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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Offensive realism, differentiation theory, and the war in Ukraine

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Abstract In this article, I shall demonstrate that several of the arguments made in favour of an offensive realist explanation of Russian actions in Ukraine as part of a power balancing process are inconsistent both with available empirical knowledge of the conflict in Ukraine and with the structural logic postulated by offensive realist theory itself. Rather than a conflict about power in a material sense, I will argue that the war in Ukraine is better understood as a conflict about the incompatibility of the Russian state structure to cope with the imperatives of functional differentiation as understood by theories of world society.

Keywords Russia · Ukraine · Offensive realism · Differentiation theory · Conflict · World society

Russia, the war in Ukraine, and realist theory

Russia has traditionally served as something of a textbook case for realist IR theories. This was plausible or even necessary during the Cold War, when, as the Soviet Union, Russia served as one of the poles establishing bipolarity as a guiding concept for the discussion of Cold War issues (Waltz 1964). The phenomenon of Russia as poster child of realism might have even deeper roots if one considers the geopolitics of Halford Mackinder as some form of proto-realism (Berryman 2012). It has also persisted into the post-Cold War era: The historical evolution of Russia, replete with great power conflict, balancing, and other instances of behaviour associated with realism, allowed the latter to demonstrate its consistent relevance in a phase

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of theory development when it was broadly rejected for being 'ahistorical' (Wohlforth 2001, p. 215). Even when Russia's great power status was disputed, authors tended to describe the country's foreign policy orientation as determined by that loss of rank, or by the quest to re-emerge from the geopolitical netherworld—as realist approaches would expect (Mankoff 2012, p. 52).

Interestingly, when constructivists started studying post-Soviet Russian political discourse essentially as a large-scale societal identity crisis, they found that the most common attempts to provide some form of collective identity relied on implicit or explicit assumptions about Russia's great power status and its relations with other powers (Hopf 2002, pp. 213–219). Their assumptions on Russian foreign policy are thus often compatible with the gist of realist analyses in the sense that the former examine the social construction of a reality which the latter would view as an ontological given (cf. Ziegler 2012). Depending on the degree to which realist IR theory is considered to rely exclusively on material measures of power (Barkin 2003, p. 330), Russia might be the one place where the two theories could go to agree with one another. It would be, however, a lopsided agreement, with constructivists finding that Russian foreign policy actors construct their reality in those same terms that realists insist are the only real ones anyway (cf. Feklyunina 2012, p. 442). Despite impressive contributions of other approaches, in theoretical terms, Russia is realist home turf.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that when Russian infantry, marines, and special operations forces in unmarked uniforms and vehicles invaded Crimea in February 2014—and some months later, when Russian troops and equipment were found to be more or less openly supporting insurgents in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine—realist IR scholars had a field day attributing these actions to foundational realist hypotheses about security competition and the inevitability of great power conflict. The probably most discussed work of this nature was published by John J. Mearsheimer in *Foreign Affairs*. Here, the central author of offensive realist theory makes a series of arguments that can be summarized as follows: First, the cause of Russian military action against Ukraine was the Western policy of expanding NATO—with EU enlargement, support for Ukrainian political forces perceived as hostile, as well as fear of future 'democracy promotion' in Russia itself as additional factors. Second, this violent reaction triggered by Western states played out according to the balancing imperatives posited by offensive realism, and which European and American leaders unwisely ignored. Third, the Russian strategy thus described is rational according to the basic tenets of realist IR theory—'Putin […] is a first-class strategist who should be feared and respected by anyone challenging him on foreign policy'. Fourth and finally, the situation might be defused by respecting the stated security interests of Russia as a still relevant 'declining power', and making Ukraine a neutral buffer state (Mearsheimer 2014).

Other realist IR scholars have also weighed in on possible explanations for Russian behaviour. Generally, those works tend towards perspectives of the offensive and neoclassical realist varieties. This is plausible, as defensive realist theory with its more limited explanatory claims cannot be expected to deal with foreign policy specifics such as one particular military action of a particular country against another at one specific moment (Waltz 2000, pp. 38–39). Offensive realism is much

more encompassing in explanatory scope—adding, besides the presumption of a tendency towards power maximization, a generalized rational actor assumption to the tenets already established within the basic structuralist framework. Within offensive realism, it should therefore be possible to explain, within certain parameters, the decisions made by great powers in concrete situations, and as rational actors seeking regional hegemony, they 'are expected to act in strategically smart ways most of the time' (Mearsheimer 2009, p. 246). Scholars working within the same framework generally concur that according to offensive realism, the decision to invade Ukraine represents an instance of this tendency. Götz (2016a, b) adds to Mearsheimer's assertions, arguing that establishing dominance over Ukraine's political alignment had been one of the central aims of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy. Yet, he also recognizes the need for conceptual elaboration on the theme of regional hegemony-seeking and the accompanying need for great powers to dominate smaller neighbours (p. 303).

