

## How Russia's War Hits International Relations Studies

Kurnyshova, Yulia

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kurnyshova, Y. (2023). How Russia's War Hits International Relations Studies. *Ukrainian Analytical Digest*, 2, 6-7.  
<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000637349>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## How Russia's War Hits International Relations Studies

By Yulia Kurnyshova (University of Copenhagen)

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000637349

The full-scale Russia's invasion of Ukraine challenged international order in many ways. But the same is true for the discipline of International Relations studies (IR), as many of its paradigms are struggling to elucidate the effects of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This essay discusses the main trends in International Relations studies (IR) resulting from Russia's full-scale invasion. In an attempt to reflect on this major international crisis, two foundational theories of IR, realism and liberalism, clashed once again. They are dominating much of the political commentary on the war (Patman, 2023), and their outsized presence in the media has further exposed the shortcomings of both approaches.

Realists in IR prioritize self-interest of states, emphasizing conflict and power politics in the international arena. As they accept war as a valid option in global politics, now they can rightfully claim they saw it coming for Ukraine as well. Amidst the ongoing fight, their fears are mostly about the use of nuclear weapons and the rise of Russo-Chinese alliance (Mankoff, 2023). To avoid these outcomes, John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent figure in contemporary realism, has called for a peace deal, even one without Ukrainian territorial integrity being restored (Mearsheimer, 2023).

His views are shared by a substantial number of realists in IR (Edinger, 2022; Ezra 2022), effectively making their stance an intellectual foundation for the aggressor's appeasement. By treating military might and physical control of foreign lands as a valid security strategy, they are playing into Russia's political narrative. And it's not only about moral ambiguity of such views. For realists, Russia's war of aggression is a "normal" act by the great power (Walt, 2022); they thus struggle to accept that Russian actions are, in fact, highly detrimental to the international order and undervalue the importance of a Western stand on Ukraine for preserving global peace and stability.

Conversely, the liberal approach is strong in justifying the collective support for Ukraine by all Western democracies—both as a part of mutual institutional interaction and as a means to defend liberal democratic order against authoritarian assault (Pietro, 2023). The West's firm stand to protect Ukrainian freedom and independence made liberal claims for the value-based international system much stronger (Way, 2022). Yet, while many Western liberal politicians are backing material efforts to make possible Ukraine's victory on the battlefield as the sole viable end to the war, the lib-

eral paradigm is yet to embrace the key importance of hard power for international security and for safeguarding democratic values.

Proponents of the liberal approach rightfully blame Russian authoritarianism for its aggression against Ukraine and advocate for a subsequent marginalisation of Russia on the international arena (Somin, 2023). But at the same time, liberal institutionalism underestimates other reasons for Russian hostility against Ukraine, some of which span across the centuries. If one needs to properly understand the causes of the war and come with strategies to restore peace and avoid new wars in the future, it is no less important to take into due consideration historical hostilities and clashing identities, not just current political institutions. Finally, there are many reasons to study interdependence and cooperation under the multi-order world (Flockhart, 2022), which is now seen as a more legitimate concept as we witness multiple views on the Russo-Ukrainian war across the globe, definitely more than only the Russian and pro-Ukrainian.

The viability of such a worldview is founded on the seemingly growing rift between the global South and the global North. Most non-Western countries are trying to remain neutral in the Russo-Ukrainian war: they criticize the Russian act of aggression, but do not join Western efforts to curb it. The postcolonial IR approach has elaborated on the global effects of colonialism and the different experiences of colonizers and colonised nations in the post-colonial world, so for scholars of this camp of IR this split would be viewed as natural (Askew, 2023).

But even though the postcolonial paradigm can help explain why international engagement with the Ukraine's resistance is so different across the globe, there are at least two issues it faces in the context of this conflict. First, scholars of postcolonial IR invested significant effort in proving that Eastern Europe is a legitimate part of the postcolonial space (Owczarzak, 2009), yet the region's strong alignment with the West is alienating it from the rest of the global South. Second, proponents of postcolonialism need to explain why, in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian war, most countries of the global South are prioritizing opposition to the West, as opposed to embracing the values of independence, non-interference, and sovereignty that postcolonialism has always defended as the paramount global good of our time.

