Introduction: Russia's War Against Ukraine

*Hilary Appel and Rachel A. Epstein**

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had catastrophic human consequences and destabilizing geopolitical effects. From Russia's 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine and illegal seizure of Crimea to the full-scale invasion of the country in 2022, policymakers and scholars alike have sought answers to critical questions about the origins of this conflict and how best to end it. Was Russian president Vladimir Putin driven to aggression because of NATO enlargement, as some scholars and politicians have claimed? Or is Putin pursuing an imperialist strategy to rebuild a Russian empire and erase the Ukrainian nation in the service of consolidating political support at home? Has Western aid to Ukraine effectively prevented escalation with Russia, or has it merely contributed to a deadly stalemate in which Ukrainian forces are prevented from ejecting the invaders? Is the West's strategy of pushing Ukraine to conform to the European Union's accession criteria, democratic governance, and corruption control while that country fights a war for its survival the right one? And what is the EU's own responsibility for reform to assist Ukraine in confronting its existential crisis?

As researchers grapple with these issues and try to inform the policy debate, the essays in this roundtable make an important intervention: Seemingly empirical

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questions about the origins of conflict, war termination, and democratic consolidation are rarely adjudicated on evidence alone. Values infuse research on such questions in important but often unacknowledged ways. And policymakers are much more likely to embrace research findings that affirm their preexisting political commitments than those that contradict them.[1]

The difficulty of separating empirical findings from underlying values raises an ethical dilemma for researchers: what responsibility do they have for examining and understanding their underlying political and normative commitments and the way those biases infuse their findings? The three essays in this roundtable underscore the point that comprehending and acknowledging one's values is critical to responsibly participating in and adjudicating policy debates.[2] This assertion will seem foreign to many researchers within the positivist tradition who were trained to strive for objectivity and who were taught that theorizing can and must be divorced from normative concerns.[3] By the same token, the contributors here note the importance of scholarship in bringing specificity and context into any analysis, irrespective of the normative implications. While the normative and positive (that is, scientific) might sometimes be separable, doing so is often much harder than theorists of international affairs have openly acknowledged.[4] The failure among scholars and policymakers to be explicit about the values that inform their conclusions—or to even understand what their biases are—has led to ethical lapses in the research-to-policy interface, including in the overgeneralization of findings, "prosocial" lying, and the distortion of evidence.[5]

There is an old but enduring debate in the social sciences about how the world is vs. how we want it to be. One distillation of this debate is from E. H. Carr, who famously argued that the world for which liberal idealists hope is radically different from the world as it actually exists.[6] He cautioned that balance of power, survival, and competition among states were necessary starting points for analysts of international affairs. And yet these assertions also raise a crucial question: What if, by *assuming* the immutability of states' drive for power maximization, we inadvertently perpetuate an inequitable status quo by advising national leaders that to do anything other than maximize power is patently foolish? In Ukraine's case, some international relations scholars and policymakers have gone so far as to argue that Russia was *justified* in attacking Ukraine to preserve its sphere of influence, blaming NATO enlargement for the war.[7] But that argument ignores the extent to which "Great Power" privilege within some theories embeds values, including the preservation of dangerous and violent hierarchies, that are starkly at odds

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with democratic sovereignty. Theories that embed assumptions about Great Power prerogatives are deeply neocolonial by nature. Structural realists in particular confuse "what is" with "what," they inadvertently argue, "ought to be."[8]

The contributions to this roundtable expose the problem of concealed political and normative commitments within research by unearthing biases intrinsic to particular conceptualizations and categorizations and by questioning the putative separation of "interests" from "values." They also draw attention to the ethical problems that scholars and policymakers bring to policy debates through the occlusion of their preexisting political commitments.[9] Sometimes this omission stems from the failure of researchers to even realize that they have political commitments. Biases are nevertheless revealed by researchers' theoretical and methodological choices, which they may have never critically evaluated. This collection of essays on Ukraine aims to rectify some of these blind spots, making explicit the ways in which values may, and in some cases must, be intrinsic to policy analysis.