This dominance, in his model, serves conventional strategic purposes derived from offensive realist logic—to deny the use of neighbouring states as a military staging area to competing great powers, to make use of them as such themselves, and to avoid potential cut-offs from trade flows by indirectly controlling use of their transport infrastructure (p. 304). If there is little to no pressure from outside competitors, these needs may be fulfilled by a mostly benevolent 'soft-power' strategy. In the case of high outside pressure, such as an outside great power being engaged 'in substantial military cooperation' with the neighbouring state, there will be a strong tendency to react with 'hard-power instruments' ranging from 'sanctions or blockades' to full-scale warfare. In the middle ground between these extremes—when there is no substantial external military presence, but the neighbouring state in question is entering into 'closer economic and political relations with extra-regional powers' that might imperil regional hegemonic projects in the future—'the local great power will pursue hybrid strategies', combining political and economic pressure with limited military posturing and coercive diplomacy (p. 305). Götz then links turning points in post-Soviet Russia–Ukraine relations to these three ideal types of small state–great power interaction, advancing the argument that except during a phase of Russian weakness in the late 1990s, Russian foreign policy generally adjusted its dealings with Ukraine according to offensive realist logic. With the Maidan revolution of 2013–2014, he asserts, Russia 'faced a nightmare scenario of having a giant client state of outside powers on its doorstep', therefore necessitating hard-power intervention in order to comply with the structural imperative for regional hegemony (p. 314f).

This conceptual clarification is important, as it connects the abstract principles of offensive realist theory to the observable behaviour of states in their regional context in a way that appears highly stringent and plausible at first sight. Other realist authors have added to the argument, without establishing propositions that run counter to the basic line of thought brought forth by Mearsheimer and Götz. Another group of scholars argue that the use of armed force could be explained by balance of threat theory (Walt 1987) and note its essential compatibility with offensive realism for the case in question (Bock et al. 2015, p. 103). Tsygankov (2015) proposes a somewhat similar, but less theoretical argument. MacFarlane (2016, p.

348) describes the discussion of causes for Russian behaviour as a 'lightning rod' in the 'broader and historically deep debate' over systemic or domestic and material or cognitive factors in IR theory. He comes to the conclusion that power balancing as a systemic imperative is an indispensable component of several, 'mutually reinforcing' factors, which also include 'domestic logics' and 'incompatible worldviews' (p. 354), which appears as compatible with neoclassical realist foreign policy analysis. Such a perspective is explicitly employed by Becker et al. (2016), who accept the basic validity of structural realism for explaining the situation, but emphasize the relevance of 'non-military, non-traditional tools' (p. 115) in the Russian approach to the situation. Overall, very little in their work actually contradicts offensive realist explanations. Rather, it highlights some additional facets, such as discursive attempts by Russian government actors to legitimize their essentially realist foreign policy to domestic and foreign audiences (p. 123ff)—facets that structural realists might have ignored, but not denied.

Korolev (2017) likewise interprets Russian actions in Ukraine as driven by the necessity of anti-hegemonic balancing in 'an area of core strategic interests' (p. 9f) and credits the 'balancing response' with having 'fulfilled its goal once again' (p. 18), thus echoing Mearsheimer's evaluation of the action as both rational and successful. In an earlier publication, the 'drastic measures' are more clearly linked to the Russian need to balance 'the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU' (Korolev 2016, p. 385). Kanet (2015) gives similar, though not explicitly theorized explanations. Military action in Georgia and Ukraine is traced both to defensive reactions against 'US, NATO and EU policies of containment and expansion' and to the essential offensive realist necessity 'of establishing a Eurasian Union that is expected to provide [Russia] with the structures to dominate much of Eurasia both economically and politically' (p. 504f). That article may well serve as an example for how closely common-sense interpretations of Russian actions often track the theoretical rationality of offensive realism. The same tendency is visible in an article by Nitoiu (2016a, b), who adds an interesting interpretation of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy as an EU attempt at status-seeking as a liberal great power, which was then countered by familiar hard-power strategies. In a more recent publication, the same author argues for a neoclassical realist understanding of the conflict, focusing more on mutual perceptions than material capabilities, but also describing Russian actions as a 'counterbalance' to 'the EU-centric understanding of the European order' (Nitoiu 2016a). Again, alternative realist interpretations do not actually challenge the basic causal narrative laid out by Mearsheimer, but merely suggest additional factors and mechanisms according to theoretical preference.

