Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract:

The term "realism" has been invoked often in discussions of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, both to explain what happened and to evaluate potential policy options for the West. This article examines the application of realist international relations theory to the conflict, focusing on two crucial issues. First, before one can apply realist theory to any topic, one must specify what version of the theory one is applying. Whether one adopts "offensive" or "defensive" realism is potentially decisive in determining what policy prescriptions result. If one adopts offensive realism, trying to strike a bargain with Russia makes no sense. If one adopts defensive realism, a deal with Russia is at least theoretically possible. Second, if one adopts defensive realism the key question is whether Russia is a "status quo" or revisionist power. Only if one adopts defensive realism, *and* if one finds Russia to be a status quo power, does accommodating Russia's demands follow from realist theory.

Introduction

Since Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatism in the Donbas in 2014, policy makers, commentators and scholars have sought to identify policy prescriptions that would bring the conflict to an end. Nearly everyone who weighs in on the conflict focuses on the degree of realism that is needed to bring the conflict to an end. Because of the profound disagreements on what outcome is fair, just, or in the interest of various powers, identifying ideal solutions will not bring them about. Therefore, we logically focus on realities that are unbendable, whether we like it or not, and accept that finding a solution to the conflict requires finding one that works within these realities, rather than denying them or wishing they will go away. In this vein, the Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Pinchuk wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that "Instead of issuing ever-shriller appeals, we must also adapt to the new reality…" (Pinchuk

2016). Similarly, Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton (2017, 179) ask "Is it realistic to think that Russia, an order of magnitude weightier than the states at its doorstep, would have *no* influence over them?"

While some who advocate "realism" are, like Pinchuk, simply invoking pragmatism, others explicitly invoke realist international relations theory. One example is John Mearsheimer's argument that western policy toward Russia failed because it was premised on fallacious principles of liberal international relations theory rather than on *realpolitik* or realism. (Meahsheimer 2014). While one should not confuse opinion pieces with scholarly research, the invocation of realism by various authors, and the attention that prominent realist authors have given this case, press us to explicitly explore how realism might be applied to this case.

What does realist international theory tell us about the Ukraine conflict, and about the policies that various actors should take? This article seeks to address that question.[1] Those who invoke realism seem to assume that doing so leads to an unambiguous understanding of the problem, and therefore an unambiguous understanding of what will and will not work to solve it. Richard Sakwa (2016), for example, argues that "Realists would accept the situation, and then talk of frontline countries such as Ukraine becoming neutral buffer states."

However, realist theory does not eliminate ambiguity, either in general or when applied to this case. The realist tradition is a multi-faceted one encompassing numerous strands and theories (Gilpin 1984, 302). Moreover, realism is intended to explain general tendencies rather than specific outcomes (Waltz 1978, 618-9; 1979, 122). Nor does it offer specific policy advice for individual cases. To do either of these tasks, realism requires additional hypotheses or empirical information at the state and substate levels of analysis. To apply realism, we have to first set out what version of realism we are applying, and then have to say what additional assumptions or hypotheses we will add to apply it to specific cases.

Even if we agree on what version of realism to apply, devising predictions and policy recommendations for the West requires reaching some assessment of Russian intentions. The dilemma

for the West (and for Ukraine) is stated concisely by Stephen Walt (2015): "Applying the deterrence model to an insecure adversary will heighten its paranoia and fuel its defensive reactions, while appeasing an incorrigible aggressor is likely to whet its appetite and make it harder to deter it in the future." Determining which model applies depends on assessing actors' intentions. Walt asserts that the case of Ukraine is "almost certainly" a spiral model, and that additional assumption, rather than just the invocation of realism, leads him to advocate an accommodation with Russia.

To summarize, while applying realism to this case is essential, how to do so is not self-evident. Applying realism points to very different, and indeed contradictory, strategies depending on what version of realism one applies and on what one assumes about Russian intentions. If Russia is a status-quo power, then accommodating it may promote peace, and confronting it may lead to further conflict. If Russia is not satisfied with the status quo, then accommodating it will facilitate, and perhaps even encourage, further aggression, while confronting it might at least keep it in check. Moreover, if the world is best characterized by defensive realism, then finding a new *modus vivendi* should be possible, even if the West disagrees with Russia about exactly what it should be. If the world is more like the one characterized by offensive realism, then confrontation between the West and Russia in Europe is more or less inevitable, and the West should presumably prepare for it.

The purpose of this paper is to bring the various strands of realism into the foreground, so their implications for the Ukraine conflict can be better understood and debated. Between the invocation of realist international relations theory and the arrival at policy prescriptions, two essential questions must be answered. First, what version of realist theory does one use? Second, what does one assume about Russian intentions? Depending on how one answers those questions, realism leads to dramatically different understandings of the sources of the conflict and the policy options. Specifically, the argument that realism counsels reaching an accommodation with Russia relies on two further crucial steps. The first is the adoption of "defensive" over "offensive" realism, and the second is the assertion that Russia

is a status-quo power. If one or the other of those arguments does not hold, then realism would counsel

containment or confrontation rather than accommodation.

