



The American Pundits Who Can't Resist “Westsplaining” Ukraine

John Mearsheimer and other foreign policy figures are treating Russia's invasion of Ukraine like a game of Risk.

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War is hell for anyone in it. And it's a predictable but regrettable call to arms for people with opinions who aren't. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, as the fighting on the ground has escalated, so has the volley of opinions about the war. And for Eastern European scholars like us, it's galling to watch the unending stream of Western scholars and pundits condescend to explain the situation in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, often in ways that either ignore voices from the region, treating it as an object rather than a subject of history, or claiming to perfectly understand Russian logic and motives. Eastern European online circles have started using a new term to describe this phenomenon of people from the Anglosphere loudly foisting their analytical schema and political prescriptions onto the region: *westsplaining*. And the problem with westsplaining is illustrated particularly well when pundits westsplain the role of the eastward expansion of NATO in triggering Russia's attack.

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Eastern Europe is maddeningly complex. It doesn't even have a clear definition: Spanning from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania down (depending on whom you ask) through Poland, Belarus, Slovakia, Czechia, and Hungary, then east to encompass Moldova, and south to Romania and Bulgaria, and perhaps taking in other countries, the region has little to give it cohesion. It's not unified culturally, religiously, linguistically, racially, politically, or even geographically (Greece and Finland are further east but never get included in the category, Georgia is discontinuous from the others and yet is often counted, and Ukraine's conceptual membership and very existence are at stake in the current conflict).

If anything unites the region, it is its historically unfortunate location as the plaything of empires, its borders and definitions made and remade over the centuries, most recently through its emergence from the collapse of the USSR. The defining geopolitical feature of the region is that it is defined from the outside. As the Polish linguist Piotr Twardzisz puts it, “There is relatively

little of Eastern Europe in Eastern Europe itself. There is more of it in Western Europe, or in the West, generally.”

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In the past week, westsplainers on American televisions and in American opinion pages have suggested that NATO, by allowing in Eastern European countries as members, has driven Putin to lash out like a cornered animal. The story goes more or less like this: After the breakup of the Soviet Union, NATO promised Russia it would not expand. But in 1997 it nonetheless expanded. In 2007, ignoring Russian complaints, it opened the way for expansion into Georgia and Ukraine. Russia was forced to react, hence its invasion and occupation of Georgia that year. Later, when the U.S.-sponsored protests deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich for abandoning the country’s pro-Western course, Putin again reacted, this time invading and occupying Donbass and Crimea in 2014. And now he is trying to take over Ukraine to head off American influence in the region.

This story isn’t surprising, coming from so-called realist international relations scholars intellectually forged during the Cold War. The University of Chicago’s John Mearsheimer, for instance, recently claimed in *The New Yorker* that NATO’s expansion was perceived as a security threat, eliciting a lethal response. To Mearsheimer’s credit, he admits that great powers are predators ensuring that their smaller neighbors are not free to pursue policies of their own choice. But on this reading, it is NATO’s fault, driven primarily by America’s interest in expanding its sphere of influence, that Russia has lashed out, seeking to protect its own sphere of influence. This isn’t a novel view: It’s the position Putin himself laid out in a speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007.

The prescriptive implications of this position are clear: NATO should cease its efforts to woo countries like Ukraine, and countries like Ukraine should give up any aspirations of becoming members of NATO or potentially the European Union if they want to survive as states. In other words, Eastern European countries should recognize their status as second-class citizens in the community of states and accept their geopolitical role as neutral buffers at the edges of the vestiges of the American and Russian empires.

In recent weeks, this argument has caught on across the political spectrum. It has made bedfellows of Ted Galen Carpenter of the libertarian Cato Institute and the seminal German leftist intellectual Wolfgang Streeck, who wrote that “the war over Ukraine” exploded out of the “uncompromising brinkmanship on the part of both the U.S. and Russia.” (War *over* Ukraine? Given that the only combatants on the ground are Russian invaders and Ukrainian defenders, the implication that this is a battle between the U.S. and Russia over influence is ridiculous.) It has united the economist Jeffrey Sachs, apparently cured of his intoxication with neoliberalism but not from telling Eastern Europeans what to do, and Greek anti-neoliberal politician Yannis Varoufakis. Fox News’s Tucker Carlson and progressive economist Mariana Mazzucatto both likened the situation to China convincing Mexico to join an anti-American security alliance. *The Guardian*’s populist columnist Owen Jones suggested that the war could have been avoided had there “been an attempt to craft a neutral buffer zone after the Cold War.” (The tweet in question

has since been deleted, and Jones apologized for ignoring the rights of the people living in said zone and “sounding like an imperialist playing Risk with the people of Europe.”) The implication is also there in a tone-deaf statement released by the Democratic Socialists of America that called for an end to the war but blamed “imperialist expansionism” for leading to it.

