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Nov 17 · 30 tweets · [kamilkazani/status/1593388247799021568](https://twitter.com/kamilkazani/status/1593388247799021568)

## The Poverty of Realism

This interview illustrates some key fallacies, shortcomings and outright intellectual dishonesty associated with Mearsheimer's realist approach. And since his authority is instrumental in legitimising the appeasement advocacy, I will discuss it in detail



### JOHN MEARSHEIMER ON PUTIN'S AMBITIONS AFTER NINE MONTHS OF WAR

*The realist political scientist explains why Russia's move to annex four Ukrainian provinces isn't imperialism.*



By Isaac Chotiner

November 17, 2022



Let's start with dishonesty. Mearsheimer denies that Putin hold any intention to conquer Ukraine before this war. He even quotes Putin's article of July 2021 as an evidence of Putin "recognising the Ukrainian sovereignty". This is a highly inaccurate representation of its content

**He has said that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. He said that before the war.**

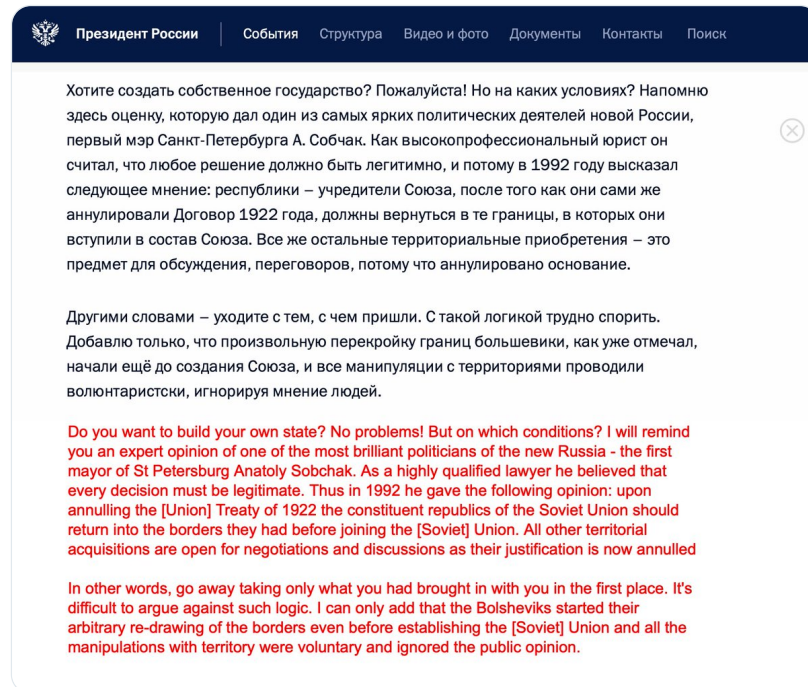
He said that in a [famous article](#) that he wrote on July 12, 2021. But in that same article, he made it very clear that he recognized Ukrainian nationalism, that he recognized that Ukraine was a sovereign state. There is no evidence in there that he was bent on conquering Ukraine and incorporating it into a greater Russia.

**Before he violated Ukrainian sovereignty, he respected Ukrainian sovereignty, because he said he did?**

I'm just telling you what he said in the July 12, 2021, article that he wrote, the famous article.

Let's open the original text of Putin's article <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

Putin argued that modern borders of Ukraine are illegitimate. They had more territory leaving the USSR in 1991 than they had joining it in 1922. Justice would require Ukraine to give it all away [to Russia]



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Хотите создать собственное государство? Пожалуйста! Но на каких условиях? Напомню здесь оценку, которую дал один из самых ярких политических деятелей новой России, первый мэр Санкт-Петербурга А. Собчак. Как высокопрофессиональный юрист он считал, что любое решение должно быть легитимно, и потому в 1992 году высказал следующее мнение: республики – учредители Союза, после того как они сами же аннулировали Договор 1922 года, должны вернуться в те границы, в которых они вступили в состав Союза. Все же остальные территориальные приобретения – это предмет для обсуждения, переговоров, потому что аннулировано основание.

Другими словами – уходите с тем, с чем пришли. С такой логикой трудно спорить. Добавлю только, что произвольную перекройку границ большевики, как уже отмечал, начали ещё до создания Союза, и все манипуляции с территориями проводили волюнтаристски, игнорируя мнение людей.

