

# The greatest source of misinformation on Ukraine

Wednesday 29 June 2022, by [HORESH Theo](#) (Date first published: 21 March 2022).

**The greatest source of misinformation making its rounds on Ukraine this time around may not be manufactured in Russia but rather the University of Chicago. In a 2015 video that has been viewed on YouTube over 22 million times, professor of international relations John Mearsheimer falsely identifies the removal of Ukraine's president in 2014 as a coup, misleadingly portrays Russia's annexation of the Crimea as the fruit of a legitimate vote, and inaccurately states that Georgia was slated to become a member of Nato before it was invaded in 2008.**

The video is also a hodgepodge of failed predictions. He states that there will be no "new Cold War" and claims "Nato is in serious trouble and will disappear as a functioning alliance over China." He dismisses the idea that Putin is bent on "creating a greater Russia," conveniently overlooking his annexation of territories from two separate states and his devastation of Syria. And he assures his audience that there is no way Putin is going to carry out a full scale invasion of Ukraine.

So, why is such a misleading video, chock full of so many failed predictions, being treated as so authoritative, and why has Mearsheimer gotten so much wrong?

The multiple failed predictions shine a light on his disinterest in the state outside its position on a geopolitical chess board. Mearsheimer is an international relations theorist more focused on fitting reality into his own prefabricated boxes than studying events on the ground. And as if to highlight the point, he does not once mention what might be best for Ukrainians. Consider his misleading portrayal of the ethnolinguist divide in Ukraine.

Mearsheimer portrays the conflict between Russia and Ukraine that broke out in 2014 as a civil war based on an ethnolinguistic divide between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. Yet, somehow, Ukraine's fiercely anti-Russian president is a Russian speaker, and there are no major groups of Ukrainians in even the most predominately Russian enclaves welcoming the recent invasion. That's because there is neither an equation in Ukraine between speaking Russian and being Russian, nor being Russian and wanting to unite with Russia.

The identities are actually in flux and have changed dramatically since 2004, when the maps for the video were made. The country was almost equally divided between people who identified themselves as Russian in 2004, but the identities were never definitive and the Russian identity has declined dramatically in recent years. According to a recent Morning Consult poll, a mere 9 percent of Ukrainian citizens identify themselves as Russian today. Even among Russian speakers, 42 percent identify with "Western interests" while only 18 percent identify with "Russian interests."

Mearsheimer is clear that the West is mostly responsible for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, because the West has sought to peel Ukraine away from the "Russian sphere of influence." According to Mearsheimer, the West has sought to do this through EU and Nato expansion, and by promoting

democracy in Ukraine. But he neglects to mention that while Ukrainians have sought Nato membership since the end of the Cold War, there has been little stomach for it in Nato, precisely out of a respect for the “Russian sphere of influence.”

If Ukraine’s membership were so important to Nato, they might have been expected to invite Ukraine to join when they possessed over four thousand nuclear warheads and were clamoring to be admitted in the early nineties. They might have been expected to invite Ukraine to join after they held mass peaceful protests calling for democracy and an end to corruption in the 2004 Orange Revolution. They might have been expected to invite Ukraine after citizens overwhelmingly voted in pro-Europe candidates in a series of elections following the Euro Mайдan Protests in 2014. And they might have been expected to start the admissions process when Ukrainians overwhelmingly voted for a president who made joining Nato a central plank in his campaign in 2019.

Mearsheimer neglects to mention that Ukraine was not slated to join Nato when Putin invaded it in 2014, and there was no serious talk of it when he invaded in 2022. In fact, Putin made sure that Ukraine could not enter Nato by maintaining an ongoing war in the Donbass, for no states with ongoing border disputes can join Nato. Mearsheimer definitively negates the argument that Putin recently invaded Ukraine because of Nato expansion in stating that he has “talked to countless policy makers about it” and “Nato expansion is dead.”

But if Mearsheimer was positive that Nato expansion was dead in 2015, why are people sharing his videos as proof that Nato is to blame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022?

Mearsheimer blames Nato for welcoming Georgia into its alliance on April 3, 2008, claiming that it got “uppity,” and that this justified Russia’s invasion of it. However, Georgia and Ukraine were not invited to the conference. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel and several other heads of state vetoed their membership request at the meeting, noting Mearsheimer’s own argument that it encroached on the “Russian sphere of influence.” Thus, when Russia invaded Georgia later in 2008, and peeled away its province of South Ossetia, they were invading a country that had actually just been rejected from Nato.

Mearsheimer’s disingenuousness is on full display when he digs into the details.

He gives a day by day account of what happened in the so-called Euromaidan “coup” of 2014. Yet, in a striking act of intellectual dishonesty, he conveniently leaves out the date in which a quorum of every voting member of every major political party in parliament voted to remove Yanukovich from the presidency. He says “there is killing on the Maidan,” and he lists the number of people killed, while emphasizing the “fascist elements” engaged in violence. But he fails to mention that the police started the killing, killed dozens before protesters started fighting back, and killed roughly eight protesters for every officer downed.

He gives a day by day recounting of Russia’s annexation of the Crimea, mentioning that Crimea’s parliament voted to join Russia. Yet, he neglects to mention they literally did so at gunpoint, with Russian troops surrounding the voting chamber. He mentions that Crimeans voted to join Russia in a referendum but neglects to mention that surveys prior to the vote suggested only 20 to 40 percent supported joining Russia while an absurd 97 percent purportedly voted for it in the referendum. Of course, the referendum was fraudulent. It occurred ten days after the invasion, was overseen by a pro-Russian extremist party, involved no international observers, and took place amid numerous disappearances of politicians and activists.

Mearsheimer has a more general point to make about the expansion of Nato stoking Russian fears. Yet, as we have seen, the wider argument is rooted in a series of misleading claims. Meanwhile, he

overlooks his own role in influencing policy makers. For decades, he has argued that Russia will strike back if Nato expands into its “sphere of influence.” And ever since the Berlin Wall fell, western heads of state have heeded the warning, delaying and rejecting the pleas of Eastern European states to be let into the organization.

And at the end of the day, he turned out to be wrong. It was the states that Nato admitted which remained safe and only those that remained on the outside, when they were not being seriously considered for membership, that were invaded. In this way, Mearsheimer helped invite Russian imperialism by seeking to placate it. And he completely misjudged Putin, who not only invaded the whole of Ukraine, but did so when it was not slated for Nato membership. Meanwhile, he did so when Nato was not expanding but rather at its weakest, following the controversial withdrawal from Afganistan.

But that doesn't disturb the desperate ideologues distributing his videos in an effort to bring a big gun into their campaign to blame Nato—even as Putin bombs nuclear power plants, obliterates retirement homes, and ships thousands of Ukrainians to undisclosed locations in the heart of Russia.

---

## **Theo Horesh**

[Click here](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

---

## **P.S.**

Theo Horesh

<https://www.facebook.com/636661241/posts/pfbid027GK4DTUxHrh3KrUbBs5ztyjPaNJuB9twKATkimqhHKHkOp8KUdhqpfhj4x5x2Kcal/?sfnsn=mo>