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REALISM SAID, “GOODBYE!” TO LIBERALISM: THE CASE OF RUSSIA’S INVASION OF UKRAINE

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Abstract: This study dwells on the challenge between realism and liberalism in the international relations (IR) field. Realism and liberalism have been in the fight since World War II (WWII) in IR studies. Realist scholars promote the idea that there is anarchy in the world order, whereas liberals support a hierarchic preset in international relations. Yet, since WWII, the world has witnessed several incidents that ashamed the liberal IR mindset. Conquests/invasions, annexations, and unilateral actions by powerful states pose that international law and mechanisms do not work for them when they would like to breach the liberal world order. There is still no World War III (WWIII) as liberal thought has found its supporting point for their own ideas; nevertheless, the holes created in the international law and organizations by the powerful states are essential evidence for the realist school. As in the latest case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, no such international law rule has been followed by the occupier. This was, to say that the farewell ceremony of liberalism by realism.

Keywords: realism, liberalism, Ukraine, Russia, international law

JEL: F51, K33

Introduction

This paper attempts to seek the answer to whether liberalism or realism could explain the current world issues considering Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, we employed these two mainstream theories of IR to comprehend the recent invasion.

Liberalism has its roots deep in philosophy, as well as realism. However, it is widely believed that the first grand debate among IR theories occurred between liberalism and realism after WWII. Liberalism was the leading theory after WWI, thanks to Woodrow Wilson, yet it was criticized by realist scholars, especially after WWII. Today, the debate is still an ongoing challenge for the two camps.

This paper will try to analyze the liberal world order and realist perception of international relations, considering their approach to international law. It is easy to say that whereas liberalism has an optimistic view regarding international law, realist scholars are pessimistic and skeptical about it. However, the two camps are really strong in their standing points. Many scholars support the liberal IR theory, while there are a number of scholars who also support the realist IR theory. Therefore, the paper is outlined as follows. The first section will explain the liberal view of international relations through the lens of international law. The second section, then, look for the realist view of international relations to international law. In the third section, we will try to comprehend the latest invasion of Russia in Ukraine through liberal and realist theories. We have chosen this invasion as a case study to analyze liberal an realist world order because it is the recent issue that happened in an era when the world has all of the liberal institutions and tools. Such institutions and tools as international organizations and law were not enough to prevent this invasion. There still might be some liberal points supporting the idea that Russia’s invasion has remained limited because of the liberal world

order, yet it seems more logical to interpret this incident from the perspective of realist power play. Indeed, there have been several incidents in the last decades about abuse and violation of international law by powerful states. Yet, the recent invasion conducted by Russia is the latest issue that even took place after the previous violations. Therefore, we could interpret this issue that if liberalism had been sufficient enough, the world would not have witnessed this invasion today especially after the past experiences.

The paper, in conclusion, suggests that the world order is now clearly realist when the Ukraine invasion is considered. As Russia has continued its invasion of an independent European country against all of the sanctions and criticisms, it is not possible to support the idea that liberal IR theory is applicable to powerful countries now. Therefore, we conclude that realism clearly said goodbye to liberal IR theory in the light of recent issues.

1 Liberal world order: Reign of the international law

Liberalism or idealism as an IR theory has its deep roots in philosophy. Despite the fact that liberalism is an essential part of European enlightenment so that it has a philosophical background, it became the leading theory of IR, especially after World War I (WWI). Especially, we have to highlight that international law is one of the vital tools of liberal IR theory. Nevertheless, this section will provide the main assumptions of liberal IR theory concerning international law.

Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism is the most famous form of liberal IR theory.¹ That theory basically relies on the Fourteen Principles of Woodrow Wilson, which promoted democracy among states' affairs. In 1917, Wilson clearly stated that "a peaceful world order would require the extension of democracy."² Because of the belief that democratic states will not fight against each other, promoting democratic world order on a global scale was a vital point of Wilsonian Liberal Internationalism.³ Liberalism also promotes the idea that human nature is peaceful.⁴ Wilson framed the liberal theory of IR with his fourteen principles in 1918 by suggesting the establishment of the League of Nations, prohibiting secret agreements among states, and freedom of the seas.⁵ Years before these principles, in 1899 and 1907, there were two conferences held; namely, the Hague Conferences, to attempt to define just war and rules during a just war. *Jus ad Bellum* and *Jus in Bello* rules, which define the just war and rules during a just war, were comprehended as the first initiatives to limit the use of force in the international sphere.⁶