The next section of the paper addresses the theoretical question, focusing on the distinction

between offensive and defensive versions of realism and their implications for policy for Ukraine and the

West. One conclusion of that discussion is that under some versions of realism, the actors' intentions

are important in explaining conflict. The following section, therefore, addresses different

understandings of Russia's intentions, focusing on the traditional realist question of whether Russia is

satisfied with the status quo or seeks to overturn it. The empirical cases for three different perspectives

are briefly discussed. A discussion then brings the two questions—variants of realism and Russia's

intentions—back together to show which combinations lead to particular policy recommendations.

Offensive versus Defensive Realism

Realism is a diverse body of theory, spanning authors from Thucydides in the fifth century BCE to

the present, and including theories operating at the individual, state, and system level of analysis (Gilpin

1984). Thus, to say one is applying realism refers only to a general philosophical approach until one

specifies what version of realism one is applying. Here, we focus on a central line of debate that has

particular relevance to the Ukraine conflict, that between "offensive" and "defensive" realism (Rose

1998; Mearsheimer 2013; Lobell 2010; Golovics 2017).

These approaches are variants of structural realism ("neorealism") (Waltz 1979), whichlocates the

key sources of state behavior in the nature of the international system. Both variants agree that

international anarchy means that states have to rely on themselves for survival and that their efforts to

provide for their own security invariably make those around them less safe, resulting in a "security

dilemma." The essential difference between offensive and defensive realism concerns how difficult it is

to avoid war in these conditions. "In the offensive realist world rational states pursuing security are

prone to take actions that can lead to conflict with others and usually do…. In the defensive realist world rational states pursuing security can often afford to be relaxed, bestirring themselves only to respond to external threats, which are rare" (Rose 1998, 149).

Defensive realism stresses that as long as the states themselves do not seek expansion, peace may prevail. In other words, even given the dangers of the anarchic system, it takes an aggressive or dissatisfied state to disrupt peace and start war (Schweller 1996). As long as states are satisfied with the status quo, they will pursue only enough power to maintain the existing distribution of power, and not try to overturn it. In such conditions, stability will prevail. Because defensive realism finds that satisfied states can generally manage to avoid war, it requires some additional cause for war to occur, and that is usually a state that is not satisfied.[2] Thus, Schweller insists that if one asserts, as Waltz and other realists do, that states seek security (or in other words are "defensive positionalists") then the security dilemma largely disappears, becoming a much more tractable "stag hunt" or "assurance" game (Schweller 1996, 104). In this view, neorealism "overlooks the importance of revisionist" goals in driving the security dilemma and conflict (Schweller 1996, 92). Walt (1985, 4) argues: "Status quo states should therefore avoid provoking countervailing coalitions by eschewing threatening foreign and defense policies." This assertion is especially relevant to post-Cold War Europe, as many feel that the West violated this precept by expanding NATO and the EU, thus provoking Russian reaction (Mearsheimer 2014, Walt 2015, Sakwa 2015).

Offensive realism, in contrast, finds that the cautious thing for states to do is to constantly seek more power. Because one can never be fully assured that other states will not seek to use their power, the safest thing always is to get as much as one can. This version of realism retains the traditional realist assumption that the primary state goal is power, rather than the defensive realist assumption that states seek security. The most well-known advocate of this view in recent years has been John Mearsheimer, whose offensive realism is articulated in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*:

> There are no status quo powers in the international system, save for the occasional
>
> hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position over potential rivals… [T]he
>
> desire for more power does not go away, unless a state achieves the ultimate goal of
>
> hegemony…. (Mearsheimer 2001, 2)

Why do states behave this way? Why must they be offensive rather than defensive?

> My answer is that the structure of the international system forces states which seek
>
> only to be secure nonetheless to act aggressively toward each other.…[S]tates can never
>
> be certain about other states' intentions. Given this fear—which can never be wholly
>
> eliminated—states recognize that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the
>
> better their chances for survival (Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

If one subscribes to offensive realism, the intentions of states do not matter much. States are compelled to pursue power, knowing that others will do the same. However, if one subscribes to defensive realism, then the intentions of the states become essential. Is one or more of the states in the system dissatisfied with the status quo? If so, that dissatisfaction may lead to conflict.

While few scholars have explicitly invoked these variants of realism in addressing the Ukraine conflict, the connections are clearly visible, and one goal of this paper is to make them more explicit. Perhaps most interesting is that the perspective of offensive realism has generally been neglected in the study of this conflict. We have seen relatively little attention to the argument that the anarchic nature of the system was sufficient to cause this conflict. Instead, nearly every analysis directs blame at one side or another—or in some cases both—in explaining the conflict.

In identifying the sources of the conflict in Ukraine, defensive realism has dominated. Perhaps the most compelling example of this is the commentary of John Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer advocates offensive realism and his work *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* stresses the argument that conflict

happens even when no one seeks it. Yet on the case of the Ukraine conflict, Mearsheimer (2014) indicts both the West and the interim government in Ukraine for causing the conflict. This fits more closely with the defensive realist school, which argues that "Under most circumstances, the stronger states in the international system should pursue military, diplomatic, and foreign economic policies that communicate restraint" (Taliaferro 2000/2001, 129). Mearsheimer's shift from his general stance of offensive realism to defensive realism on this case, apart from being confusing, has important consequences for policy debates.