Many post hoc realist explanations of the Ukraine crisis also read like retroactive confirmations of earlier realist predictions that post-Soviet Russia would eventually display some form of balancing behaviour due to 'NATO expansion' as well as a host of other factors related to US foreign policy (Ambrosio 2001, p. 46). Larson and Shevchenko (2010) made an argument similar to the neoclassical realist works cited above, predicting balancing behaviour not only due to material power considerations, but to 'Russian elites' sense of injury and humiliation' (p. 93). Yet, those sentiments are found to be triggered by the same events—NATO expansion and support for opposition forces in Ukraine—that offensive realists describe as

direct causes of armed action. Nygren (2012), also working within a neoclassical approach, argued that predictions of great power behaviour should be based not on material capabilities or threats, but on their publicly stated interests, which in this case amount to 'Putinism' as an ideational conglomerate of 'traditional Russian realist, geo-political, geo-economic and geo-cultural thinking' (p. 522). In other words, Russian behaviour tends to conform to realist theory because the Russian leadership thinks in broadly realist terms—an argument that can be turned on its head by taking it as a confirmation of the validity of realist premises: Realism tends to become the 'hegemonic discourse' on international politics because it is 'mainly a reflection of developments in the objective world' (Mearsheimer 1995, p. 42f).

Most of the neoclassical arguments that purport to explain Russian behaviour through the addition of ideational factors to the structural realist causal narrative thus tend to add ontological nuance, but not explanatory power for this specific case. Overall, there appears to be an implicit agreement among a significant part of the academic community that offensive realist arguments explain the current situation rather well. In the theoretical IR literature, this agreement might connect to recent historical studies that have sought to rehabilitate, within structural realism, the assumption of a general tendency of states to balance at least geographically close competitors (Parent and Rosato 2015, p. 57). It is also virtually identical to arguments made in the realist literature on other aspects of Russian foreign policy such as the war in Georgia (Karagiannis 2013). As such, the clear trend to interpret the Ukraine crisis in the light of a well-worn realist approach might be classified as part of a wider intellectual trend of 'returnism'—that is to say, the diagnosis that contemporary world politics is best explained by returning to traditional ideas of great power competition, geopolitics, and other concepts once relegated to the proverbial ash heap of history (Heng 2010, p. 536). Yet, is conceptual stagnation the price of understanding the present? Is there such little theoretical progress in IR that more recent approaches have little to offer?

Offensive realism and dubious arguments regarding NATO membership

In this article, I shall demonstrate that several of the arguments made in favour of an offensive realist explanation of Russian actions in Ukraine as part of a power balancing process are both inconsistent with available empirical knowledge of the conflict in Ukraine and with the structural logic postulated by offensive realist theory itself. Rather than a conflict about power in a material sense, I will argue that the war in Ukraine is actually better understood as a conflict about the incompatibility of the Russian state structure with the imperatives of functional differentiation as understood by contemporary world society theory (cf. Albert 2016, p. 170). Overall, two separate, but interconnected findings lead me to the conclusion that while phenomena of power expressed in terms of material capabilities play an important role in the contemporary conflict in Ukraine, it is implausible to describe the latter in the causal terms suggested by offensive realism.

The first of these arguments concern the possible enlargement of international institutions such as the EU and, most often cited by Russian government sources as a source of mistrust (Sarotte 2014), NATO, as a cause for the Crimean invasion. It is obvious to even the casual reader of theoretical IR literature that membership in international organizations by itself—or expectations about future membership in international organizations—is not a causal factor taken very seriously by realists. Specifically, in the case of NATO, offensive realists have emphasized that the effects ascribed to it as an institution by competing theories—deterrence of the Soviet Union, absence of security competition between European states—should rather be traced to the material deployment of US conventional and nuclear forces, and to the disciplining effects of a bipolar international system, respectively (Mearsheimer 1990). The possible enlargement of NATO by itself therefore should not count as an explanatory factor in structural realist approaches. The general idea of an important causal role for possible NATO expansion could still be rescued under two conditions—first, if earlier instances of Eastern European states' NATO membership had led to a significant deployment of actual forces to those countries, and, second, if Ukrainian NATO membership had become significantly more likely in early 2014 than in previous crises. However, both conditions are not met.

Russian foreign policy rhetoric had made it clear already since the 1990s that it considered NATO both a relic of the Cold War and a potential threat (Tsygankov 2013, p. 186). In our case, the ongoing debate on whether Western politicians lied to Russia over the eventual expansion of NATO (Shifrinson 2016) can be safely ignored because, as already mentioned, structural realism expects state intentions to be highly unstable, and therefore not a rational foundation for foreign policy decisions. However, the question of whether the actual expansion affected the material balance of capabilities cannot be dismissed. After all, the current National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (SBRF 2015, translations by the author) frames the issue in terms very close to realist theory—describing increases in 'military activity', the creation of 'an anti-missile defence system' and, most importantly, the encroachment of 'military infrastructure closer to Russian borders' as 'unacceptable' and a 'decisive factor' in mutual relations. Yet, Mearsheimer (2014) himself admits that 'the alliance has never permanently deployed military forces in its new member states', and simulation workshops conducted after the Crimean crisis have convincingly demonstrated that actually existing NATO forces would be unable to even defend its Baltic member states, much less project power into Ukraine or—for whatever implausible purpose—into Russia itself (Shlapak and Johnson 2016).