Milada Anna Vachudova and Nadiia Koval argue in their contribution that the EU is stronger if it upholds its democratic values and recalls the liberal tenets that motivated its founding. This essay also reminds us of the core principle in international law that sovereign states cannot have their policies dictated by an outside power, and states maintain the right to ally with whom they choose. Vachudova and Koval argue that international politics theorizing about European integration has often uncritically assumed that interests were necessarily separate from or at odds with values. This led policymakers to pursue short-term interests that were distinct from values, such as the cultivation of energy dependence on Russia despite its authoritarianism and revanchist foreign policy. But EU members' ethical neglect in pursuing these strategies has come back to haunt their core interests, according to Vachudova and Koval, critically damaging the EU's internal cohesion and geopolitical power. The authors argue that values are an intrinsic part of EU interests, which, in turn, points to a logically consistent pathway for Ukrainian accession to the EU. From Vachudova and Koval's perspective, while Ukraine must undertake reform to qualify for EU membership, equally important is the EU's own needed reforms that put liberal-democratic values at the forefront of how it wields power in shaping integration inside the EU and in projecting power on the world stage.

Oxana Shevel's contribution examines the ethical ramifications of bias that can affect the scholarly analysis of sociopolitical realities and consequently academic teaching and policy recommendations. Focusing on the apparent distinction

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between civic and ethnic nationalism, Shevel cautions scholars against using a one-size-fits-all ethical designation of state policies that fails to consider the local context, and the consequences that a policy may produce given that context. Shevel observes that in nationalism studies, "civic" nationalism is believed to be democratically and therefore ethically preferable to "ethnic" nationalism. If civic nationalism represents shared loyalty to particular ideas in connection with sovereign control over a defined territory, then, according to this line of thinking, nationalism can be built around democratic ideals. Ethnic nationalism, by contrast, is characterized in much of the literature as being exclusionary and discriminatory, and therefore anti-democratic. But upon closer inspection of the post-Soviet sphere and present-day Ukraine, in particular, these overly simplistic and context-deflecting categories have little meaning or analytical power, Shevel contends. When the historical and contemporary context is taken into account, it becomes clear that the processes ongoing in Ukraine center on voluntary reidentification and are accompanied by a strengthened commitment to democracy. By contrast, today's Russia, like the USSR in the past, pursues an imperialist and anti-democratic agenda that it cloaks in the mantle of civic nationalism. And yet, much of the existing literature on nationalism threatens to misconstrue both the democratic sources and the effects of Ukrainian nationalism, to the possible detriment of Ukraine's war of liberation. Shevel's analysis raises questions more broadly about whether existing theories of nationalism obfuscate more than they clarify, by deductive generalization rather than ground-up investigation.

Finally, Charli Carpenter's essay is concerned with a different kind of bias. Rather than focusing on the ways in which researchers embed bias within their work, Carpenter considers the ethical dilemmas that human rights organizations face when a weaker country commits human rights violations in the context of defending itself from a more powerful armed aggressor. In this case, Carpenter calls attention to Ukraine's discriminatory ban on all Ukrainian men, ages 18–60, from leaving the country. The ban was arguably in violation of international human rights law, given that those restricted had not actually been conscripted. Carpenter acknowledges that Russia is the far worse transgressor here—not only in terms of launching the war but also in terms of the panoply of very serious human rights violations committed in its prosecution of the war. At the same time, Carpenter argues we do no one any favors by applying human rights standards and law selectively. Carpenter argues that human rights organizations should be prepared to put appropriate pressure on their allies as

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well as on their adversaries, lest human rights come to be viewed as a tool of convenience and human rights groups as political pawns. Holding Ukraine to the highest standards of accountability is one way of elevating the country's stature as a democratizing power, while also maintaining the integrity of the broader human rights advocacy enterprise.

We recognize that calling for deeper exploration of one's biases and values is not straightforward for many. Advanced training in social science research does not necessarily encourage ethical reflexivity since pretensions to applying science in certain methodologies rule out the possible existence of politics in research. Even in this collection of essays, contributors come to competing conclusions about the effects of unearthing values in research. Shevel finds that universal claims and rigid categorizations misconstrue the relationship between nationalism and democratization in some critical cases, including in Ukraine. Carpenter, on the other hand, argues that political loyalties risk undermining the consistency and authority of the human rights advocacy community and that we need well-defined standards that are applied regardless of context. This roundtable's objective is not to settle all controversies but rather to elicit broader conversations about how researchers engage in policy responsibly, given the inescapability of values in our inquiry.