There is, of course, no requirement that scholars' policy recommendations follow their academic writings. Mearsheimer's critique of the West's policy is less a doctrinaire defense of realism as it is an indictment of liberal internationalism (Mearsheimer 2018). The point, therefore, is not to accuse Mearsheimer of contradiction, but rather to use his academic writings, along with those of others, to explicate the underpinnings of some of the policy prescriptions that are being made. That he happens to be one of the people making prescriptions is somewhat incidental to the argument that realism does not lead necessarily to those prescriptions. Mearsheimer is only one of many scholars and commentators who identify western overreach as the most important cause of the war, and accommodation of Russia as the solution.

Applying Realism to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

To the extent that the West is to blame for the conflict, it seems natural to conclude that Russia is not. "The reason why Putin answered aggressively was not of his personal attitude or irrationality but since the structure of international system made him to act so" (Golovics 2017). From the perspective of either offensive or defensive realism, this provides a sufficient explanation of Russia's behavior (it had no choice) but no explanation at all for the West's behavior. The West's decisions must be attributed to some combination of aggression and stupidity. "Putin and his compatriots have been thinking and acting

according to realist dictates, whereas their Western counterparts have been adhering to liberal ideas

about international politics (Mearsheimer 2014, 8)." To the extent that one of the major actors was

acting irrationally or aggressively, we need to look into their domestic politics and decisionmaking

understand the sources of conflict.

Two other strands in the realist tradition consider the particular attributes of states to be essential.

"Classical" realism, associated with E. H. Carr (1964 [1939], Hans Morgenthau (1973), and Henry

Kissinger (1957), among others, puts considerable emphasis on the state and substate levels of analysis.

A newer strand of realism, "neoclassical realism" (Rose 1998; Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell. 2016) also

looks at the state level, particularly at how domestic factors influence the state's ability to build and use

its power.

For the purposes of informing analysis and policy on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, both traditional

and neoclassical realism would find that state intentions are crucial for understanding the likelihood of

conflict and the policy options for particular states. Carr, Morgenthau and Kissinger all stressed, using

slightly different terminology, the crucial distinction between revisionist states and those satisfied with

the status quo. Only if all the great powers in the system were satisfied with the status quo was peace

possible.

Similarly, an explicitly neoclassical realist treatment of West's relationship with Russia after the

Cold War looks at the dynamics within western institutions to explain why, in spite of a security

environment that looked favorable, the West enacted policies that Russia regarded as threatening. An

important part of that explanation is "threat perception," which depends at least in part on the internal

traits of the actor (Diesen 2016, 8).

In contrast to those who blame the West, an alternative view that is consistent with defensive

realism puts the blame for the conflict squarely on Russia (Wilson 2014). In this view, it is Russia that

was trying to disrupt the status quo in Europe by attacking not only Ukraine but also Georgia. Among

those who hold this position, the West's policy toward the conflict should not only to help resolve the Ukraine conflict, but also to push back against further potential aggression (for example, see Rühle 2015).

One can also apportion blame more evenly. An intermediate view (Charap and Colton 2015) faults the West for fostering a situation with which Russia was so dissatisfied but finds that, in spite of those actions by the West, Russia should not have attacking its neighbor. This more even distribution of blame is also consistent with defensive realism, because it finds the cause of the conflict in the errors of states, rather than in the nature of the system.

Offensive realism provides a very different explanation of the both sides' behavior. The West, and the US in particular, were behaving in this view exactly as states are expected to: given opportunities to expand their influence, they took them, recognizing that others would do the same, and that restraint will not be rewarded with restraint on the part of others. "[O]ffensive realism would view Ukraine as a battleground on which to fight Russia for global prestige and influence, and would risk a militarized crisis for a point of honor" (Miller 2014). This offensive realist view, therefore, diverges considerably from the widely articulated view that the West's policy was actually defensive or was aimed at preserving the status quo. The offensive realist argument would not be that the West's policy was justified or that it was benign, but rather that it is exactly what states who seek to maximize their security are expected to do. Similarly, an offensive realist view would say that Russia expanded into Ukraine because it could.

John Owen and William Inbode (2015) point to a double standard in the "realist" take on Ukraine: "Mearsheimer, Walt, and Cohen seem to accept that realist maxim [that "might makes right"] when it comes to mighty Russia and vulnerable Ukraine. Yet somehow, when it is the West that is mighty and Russia that is vulnerable, might definitely does not make right." Given the rivalry with the West, Russia would be expected to expand when it could do so at reasonable cost. Despite the overall influence of offensive realism among theorists, few have applied it to the Ukraine conflict. Following Mearsheimer,

many have sought to identify actors to blame, implicitly adopting defensive realism, rather than blaming the structure of international politics.

Implications for Policy

If one adopts offensive realism, intentions are relatively unimportant and the debate over policy can end quickly. Conflict is inevitable, so Ukraine and the West should seek any advantage they can and should expect Russia to do the same. However, if one adopts defensive realism, classical realism, or neoclassical realism, the question of Russian intentions becomes central. Is Russia a "revisionist" or "status-quo" power? Explanations of the conflict's origins differ dramatically on this question, as do policy prescriptions. Looking toward future policy, the key question from these perspectives is what arrangement of affairs in the region would satisfy Russia? To the extent that Russia is satisfied with what it already has, non-offensive schools of realism see potential for a settlement through which Ukraine and the West accept Russia's gains. Put differently, if Russia is defensively oriented, and the West's aggression and Ukraine's provocations caused the conflict, then the West and Ukraine can resolve the conflict by acceding to Russia's security needs. Even if Russia was not satisfied with the pre-2014 status quo, if it is satisfied with the post-2015 status quo, the basis for stability would exist if Ukraine and the West were to accept the post-2015 status quo.