One could even make the argument that by overstretching itself, the alliance's credibility would have been weakened so much as to become irrelevant (Calleo 1998). And while the wisdom of missile defence programmes is debatable as such, it is implausible that they played a large role in the Ukrainian context—especially since interceptors based in the continental USA are potentially more damaging to the Russian nuclear deterrent than any activity in Europe, and Ukraine apparently never was an issue in previous negotiations on the topic (Zadra 2014). Nor does it appear to be a plausible location for any imaginable missile defence mission. Therefore, if neither missile defence nor the deployment of significant military forces could be at stake, the last issue that might be a plausible realist factor is the

expansion of NATO military infrastructure, which might facilitate future realignments of forces in the direction of Russia. Yet, such steps were neither taken nor considered beyond minimal compatibility improvements with new NATO members before the invasion in Crimea, and even since, they have been limited to measures enabling quick troop movements on the scale of a brigade or smaller, which would find themselves beyond the reach of NATO's pipeline network. As of 2016, no funding had been allotted so far to remedy this situation (Fiott 2016). Overall, there is no visible indicator that NATO expansion has influenced the regional balance of power to Russia's disadvantage in any material way recognizable by an offensive realist approach (cf. Mearsheimer 2016, p. 28), or that a future Ukrainian accession to the alliance would have had such an influence.

One author evades this particular problem by postulating that potential regional hegemons do not only seek to maximize military strength vis-à-vis smaller countries, but also tend to impose limits on their 'foreign-policy autonomy' (Götz 2016a, b, p. 301). If we accept this modification of the argument—dubious though it may appear under strictly structural realist assumptions—it becomes possible to argue that Russia invaded Ukraine in order to reduce the latter's political autonomy, essentially establishing some form of suzerain relationship between the two. Despite the oft-criticized problem that such forms go beyond the strict hierarchy–anarchy dichotomy of structural realism (Buzan and Little 1996), this innovation appears as more plausible than the idea that Russia invaded Ukraine due to considerations of material capabilities: In this case, the purpose was not to prevent a decision that would directly affect the balance of power, but rather to eliminate the possibility of hitherto undefined future decisions that might have such an impact. Such an explanation for Russian actions—in conjunction with offensive realism's assumption of state rationality, affirmed specifically for the case by Mearsheimer (2014)—implies that in February 2014, Ukrainian NATO membership must have been a likelier possibility than at any time before. Yet, this proposition does not withstand empirical scrutiny, either. Actually, political initiatives to bring Ukraine into NATO were flourishing not at the point of the invasion, but 9 years before, when then-President Yushchenko's government announced its firm intention to fully join NATO. This proposal was welcomed by the USA, and membership for Ukraine (and Georgia) became an issue at the alliance's Bucharest summit in 2008, where the plan was defeated—at least in part, due to Russian diplomatic pressure (Tsygankov 2013, p. 186).

The war with Georgia came several months later and therefore cannot be the cause for the end of NATO expansion at that point, nor can it otherwise be well explained in realist terms (Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist 2009). Through the skilful application of economic pressure and the cultivation of political mistrust between Ukrainian leaders of the Orange Revolution, Russian policies then played a major part in creating the conditions for the election of pro-Russian leader Yanukovych, who ended attempts at NATO membership (Tsygankov 2015, p. 283f). It was therefore possible for Russia to peacefully achieve its stated aims regarding NATO expansion in 2008, when Ukraine came very close to actually joining NATO in the near future. In 2014, after the fall of the Yanukovych government, joining NATO was not on the agenda of the new government, as it made sure to consistently communicate

(Sestanovich 2014, p. 172). Had it chosen to pursue such a course of action, it is unclear why similar kinds of pressure should not have achieved the same effect as 6 years before. Ascribing direct causality leading to the invasion in Ukraine to the latter's potential NATO membership is therefore dubious—according to the three-stage model proposed by Götz (2016a, b), that action might perhaps have occurred in 2007, but not when it actually did occur. Overall, and despite strong assertions, it is impossible to derive any meaningful interpretation of the significance of NATO for the events of 2014 from offensive realist tenets (cf. Sperling and Webber 2016, p. 22). This fits well with the diagnosed tendency of highly parsimonious, abstract, and generalized structural realist IR theories to become indeterminate and soften core assumptions as they are applied to real-world politics (Guzzini 2004, p. 534).

