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**INSTITUTIONS DO NOT STOP TANKS: REALISM AND THE LIMITS
OF LIBERAL GEOPOLITICS**

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Abstract: *This article analyzes how realism and liberalism explain current geopolitical conflicts, focusing on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Liberal theories emphasize that economic ties, international institutions, and shared democratic values deter war. Recent geopolitical events raise doubts about these assumptions, as they have not stopped major powers from using force. Applying a structured comparison of liberalism and realism and a case study, this article explores how each theory interprets state motivations and strategic choices. This analysis finds that liberalism falls short in explaining why economically connected states embedded in international institutions still initiate costly military aggression when political leaders believe their security or power interests are threatened. In contrast, realism gives a clearer explanation by referring to international anarchy, spheres of influence and relative power. The study concludes by recommending an integrated approach that combines realist components of power dynamics with liberal ideas of institutional cooperation.*

Keywords: *Realism; Liberalism; International Order; Security Dilemma; Ukraine War*

INTRODUCTION

The debate between liberalism and realism, and its sub-theories, has been shaping the field of International Relations for a long time. This debate allowed the so-called Critical Theories to establish and develop. But recent geopolitical shocks questioned many assumptions which support liberal theory and its inherent optimism. Liberal theory argues that economic interdependence, international institutions and shared norms, values and laws lower the possibility of war or aggression (Burchill 2005, pp. 58–59, 81–82). By contrast, realism assumes that countries interact in an anarchic system where national security and power competition are key factors that determine their actions (Donelly 2005, pp. 30–32).

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is an interesting case study to test both these theories. The conflict broke out despite deep economic relations and institutional connections between Russia and Europe. Various researchers argue that the war marks a turning point in global politics as it exposes the weaknesses of the liberal theory: the liberal assumption of peace through interdependence is at stake (Fida, Sulaiman, Kazmi 2023, p. 112; Geis, Schröder 2024, p. 11).

This article analyzes whether realism offers a stronger explanation for understanding today's ongoing geopolitical conflicts than liberalism. Comparing these two theories while undergoing an empirical case study of the Ukraine war, the paper highlights that realism reflects how states behave in perceived high-threat environments more accurately. Liberalism on the other hand only functions primarily under limited conditions of shared interests.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative and theory-driven single-case study approach. The theoretical framework is drawn from various works, articles and papers which outline liberalism and realism. Especially useful is the comparative overview in the book *Theories of International Relations* by Burchill et al. (2005). Additional sources on the Ukraine war in the field of International Relations, like Oguejiofor (2024), Rösch (2022) and Fida et al. (2023), are added to ensure that the analysis is based on current scholarship.

Empirically, the paper uses Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a case study as it very likely

challenges the liberal theory due to the high level of economic interdependence between Russia and Europe and the strong institutional integration. This case study relies on policy research like Martill and Sus (2024) and Geis and Schröder (2022, 2024) and on secondary data when it comes to economic figures. The secondary data are used to assess the economic interdependence before the invasion and are derived from Eurostat: data on EU natural gas imports from Russia as well as data on Russia's share of total EU-27 trade. The data are used to provide contextual evidence of the extent of Europe's economic ties to Russia. It is not a comprehensive measure of bilateral dependence.

This allows for a direct comparison between theoretical expectations, observable state behavior and economic data.

RESULTS

(1) Theoretical Foundation: Liberalism and Realism

The core assumption of liberalism is that international cooperation through institutions, norms and economic ties like trade, can transform an archaic system into a peaceful codependence. Liberals expect that a growing interdependence leads to high costs of aggression and therefore deters such actions. Cooperation is viewed as the key to stability and national security (Burchill 2005, pp. 58–61 and 81). The liberalist standpoint on human nature is positive: human beings are willing to interact with others in a way to ensure everyone's well-being. Therefore, peaceful, cooperative conflict solving is rational (Navari 2023, p. 48). Liberals believe that supranational institutions create an environment that helps exporting democratic values while increasing reputational and legal costs of war: the higher the integration, the lower the risk of insecurity (Navari 2023, pp. 37 and 46). This article does not assume that liberalism considers war to be impossible, but focuses on the main liberal expectation: high levels of economic interdependence and institutional integration reduce the likelihood of aggression significantly.