On the other hand, if Russia seeks even more than it has already gained, even non-offensive schools of realism would find that Western restraint will not solve the problem. Ukraine and the West would have to assess whether they are willing to acquiesce to further concessions to satisfy Russia, or are willing to pay a cost to resist them. To the extent one believes that Russia fundamentally rejects the post-cold war status quo in Europe, defensive realism would likely find that concessions are unlikely to lead to greater security or stability. The same would be true for classical or neoclassical realism.

Different prescriptions therefore depend crucially on different assumptions about what would satisfy Russia.

Assessing Russian Intentions

How aggressive or defensive is Russia? What set of arrangements would satisfy Russia, making it a status quo power? Assessments of Russia's intentions run along a spectrum from those who see Russia as completely defensive, seeking only to protect a most basic conception of its security, to those who see Russia as aspiring both to reassert itself in Europe and to reorder the global system away from the central role of the US. A similar array of interpretations is proposed for the specific decision to seize Crimea (Treisman 2018, 278). In order to analyze the range of thinking, we examine three different perspectives. The first of these sees Russia as defensive, seeking to preserve a status quo in which NATO expansion halts and Russia's view of the "near abroad," including Ukraine as a "privileged zone of interests" is recognized by the US and NATO. The second sees Russia as opportunistic: seeking to improve its position but sensitive to costs. A third sees Russia as more aggressive, not only testing the West's resolve with various confrontations, but trying to undermine it through "active measures" such as interference in elections.

Russia as Status Quo-Oriented

Those who see Russia as cautious and defensive attribute Russia's actions in Crimea, and eastern Ukraine to the need to defend against Western expansionism. Walt (2015), for example, says that Russia is "not an ambitious rising power like Nazi Germany or contemporary China; it is an aging depopulating and declining great power trying to cling to whatever international influence it still possesses and preserve a modest sphere of influence near its borders so that stronger states—and especially the United States—cannot take advantage of its growing vulnerabilities." In this view, "the Ukraine crisis did not begin with a bold Russian move or even a series of illegitimate Russian demands; it began when the

United States and European Union tried to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and into the West's sphere of influence" (Walt 2015). Similarly, Andrei Tsygankov (2015) argues that while Russia's actions in Ukraine were assertive, they were necessary to counteract Western actions in the region. Different authors have focused on different threats that Russian actions may have been intended to defend against. One is the threat NATO would expand into areas Russia considered to be of vital interest. Related is the view that Ukraine might move from "non-bloc" status to alignment with the West. Another concern is that redirecting Ukrainian trade toward the EU would injure Russia's economy. A narrower defensive objective, stressed by Treisman (2018, 281-2) was to ensure that Russia did not lose access to the naval base at Sevastopol, which some see as especially important in controlling the Black Sea.

The implication is that absent provocation from the West and Ukraine, Russia would remain peaceful. This argument fits with at least some of the explanations Russian leaders advance for the conflict. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Vladimir Putin complained bitterly that the West was continuing the Cold War and was taking steps that injured Russian interests. Similarly, one of the themes in Putin's address to the Duma in 2014 justifying the annexation of Crimea was the misdeeds done by the West:

> Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right. They act as they please: here and there, they use force against sovereign states, building coalitions based on the principle "If you are not with us, you are against us." To make this aggression look legitimate, they force the necessary resolutions from international organisations, and if for some reason this does not work, they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall (Putin 2014a).

While it is a minor point in many realist writings, Mearsheimer (2003, 31) stresses that along with their territorial integrity, "states seek to maintain…the autonomy of their domestic political order." This is an area in which Russia may feel particularly threatened. Some have argued that the threat from the 2014 revolution in Ukraine was less to Russia's geopolitical position but to its domestic autonomy, as it raised the potential for a protest movement to try to depose the Putin regime (Stoner and McFaul 2015). To the extent that such "nonterritorial interests" are at stake, "the potential for conflict is great, and the policies followed are likely to exacerbate the security dilemma" (Jervis 1978, 184).

A related possibility is that Russia is a "limited-aims revisionist power" (Schweller 1996, 106), not satisfied with the existing status quo, but likely to be satisfied if the status quo were modified in relatively limited ways. One possibility is that regaining further control over all of Ukraine, perhaps by its integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, which would be a considerable change over the current state of affairs, would satisfy Russia. Anna Matveeva (2018, 711) argues that "Moscow remains an anti-revisionist power beyond the Ukrainian case and continues to act as a status quo power in Europe and other regions." The fact that Russia did not intervene further in Ukraine may be evidence that its aims were fundamentally limited.

If Russia's aims are limited, a new deal might be possible. Advocates of various kinds of "grand bargains" have supported various arrangements. Thus Elias Götz (2015) argues: "The annexation of Crimea notwithstanding, it appears highly unlikely that Russia will go on a rampage to conquer other former Soviet republics." That is the case, he argues, even though "the pursuit of regional domination will remain a central objective of Russian foreign policy." The key distinction is between regional domination and Europe more broadly: if Russia is allowed to dominate its surroundings (presumably including Ukraine) there will be no cause for broader conflict.

