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How Realism Relates to the Russia-Ukraine War: A Case Study

- Disha Parmar

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine War is one of the most significant conflicts of the 21st century. The war began in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, a region that had been part of Ukraine but was of immense importance to Moscow from both a historical and strategic perspective.¹ What initially appeared to be a minor territorial dispute gradually escalated into a full-scale invasion by the year 2022, resulting in Europe's largest land war since World War II. This war not only increased human suffering but also completely altered the global balance of power and security.²

International Relations (IR) provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding this complex and multi-layered conflict.³ IR theories help explain why states behave the way they do, whether for moral, strategic, or power-related reasons. Of these theories, Realism appears most relevant to the analysis of the Russia-Ukraine war because it focuses directly on power, security, and national interest, the very factors driving both Moscow's aggression and the West's response.⁴

What is Realism?

Realism is a theory of international relations (IR) that holds that the world system is anarchic, meaning that there is no central authority or supreme power over states.⁴ Every State act to

¹ The Geopolitics, 'A Realist Perspective: Russia and Ukraine' (The Geopolitics, 2022) <<https://thegeopolitics.com/a-realist-perspective-russia-and-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

² Institute for Greater Europe, 'Revisiting the Russia-Ukraine War through the Lens of Realism' (Institute for Greater Europe, 2022) <<https://institutegreatereurope.com/publications/research-pieces/revisiting-the-russiaukraine-war-through-the-lens-of-realism/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

³ The Kilorant Blog, 'Exploring Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding the Ukraine-Russia Conflict through Realism and Liberalism' (The Kilorant Blog, 2022) <<https://www.thekilorant.blog/post/exploringtheoreticalframeworks-understanding-the-ukraine-russia-conflict-through-realism-liberal>> accessed 17 September 2025. ⁴ Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI), 'The Realist Case for Ukraine' (FPRI, 2023) <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/the-realist-case-for-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

⁴ Aleezay Gul, 'Revisiting the Russia-Ukraine War through the Lens of Realism' (Institute for Greater Europe, 2022) <<https://institutegreatereurope.com/publications/research-pieces/revisiting-the-russia-ukrainewarthrough-the-lens-of-realism/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

protect its survival and national interest. Realists state that they always seek to be strengthened and maximize their power, sometimes for security or sometimes to dominate others. Some key concepts of realism are the security dilemma, where one state's efforts to increase its own security leave other states feeling threatened; the balance of power, which aims to prevent any single state from becoming so powerful that others are controlled; and the understanding that states do not have permanent friends, only permanent interests, which guide their foreign policy decisions.⁵

Security Dilemma and NATO Expansion

The realist interpretation of the Russia-Ukraine war considers the Security Dilemma a major factor.⁶ NATO's eastward expansion was seen as a direct threat to Russia. Ukraine's shift toward Western institutions, particularly the European Union (EU) and NATO, signaled to Moscow that its strategic buffer zone was eroding. According to realism, when one side becomes more powerful, the other side feels insecure and responds aggressively. From this perspective, Russia's 2022 invasion is seen as a reaction to NATO's perceived expansion in order to protect its sphere of influence.⁸

Balance of Power and Spheres of Influence

According to Realism theory, countries always try to maintain a balance of power. The main aim of every country is to ensure that no other country becomes so powerful that it can challenge its security or influence. The situation of Russia and Ukraine provides a strong example to understand this theory.

Historically, Ukraine has not only been a neighboring country for Russia, but has also acted as a strategic buffer zone. Ukraine's geographical location plays an important role in Russia's military security and defense planning. For example, if any Western military alliance increases its influence in Ukraine, Russia could feel a direct threat near its borders. Similarly, Ukraine's location near the Black Sea is also very valuable for Russia's naval strength, as Russia can control its maritime routes and military presence from this region.⁶

⁵ Kelly Watt, 'Exploring Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding the Ukraine–Russia Conflict through Realism and Liberalism' (The Kilorant Blog, 2022) <<https://www.thekilorant.blog/post/exploring-theoreticalframeworksunderstanding-the-ukraine-russia-conflict-through-realism-liberal>> accessed 17 September 2025. ⁶ Matthew MacKay, 'A Realist Perspective: Russia and Ukraine' (The Geopolitics, 2022) <<https://thegeopolitics.com/a-realist-perspective-russia-and-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025. ⁸ Jeffrey Mankoff, 'The Realist Case for Ukraine' (FPRI, 2023) <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/the-realistcase-forukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

⁶ Alezay Gul, 'Revisiting the Russia–Ukraine War through the Lens of Realism' (Institute for Greater Europe, 2022) <<https://institutegreatereurope.com/publications/research-pieces/revisiting-the-russia-ukrainewarthrough-the-lens-of-realism/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

A practical example of this is the 2014 Crimea incident.⁷ When Ukraine's political situation became unstable and the pro-Russian leadership was removed, Russia established control over Crimea. Crimea holds strategic importance for Russia because it is home to the Sevastopol naval base, considered a major center of Russia's naval operations. If Russia were to lose control of this area, its maritime power could be significantly weakened.

From the perspective of international law and global politics, the takeover of Crimea is considered illegal and controversial. But realism theory states that countries often prioritize their national interests and security priorities over moral or legal principles. To illustrate this logic, the Cold War can be cited as an example in history, where both the United States and the Soviet Union were trying to expand their influence and control the other in order to maintain the balance of power.

Similarly, Russia's control of Crimea and subsequent military activities can be understood as a calculated strategy. Russia probably wanted to ensure that Western alliances such as NATO could not establish a strong foothold in its neighboring regions.⁸ If seen from a realist perspective, this step can be considered as an attempt by Russia to protect its regional dominance and security.