Leftists in particular may think, when criticizing NATO expansion, that they are correcting their own or fellow citizens’ biases as citizens of an imperial power that has often acted in bad faith. They may think they are adequately acknowledging this fraught legacy by focusing their critique on what they perceive to be Western expansionism. But they in fact perpetuate imperial wrongs when they continue to deny non-Western countries and their citizens agency in geopolitics. Paradoxically, the problem with American exceptionalism is that even those who challenge its foundational tenets and heap scorn on American militarism often end up recreating American exceptionalism by centering the United States in their analyses of international relations. It is, in Gregory Afinogenov’s words, a “form of provincialism that sees only the United States and its allies as primary actors.” Speaking about Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans without listening to local voices or trying to understand the region’s complexity is a colonial projection. Here the issue of NATO is particularly telling.

There is, of course, plenty to criticize about NATO and American foreign policy, not least the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. As *The New Yorker*’s Masha Gessen points out, this has been used by Putin to justify his expansionism. But by focusing almost exclusively on the wrongs of NATO, critics ignore the broader question of Eastern European states’ right to self-determination, including the right to join military alliances. Westsplaining ignores Eastern European history and the perspective of the Eastern Europeans, and it selectively omits facts on the ground about NATO expansion.

As much as U.S. militarism and imperialism should be criticized, it has to be acknowledged that in Eastern Europe it is not the U.S. or NATO who have been an existential threat. In the twentieth century the formative experience for the countries of the region was direct and indirect Soviet control. States like Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Poland, although nominally independent, were not free to pursue their own policy—either domestic or foreign. Hungary and Czechoslovakia were invaded by the Soviet Union when they tried to steer off the Moscow-prescribed course. Poland’s Soviet-imposed authorities brutally repressed popular protests in 1956, twice in the 1970s, and in 1981. Ukraine didn’t even have the luxury of formal independence and for their opposition to forced collectivization, Ukrainians paid a dear price: Holodomor, the deliberately engineered famine, killed between three and 12 million people. Eastern European calls for NATO and EU membership stem from this historical experience of oppression. Any analysis that does not acknowledge it is doomed to be incomplete at best and false at worst.

This leads us to the second point: NATO did not *expand* into “Eastern Europe.” Czechia, Poland, and Hungary in 1999 and the Baltic countries among others in 2004 actively sought membership in the alliance. This is not just semantics. For the historical reasons mentioned above, the West has been a desired political direction associated with prosperity, democracy, and freedom—despite the limitations of Western liberal capitalist democracies and the implementation of that

model in Eastern Europe. Being at the receiving end of Russian imperialism, many Eastern Europeans looked forward to membership in NATO as a means of securing their sovereignty. NATO, in other words, would not have “expanded” into Eastern Europe if the Eastern European nations had not wanted it and actively pursued it.

As 2020 Pew Research Center data show, Eastern European members generally see NATO favorably. Fifty-three percent of Czechs have a positive opinion about NATO, as do 77 percent of Lithuanians. NATO’s most enthusiastic supporters are Poles, with 88 percent supporting the alliance. Fifty-three percent of Ukrainians view NATO favorably, compared to 23 who view it negatively. This support, one might argue, as do some Eastern European critics, is misguided, shortsighted, and westphilic. But it is also undeniable, and undeniably shaped precisely by the fear of what is currently happening in Ukraine.

This is crucial when it comes to understanding the current war. However tempting it might be to analyze it in terms of a proxy war between NATO and Russia, Ukraine is an active participant in this historical process. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine several times attempted to assert and defend its westward course, including in 2004 and in 2014, both times to great resistance on the part of the Kremlin. There is no point in denying that the West actively intervened in this. But so did Russia.

Some pundits might argue that while this history is tragic, it is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things: Whether imaginary or not, Russia has security concerns that the West should have taken seriously. Although the parsimony of this explanation might be tempting, logically it does not hold. Implicitly, it is based on a counterfactual scenario in which NATO is not enlarged and Russia does not attack Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022. It fails at the same time to consider a different counterfactual scenario: NATO enlargement does not happen, and Russia invades its neighbors nonetheless. We cannot know what would have happened.

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In the westsplaining framework, the concerns of Russia are recognized but those of Eastern Europe are not. This, again, mirrors the Russian line that “Ukraine’s current regime lacks any sovereignty,” which of course also operates within a framework inherited from the bipolar world of the Cold War. Eastern Europe is something that can be explained but isn’t worth engaging with.

If the westsplainers were to engage in intellectually honest critique of NATO and its expansion and therefore of the war in Ukraine, they would have to, by extension, critique Eastern European politicians and voters who have adopted (although in some cases, like Poland and Hungary, quite spottily) the Western ideals of democracy and national self-determination. They would have to acknowledge that their ideas for how to end the conflict—vague calls for diplomacy or even opposition to NATO, even as Ukrainians on the ground call for active support—may represent American preferences for avoiding conflict or opposing NATO rather than those of Ukrainians.

The result is that hard-nosed realists see the world not as it is but as it appears in their theories and, worse, that Western internationalism, which claims to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, does the opposite: It asks the subaltern to speak, only to ignore them when they ask for military support or self-determination.

Of course, there is no single Eastern European voice and we do not pretend to ventriloquize it. Nor do we offer our own prescriptions; better ones than we could offer have already been given by the Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Polish left. But any analysis of the current conflict needs to get past a framework that only gives voice and agency to the West and to Russia and start listening to Eastern Europeans, especially since it is Eastern Europe that will be dealing with the repercussions of the current war for years to come.