Offensive realism and the problem of indeterminacy

This brings us to the second problem identified with the realist interpretation of the war, which concerns the overall effect of Russian actions on its position in the balance of power and the resulting rationality ascribed by Mearsheimer (2014) and others (Götz 2016a, b). The difficulties of utilizing power as a one-dimensional, resource-based variable have been noted (Barnett and Duvall 2005). But even without considering conceptual fuzziness, it is difficult to reconcile the events during and since the beginning of 2014 with the assertion that they improved Russia's position in the balance of power. Such an improvement, as understood by offensive realists, means nothing else than an increase the rising power's share of total military capacity in the world (Valeriano 2009, p. 181). Without that tendency, Mearsheimer's (2014) assessment of the conflict encounters a dilemma: Either, Russian actions are not rational, clashing with the diagnosis that they are an instance of a state 'willing to pursue risky strategies to gain more power' (Mearsheimer 2011, p. 429)—or, the theory employed has deficiencies that preclude a useful analysis of the particular case from the beginning. Several contexts must be taken into account in order to make a rough assessment of how Russian actions may have impacted the overall distribution of power within the system.

In accordance with the offensive realist imperative of striving for regional hegemony, the results in terms of military power relations in the immediate neighbourhood should be discussed first. While Russia obviously maintains massive military superiority within post-Soviet space, the performance of Ukrainian forces in the latter stages of the war suggests that it may, for the first time, have encountered an enemy capable of inflicting considerable damage on its forces. This was not the case during and shortly after the initiation of hostilities in 2014, when the rapid occupation of Crimea and some parts of the Donbas by unmarked forces spawned worries about a new threat of 'hybrid warfare' (Freedman 2014, p. 10f). Yet, these successes occurred at a time at which the Ukrainian government was paralyzed, and in areas where Russia had both ethnic and political sympathies as well as a pre-existing formal (in Crimea) and clandestine (in Donbas) military presence (Renz 2016, p. 288). Relatively soon, regular Ukrainian forces were defeating Russian-aligned irregulars, who could only hold or regain their territory after a direct, obvious, and highly

conventional intervention by regular Russian forces. However, the latter soon faced a rejuvenated Ukrainian army—partly sustained by volunteers and private donations—that enjoyed the support of a reactivated industrial, logistical, and communications network. Despite many lingering problems, the hitherto almost ineffective military emerged from the situation capable of imposing prohibitive costs on further Russian advances (Lelich 2016). A 'gradual escalation of the conflict' gave time to surge as a relatively effective force, and ironically, a number of logistics and training procedures have already been harmonized with NATO standards, partly with NATO support (IISS 2017, p. 196). NATO membership was also proclaimed as a goal of the Ukrainian government soon after the invasion, though the prospects are still very limited (BBC 2014).

Overall, while the disparities are still huge, the correlation of Russian and Ukrainian forces has clearly shifted somewhat in disfavour of the former due to the armed incursion. For this, Russia has gained tenuous control over territory of dubious economic and strategic value (Freedman 2014, p. 28f) and has provoked adverse reactions from other powers: In the wider regional context, the conflict in Ukraine has been used to legitimize the renewal of armed forces from Norway to Romania. Finland and Sweden, despite their status as neutrals, have both strengthened links to NATO and increased exercise activity in areas close to Russian borders (Åtland 2016). Seventeen NATO countries are now deploying four rotating battlegroups of the size of reinforced battalions, which include heavy armour and artillery, to the Baltic states and Poland (Tigner 2017). Obviously, these forces would not be sufficient to defend the Baltics from a full-scale conventional invasion, even though they might make a decisive difference in hybrid scenarios similar to the beginning of the Ukraine war. But more importantly, according to the principles of structural realism, the deployment of even relatively small ground forces signals a significant degree of commitment to collective defence (Mearsheimer 2010, p. 388). This material commitment did not exist before the war in Ukraine and is a direct result of Russian actions in Ukraine. The implication is that the latter, in military terms of power, had an effect contrary to the assessments of the realist analyses cited above—even though this effect might well be judged small, irrelevant, or indeterminate.

A nearly identical diagnosis can be made regarding the question of the coherence of the bloc opposed to Russia. Whereas there are indeed significant differences between European NATO countries regarding reactions to events in their eastern periphery, at least the central European actors are significantly more united in their policies regarding Ukraine than on many other issues. Some authors assert that while fissures in the EU driven by the financial crisis of the Eurozone and by populist movements—some of them supported more or less obviously by Russia—are indeed increasing, this process was actually slowed down or reversed by the perceived necessity to cooperate in facing down a new threat (Baev 2015, p. 95f). In Germany, with its traditionally 'pro-Russian' and NATO-sceptic public opinion as well as significant elite support for cooperation with Russia, there is now a consensus across most party lines that relations will be mostly conflictual in the foreseeable future (Adomeit 2015). An evaluation of several studies comes to the conclusion that 'intra-EU trust' has been increased by Russian actions (Karolewski and Cross 2017, p. 145). Regarding the effect of (mostly) fringe parties and their direct