A second major ambiguity is whether Russia's position on Ukraine's position is essentially negative or positive: is it simply trying to prevent Ukraine from joining a free trade area with the EU, or does it insist that Ukraine join a Russia-led trade bloc? Walt (2015) argues that the West should "do whatever it takes to convince Russia that we want Ukraine to be a neutral buffer state in perpetuity." Would Russia be satisfied if Ukraine were a "neutral buffer state in perpetuity?" Or would it pursue further gains? To the extent that Russia is defensive, and attacks its neighbors only when threats cross a certain threshold, it is crucial to know where the threshold is.

At one time, Vladimir Putin (2002) voiced equanimity about Ukraine's relations with NATO, saying that "[i]t is a matter for those two partners," but that view seems to have changed over time. Suggestions for "grand bargains" with Russia differ over whether Ukraine would be banned from joining only NATO, or the EU as well. A *Nation* editorial advocates a deal that puts Ukraine in both the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union, but rules out NATO (Nation 2014). John Mearsheimer (2014, 10-11) argues that Ukraine should be a "neutral buffer between NATO and Russia, akin to Austria's position during the Cold War," and that "the United States and its allies should publicly rule out NATO's expansion into both Georgia and Ukraine." While Russian leaders have stated their clear opposition to Ukraine's membership in NATO, their position on the EU remains more ambiguous. Presumably, negotiations with Russia could clarify what it would accept and what it would not.

One might point to two additional arguments that reinforce the notion of Russia as defensive in Ukraine. One is that Russia did not invade before it did. Russia has enjoyed considerable military superiority over Ukraine for some time, and the fact that it did not use this superiority earlier might be seen as evidence that it really did not want to, as long as it there were other options. The immense diplomatic effort, backed by financial incentives, that Russia used to try to draw Ukraine in might also be seen as evidence that Russia preferred not to use force to get its way unless it faced an imminent danger.

It is also the case that when Russia backed rebels in eastern Ukraine, it could have done much more. While Russia's claims not to have deployed its army in Ukraine were debunked, Russia could have invaded on a much larger scale. At a minimum, this can be seen as evidence of sensitivity to costs. At a maximum, it may be seen as evidence that Russia never had any desire to control greater areas of Ukrainian territory. While it is difficult to ascribe a defensive motivation for intervening in eastern Ukraine, one might argue that the goal was to make it impossible for Ukraine to join NATO, on the grounds that the alliance does not admit new members with existing conflicts.

Russia as Opportunist

A second view sees Russia as hoping to revise the status quo, but as being cautious about doing so. In this view, Russia had long sought to regain Crimea and perhaps eastern Ukraine, but intervened militarily only when there was an incredibly good opportunity to do so with very little risk. When the Ukrainian government fell into chaos with the departure of Viktor Yanukovych, not only was the Ukrainian military unable to respond to Russia's actions, but the political costs of intervention were reduced by the perception that the new government lacked legitimacy. Adrian Karatnycky (2018) articulated the view that Ukraine is a "guinea pig:" "During this conflict Russia has used Ukraine not only as a testing ground for techniques of hybrid war and political disruption, but as a test of the West's resolve." This implies that Russia is not implacably aggressive.

The 2014 "Novorossiya" gambit provides support for this interpretation. After the success of the Crimea annexation and early progress in eastern Ukraine, the Russian government talked openly of "Novorossiya," a geographic designation from the Tsarist era which included much of southern and eastern Ukraine (Laruelle 2016). Strategically, a Russian takeover of the regions Putin listed would have established a land connection with both Crimea and with Russian-controlled territory in Transnistria (Moldova), given Russia control of the important city of Odessa, and cut Ukraine entirely off from the

Black Sea, leaving it landlocked. Just as Putin's talk of the history of Crimea in the Russian empire and the Soviet Union was seen as justifying and preparing public opinion for the annexation, the talk of Novorossiya was seen as indicating an interest in taking over this larger swathe of territory. On a call-in program in April 2014, Putin stressed his view that the territories' inclusion in Ukraine was artificial: "[W]hat was called Novorossiya back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows..… Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained." (Putin 2014b)

However, the formula that worked in the eastern Donbas did not succeed elsewhere. Attempts by pro-Russian activists to start rebellions in several other key cities, including Kharkiv, Odesa, and Mariupol, were defeated by local forces. One interpretation is that Russia welcomed the opportunity to seize control of this much larger chunk of territory, but only if it could be done at relatively low cost. Russia may have been prepared to sponsor local separatists and seek referenda or declarations that the regions wanted to joint Russia, while being unwilling to invade Ukraine on the scale that would have been needed to seize this territory without decisive support from local elites. To the extent that Russian leaders were sensitive to the costs, it is unclear what combination of costs—in terms of casualties and expense, international sanctions, and domestic political opposition —was seen as being acceptable.

Looking forward, what evidence would support the argument that Russia is opportunistic but sensitive to costs? We might see Russia continuing to initiate probes to test others' resolve, while hesitating to commit forces to action unless they can triumph relatively easily, as they did in Crimea and in Donbas. Russia's actions in the Kerch Straits in November 2018 might be interpreted this way.