On the other hand, realism does not share the same optimism. For realists, the states' prime concerns are survival and relative power in an archaic system. Institutions are viewed as reflections of the underlying power structures between states: they are not independent or able to constrain states' behavior. (Donnelly 2005, pp. 44 – 47). The main principle is laid out by Jensen (2023, pp. 18–19): the more power a state holds, the higher its national security and the ability to enforce its international demands. Rösch (2022, pp. 211–216) argues from Morgenthau's perspective that diplomacy and legal norms cannot prevent wars and conflicts: military presence and deterrence need to be in place to ensure national security. Realists are less positive and optimistic when it comes to human nature as they skeptically highlight its selfishness (Donnelly 2005, pp. 30–31). Smith and Dawson (2022, p. 195) conclude that "great power competition is back at the forefront of international politics", while distinguishing various realist theories.

The theoretical separation between liberalism and realism sets the stage for the following case study of the Ukraine war.

(2) Empirical Case Study: Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

(2.1) Historical Context

When it comes to conflicts, there is usually historical context. Very likely that is the case with the origins of the Ukraine war. Achudume (2023, pp. 92–94) explains that the post-Soviet space was contested after the Cold War and that Russian leaders considered Ukraine as their sphere of influence. From Russia's perspective, every action taken by Ukraine towards Western institutions was and is still considered a threat to Russian security and its sphere of influence. Therefore, Russia intervened long before the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the escalation to a full-scale war in 2022 in the politics of Ukraine. Perga (2025, pp. 28–30) shows that as a response the West supported the Ukraine with military aid and continued Ukraine's integration into Western institutions. The West's and Russia's visions for a European order and security architecture seem incompatible: not just since 2014 or 2022, but since the end of the Cold War. Martill and Sus (2024, pp. 1–3) demonstrate how European states gradually changed their response to Russia's actions in Ukraine from engagement to military deterrence, although the European states did not react uniformly. Overall, the historical context offers insights into the possible roots of this conflict.

(2.2) Liberal Explanations

From a liberal point of view, Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a serious empirical challenge: the depth of economic interdependence between Russia and Europe and Russia’s integration in international institutions before the war raises question regarding the liberal theory of interdependence.

Before 2022, economic relations between the European Union and Russia were relatively stable and dense, especially when it came to the energy sector. Eurostat data show that the EU heavily depended on Russian natural gas imports in the years leading to the invasion (EUROSTAT 2025a, see fig. 1). The red lines in the following diagrams represent the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022. It shows that prior to the annexation of Crimea the EU imported about 35% of its natural gas demand from Russia. Although Russia was sanctioned after the attack on Crimea, the EU increased the gas imports to above 40% of its overall demand just before 2022. After the full-scale invasion, the EU reduced its dependency on Russian Energy significantly.

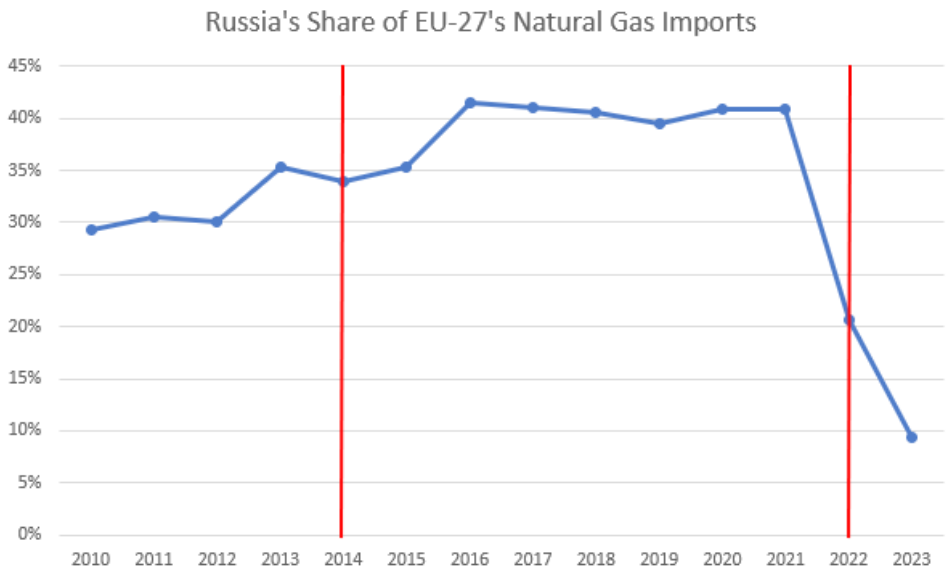


Fig. 1. Russia’s Share of EU-27’s Natural Gas Imports (EUROSTAT 2025a)

Beyond energy, Russia also was an important trade partner of the EU as it represented a notable portion of total EU-27’s external trade (EUROSTAT 2025b, see fig. 2). Before the annexation of Crimea, the imports reached around 12% of total EU-27’s external trade. The following sanctions targeted mostly the non-energy sectors and reduced the overall trade. After 2022, the trade partnership almost came to a halt.