One of the key challenges to IR as a discipline lies in the fact that Russo-Ukrainian war undermines the

international normative basis for preventing aggressive territorial conquest. In the post-WWII world, this norm was set by Article 2(4) of the UN Charter and has been observed ever since by the vast majority of states, including all major powers (Fazal, 2022). Annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia questions this norm, and ultimately challenges the conventional wisdom of IR studies.

Since most of contemporary paradigms in IR theory emerged after WWII, they reflected a reality in which wars were relatively rare, and the threat of 'state death' was very low. Security studies now needs to reassess the impact of possible wars of conquest on the international order, as well as the outcomes for IR of the ailing European security architecture, massive acts of state terrorism, and the growing threat of the use of nuclear weapons.

#### *About the Author*

*Yuliia Kurnyshova*, Ph.D., is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Copenhagen. Her current research project explores the political and security implications of Russia's war against Ukraine. A historian by training, she uses interdisciplinary approaches to analyze the political discourse of the war.

#### *Bibliography*

- Askew, J. (2023). Why does so much of the Global South support Russia, not Ukraine? [online] Euronews. Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/03/29/why-does-so-much-of-the-global-south-support-russia-not-ukraine>.
- Edinger, H. (2022). Offensive ideas: Structural realism, Classical Realism and Putin's War on Ukraine. *International Affairs*, 98(6). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia217>.
- Ezra Klein Interviews Emma Ashford. (2022). *New York Times*. [online] 18 Mar. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-emma-ashford.html>.
- Fazal, T. (2022) Putin is breaking 70 years of norms by invading Ukraine. What comes next? (n.d.). *Washington Post*. [online] Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/25/putin-is-breaking-70-years-norms-by-invading-ukraine-what-comes-next/>.
- Flockhart, T. (2022). After the Invasion of Ukraine: The Old Order is Dead – Long Live the New Order. University of Southern Denmark, Center for War Studies. Available at: [www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/cws/cws%20activities/the%20war%20in%20ukraine/the%20old%20order%20is%20dead](http://www.sdu.dk/en/forskning/forskningsenheder/samf/cws/cws%20activities/the%20war%20in%20ukraine/the%20old%20order%20is%20dead)
- Mankoff, J. (2023). The Realist Case for Ukraine – Foreign Policy Research Institute. [online] [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org). Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/the-realist-case-for-ukraine/>.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2023): Is China the Real Winner of Ukraine War? | Endgame #136 (Luminaries). [online] Available at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl7goPRw\\_eE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yl7goPRw_eE)
- Owczarzak, J. (2009). Postcolonial studies and post-socialism in Eastern Europe. *Focal*, Vol. 53, pp. 3–19
- Patman, R.G. (2023). Liberal hawks versus realist doves: who is winning the ideological war over the future of Ukraine? [online] *The Conversation*. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/liberal-hawks-versus-realist-doves-who-is-winning-the-ideological-war-over-the-future-of-ukraine-198652>.
- Pietro, J. (2023). One year of war in Ukraine: six experts predict what will happen next. [online] *The Spectator World*. Available at: <https://thespectator.com/topic/war-ukraine-one-year-anniversary-experts/>
- Somin, I. (2023) A Conflict Between Liberal Democracy and Authoritarian Nationalism: Implications of the Ideological Stakes in the Russia-Ukraine War. [online] Available at: <https://reason.com/volokh/2023/02/24/a-conflict-between-liberal-democracy-and-authoritarian-nationalism-implications-of-a-broader-stake-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/>.
- Walt, S.M. (2022). An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine. [online] *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/>.
- Way, L. (2022). The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order? *Journal of Democracy*. [online] Available at: <http://www.journalofdemocracy.org/the-rebirth-of-the-liberal-world-order/>