Russia's interference in elections in Europe and the US might be seen as supporting this opportunistic perspective. The actions indicate a much further-reaching agenda than simply keeping western organizations from granting membership to Ukraine, but they also indicate a preference for

non-military measures. Russia's emphasis on "soft power," (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016; Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Sergunin and Karabeshkin 2015), a term that Russia uses very differently from Joseph Nye, who popularized it, supports the notion that Russia has extensive ambitions but is sensitive to cost. Russia's increased activity in the Arctic, where climate change is dramatically reshaping the strategic environment (Laruelle 2014) also fits with the "opportunistic" interpretation.

If Russia is opportunist, Western resistance (or the lack thereof) will have a significant impact on Russian behavior. Lilia Shevtsova (2018) argues that "Putin became a 'collector' [of Russian lands] at the moment when he believed that the West would swallow everything. *Krymnashism* [the slogan that Crimea is 'ours'] was above all a consequence of the reaction of the West to the Russian war in Georgia." In this perspective, western accommodation of Russian demands will encourage further demands, not make Russia a satisfied power.

Russia as Revisionist

There is also a case to be made that Russia is a revisionist power, determined to revise the "rules" of the system and perhaps to further redraw boundaries (Krastev 2014). Mead (2014, 74) asserts that "Russia wants to reassemble as much of the Soviet Union as it can." Andrei Piontkovsky (2015) reads Putin's April 2014 speech as a manifesto for further expansion wherever there are Russian speakers. Keir Giles and his colleagues (2015, vi) refer to "Vladimir Putin's bid to overturn the post-Cold War international settlement in Europe." To the extent that this vision is correct, even defensive realism counsels a very different kind of strategy.

Two sources of evidence can support an interpretation of today's Russia as revisionist and expansionist. The first is its behavior. While some see the invasion of Crimea as defensive, this school of thought sees it as clearly expansionist and revisionist because it used military force to change borders, violating international law, European norms and Russia's own treaty commitments. In this perspective,

Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine overturn both the territorial status quo and the normative status quo. Evidence to support this perspective could also be found in the broader pattern of Russian activity beyond its borders going back to the very first months of the post-Soviet era (in Moldova and Georgia), long before NATO expanded eastward. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 would be further evidence.

A second source of evidence for this perspective is the pronouncements of Russian leaders, including Putin. In these statements, one can find support both for the argument that Russia has further designs on Ukraine and that it seeks more broadly to disrupt the status quo in Europe and beyond. Putin's statements on Ukraine, while offering various justifications specifically for the annexation of Crimea and supporting separatists in eastern Ukraine, have in some instances been rooted in much broader arguments that Ukraine is not a legitimate state and that Ukrainians and Russians are essentially one people and therefore should be joined together.

Returning to Putin's 2014 speech to the Duma justifying the annexation of Crimea, some of his arguments went well beyond the arguments cited above that focused on western misdeeds. He also pointed to the natural unity of Russia and Ukraine:

> Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of
>
> ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting
>
> Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values
>
> that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers
>
> whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. Each one of
>
> these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding
>
> valour. (Putin 2014a)

While this justification includes some themes that apply only to Crimea, several of them apply equally well to much more of Ukraine and to other countries as well (notably Belarus). The

baptism of Vladimir the Great supports a much broader argument that medieval Kyivan Rus',

with its center in Kyiv, is part of Russia and the traditional Russian view, as Putin states later in

the speech, that "we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities." Similarly, if the

standard for Russian claims on territory is based on places where Russian soldiers fought bravely

and died, then it would stretch through much of the former Russian and Soviet empires and into

Central Europe.

While it would perhaps be alarmist to posit that Russia wants again to control East Berlin,

or even Warsaw (which was part of the Russian empire for a century), the claim that Belarus,

Russian and Ukraine are a single nation and should be unified has been asserted repeatedly over

many years by a wide range of Russian elites. The city of Kyiv plays an especially important role

in Russia's origins story. That does not definitively mean that Russia intends to seize this

territory no matter what. But supports the argument that Russia may not be completely

satisfied with its current borders, even after the annexation of Crimea.

Putin's speech went on to cite other reasons for seizing Crimea, including the status of

ethnic Russians in Ukraine. Putin then points to the precedent set in Kosovo, where the US and

other western states supported Kosovo's independence from Serbia. That too is a precedent

that could be applied anywhere else where Russia could get some local authorities to express

the desire to secede. Russia used this precedent in recognizing the independence of South

Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia (*Economist* 2008).