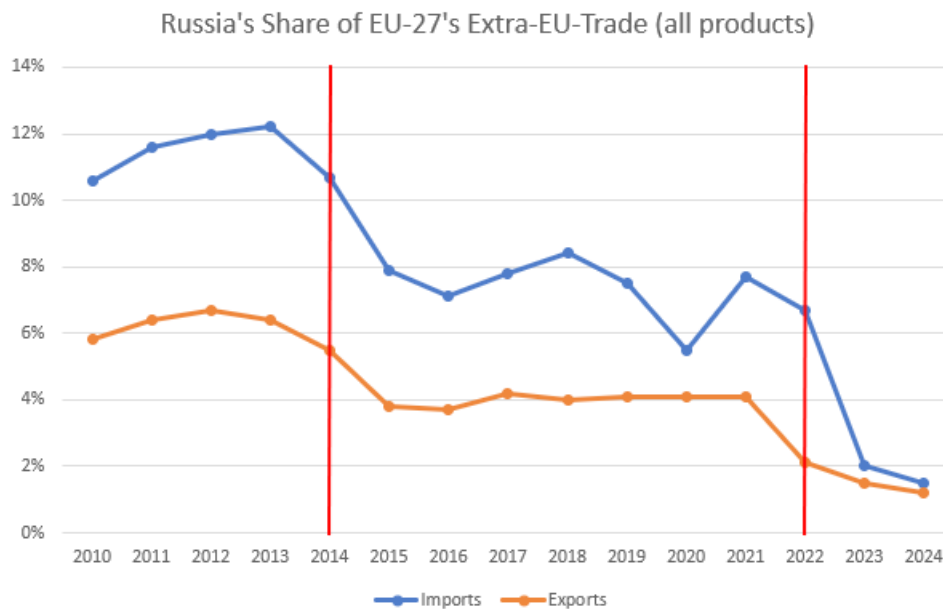


Fig. 2. Russia's Share of EU-27's Extra-EU-Trade (EUROSTAT 2025b)

From a liberal standpoint, such extensive economic interdependence should have raised the expected costs of military actions. Significant disruptions of trade, loss of revenue for companies in both economies, sanctions and long-term damage to the trade relationship were foreseeable outcomes of the full-scale invasion. According to liberal theories, these expected costs should have deterred any further military escalation.

The second liberal argument is built around institutional integration. In addition to the above-mentioned economic ties, Russia was embedded in supranational institutions alongside European partners: it still holds a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (United Nations 2025), is a member of World Trade Organization (WTO 2025), participated in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE 2025) and was a member of the Council of Europe until its exclusion in 2022 (Council of Europe 2022). Russia was also part of global governance forums like the G8 (until 2014) and is still a member of the G20.

From an empirical point of view however, neither the economic interdependence nor institutional integration prevented Russia's military actions in Crimea in 2014 or the full-scale war in 2022. In spite of the foreseeable economic losses and the reputational risks within the international institutions, Russia was not deterred from military action. Therefore, this case highlights the limitations of liberal explanations: neither deep economic ties nor extensive institutional integration were sufficient to control state behavior and stop military actions.

Therefore, the Ukraine case indicates that the limitations of liberal explanations are directly linked to political decision-makers who interpret a situation as a core security threat. Under such conditions, economic costs and institutional integration cannot act as a deterrent to aggression. This shift creates room for realist explanations.

(2.3) Realist Explanations

From a realist point of view, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is mainly explained by security concerns, power politics and sphere-of-influence considerations. Economic interdependence or institutional integration are of little interest, at best. Realists assume that states are part of an anarchic international system in which survival and relative power are the important factors, especially when central security interests are perceived to be threatened. In these cases, security concerns outweigh any economic ties or institutional commitments.

Dawood and Diniz (2024) apply this logic directly to the war in Ukraine. They argue that Russia's actions align with the expectations of Offensive Realism. In their view, Russia's actions had the goal to prevent an unfavorable shift in power balance in Eastern Europe. The increasing in-

tegration of Ukraine in Western institutions combined with Russia fear of losing strategic options led to pressure within Russian leadership. That pressure explains Russia's military actions, even at the expense of economic stability and institutional reputation.

Oguejiofor (2024) complements the realist interpretation, showing how Western security policies were interpreted in Russia: A discussed NATO cooperation and Ukraine's Western integration were interpreted as offensive threats to Russian security. This dynamic reflects the classic security dilemma: actions taken by one side to increase its own security are perceived by the other side as threatening and destabilizing. This leads to countermeasures and escalation. This perspective explains, why Russia was ready to accept sanctions and international isolation: it believes that economic losses are less threatening than a Ukraine associated with NATO and the West.