or indirect support through financial aid and clandestine measures in various countries, two additional problems must be stated. First, their results in terms of policy orientation are not quite clear. The surge in anti-liberal movements has been fuelled mostly by resentments specific to the countries where they operate, it is unclear whether and how Russian support actually strengthened them (Oliker 2017, p. 17). In some cases, such as in Germany (Adomeit 2015) and more recently in the USA (Bremmer 2017), the association between Russia and political fringe groups may even have caused significant efforts to contain both due to resentment against either the former or the latter. Second, it is impossible to even represent such efforts within the structural realist ontology that 'tends to treat states like black boxes or billiard balls' (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 10).

Regarding more long-term, 'latent power' issues—in offensive realism, generally calculated in terms of GDP or defence-relevant industrial capacity, and considered indispensable for achieving regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 44)—the effect of the war in Ukraine might also turn out detrimental to the Russian position in the balance of power. Of course, the general economic problems besetting the Russian economy can be explained with the long-term drop in commodity prices. Yet, Western sanctions might have long-term effects that go beyond the direct prevention of trade or investment. One recent study finds that particularly technology-intensive companies appear to be harmed disproportionately and that sanctions measures might be leading to a successive accumulation of inefficiencies, in many cases propelled by autarkist state interventions that could lead to 'a reconstruction of the Cold War economy in modern Russia' (Golikova and Kuznetsov 2017, p. 60), quite obviously a long-term risk of decline for a state with a 'GDP close to that of Italy' (Freedman 2014, p. 14). Yet, the cure might be worse than the poison in this case: A tentative Russian realignment with China, visible in terms of energy infrastructure construction and in the export of hitherto closely guarded military technology from the former to the latter, has demonstrated 'Beijing's growing pre-eminence over Moscow' (Kaczmarski 2016, p. 427). While China has gained important technological and resource benefits from those deals, it has in no way committed to supporting Russia in its disagreements with Ukraine or NATO (Charap et al. 2017). Again, the consequence of intervention in Ukraine is a relative loss of power.

And if a longer-term view with regard to the latent power effects of the conflict were taken, the result would probably be identical: Eurasian regional integration, which appeared to be on the verge of success before the regime change in Kiev, and might have allowed some kind of resurgence of Russian manufacturing industry with the resulting reduction in dependence on Western energy markets (Krickovic 2014), is now stagnant. The resulting leverage that countries such as Belarus or Kazakhstan now have in commercial terms as well as their increasingly independent political stance vis-à-vis Russia is hard to reconcile with an improved power position of the latter (Vieira 2016). Yet despite all these relatively small-scale developments, within the overall, global balance of power, relatively little has changed as a result of the war in Ukraine, at least according to the economic and strategic-level military assessments preferred by structural realists. Russia is still modernizing its strategic nuclear forces, and those developments will apparently be matched or outmatched by the USA and other powers (Kristensen and Norris 2017). Russian

defence spending is higher than in 2014, but has just seen massive reductions due to the inadequacy of the economy to support the efforts required to fully modernize a military that is still mostly based on platforms developed in the Soviet Union (Caffrey 2017). The situation seems to be at an impasse. The weaponization of refugee flows in the context of Russian intervention in Syria might have created virtual leverage over receiving countries (Heisbourg 2015, p. 15), yet, it has not provided a way out of the stalemate in Ukraine, nor can it be described in the realist black-box model. It might also, analogous to the situation resulting from Russian information warfare, generate willingness in the West to cooperate against an adversary apparently ready to go to extremes to achieve dubious benefits.

Further problems within the offensive realist narrative must be mentioned. After all, structural realists consider it imperative for actual regional hegemons such as the USA 'to prevent great powers in other regions from duplicating their feat' (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 41). If exerting influence over Ukrainian foreign policy is as important for Russia's great power status as suggested by Mearsheimer (2014), would it not be rational for the USA to attempt to counteract such influence? The problem is that the notion of regional hegemony is itself a fuzzy construct without a conceptual anchor in political geography. How exactly can it be that 'before 2008'—when the Baltic states already had joined NATO—there was 'an excellent situation with regard to European security' (Mearsheimer 2016, p. 31), if NATO expansion close to Russian borders were the problem per se? Critics have also questioned the logic according to which great powers would contest the regional hegemony of other great powers at all—when supposedly, their own security is already assured by the 'stopping power of water' (Layne 2002, p. 126). In general, the political advice given by Mearsheimer to the USA appears to follow a different logic than the interests accorded to Russia. Rather than offensive realism being simply wrong about the case, it seems that offensive realism is not what the case is about at all.