As a fact, the Kellogg-Briand Pact has been the first international document to seek peaceful solutions to international disputes and renounce the act of aggression against international problems.⁷ Through this Pact, it was the first time to denounce the international act of aggression among states. However, it was also criticized by some parties, such as Eric Sevareid, stating that the Pact is a "worthless piece of paper."⁸ The main point for this kind of criticism was proposing that the Pact did not have a strong instrumental policy to outlaw war. Nevertheless, international law played a significant role through the Pact to denounce the

¹ SLAUGHTER, A-M. (1995): International law in a world of liberal states, p. 508.

² THOMPSON, J. A. (2010): The dynamics of a conflicted concept, p. 33.

³ To see more, readers may look up for Kant's Democratic Peace Theory. As a limitation of our study, we will not give details about Democratic Peace Theory in this paper.

⁴ ERALP, A. (2019): Uluslararası ilişkiler disiplininin oluşumu: İdealizm-realizm tartışması, p. 62.

⁵ SNELL, J. L. (1954): Wilson on Germany and the fourteen points.

⁶ KIRDIM, Ş. E. (2017): A dichotomous practice of international relations: Theory behind humanitarian intervention until World War II, p. 28.

⁷ DEBENETTI, C. (1972): Borah and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, p. 22; CHAMBERLIN, W. (1952): Origins of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, p. 80; KIRDIM, Ş. E. (2017): A dichotomous practice of international relations: Theory behind humanitarian intervention until World War II, p. 29.

⁸ JOSEPHSON, H. (1979): Outlawing war: Internationalism and the Pact of Paris, p. 377.

international use of force after WWI. Although the international law structure and League of Nations have been perceived as useless in preventing the outbreak of WWII, liberals still support the point that it was not the fault of the international structure. Rather, it was a result of the world system, which was not liberal enough. The second and the strongest attempt to outlaw war was the United Nations (UN) Charter of 1945.⁹ Article 2(4) of the UN Charter explicitly proposes that “All Members shall *refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force* against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”¹⁰

The decrease in the numbers of armed interstate conflicts after 1945, after the UN Charter, is the most vital supporting point of liberal IR theorists to advocate the idea that international law and organizations play an essential role in preventing conflicts among states. Indeed, the conquest attempts and the international sanctions for the aggressor states are the guardians of the international peaceful world order. As liberalism suggests, the more the world is liberal, the more the world will be peaceful, thanks to international law and possible sanctions that will abuse the regulations. However, realism proposes a different story of international law and its application. The next section will try to comprehend the realist IR idea of international law and its features.

2 Realist world order: Power-play

Realism is known as the main opponent of liberal IR theory. It is believed that the first grand debate in IR theories occurred between liberalism and realism after WWII.¹¹

Schuman supports the idea that international law is unnecessarily weighted in the IR field.¹² Realist theories main pillars are criticizing the liberal theory on the basis that liberalism has failed to prevent the outbreak of WWII and could not provide a peaceful world order. Therefore, the utopian belief that assumes the world is in peaceful order is not valid for realists. Instead, they believe that the international world order is anarchic instead of being hierarchic as in the liberal assumptions, selfish, and depends on the national interests of states. As Jervis puts it, “The lack of an international sovereign not only permits wars to occur but also makes it difficult for states that are satisfied with the status quo to arrive at goals that they recognize as being in their common interests.”¹³ According to Eralp, Morgenthau, and the other realists describe, the human being is selfish, and power is the most significant issue for states to protect their self-interests.¹⁴ Realism is known as the worldview that comprehends the world order as being anarchic.¹⁵ The anarchy in the IR field and theories refer to that there is no superior organization and power above the state’s decisions and actions. Therefore, all states are equal depending on their powers in the international sphere. This fact results in chaos and anarchy, which creates a power-play in the international area.

Contrary to the utopian perception of liberalism, realism focuses on the real-world, namely, *realpolitik*. *Realpolitik* suggests that states pursue their self-interests in world affairs.¹⁶ The crystal clear example of *realpolitik* is indeed the United States of America (USA). One of the main pillars of the US foreign policy is that concerning international law and organizations

⁹ SCHRIJVER, N. (2015): The ban on the use of force in the UN Charter.

¹⁰ Emphasis added.

