

How we got Putin so wrong

Taking Putin at his Word

Kalyvas, Stathis N., 01 March 2022

An influential analysis of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine suggests that it's NATO's overreach in the region that's to blame. Russia is simply defending itself from being encircled by Western power. But, pay attention to what Putin is actually saying, and a very different explanation emerges. Putin thinks his destiny is to restore Russia to its former glory, writes Stathis Kalyvas.

In a widely viewed [lecture](#) he gave back in 2015 (it has garnered over ten million views), John J. Mearsheimer, a respected professor of International Relations at the University of Chicago and perhaps the best-known exponent of the so-called [Realist](#) school of thought, explained the crisis that broke out in the Ukraine the year before. In essence, he blamed Russia's aggression in 2014 on the US and NATO overreach, an unneeded provocation against Russia. It was only natural for Russia to react the way it did, and the West had only itself to blame for prioritizing what Mearsheimer describes as frivolous "21st century" ideas over his own solid "19th century" ones. As for the Ukrainians, tough luck. In the hard world of great power politics, you can't possibly seek closer integration with the West if you happen to live on Russia's doorstep. "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," is how Thucydides famously had the Athenians say and what Mearsheimer echoes.

Mearsheimer's lecture is referenced these days by those who wish to blame the West for Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Yet, it also contains a remarkable passage. At two points, Mearsheimer observes that "if you really want to wreck Russia, what you should do is to encourage it to try to conquer Ukraine. Putin," Mearsheimer adds, "is much too smart to try to do that." In his telling, Russia could safely undermine Ukraine without having to invade it. Things turned even worse than this grim realist predicted. So why did this analysis prove so wrong, and how should we understand Putin instead?

A key insight from economics to international relations, and beyond is that "talk is cheap." Because what one says is potentially of little consequence, it should be heavily discounted. So, when on 12 July 2021 the Russian president Vladimir Putin published a student-like essay with the telling title "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", not many people took notice. After all, the pandemic dominated the news cycle and Ukraine seemed irrelevant. But Putin meant what he said.

Putin's essay is chilling both because of its form but also its content. The claim that Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians are one people belonging to the historical Russian nation is shocking. Yet Putin kept reiterating it in subsequent speeches. Most analysts ignored it, seeing it as cheap talk meant for internal consumption. Conventional wisdom was that Putin could win just by threatening to attack, not by attacking. So why did he decide to invade? The answer lies in two features that Realists tend to underestimate if not downright ignore: leaders' preferences and peoples' demands.

We now know that Putin really meant his July 2021 invective against the Ukrainians; he really believes that Ukraine does not exist as a nation; and he really seems to think that his own historical role is the restoration of the former Soviet Union. Put differently, his stance is no longer informed by the kind of strategic calculus implied by Mearsheimer. To understand his behavior we must turn to a strand of International Relations known as [constructivism](#), which posits that leaders shape their goals and actions based not just on balance of power calculations, but also on their own understanding of who they are and what their goals should be. Leaders are not irrational, but rationality serves their goals. Seen from this perspective, Putin looked around and saw that the United States was distracted by China, that Germany had a new and untested government, and that Europe was dependent on Russian gas. The moment seemed propitious for his move, but his move was a function of his broader goals. His talk hadn't been cheap after all.

Realists do not only underestimate leaders' preferences; they also disdain domestic politics and agency. Watching Mearsheimer speak, one is struck by his disregard for the Ukrainian yearning for democracy and closer ties to the West, which he depicts as foreign-incited and ultimately irrelevant. He dismisses the 2014 Euromaidan revolution as a coup, a gratuitous disturbance to the work of great power politics. And yet, there are times when history is powered by peoples' desires rather than the logic of the international system.

I was reminded of all this quite recently, while Greece celebrated the bicentenary of its war of independence. Being Greek myself, I used the opportunity to catch-up on its history, including the historian Mark Mazower's new [book](#). Although the uprising was directed against Greece's Ottoman overlords, it was opposed by the [Concert of Europe](#), the European alliance that sought to maintain stability in the wake of the Napoleonic upheaval. Klemens von Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor at the time, was Mearsheimer's forerunner, the great Realist of the day. In fact, he did everything he could to help suppress the uprising. He failed. The Greeks got their state and began their journey to join the West. Somehow, their desires both trumped and altered European balance of power considerations. Ultimately then, this is the tale of how Vladimir Putin's idiosyncratic imperial revanchism met the Ukrainians' national aspirations to potentially upend the Realist logic of great power politics. Perhaps it is also the story of how an

uncalled-for war of choice that was supposed to put an end to the liberal post-Cold War world, might well end up invigorating and expanding the very institutions it was meant to terminate.

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