Realism and the challenge of differentiation theory

Offensive realism's—not failure, but rather, indeterminacy—with regard to an issue to which it seemed so well adapted in terms of the vocabulary used by the parties involved could be resolved in two ways. First, it seems appealing to append the parsimonious framework of offensive realism with additional constructivist assumptions in the fashion of neoclassical realism, which tend to transfer the problem to the question why or how the relevant constructions of reality suddenly lead to conflict. A variation of this strategy is to adapt 'synthetic' approaches to the situation—as does Götz (2016a), who seeks to integrate psychological, second-image, 'ideational', and 'geopolitical' accounts to provide a comprehensive understanding of Russian actions in its 'near abroad' (p. 228). While such a method may be considered, a more elegant approach might lie instead in questioning the mostly traditionalized, implicit assumptions on the structural differentiation of global politics carried along in the realist tradition, making use of the recent introduction of more elaborated concepts derived from world society theory. The question, then, is not whether 'realism has been poorly applied to the Ukraine case' (D'Anieri 2016, p. 501), as one critic

asserts, but rather whether its division of the world into identical, segmented units is an adequate ontology for capturing the dynamics observable in this conflict. Not treating states as like units might be a first step towards a more adequate theoretical treatment of the conflict. After all, doing away with this 'pernicious postulate', based on 'a mistaken reading of nineteenth-century social changes' (Tilly 1984, p. 11), has long ago been identified as an important epistemic barrier in social theory.

Yet, the answer found in neoclassical realism—a simple addition of some human agency in terms of the construction of international reality—mostly fails to convince, being as it is based on the already noted assertion that states behave in terms of great power politics because humans perceive the world in terms of great power politics. As demonstrated above, this narrative disappoints on at least one count, suggesting that an altogether more radical approach could be more productive. A possible alternative suggested here relies on the sociological systems theory established by Niklas Luhmann (2012), which in contrast to structural realist theory is not based on primordial classifications of territorial spaces as actors. Rather, society as the encompassing social system consists of the processing of meaning within flows of communication. Humans as biological or psychological entities are not considered elements of society—even though they represent its relevant and necessary environment, which is why sometimes the self-description of society as a geographically delimited aggregation of human beings may function as a useful semantic (Luhmann 1995, pp. 210–214). This would be the case as well in traditional conceptualizations of the role of states as actors in traditional IR approaches. Another difference from the latter is that Luhmann's theory understands contemporary society as a world society, containing any and all communications that can potentially connect to each other. Society is not a priori separated into territorial blocs such as nations or regions (Luhmann 2012, pp. 83–84). Rather, the primary structure of society depends on its dominant form of differentiation—the latter being defined as the principle conditioning mutual connectivity of communications. Whereas small-scale interactions can establish rules of limited temporal and topical range based on ad hoc consensus, or organizations might synchronize communication at significantly higher degrees of complexity, modern society as a whole must be described as based on a much more general level of rules for potential connectivity (Luhmann 1995, pp. 154–155).

The main principle structuring this world society is considered to be its differentiation into function systems. These produce and re-produce themselves by generating boundaries of meaning based on system-specific binary codes—powerful/powerless in the political system, payment/non-payment in the economic system, or immanent/transcendent in the system of religion (Luhmann 2013, p. 53), among others—which allow communications to connect to other, similarly coded communications in a self-referential, iterative process (Luhmann 2012, p. 297). Modern world society distinguishes itself from historically earlier social forms by differentiating itself internally in terms of referent problems, and not in terms of stratification (as in nobility-based social orders), of centre and periphery (as in ancient city states and empires), or of segmentary units (as in tribal societies, nationalist semantics, or structural realist theory) for processing its internal complexity (Luhmann 1998, p. 4). These historically older forms of differentiation may remain as secondary

structures, but are always generated in relation to the distinctions established in function systems. In contemporary world society, we accordingly encounter system-specific concepts such as that of the sovereign state as a semantic for the operational closure of the political system, of the market for the economic system, of academic freedom for the system of science, of positive law for the legal system, of abstraction or at least of self-referential art for the system of art (Luhmann 2000, p. 149), and so on. Diverging from more traditional assumptions about societal structures found in IR theory, differentiation theory does not accord any sort of ontological status to states—these constitute a form of segmentary differentiation within the global political system—nor to inequalities in terms of different positions on global capitalist chains of production (as in world systems or dependency theory)—which would constitute a semantic describing centre–periphery differentiation within the global economic system.