¹¹ BOOTH, K. – ERSKINE, T. (2016): International relations theory today; BURCHILL et al. (2013): Theories of international relations; DUNNE et al. (2021): International relations theories: Discipline nad diversity; MCGLINCHEY, S. – SCHEINPFLUG, C. – WALTERS, R. (2017): International relations theory.

¹² SCHUMAN, F. L. (1941): International politics.

¹³ JERVIS, R. (1978): Cooperation under the security dilemma, p. 167.

¹⁴ ERALP, A. (2019). Uluslararası ilişkiler disiplininin oluşumu: İdealizm-realizm tartışması, p. 73.

¹⁵ DONNELLY, J. (2005): Realism, p. 31.

¹⁶ MOTYL, A. J. (2015): The surrealism of realism: Misreading the war in Ukraine, p. 76.

only if they comply with the country's needs and interests.¹⁷ The USA has always been hesitant regarding international law, according to Malone & Khong.¹⁸ Especially the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by the USA has been the most significant example of the USA for their perception and interpretation of international law when there is a need for their national interests.¹⁹ As Fabbrini puts it, the unilateralism of the USA in international law and organizations notably increased after George W. Bush's second term.²⁰

According to the realist IR view and its relation to international law, one could easily say that international law is a power-play in the international sphere. The reign of powerful states is obviously creating an uneven development in favor of international law and threatens its equal application to all the states. The powerful states usually have a right not to follow international law when it contradicts their national interests or generally shapes the international law in complying with their self-interests. One of the essential examples of this hypocrisy of international law is the veto power of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Permanent Five (P-5) members of the UNSC have a right to veto the votes under certain conditions. Therefore, their voice is more important than the other states in the UNSC.

The rest of the paper will try to analyze Russia's Ukraine invasion through liberalism and realism in the context of international law. In the conclusion of this section, we can assume that international law is a playground for powerful states from the point of view of realist IR theory. Powerful states usually shape and interpret international law regarding their national interests. This fact makes international law a component of power-play.

3 The case study: Russia's Ukraine invasion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine officially started on February 24, 2022, from the east part of Ukraine. Although there was a long history of preparation for an invasion by Russia, such as gathering troops around the country the last year, the invasion happened suddenly on that day. This section will discuss the compatibility of Russia's invasion with international law and organizations. To do so, we will employ liberal and realist theories to interpret the invasion.

For a comprehensive evaluation of Russia's Ukraine invasion, one must look at the history between the two countries. Yet, we will not provide the details of the countries' histories in this section because of the scope of the study. However, it is still needed to be highlighted that, since the foundation of Ukraine in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there have been debates and disputes between Ukraine and Russia. Thus, the historical background of the Ukraine-Russia conflict has been a really hot topic for IR scholars.²¹

The first significant incidence was clearing Ukraine from nuclear power in 1993. Mearsheimer, in 1993, clearly stated that most of the western countries wanted Ukraine to get rid of nuclear power. Nevertheless, he also pointed out that Ukraine's nuclear power was vital for two reasons: the persistence of peace between Ukraine and Russia and the nonsense of giving nuclear weapons to Russia.²² That issue is the core of the disputes between Russia and Ukraine today from the point of nuclear deterrence. As Russia has a considerable amount of nuclear power against Ukraine, they are able to use the power-play on Ukraine. From the realist perspective, if one state is stronger than the other one, most likely, it will have an advantageous position on it, and Russia clearly used that card against Ukraine. The other point is the lack of

¹⁷ DEMIRKOL, A. (2021): Understanding American strategic culture and foreign policy through Robert Kagan: A review.

¹⁸ MALONE D. – KHONG, Y. (2003): Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Perspectives, p. 5.

¹⁹ KIRDIM, Ş. E. (2021): Uluslararası hukuk savaş halinde: Trump yönetiminin uluslararası hukuk yaklaşımı üzerine bir inceleme.

²⁰ FABBRINI, S. (2006): US unilateralism and American conservative aationalism, p. 3.

²¹ BAUER, Y. (2022): The Russo-Ukrainian war through a historian's eyes, p. 1.

²² MEARSHEIMER, J. J. (1993): The case for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent, pp. 50-51.

international cooperation between Ukraine and the western world, such as NATO and the European Union (EU). Ukraine has attempted to join NATO and EU several times in history, but the processes have been pending until now. That created the opportunity for the Russian side to claim that Ukraine is not officially part of western society and culture.