**Do you want to build your own state? No problems! But on which conditions? I will remind you an expert opinion of one of the most brilliant politicians of the new Russia - the first mayor of St Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak. As a highly qualified lawyer he believed that every decision must be legitimate. Thus in 1992 he gave the following opinion: upon annulling the [Union] Treaty of 1922 the constituent republics of the Soviet Union should return into the borders they had before joining the [Soviet] Union. All other territorial acquisitions are open for negotiations and discussions as their justification is now annulled**

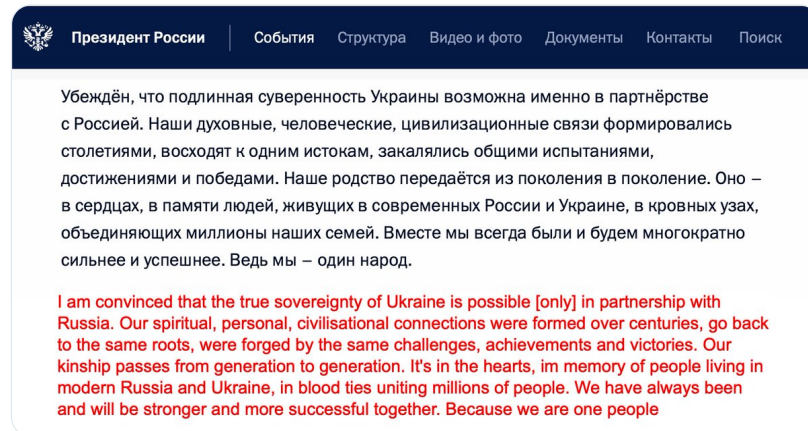
**In other words, go away taking only what you had brought in with you in the first place. It's difficult to argue against such logic. I can only add that the Bolsheviks started their arbitrary re-drawing of the borders even before establishing the [Soviet] Union and all the manipulations with territory were voluntary and ignored the public opinion.**

Already in July 2021 Putin portrayed Ukrainian borders as fundamentally unjust. Tolerating this "new geopolitical reality" is our concession. There's no "recognition of sovereignty" here, rather the opposite. Ukrainian border is illegitimate, we just had been merciful to them

So here is the first Mearsheimer's shortcoming - he misrepresented the content of a key source he was referring to. Putin didn't "recognise that Ukraine was a sovereign state" as Mearsheimer claims. To the contrary, he questioned the legitimacy of its national borders

Ok, but what does Putin write about Ukrainian sovereignty in this article?

1. Ukraine is not sovereign now (explicitly)
2. It can be sovereign only in partnership with Russia (explicitly)
3. It's apparently up to Russia to decide whether Ukraine is sovereign or not (implicitly)



That's a very important point. It brings us to another problem - the meaning of words. As we can see here, Putin's understanding of Ukrainian sovereignty (=partnership with Russia) is opposite to what we conventionally understand by sovereignty (=choosing your own road)

If Putin talks about "Ukrainian sovereignty", you can't conclude "Oh yes, he respects Ukrainian sovereignty very much". Nope. What Putin understands by "Ukrainian sovereignty" has nothing in common with what most people would understand by it. It's rather the opposite

"Putin talks about Ukrainian sovereignty -> He recognises it!" - It's not an analysis. It's not a research. It's a neuron activation. Research would require an analysis of what exactly Putin understands by "Ukrainian sovereignty". Because he may mean a different thing. As he does

This brings us to a second major shortcoming of Mearsheimer: the lack of basic empathy. And I don't mean the emotional empathy with Ukrainians, God forbid. I mean the cognitive empathy with Putin. You must empathise with Putin to get what he's doing and why

Mearsheimer refuses to analyse what we know of Putin's worldview. Look how he casually dismisses Putin comparing himself with Peter I. Meanwhile, this is the key to understanding Putin's motivation. He doesn't see himself as a conqueror. Not at all. He thinks he is a REconqueror

**Do you think there's a reason Putin himself has been talking about this in terms of imperial ambitions? He talked about Peter the Great. "What was [Peter] doing?" Putin asked. "Taking back and reinforcing. That's what he did." He then said, "And it looks like it fell on us to take back and reinforce as well," in terms of returning land to Russia. How do you view those comments?**

He did not make any comments of those sorts before February 24th. And the only such comment he has made since February 24th is the Peter the Great comment. I don't think that's indicative that he is interested in conquering all of Ukraine and making it part of the greater Russia. He has never said that. What he's interested in doing is conquering those four oblasts in the eastern part of Ukraine. And he was not interested in conquering those four oblasts before the war started. It was only after the war started.

**We know that?**

Yes.