Related to this is evidence of a much broader Russian rejection of the norms that have come to

define Europe in recent years, namely the principles of liberalism and internationalism, in favor of

traditional values and nationalism. Fyodor Lukyanov of the Russian International Affairs Council asserts

that "[b]y taking action in Ukraine and Syria, Russia has made clear its intention to restore its status as a

major international player" (Lukyanov 2016, 31). This formulation is significant in two ways. First, it

highlights that the same actions can be seen both as overturning and restoring the status quo. To Lukyanov, this restorationist agenda does not make Russia "revisionist." This shows why it is so hard to determine whether Russia (or the West) is revisionist or not. Doing so depends not only on evaluating particular actions, but on agreeing on what the status quo is, or should be. This is especially difficult during a period of rapid change such as that of post-Cold War Europe. Second, this notion that the same action is both revisionist and status-quo oriented points to why realist analysis is so important. By highlighting the intractability of the security dilemma, realism stresses that actions that are meant to be defensive are seen as offensive by others. Underlying the argument about whether Russia is revisionist or not is an argument about what post-Cold War Europe should look like. Putin famously called the collapse of the Soviet Union"the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (*New York Times*, 2005). Ukraine and the West clearly do not agree. As Kissinger (1957, 2) argued, when states disagree about the status quo, they see each other as revisionist and as acting in bad faith.

The argument that Russia is prepared to go beyond opportunism to more risk-taking might be supported by the Russian poisoning of a former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in England. Russia sought to assassinate Skripal using nerve gas in the middle of an English city, with the apparent result that three others besides Srkipal were poisoned, one of whom died. This was not a cautious operation, but rather a brazen one. It is hard to see how Skripal posed a threat to the Russian government that made his attempted assassination a defensive move. Similarly, Russia's support of right-wing groups throughout Europe and the US is possible evidence that Russia seeks not just to defend a sphere of influence in Ukraine, but to undermine democratic norms in the West. These actions appear much more consistent with an interpretation of offensive revisionism than with one of defending the status quo.

Discussion:

Applying realism to the Russia and Ukraine requires first deciding which school of realist thought to invoke, and second, whether Russia is a revisionist or status quo power. How the different versions of realism and different beliefs about Russian intentions combine to yield different policy prescription is summarized in Table 1. If one believes in offensive realism, there is not much more need for discuss intentions, as offensive realism finds that states are bound to seek more power. Therefore, it would expect Russia, the West, and Ukraine all to press for whatever advantage they can get, and would interpret their efforts to do so not as evidence of malice or stupidity, but as inevitable reactions to the hazards of the anarchic system.

Therefore, if one applies offensive realism, Russia's intentions are irrelevant, and this is shown by the fact that the right-hand column in Table 1 shows the West and Ukraine seeking advantage regardless of what Russia's intentions are. Even if Russia is satisfied with the status quo, the cautious offensive realist would take steps to counter it.

Table 1: Arguments and Prescriptions for the West and Ukraine vis-à-vis Russia

		Version of Realism		
		Defensive Realism	Classical/Neoclassical Realism	Offensive Realism
Russian Intentions	Russia Defensive	Accommodate Russia	Accommodate Russia	Seek advantage
	Russia Opportunist	Contain Russia	Contain Russia	Seek advantage
	Russia Revisionist	Contain Russia	Contain Russia	Seek advantage

If one subscribes to defensive or classical/neoclassical realism, however, Russia's intentions become essential to prescribing policy for the West and Ukraine. If Russia is defensive, then accommodation is possible, although one might still debate whether accepting some Russian demands is a reasonable price to pay to end the conflict.

For the US and the rest of the West, confidence that Russia would become a satisfied power with concessions in Ukraine would merit compromise if one adopts defensive realism. The realist ethical perspective stresses the importance of doing what is best for one's own state, not for others. For the West, the benefits of a stable relationship with Russia relative to the costs of an acrimonious one would likely outweigh any intrinsic interest the West has in Ukraine. Whether this is fair to Ukraine or how it would fit with international law is largely irrelevant from any realist perspective.

Ukraine, not surprisingly, might object to such an outcome. For Ukraine, a relatively weak country in the sights of a much more powerful one, the dilemmas are intense, even if one believes that Russia's aims are limited. Some of the steps proposed to satisfy Russia would be immensely damaging to Ukraine's security interests. The question from any realist perspective is whether they would be more damaging than continuing the war and risking the chance that eventually even more is lost. As Waltz has shown, the decision of weak states to "balance" against or "bandwagon" with powerful states depends on the characteristics of the system (Waltz 1979, 126).

If Russia is revisionist, the West will find itself confronting Russia somewhere, and the question then is where the best place to do that is. It seems likely that the further Russia's influence moves West, the more likely it is that the western European states and the US will feel compelled to get involved (Wohlforth and Zubok 2017). For example, what would NATO's posture be if Poland were to face large numbers of Russian troops on the current Ukrainian-Polish border? It might be much safer and less costly to oppose Russia in Ukraine than to do so on the border between Ukraine and Poland, Slovakia,

Hungary, and Romania (NATO already shares short borders with Russia, between Poland and Kaliningrad, between Lithuania and Kaliningrad, between Latvia,Estonia and Norway and Russia).

Much the same analysis holds if Russia is opportunist, though it may be easier to contain an opportunist Russia than a revisionist one. If Russia would like to expand, but is highly sensitive to costs, resistance by Ukraine and reaction by the West would keep it in check, while the absence of counterpressure would encourage further moves. For the US and NATO, the question would be the same as above: would they rather confront Russia in Ukraine or further West?

While more evidence might, in theory, help distinguish which set of empirical arguments about Russia's intentions is true, it appears equally likely that the opposite is taking place: People's pre-existing policy preferences seem to determine what they regard as evidence and how they interpret it. There is not much disagreement about what happened in Crimea in February and March of 2014. But whether that behavior is more consistent with the argument that Russia was defending the existing status quo or trying to overturn it, whether it make Russia a revisionist or a defensive power, whether or not it makes Russia "aggressive" is intensely debated.