Realism also helps understanding why economic interdependence and institutional integration failed to prevent military actions: once the diverging interests were framed as strategically important, Russia's concerns about power, sphere of influence and security became the main issue. When states believe their own security is at risk, power politics tend to override economic dependencies and institutional integration.

DISCUSSION

The findings in this paper highlight clearly the tension between what liberal theory would expect and what actually happened in the Ukraine war. Liberalism argues that deep economic ties and strong institutional integration raise the costs of conflict and aggression so much that war becomes highly unattractive. Before 2022 and especially before 2014, the relationship between the EU and Russia fits this theory. Eurostat data indicate strong economic ties, especially in the energy sector and Russia was embedded in several important international institutions. Despite these conditions, Russia decided to start a war with Ukraine, which challenges liberal assumptions.

A realist perspective on this conflict is much more convincing. The case supports the realist view that when states believe their security is at stake, concerns about survival, power and strategic independence outweigh economic losses and institutional commitments. Once Russia perceived the conflicting interests as strategically important, it was ready to endure economic sanctions, international isolation and exclusion from international institutions. This shows that interdependence is not a restraining factor for state actions and was more a source of vulnerability than a stabilizing factor.

Nonetheless, liberal mechanisms were not entirely lacking. Economic ties and institutional responses shaped the aftermath of the invasion: sanctions, disrupted trade and reputational damage. But these effects came in effect after the war had already begun. They influenced how the conflict evolved, not whether it occurred in the first place. This distinction helps assessing the liberal theory: interdependence and institutions might shape conflict outcomes, but they do not necessarily prevent aggression or conflicts.

Although a single-case study limits wider generalization, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a critical test for liberal theory. The inability of interdependence and institutional integration to be a deterrent to war in this case, strengthens the argument that realism offers a stronger explanation for understanding today's ongoing geopolitical high-threat conflicts. Liberal explanations seem to depend on shared security interests and stable expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explored whether realism offers a stronger explanation than liberalism for today's ongoing geopolitical conflicts, using Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a case study. It indicates that central liberal assumptions, like the idea that economic interdependence and institutional integration reduce the likelihood of war, do not hold in this case. Despite deep trade ties, significant energy dependence and Russia's integration in important international institutions, none of these factors prevented Russian aggression: neither in 2014 nor in 2022.

In contrast, realism offers a more convincing argument in this case. It shows that when states believe their own security is at risk, considerations of power, strategic positioning and survival

outweigh economic costs and institutional obligations. Russia's willingness to face severe economic damage and international isolation underlines the realist argument that power politics dominate in perceived high-threat situations. Therefore, the central contribution of this paper is the empirical demonstration that liberal explanations have limitations in such conditions. It reaffirms the continued relevance of realism in explaining state behavior.

However, this article does not reject liberalism entirely. Economic interdependence and international integrations shaped the evolution and the consequences of the war: through sanctions, diplomatic responses and economic losses. Nonetheless, they failed to act as deterrents.

Future research could extend this analysis through the inclusion of different conflicts as case studies to better identify the circumstances under which liberal or realist theories are better in explaining today's international relations.

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ИНСТИТУЦИИТЕ НЕ СПИРАТ ТАНКОВЕТЕ: РЕАЛИЗЪМ И ГРАНИЦИ НА ЛИБЕРАЛНАТА ГЕОПОЛИТИКА

Резюме: В тази статия се анализира как реализъмът и либерализмът обясняват настоящите геополитически конфликти, с фокус върху пълномащабната инвазия на Русия в Украйна през 2022 г. Либералните теории подчертават, че икономическите връзки, международните институции и споделените демократични ценности възпират войната. Последните геополитически събития поставят под съмнение тези предположения, тъй като те не са попречили на големите сили да използват сила. Чрез структурирано сравнение между либерализма и реализма и казус тази статия изследва как всяка теория интерпретира мотивациите и стратегическите избори на държавите. Анализът установява, че либерализмът не успява да обясни защо икономически свързани държави, вградени в международни институции, все пак предприемат скъпо струващи военни агресии, когато политическите лидери смятат, че тяхната сигурност или интереси са застрашени. За разлика от това, реализъмът дава по-ясно обяснение, като се позовава на международната анархия, сферите на влияние и относителната власт. Проучването завършва с препоръка за интегриран подход, който съчетава реалистични компоненти на динамиката на властта с либерални идеи за институционално сътрудничество.

Ключови думи: реализъм; либерализъм; международен ред; дилема на сигурността; войната в Украйна

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