



Satisfactory, but not enough: Liberalism's outlooks on the Russian war in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

The Russian war against Ukraine is an attack on liberal values. This essay bases itself on the critical analysis of few selected exponents and defenders of modern liberalism in International Relations, which recently appeared in some media outlets and academic reviews. It critically engages with this International Relations' theory and offers the advantages and limitations, interpretations, and outlook on it considering the aggression in Ukraine. Most of all, it discusses the advantages – security concerns, principles of ethics, defence of national independence, spread of democracy – and the disadvantages – security threats, fallacy of trade, geopolitical return of Russia, lack of State-level analysis – liberalism's spectacles entails. Liberalism is convincing in analyzing the facts and has a good theoretical frame for exploring historical and geopolitical events. However, it risks being too naïve and incomplete in its diagnosis.

RESUMO

A guerra russa contra a Ucrânia é um ataque aos valores liberais. Este ensaio baseia-se na análise crítica de alguns expoentes e defensores selecionados do liberalismo moderno nas Relações Internacionais, que recentemente apareceram em alguns meios de comunicação e revistas acadêmicas. Envolve-se criticamente com esta teoria das Relações Internacionais e oferece as vantagens e limitações, interpretações e perspectivas sobre ela, considerando a agressão na Ucrânia. Acima de tudo, discute as vantagens – preocupações de segurança, princípios de ética, defesa da independência nacional, difusão da democracia – e as desvantagens – ameaças à segurança, falácia do comércio, retorno geopolítico da Rússia, falta de análise a nível estatal – os espetáculos do liberalismo implica. O liberalismo é convincente na análise dos factos e tem um bom enquadramento teórico para explorar acontecimentos históricos e geopolíticos. No entanto, corre o risco de ser demasiado ingénua e incompleto no seu diagnóstico.

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Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Russia attacked Ukraine, provoking the most massive land military invasion since the Cold War's end on European soil. The event shocked the world and triggered a wave of sanctions against Moscow, accused of wanting to destroy not just Ukraine, but also the liberal international world, rule of law, and peace. The Russian war against Ukraine – officially justified by supposed fears of NATO's expansion and the need to protect Russian minorities abroad – is a wide-scale attack on liberal values that governed international affairs in the last thirty years. It raises questions for the West, the liberal order, and liberalism in International Relations. The invasion triggered a clash of two conceptions of power: “On the side of the invader, power is primarily about military force projection and aims to destroy, kill, and intimidate. On the side of the Euro-Atlantic West, power is [...] based on shared principles and rules as well as on multilateral institutions” (Makarychev 2022).

The attitude of much of the liberal scholars has been of unequivocal condemnation of Russian aggression, but what are the advantages and disadvantages of liberal analysis, interpretations, and outlooks of the conflict in Ukraine? In other words, does liberalism effectively explain the war in Ukraine? This essay is based on the critical analysis of exponents of liberalism in International Relations, which appeared in influential media outlets and academic environments. The sources are mostly articles from online International Relations journals and encompass analysis of the pro-liberal approach and interpretation of the Russian war – *e.g.* Applebaum, Fukuyama, McFaul – and critical of the liberal approach – *e.g.* Mearsheimer, Trachtenberg, Walt. This does not mean these authors are political liberals in the American – center-left – or European – center-right – significance of the term. It means they support or not liberalism in International Relations about the Russian invasion.

The essay does not consider many academic sources, as the events are very recent. Thus, academic contributions on the subject are per se limited so far. However, this is also an advantage, as the essay offers an original and fresh critical review on the subject, encompassing perspectives of liberalism in International Relations. A second limitation of the paper is the difficulty in selecting authors – most of them focused on the international level according to the “levels of analysis” (Temby 2015) system. The essay also offers a concise critical analysis, of the pros and cons of liberalism in International Relations *vis-à-vis* the war in Ukraine. It introduces the theoretical frames of Liberalism; it illustrates five advantages and five disadvantages of liberal analysis on the subject; and in its conclusion it welcomes the necessity to integrate liberal theories with other International Relations' theories – liberalism might offer a satisfactory outlook on the crisis but is not enough convincing.

Exploring advantages and disadvantages

While there is no canonical description of liberalism (Doyle 1986) as such, liberalism in International Relations promotes international institutions, cooperation among actors, free market, free trade, spread of democracy and human rights, globalization, rule of law, with close focus on to the individual and its preferences, rejecting war and conflict, with gains' maximization. More recent versions merge some aspects of classical realism – particularly, power's struggle and national interests – and liberalism, with a focus on the role of information, cooperative institutions, and self-interest (Keohane-Martin 2003). Liberalism “seeks to control violence [...]. It recognizes that people will not agree on the most important things [...] but that they need to tolerate fellow citizens with views different from their own [...] by respecting [...] equal rights and dignity [...], through a rule of law and constitutional government that checks and balances the powers of modern States” (Fukuyama 2022a).

