Polgári Szemle, 13. évf. 1–3. szám, 2017, 362–369., DOI: 10.24307/psz.2017.0930

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Contemporary Realism in Theory and Practice

The Case of the Ukrainian Crisis

Summary
This paper analyzes the Ukrainian crisis through the lenses of the contemporary realist schools of the theory of international relations. One the one hand, it is claimed that Russian responses were motivated by the logic of the balance of powers, upset by actions taken by the West. On the other hand, we prove that realism still has significant explanatory power in the context of 21st century.

Journal of Economic Literature (JEL) codes: F50, F51, F59
Keywords: international relations theory, realism, Ukraine, Russia

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The significance of realist thinking in international relations is unquestionable. Realism has been the predominant theory after the emergence of international relations as an academic discipline, and despite harsh criticism it has considerable relevance in the globalized world of the 21st century (Dunne–Schmidt, 2014:99–112). Nevertheless, it cannot be regarded as the sole theory, as several schools of realism exist parallel to one another. Nowadays, and especially after the end of the Cold War, three different schools predominate the realist way of thinking: defensive realism, offensive realism and neo-classical realism.

In this paper it is claimed that realism undoubtedly has a significant explanatory power in the field of international relations, however, different schools of realism

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emphasize different aspects of practical phenomena. As a result, a weakness of one theory can be the strength of the other, but at the end of the day, realism as a bunch of different theories suitable for explaining and interpreting the events of world politics.

To prove the above claims, the recent Ukrainian crisis is analyzed. Theorists and analysts interpret this crisis differently. One may claim that Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive personality and antidemocratic attitude is responsible for the recent events, while others might blame Western intelligence services for the ouster of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. In this paper, we claim that the outbreak of the military conflict is rooted in the structure of the international system and its features made Russia to act aggressively. To argue for this view, we use the analytical framework of offensive realism. In addition, we also invoke a defensive realist approach (the other significant branch of structural realism) and neo-classical realist ideas to make a comparison with and supplement the offensive realist way of thinking.

The paper is structured as follows: the main characteristics of the three schools of contemporary realism are described, then they are applied to the Ukrainian case. Finally, we conclude the main findings of the paper.

Contemporary Theories of Realism

Although this paper focuses on contemporary realist theories, it is unavoidable to spare some words on their background. Although the description of classical realism – influenced by the Thukydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes – falls beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that Morgenthau's classical realism was the predominant school after WWII. Based on a pessimistic view of man, this unit-level approach deduced its findings from human nature. Classical realists claimed that since states are led by people, they also act like people: one state is a wolf to another state and this is the reason why they pursue power.[1]

Structural realists also view international politics as a dangerous game led by pursuit of power but their approach is quite different. Instead of classical realists' state-level angle, structural realists (also called neo-realists) claim for a systemic approach and deduct their findings from the structure of international system. This tradition – inspired by natural sciences and economic theories of industrial organizations – was started by Waltz's seminal works and has been followed by others in the recent decades (Waltz, 1959; 1979). Nowadays, the Waltzian way of structural realism is often called "defensive realism", while another notable branch, offensive realism also plays an important role in contemporary structural realist thinking (Mearsheimer, 2013, 77–93).

In spite of this, structural realism has often been criticized for not being able to explain new global phenomena of the 21st century. Therefore a new school of thoughts, neo-classical realism has emerged. In certain respects it reaches back to the roots of classical realism to supplement the presumed incompleteness of neo-realism (Jackson–Sorensen, 2013).

In the following subsections the main features of the three latter theories are characterized. Since our further analysis is primarily based on offensive realism, the

description begins with its characteristics including the overview of basic properties of structural realism in the broader sense. Then the differentiating attributes of the other two schools are analyzed.

Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer is considered to be the leading scholar in offensive realism. The description below about the nature of offensive realism is based on his seminal book – *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* – and his other works (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Offensive realism is built on five bedrock assumptions:

1.) The international system is anarchic. In this respect, anarchy is not equal to chaos but refers to the lack of hierarchy. It means that there is no central authority, "no night watchman" that states could turn to for help in the case of emergency (Mearsheimer, 2010:387).

2.) Realism traditionally focuses on states but offensive realism emphasizes that great powers are the major players of international politics and each of them possesses some offensive military capacity. It implies that "states are potentially dangerous to each other" (Mearsheimer, 2001:30).

3.) "States can never be certain about other states' intentions" (Mearsheimer, 2001:31). This assumption does not refer to the necessity of hostile intentions but emphasizes the danger of uncertainty.

4.) The primary goal of states is survival. They may have further objectives but they cannot seek them without securing their own existence. Therefore, survival is more important than any other motive.

5.) States are rational actors. This assumption does not exclude the possibility of miscalculation but claims that states think strategically and act intentionally and rationally in their best interest (Mearsheimer, 2009:241–256).

Mearsheimer emphasizes that none of these assumptions alone implies that states will act aggressively towards each other, but the "marriage" between these five assumptions create a dangerous world. Under these circumstances states are afraid of each other and the only way to secure their own survival is to gain as much power as possible. However, this intensifies the sense of insecurity in other states that also make efforts at acting similarly.