Offensive Realism & Power Maximization

To understand Realism, it's important to examine its two major strands: Defensive and Offensive Realism.

- Defensive realists declare that the primary motive of states is to maintain their security and stability. They seek preservation, not expansion, through their actions. Viewed from this perspective, some of Russia's actions, such as its reaction to NATO expansion, may be defensive, designed to prevent threats near its borders.
- Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that great powers are never satisfied. They always strive to increase their power and influence.⁹ From this perspective, Russia's

⁷ Daniel Pelu-Jones, 'The Russia-Ukraine War: An Analysis of Realism and Liberalism Theoretical Perspectives on the War' (Academia.edu, 2023)

<https://www.academia.edu/124600045/THE_RUSSIA_UKRAINE_WAR_An_analysis_of_Realism_and_Liberalism_Theoretical_Perspectives_on_the_War> accessed 17 September 2025.

⁸ The Geopolitics, 'A Realist Perspective: Russia and Ukraine' (The Geopolitics, 2022) <https://thegeopolitics.com/a-realist-perspective-russia-and-ukraine/> accessed 17 September 2025.

⁹ Jeffrey Mankoff, 'The Realist Case for Ukraine' (FPRI, 2023) <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/therealistcase-for-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

invasion was not merely a defense, but an offensive move, an attempt to assert its dominance, challenge the West, and reassert its position as a great power.¹⁰

Realism in Western Responses

Realism not only explains Russia's actions but also justifies the West's responses. Western states imposed heavy sanctions and provided military and financial support to Ukraine - all of this was part of balancing strategies.¹² The West sought to prevent Russia from becoming overpowerful, because that would have permanently disrupted the European balance. In Realist terms, supporting Ukraine was not just a moral or ethical decision, but a strategic move to contain Russia.¹¹

Strategic Outcomes in Practice

If seen on the ground, realism is clearly reflected. Crimea annexation gave Russia strong control over the Black Sea and secured its naval interests. The use of Russian proxies in the Donbas conflict was a typical realist indirect control strategy. And the 2022 invasion was a clear example of power politics, where survival and dominance drove state behavior.¹²

Ukrainian Resistance

While Realism explains state actions based on power and interest, it ignores a crucial aspect: the human spirit and resistance. Ukraine's resistance is based not only on military strength, but also on its people's patriotism, unity, and sense of sovereignty. Despite extremely difficult circumstances, Ukrainian citizens, soldiers, and leaders presented a united front. Their struggle brings an emotional and moral dimension; it shows that sometimes a nation's will and identity are stronger than the logic of power politics.¹³

¹⁰ Kelly Watt, 'Exploring Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding the Ukraine–Russia Conflict through Realism and Liberalism' (The Kilorant Blog, 2022) <<https://www.thekilorant.blog/post/exploring-theoreticalframeworksunderstanding-the-ukraine-russia-conflict-through-realism-liberal>> accessed 17 September 2025. ¹² Alezay Gul, 'Revisiting the Russia–Ukraine War through the Lens of Realism' (Institute for Greater Europe, 2022) <<https://institutegreatereurope.com/publications/research-pieces/revisiting-the-russia-ukraine-warthroughthe-lens-of-realism/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

¹¹ Matthew MacKay, 'A Realist Perspective: Russia and Ukraine' (The Geopolitics, 2022) <<https://thegeopolitics.com/a-realist-perspective-russia-and-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

¹² Jeffrey Mankoff, 'The Realist Case for Ukraine' (FPRI, 2023) <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/01/therealistcase-for-ukraine/>> accessed 17 September 2025.

¹³ Academia.edu, 'The Russia–Ukraine War: An Analysis of Realism and Liberalism Theoretical Perspectives on the War' (Academia.edu, 2023)

Limitations of Realism and Empathetic Reflection

Realism theory provides a strong framework, but not a complete explanation. This theory ignores the moral, cultural, and emotional aspects of conflicts. It also overlooks the role economic interdependence and international institutions (UN and EU) played during the war through sanctions, diplomacy, and humanitarian aid. Most importantly, realism ignores the human cost of war: the destroyed cities, displaced families, and trauma of the millions of people living through this conflict.

If viewed through an empathetic lens, no theory can justify the pain of this war. Realism can explain why Russia initiated the war, but it cannot determine whether it was justified. War may serve national interest, but it always damages the core values of humanity.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates that realism remains highly relevant in international relations (IR). Its key theories - anarchy, security dilemma, balance of power, and power amplification help directly explain Russia's actions and Western reactions.

If we critically examine the entire conflict through the lens of Realism, we emerge with a balanced picture; the theory is both powerful and limited. Realism accurately predicts that rivalries and conflicts are inevitable in a power-driven world. It logically explains Russia's reaction to NATO expansion and the West's balancing strategies. But it also reveals a moral blindness; it fails to address human suffering and ethical responsibility.

In today's interconnected world, wars are fought not just for territory, but also for identity, legitimacy, and justice. The Russia-Ukraine War proved that Realism's outdated assumptions are insufficient for a modern, emotional, and globalized world. Where public opinion, media, and humanitarian concerns influence policy, power politics alone provide an incomplete explanation.

Therefore, only by combining Realism with Liberalism (which focuses on cooperation and institutions) and Constructivism (which understands ideas and identity) can we truly understand both the logic and tragedy of this war.

Realism provides a clear framework for understanding this war as a struggle for security and survival in an anarchic world. But for a holistic understanding, other perspectives must also be considered. Still, Realism is the most convincing lens for explaining power dynamics.

<https://www.academia.edu/124600045/THE_RUSSIA_UKRAINE_WAR_An_analysis_of_Realism_and_Liberalism_Theoretical_Perspectives_on_the_War> accessed 17 September 2025.