At the international realm level, liberalism promotes an open society (Stoner 2022), advocating for countries to foster economic ties. Cooperation enables shared prosperity through interdependence (Brown 2022). Liberalism in International Relations stands for defense and territorial security. It promotes democracy, maintaining that States are “driven mostly by their internal characteristics and the nature of the connections among them. It [...] maintains that conflicts arise primarily from the [...] impulses of autocrats [...]. For liberals, the solution is to topple tyrants and spread democracy, markets, and institutions based on the belief that democracies don't fight one another” (Walt 2022). The selected authors explore liberalism in International Relations, illustrating the advantages and convincing points of this approach *vis-à-vis* the war in Ukraine. Critics of liberalism and liberalism's unconvincing points are presented later on.

The first advantage, is that liberalism addresses the security concerns in International Relations by maintaining that Russia should not be afraid of NATO's expansion eastward. Liberals pundits argue that the supposed threat of NATO is an implausible explanation (Person-McFaul 2022) to justify the Russian invasion. Liberals argue that it is ludicrous that a country as large as Russia could have felt threatened by small NATO countries – *e.g.* the Baltic States. “NATO expansion has not been a *constant* source of tension between Russia and the West, but a *variable*” (*ibid.*): NATO enlargement is just an excuse for Russia to expand itself, liberals argue. Liberalism advocates for freedom of choice in the matter of international agreements, promoting the nations' self-determination. Putin “may dislike NATO expansion, but he is not genuinely frightened by it” (*ibid.*). NATO expansion reached its high point more than fifteen years ago: it hardly represents a new threat today (Mulligan 2022).

Second, liberalism promotes principles of ethics and humanism, as well as a free economy. In the liberal mindset, the three things go together. After the invasion of Ukraine, many Western companies left the Federation, as “liberal conditions” for doing business were

no longer there. Liberalism in International Relations always promotes business and uses economics as a “tool” of power and does not ignore absolute power; it just does not give the importance realism does. However, critics of the liberal point have a fair point when they contest the Western retaliation as inconsistent with the liberal approach. Some consider that the Western responses to Russia’s invasion are eroding liberal values (Dax 2022), such as freedom of expression, economic openness, and diplomacy (*ibid.*). However, liberalism is no pacifism and is not appeasement to illegal violations of the global order. Sanctions might prevent other States’ Russian-like invasions (Kramer 2022) or in the field of human rights.

Third, liberalism stresses the need to defend national independence from violations of international norms. Russia’s disregard for international sovereignty sparked fears in the field of security (Way 2022): after the invasion of Ukraine liberal democratic States acted consequently. As liberalism advocates for institutions and cooperation, Western reactions are consistent with this approach. On the other hand, the attack on Russia showed that contempt for institutionalism and interstate cooperation leads to reactions. “Russian military action poses challenges for the status quo powers [...]. International orders risk becoming meaningless if the norms and institutions are not enforced and States can violate them with relative impunity” (Mulligan 2022). Despite dilemmas, cooperation and respect for international law cannot be unilateral. Otherwise, interdependence will not lead to peace, which are achieved when everyone agrees on fundamental principles in the international realm.

Fourth, as liberalism looks with favor the spread of democracy, it is not a coincidence that Russian key motivation to invade was to prevent the thriving of democracy in Ukraine – liberals argue. What caused the crisis in the first place was Ukrainians’ desire to live in an open and democratic society (Zakaria 2022). Indeed, Putin’s primary threat is not NATO, but democracy (Person-McFaul 2022). Tyrannies and autocratic regimes fear freedom. Despite their claim to be democratic, they do despise true democracy. “Putin’s fear of a successful, vibrant, *democratic* Ukraine on Russia’s border is the real reason for the invasion. Nothing scares Putin more than for Ukraine to become a successful alternative model to the rotten, authoritarian system” (Kramer 2022). And again, while Putin dislikes the idea that Ukraine might join NATO one day, his attack was not led by this fear (Fukuyama 2022b): the concern was about democracy spreading in ex-Soviet States.

Fifth, democracies respond to attacks. The Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) asserts that democracies do not usually go to war against each other and that democracies go to war against autocracies, especially for self-defense, if attacked (Doyle 1986). These two assumptions are also the case in Ukraine: Kyiv responded when attacked and has not gone to war with other democracies. Secondly, Kyiv responded when attacked by Russia, more of an elective autocracy rather than a democracy. Putin underestimated the fact that democracies

are resistant and counterattack to defend themselves. As Ukraine counterattacked, the West fought back with sanctions – favored by liberal pundits to tackle autocracies (Makarychev 2022). “*There is no natural liberal world order, and there are no rules without someone to enforce them.* Unless democracies defend themselves [...], the forces of autocracy will destroy them” (Applebaum 2022). And consistently with liberalism, Ukraine defended itself.

