independence (Gordon 1998; Hoppe 2007, pp. 107–120; McMaken 2022). Therefore, even if a libertarian subscribes to Rothbard's rigid pacifism, they should at least concede that Ukraine is fighting for something of value, whereas Russia is bent on destroying it.

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