Rather than attempting a grand theory comparison between structural realism and world society theory—the relation between the two theories has already been treated with great sophistication by Albert (2016)—these final considerations are exclusively meant to suggest a more elegant solution to the problem offensive realism faces when confronted with the empirical complexity of real-world conflict phenomena (cf. Pashakhanlou 2013, 2014). They are based on the diagnosis that the evolution of the Russian political system—both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union—charted a course somewhat different from the standard model of Western modernity underlying world society theory. Rather than maintaining the autonomy of a functionally differentiated legal system in order to restrict political and economic communications to their respective spheres, a form of hybrid structure evolved, in which organizational structures—first described as *oligarchs* connected to the former Communist Party, later as *siloviki* stemming from the security and intelligence services—distributed opportunities for profit and social inclusion according to specific group preferences (Hedlund 2008). Without legal structures to create expectations of stable property rights, manufacturing or knowledge-intensive industries had little chance to take off.

The political system of Russia thus became driven by a power-money nexus that, with the energy commodities boom of the 2000s, did appear as a successful, resurging great power—to use realist terminology. Yet, in negotiating its position within the world political system, it became increasingly dependent on using differential energy prices or access to energy sector profits to reward or punish behaviour by both domestic and foreign groups and organizations (Abdelal 2013, p. 430). The consequence was ‘economic securitisation’ (Connolly 2016, p. 769), that is, the distribution of economic benefits according to the stabilization of political structures. The strict domestic/international binary of traditional IR theories is much less relevant here than the appropriation of commercial flows by security elites, that is to say, a specific form of structural interaction between two function systems.

As a result of this evolution, when the raw materials boom ended and economic growth stalled—already before the Euromaidan—the Russian political system was beginning to lose its central mechanism for the peaceful maintenance of established social structures. The potential of various power centres to erupt in zero-sum conflict over the distribution of rents had been noted before (Bremmer and Charap

2007). Yet, with little to no expectations of a return to the benevolent dynamics of the previous decade, intra-elite competition, sometimes violent, began to surge. Into this situation, Euromaidan erupted. In structural terms, conflict may serve the purpose of maintaining the identity-driven cohesion of elites that were on the verge of turning against each other through 'lock-in effects', reinforcing mutual bonds while cutting off options for the mere formulation of alternative courses of action (Stetter 2014, p. 64). One might also expect that it changed their risk calculus, especially due to the personalized sanctions regime driven by the USA and the EU. Ideological aspects of the conflict—expressed as a struggle between Russia as a traditional nation state and supposedly decadent Western liberalism—are also useful for 'fixing social identities', making the legitimacy of any political utterance contingent on their basic compatibility with positions dictated by the government in order to avoid the appearance of foreignness (Morozov 2015, pp. 147–149).

In semantic terms, the twin character of a conflict with NATO and with Ukraine created the opportunity to legitimize economic underperformance through two identity-building enemies made plausible by reference to experiences from previous conflicts. The requisite for state legitimacy shifted from economic stability or social equity towards a defence against a successfully constructed external threat. Structurally, the conflict may enable state elites to locally disable the logic of functional differentiation in order to prevent legal or economic alternatives to the political distribution of economic benefits from emerging (Hayoz 2016). The appearance of such alternatives in a country considered as culturally close must have registered within Russian politics as a much more serious threat than any fictitious balance of power effect associated with Ukraine's shift of allegiance. According to this account, the realist causal narrative, in which 'the aim in a war is to win' (Keen 2000, p. 1), would have to be revised drastically: War in such a situation would no longer be an exceptional means to an end, as rationalist theories of IR assume. Rather, 'the function of war may be that it offers a more promising environment for the pursuit of aims that are also prominent in peacetime' (ibid., p. 2)—in this case, to ensure the stability of the Russian regime. Theories of intrastate conflict had to undertake such a revision two decades ago in the context of the state failure debate. It appears that a similar revision might be necessary for interstate conflict, at least in the case studied here. The role of the realist semantics that can be observed in Russian political rhetoric could then be described as what one author calls 'romantic realism' (Morozov 2002, p. 426): Rather than discussing the logic of foreign policy, they provide a moralizing rationalization for repressive domestic structures, the necessity of which is derived from the supposedly realist functioning of global politics.

Russian rhetoric and behaviour, as examined above, conforms perfectly to such logic: The intervention in Ukraine predictably led to strong symbolic antagonisms as well as to actual structural exclusions of Russian elites from the global financial systems. They were thus reduced to their role(s) within the aforementioned power-money nexus and devoid of any power alternatives. At the same time, the conflict was never escalated to the degree of actual strategic relevance that could be captured by the terminology of offensive realism. It was maintained in a fluid state that would allow tactical escalations and de-escalations, according to the stability needs of the Russian state. Armed force was used not in a revolutionary way, in order to overturn

the polarity of the international system, but in an essentially conservative fashion, to maintain some social relations peaceful by cutting off others through violence. While further empirical research into the relevant power structures and their relations to the conflict in Ukraine is obviously both necessary and difficult, a model relying on functional differentiation instead of interstate competition under anarchy seems to generate a more convincing narrative about the war in Ukraine than more traditional structural realist approaches.

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