Among the disadvantages in considering the war in Ukraine war via liberalism’ lenses, there are disadvantages mainly addressed by realist and neorealist tradition. First, security threats. Liberalism does not analyze much the logic of regional powers. Ukraine might represent an existential security threat to Russia (Way 2022). Realism would argue that the Orange Revolution undermined Putin’s intention to establish an exclusive sphere of influence in the former USSR’s territories (Person-McFaul 2022). Liberalism does not consider territorial expansion as a rightful way for States to behave. The Russian invasion worsened the country’s economy – a topic pointed out by liberalism – and its attempt to rebuild an empire (Stoner 2022). Liberals did not consider possible Ukraine threats to Russia – which, in a realist way, “treats Ukraine as a vital national security interest and has professed its readiness to use military force if that interest is threatened” (Trenin 2021).

Second, liberal literature seems to assume that every country wants or takes trade seriously. This is a mistake, as Putin is willing to destroy its economy to win the war he triggered. Liberalism explained that increased integration of Russia within the West after the USSR’s collapse would encourage the country to liberalize further (Way 2022). This did not occur. Liberal analysts seem to forget that trade *might* lead to war. “The Russian resort to military force within the context of an interdependent international system demonstrates how patterns of economic interdependence can result in military conflict, despite the predictions of liberal theorists” (Mulligan 2022). Trade might bring peace and stability, but also hierarchies and exclusions (*ibid.*) – and this is a valid point of liberalism’s critics. Furthermore, in contrast with liberalism and maximum gains politics, countries absorb much punishment to protect their interests (Mearsheimer 2014). And currently, Russia is just doing this.

Third, liberalism appears unfit to explain the “return of Russia” on the world stage. A Cold War man, Putin is a realist and believes in power politics, empire, the spheres of influence, and that Russia – being a great world power – has a say over its neighbors’ political decisions (Person-McFaul 2022). Unfortunately, liberals do not consider the reality of States’ sizes or influence. That is why it is often accused by realists of having enabled the outbreak of war in Crimea in 2014 (Gasparini 2021) and Ukraine in 2022. Neorealist Mearsheimer (2014) argues that the U.S. and its European allies “share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The taproot of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West”. Liberalism is accused of forgetting power

politics and the West's provocative role toward Russia – “Liberal illusions caused the Ukraine crisis” (Walt 2022).

Fourth, liberalism is too much based on the individual level of analysis, while often neglecting the State-level of analysis. Most importantly, it does not consider the risks of anarchy in International Relations. Famously, Waltz (2018 [1959]) argued that anarchy is the permissive cause of war, and Putin attacked knowing there was no global enforcer of the liberal order. Realism is right on this point, while liberalism argues that international cooperation, and economic influence will prevent a resort to military actions. In this liberalism is wrong – especially if a partner (Russia) does not commit itself to the liberal rules and institutions to tackle anarchy. Mearsheimer criticizes liberal world politics (international system of levels of analysis): “They tend to believe that the logic of realism holds little relevance in the twenty-first century and that Europe can be kept whole and free based on such liberal principles” (Mearsheimer 2014). This failed in the Ukraine case.

Fifth, liberalism and its scholars are often too optimistic, which does not always help in international politics. Particularly with the war in Ukraine case, one cannot be sure that, as many liberal pundits and analysts hope, European liberal democracies will continue to stand together against the Russian elective autocracy. A global liberal crusade against Russia might be a utopia. Because of the Western democracies' response, Putin's invasion might ultimately strengthen the liberal order (Way 2022). Liberal democracies indeed do have historically a good degree of cohesion in the moment of danger to their existence, but it is difficult – and pundits are silent about that – to predict how long it will last. However, liberalism maintains its naïve optimism: “The combination of moral clarity and existential peril proved a potent mix in motivating European powers to act, marking a profound shift in their policies toward Russia” (*ibid.*).

Conclusion

Considering the war in Ukraine, the essay offered the limitations, interpretations, and outlooks of liberalism in International Relations. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach have been exposed through relevant scholarship and their texts. Liberalism is convincing in analyzing the facts and has a good theoretical frame for exploring historical and geopolitical events. It draws on the peaceful tradition of the relationship between trade and repudiation of war, institutionalism, cooperation, internal security, and human rights. However, it risks being too naïve and incomplete. Based on the international realm of the “levels of analysis”, liberal authors critically address security threat concerns; they defend the principles of classical liberalism; invoke the need to defend Ukraine's independence; illustrate how authoritarian States fear the flourishing of democracies; and finally, they find a correlation with the DPT's assumption of democracies' self-defense.

On the other hand, following other authors' analysis, liberalism does not seem to be convincing and has disadvantages. Liberals do not analyze the Russian fear of having a potential hostile neighbor; not all States want to link trade to peace; States do seek influence; liberals do not address much anarchy in International Relations; finally, there is no assurance that liberal States will continue to oppose Russia. There is no perfect theory to analyze the invasion of Ukraine. Liberalism in International Relations has advantages and disadvantages in doing so. A good dosage of theories to interpret historical events and elements might be the correct way to analyze the events. Liberalism and the selected authors are half satisfactory in explaining the case – but this is not enough. But in response to realism's logic, "precisely because there is no liberal world order, no norms, and no rules, we must fight ferociously for the values and the hopes of liberalism if we want our open societies to continue to exist" (Applebaum 2022).

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