**Oh, O.K.**

Why did Putin even bring up Peter I? Well, to make a parallel between what Peter I did back then and what Putin is doing now. In Putin's interpretation Peter I didn't conquer anything. He just returned back what had once rightfully belong to Russia. Just like Putin is doing now

Putin in July 2021: "Ukrainian border is illegitimate"

Putin in June 2022: "I'm returning to Russia what had once belonged to it. Just like Peter I"

Mearsheimer ignores the first statement and dismisses the second. Considered together they break his entire line of argumentation



Contrary to what Mearsheimer claims, there was no sudden U-turn in Putin's mindset or actions in 2022. To the contrary, we see a very consistent policy based on his deep conviction that Ukrainian borders are unjust. If they are unjust, they need to be renegotiated. Simple as that

There's nothing unexpected about Putin wanting to renegotiate the Ukrainian border. Remember him quoting his old boss Sobchak? That is Sobchak's interview of 1992. We see exactly the same argumentation as Putin is using now

Ergo, it's not about Putin. It's collective mindset



It's not about Putin, it's about collective mindset. Russian politicians have been talking about Crimea for decades. Consider a mayor of Moscow Luzhkov. He started talking about Crimea being rightfully Russian back in in 1990s. In 2008 Ukraine prohibited him entering the country

## Лужкова заподозрили в попытке аннексии

Украинские власти восприняли заявления столичного мэра как попытку превратить Крым "в украинский аналог Абхазии и Южной Осетии"



Фото: ИТАР-ТАСС

Москва. 12 мая. INTERFAX.RU - Юрий Лужков добился своего. Служба безопасности Украины объявила его персоной нон-грата и на неопределенный срок запретила въезд на территорию страны. Необходимо отметить, что риторика заявлений столичного градоначальника в отношении Крыма и Севастополя не менялась, начиная с середины 90-х годов. Нынешняя реакция украинской стороны свидетельствует об очередном кризисе в отношениях двух государств: Ющенко говорит, что националисты УНА-УНСО - герои, Лужков требует вернуть Севастополь России.

Invasion of Ukraine is not some random, capricious move of Putin. Plenty of politicians had been talking of what Putin did for decades. They had been using the same arguments which Putin would use later. Ignoring this fact reflects total disinterest in Russian public imagination

I would even argue that the incredible contempt towards the public imagination of non-Western countries is a major (or perhaps \*the\* major) factor that hampers prognosing the actions of Russia, China, etc. They make their moves based on their imagination. Which you largely ignore

And the final Mearsheimer's shortcoming may be the most impressive of all. He claims that Putin did not intend to conquer Ukraine, because he sent too few troops to proceed with the conquest. Ergo, he must have wanted something else

**I just meant that if he's saying that he respects Ukrainian sovereignty and then he invades Ukraine, it makes me wonder if we should believe him when he says he respects its sovereignty. I don't know.**

I have another point to make that's really important. What we've been talking about are Russian intentions, and in particular, Putin's intentions. What did he intend to do? We also have to look at capabilities. The Russians did not have the military capability to conquer all of Ukraine. At most, a hundred and ninety thousand Russian troops went into Ukraine. There is no way a hundred and ninety thousand Russian troops could come close to conquering and occupying all of Ukraine.

That's literally the worst mistake of retrospective thinking one could have made. We now know that upon invading Ukraine Putin engaged into a bloody and protracted war. That's what we know now. But we could not have possibly known that before. We could only hypothesise

Putin couldn't have known for sure how his invasion would turn out. He could only hypothesise based on the information he got. And we have the evidence that the information he got had been misleading. Or at least he believes it had been misleading

On February 24 Putin invaded Ukraine. On March 11 he purged the 5th department of FSB: the foreign intelligence branch of the Russian state security. Dozens of officers were arrested, including the generals. Why? Most probably, they misinformed him about the situation in Ukraine

It was the 5th Department of FSB that monitored political situation in Ukraine and informed Putin. Two weeks after the invasion started, they were purged. It is highly likely that Putin found information they had provided him with to be false. Hence, punishments

Most probably, 5th Department just told Putin what he wanted to hear. Much (most?) of Ukraine hates the regime and Kyiv and secretly adores the Tsar in Moscow. Basing on this information, Putin decided to invade. That is why he didn't make proper war preparations

If most of Ukraine is actually Russian and waiting for Russian liberators, there will be no war. They just gonna drop their weapons or switch to our side. That what Putin probably expected and that is why he sent so few soldiers. He expected there would be very few resistants

This would explain why Russian army of invasion was relatively small. They just did not prepare for war. This would also explain purges against the 5th Department - they misinformed Putin and became the scapegoats for the failed invasion. Putin didn't and couldn't know the future

That is why Mearsheimer's logic (Putin sent few soldiers -> He didn't plan for conquest!) is technically correct and still false. Yes, he didn't plan a conquest. Conquest implies resistance and Putin expected no resistance. He can't see the future after all

Mearsheimer's fallacy is quite impressive but honestly very typical. We tend to underestimate how much the present differs from the past. In February most believed Russia would crush Ukraine in no time. That was considered as an almost self-obvious truth. Now we forgot about it

Nowadays we know that Russia didn't crush Ukraine. We know that Ukraine fought back and did it highly effectively. And we extrapolate current knowledge to the past. We know it now - > We've always known that. But that's not true. We did not

We underestimate how quickly and how drastically our mental models and systems of assumptions change over time. That is a major obstacle hampering our ability both to reconstruct the past and to prognoses the future. The end of 🍷

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