Therefore, Russia gained the power to conduct its unlawful invasions in parts of Ukraine. There is a camp among scholars stating that Ukraine's positioning itself toward the West was a red flag for Russia. As Bauer notes, "[i]t is understandable that the Kremlin should see Ukraine's attempt to turn to the West as a *casus belli*. Perhaps a savvier, Zelensky would have recognized this and would have tried to reassure Moscow by postponing attempts to join the EU until a better opportunity arose at some point down the line. Entry into NATO was a dicier question still."²³ From this point of view, we have to argue why an independent country's choice to be a part of a regional organization should trigger another country's security concerns, which has led to an invasion. Liberalism, at this point, is insufficient to recognize this topic, I believe. Because, as in the nature of liberalism, all states should be sovereign and equal in international relations. Therefore, one independent state can decide on a lawful action when they want to render it. However, from the realist view, we should remind the *security dilemma*. The security dilemma is, basically, "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others."²⁴ Hence, when a state tries to be a part of an international and regional security organization, it threatens the other party's security perception. This is actually what happened from Russia's perspective. Since Ukraine attempted to join NATO and the EU, Russia started to be paranoid about its national security from the perspective of *security dilemma*. These issues led Russia to invade Crimea in 2014 unlawfully. After the invasion of Georgia, Russia turned its weapons to the West, Ukraine. It was, by the words of Jeffrey Mankoff, "a deliberate strike against the West, as well as Ukraine."²⁵

In 2022, Russia conducted its biggest military invasion of the 21st century in Ukraine. Starting from the east of the country, the Russian military aimed to change the government and take control of Kyiv, the capital. However, the Russian army has not been successful so far. Although they are not successful, they are still continuing their invasion of an independent country in Europe, and the whole world is witnessing that.

The invasion itself is against international law, regarding the UN Charter and *Jus ad Bellum* rules. There are only two exceptions for the use of force according to the UN Charter, and they are i) self-defense because of an armed attack and ii) UNSC resolution to authorize the use of force to maintain the peace.²⁶ From the provisions of the UN Charter and *Jus ad Bellum* rules, there has been no such evidence and supporting point for Russia to start this invasion so that it is not in compliance with international law by any means.

Conclusion

Liberalism and Realism as IR theories have been challenging each other for decades. Although there is no clear answer to who has won the fight, we have to talk about it nowadays. The liberal assumption that international law and international organizations are the main pillars of peaceful world order has been deeply criticized by realist scholars. Realists have been claiming that the world order is not utopian; instead, it is full of chaos and anarchism. Therefore, there is no superior authority above states to regulate their actions. Whereas liberals promote the claim that conquests have been decreasing since the UN Charter, realists advocate that interstate conflicts are still ongoing between powerful and weak states.

²³ BAUER, Y. (2022): The Russo-Ukrainian war through a historian's eyes, p. 3.

²⁴ JERVIS, R. (1978): Cooperation under the security dilemma, p. 169.

²⁵ MANKOFF, J. (2014): Russia's latest land grab: How Putin won Crimea and lost Ukraine, p. 63.

²⁶ SIMMA, B. (1999): NATO, the UN and the use of force: Legal aspects, pp. 3-4.

The recent issues of Russian aggression have shown that liberalism has failed to maintain the peace in Europe. Russia's reckless actions against the international law, UN Charter, *Jus ad Bellum* rules, and even *Jus in Bello* rules -such as the targeting civilians in Bucha- have shown that realism said goodbye to liberalism.

If we were in the liberal world order in international relations, the invasion would not have occurred because of the respect for international law and organizations. Yet, it happened without hesitation by Russian forces, and it is still ongoing. Therefore, we have to admit that the world order in 2022 is realistic instead of being liberal. From my point of view, I claim that liberalism has failed to prevent the outbreak of the invasion although it had all of the international tools such as international law and sanctions. However, especially the P-5 mechanism in UNSC and the dependence on Russian gas have limited western countries to act properly to prevent or stop the invasion.

In a nutshell, liberalism clearly failed in that case study. Thus, realism has proved that the world order is a playground of powerful states and that international relations are a power play. Therefore, I suggest that all countries should be able to implement the self-help principle in the future in case they face any threat from any other country. Shortly, the world should be ready for realist global affairs.

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