The need to better understand states' intentions forces us to supplement realism with theories of foreign policy, and there are many options in this regard (see for example, Larson and Shevchenko 2014). From the perspective of structural realism, this is not surprising. Kenneth Waltz (1979; 1988) stressed that structural realism is not a theory of foreign policy (explaining what states do), but a theory of international politics (explaining the forces that states inevitably are subject to). Structural realism is therefore necessary but not sufficient to explain what states will do in particular situations or to prescribe what they shoulddo. In formulating those particular explanations and prescriptions, auxiliary theories and assumptions need to be brought in, and different analysts have brought many different assumptions about Russian and western intentions to the table.

To the extent that Russia's intentions remain unclear, realism would seem to have a clear prescription, which has been neglected in the much of the discussion of Ukraine. Offensive realism has always downplayed intentions, precisely because they are hard to gauge and because they can change. "No matter how much decision makers are committed to the status quo, they cannot bind themselves and their successors to the same path. Minds can be changed, new leaders can come to power, values can shift, new opportunities and dangers can arise" (Jervis 1978, 168). Under such uncertainty, realists of all schools have always predicted that states would prepare for the worst, because the dangers of underpreparing for conflict are much greater than those of overpreparing. The state that does too much to provide for its security might waste money and, through the security dilemma, make itself less secure. The state that does too little to provide for its security can be eliminated, as has been the fate of Russia's western neighbors repeatedly throughout history. "In the anarchy of states, the price of inattention or miscalculation is often paid in blood" (Waltz 1988, 620).

This caution provides an explanation other than aggression or stupidity for why the West sought to expand liberal institutions eastward in the post-Cold War era. Fears for security in Europe never went away after the Cold War. Indeed, it was John Mearsheimer who persuasively argued that if NATO were disbanded and the US left Europe, Germany's insecurity would lead it to procure nuclear weapons. The US, Mearsheimer (1990) argued, should facilitate this. While that fear was hypothetical, the wars in Yugoslavia were real, as were fears of Russian reassertiveness after the "red-brown" coalition won the 1993 parliamentary elections.

Uncertainty over Russia's intentions makes coming to an accommodation or "grand bargain" with Russia especially difficult in terms of realist thought. A core argument of realism, made stridently by Mearsheimer (1994/1995) is that formal agreements and institutions are not important means of protecting one's interests, because they can always be violated. Similarly, rational choice theories of conflict demonstrate that the inability of states to count on others' commitments is an irreducible

source of conflict, even when cooperation is preferred (Fearon 1995; Powell 2006). For Ukraine, and to

some extent for the West, this fear is particularly salient, because Russia's annexation of Crimea

represented the rejection of two "grand bargains"—the 1994 Trilateral Agreement in which Ukraine

agreed to surrender its nuclear weapons in return for security assurances and the 1997 Russia-Ukraine

Friendship Treaty in which Ukraine leased the Sevastopol naval base and Russia agreed to respect

Ukraine's territorial integrity. The annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine appear to

validate the argument that states take enormous risks when they premise their security on others'

commitments rather than on power. Similarly, Jervis (1978, 169) casts doubt on the efficacy of turning

Ukraine into a buffer, arguing that buffers tend to generate the perceived desire for further buffers to

protect the original one. Together, the lessons of realist theory, the fate of previous Russia-Ukraine

agreements, and the uncertainty over Russia's intentions could easily lead a realist to argue that Ukraine

and the West would be taking too big a security risk to strike a new deal that premised security on

Russian commitments.

Conclusion

While the theoretical disagreements within realism are long-standing and unlikely to be resolved,

there is at least some possibility that the disagreements about Russia's intentions might be reduced as

further evidence emerges. While we should not be optimistic about that—analysts still disagree on

whether Russia was essentially aggressive or defensive during the early years of the Cold War—more

effort should be devoted to specifying what evidence is consistent with the various assertions made

about Russian intentions.

Ultimately, while it may be possible to strike a deal with Russia that is acceptable to Russia,

Ukraine, and the West, realism does not dictate that accommodating Russia's demands in Ukraine will

be either necessary nor sufficient to bring peace and security in the region. If the West and Russia are

going to confront one another, it is only natural that the West would prefer that to happen further east,

and for Russia to want it to happen further West. The cause of such conflict, in most versions of realism,

is not stupidity or aggression, but geography and anarchy. While Mearsheimer charges the West with

idealism for thinking that institutions could resolve the security dilemma in post-Cold War Europe, the

argument that accommodating a strong power's territorial demands will satisfy that power and bring

peace is equally idealistic. Realism does not present us with simple solutions, but rather with difficult

dilemmas.

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Endnotes

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[1] The argument made here is at odds with Alexander Motyl's (2015) assertion of "realism's striking irrelevance to the current Ukrainian context." Realism is highly relevant, but not sufficient by itself to produce useful policy prescriptions.

[2] Focusing on the intentions of the states pushes the analysis from the system to the state level. Some see this as ad hoc theorizing that undermines the essential claims of structural realism, while others see this as consistent with structural realism.