These essays together call for greater intellectual honesty and heightened awareness of the implicit values that drive policy recommendations and academic analysis. They suggest we pay more attention to the values that inform our core assumptions and preferred policy responses. Vachudova and Koval remind us that for the European Union and the West, more broadly, upholding values is inseparable from pursuing geopolitical interests and cannot be divorced from how we theorize the benefits of Western military help for Ukraine and EU enlargement. This is equally true for both Ukraine *and* the EU. Shevel's essay, in a similar vein, shows how theories and policy recommendations are based on norm-driven assumptions about civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism, underplaying the possible democratic implications of ethnic nationalist movements in Ukraine today, much like the liberation movements driving the twentieth century's decolonization, which were often motivated not only by ethnonationalism but also by anti-colonial, liberalizing movements. Lastly, Carpenter's essay also demands analytical consistency and intellectual honesty when evaluating human rights violations, acknowledging the violations of rights by the weak and the strong, by victims and perpetrators, even when a scholar's or policymaker's

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normative commitments lead them to prefer to highlight only the crimes of perpetrators. While each essay examines a different dimension of the war in Ukraine, they all privilege ethics and values in their analysis, modeling a way for other scholars to do the same in their research and policy engagement.

Notes

[1] Rachel A. Epstein and Oliver Kaplan, "Responsible Policy Engagement: A New Imperative for Social Scientists," in Rachel A. Epstein and Oliver Kaplan, eds., *Speaking Science to Power: Responsible Researchers and Policymaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[2] Deborah Stone, "The 2017 James Madison Award Lecture: The Ethics of Counting," *Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 1 (January 2018), pp. 7–16.

[3] Milton Friedman, "The Methodology of Positive Economics," part 1 in *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 3–43.

[4] Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, "Why Race Matters in International Relations," *Foreign Policy*, no. 237 (Summer 2020), pp. 11–13; and Jasmine K. Gani and Jenna Marshall, "The Impact of Colonialism on Policy and Knowledge Production in International Relations," *International Affairs* 98, no. 1 (January 2022), pp. 5–22.

[5] See Epstein and Kaplan, "Responsible Policy Engagement"; George F. DeMartino, "Should Economists Deceive? Prosocial Lying, Paternalism, and the 'Ben Bernanke Problem,'" in Epstein and Kaplan, *Speaking Science to Power*; and Jason Lyall, "Pre-Register Your Ethical Redlines: Vulnerable Populations, Policy Engagement, and the Perils of E-Hacking," in Epstein and Kaplan, *Speaking Science to Power*.

[6] Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1945).

[7] John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 77–84, 85–89; and "The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War: A Lecture by John Mearsheimer," YouTube video, 2:07, from a lecture given by John Mearsheimer at the European University Institute, posted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, June 16, 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qciVozNtCDM. For a critique of those privileging great powers, see Rachel A. Epstein, "The Problem of Overgeneralization: The Effects of NATO Enlargement," in Epstein and Kaplan, *Speaking Science to Power*. For additional scholars and policymakers who share both perspectives, see *Foreign Affairs*, "Ask the Experts: Was NATO Enlargement a Mistake?" 19 April 2022, available at: www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2022-04-19/was-nato-enlargement-mistake.

[8] Jonathan Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[9] On the problems caused by "stealth issue advocates," see Roger A. Pielke, *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Abstract: Russia's war against Ukraine has had devastating human consequences and destabilizing geopolitical effects. This roundtable takes up three critical debates in connection with the conflict: Ukraine's potential accession to the European Union; the role of Ukrainian nationalism in advancing democratization; and the degree of human rights accountability, not just for Russia, but also for Ukraine. In addition to challenging conventional wisdom on each of these issues, the contributors to this roundtable make a second, critically important intervention. Each essay explores the problem of concealed political and normative commitments within much of the research on Russia's war against Ukraine by unearthing biases intrinsic to particular conceptualizations. The collection also questions the perceived separation between "interests" and "values" that permeates policy analysis. This roundtable further draws attention to the ethical problems that scholars and policymakers bring to policy debates through the occlusion of their preexisting political commitments. It argues for greater transparency around and awareness of the ways in which values, not just evidence, inform research findings and policy positions.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, war, European Union, nationalism, democratization, ethics, values, human rights, research

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