In this respect, power is a tool to guarantee survival. In the realist school of international politics, power is usually measured by military capacities, but Mearsheimer claims that military power is based on the socio-economic background of countries. As a result, wealth and the population – as the basis of latent power – also matter.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of power leads to security competition – or a security dilemma, in Herzian terms – where "most steps a great power takes to enhance its own security decrease the security of other states" (Mearsheimer, 2013:80). Under these circumstances, the best way for a state to survive is reaching hegemony, in other words, ruling the system. However, Mearsheimer claims that achieving global hegemony is unattainable because of the large bodies of water on the globe. Since offensive

realism argues for the primacy of conventional military forces (i.e. nuclear weapons only serve defensive goals), oceans prevent great powers from obtaining and sustaining dominance over distant continents. As a consequence, great powers seek to gain regional hegemony and preempt other states "in other regions from duplicating their feat" (Mearsheimer, 2006:160).

Nonetheless, this behavior always generates conflicts between states. The pursuit of regional hegemony affects the interest of neighboring states because it upsets the balance of powers in favour of the emerging great power. According to the theory of offensive realism, the affected states can respond in either of two ways: they may form a balancing coalition against the potential hegemon, or choose a 'buck-passing'[2] strategy. In addition, the prevention of the emergence of another regional hegemon (in another region) is also a conflictual process. In as much as the existing regional hegemon wants other regions to be divided it has to contain aspiring hegemons by forming balancing coalition against them. As a consequence, the rise of a great power – which is encoded in the logic of the security competition under anarchy – always leads to conflicts and aggressive strategies. At the end of the day, this is the reason why "international politics is a nasty and dangerous business" and according to Mearsheimer "that is the tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer, 2006:162).

Defensive Realism

Waltz's theory of international politics (Waltz, 1979) represented the "original" way of structural realist thinking, but after the emergence of Mearsheimer's offensive realism, it has often been labelled as "defensive realism" (Jackson–Sorensen, 2013; Mearsheimer, 2013). Nowadays, prominent scholars like Posen, Snyder and Van Evera belong to this school of thought. Since offensive realism is built on Waltz's system-level approach in many respects, the general features of structural realism are not repeated here. However, the following description provides an overview of those ideas of defensive realism which differ from those of offensive realism.

The main debate between the two schools of structural realism concerns the "adequate amount" of power. Contrary to offensive realism, defensive realists do not think that states want as much power as possible (Mearsheimer, 2013). Instead, they are considered to strive only for the appropriate amount of power (Waltz, 1989:39–52) to maintain the existing balance of powers and to prevent the trigger of a counterbalancing coalition against them (Dunne–Schmidt, 2014).

Furthermore, defensive realists claim that the costs of conquest often exceed its benefits. In other words, the "balance between offense and defence" – which is an important subject of investigation among defensive realists – favours the defensive strategy on many occasions (Van Evera, 1998:5–43). Therefore, rational actor states prefer the maintenance of balance of powers to acting aggressively towards others.

In sum, "defensive realism presents a slightly more optimistic view of international politics" (Taliaferro, 2000:159). Although defensive realists also claim that great powers seek to guarantee their survival in the anarchic structure of international relations,

they emphasize that since the pursuit of power can easily backfire, states "temper their appetite for power" (Mearsheimer, 2013:82).

Neo-Classical Realism

The end of the Cold War basically changed the international system. New phenomena emerged that challenged structural realism too. It also provoked the emergence of a new school of realism: neo-classical realism. Neo-classical realists (e.g. Rose, Schweller, Zakaria) built their theories mostly on Waltz's structural realism, however, they also reached back to the roots of classical realism. Moreover, they were also inspired by liberal approaches that dominated international relations theory at the turn of the millenium (Jackson–Sorensen, 2013).

Neo-classical realists attempt to include additional – individual and domestic factors – in their analysis in order to move beyond the parsimonous assumptions of neo-realism (Dunne–Schmidt, 2014). Although they aknowledge the structural realist argument about the importance of the international anarchy, they claim that the structure of the international system only provides incentives for states but it does not predetermine their behavior. The outcome of foreign policy is influenced by internal characteristics of state and political leadership, as well as by domestic societal actors, like interest groups too (Lobell–Ripsman–Taliaferro, 2009; Rose, 1998:144–172). As Rose claims, this approach has much in common with historical that of institutionalist too. Nonetheless, in this regard, states are not treated as "like units", and foreign policy becomes an important tool that may help scholars to explain different strategies among nations (Dunne–Schmidt, 2014).

The Ukrainian Crisis

In 2014, several revolutionary events took place in the Ukraine that provoked the Russian annexation of the Crimea. However, the outbreak of a military crisis was preceded by actions taken by Western countries. In the current section the analytical framework of offensive realism (with further additions) is used to claim that the outbreak of the crisis was encoded in the international structure and the aggressive Russian response was inevitable under the current circumstances.

According to the offensive realist arguments, the NATO expansion and the European Union association process are two major factors that must not be neglected in relation to the Ukrainian crisis (Mearsheimer, 2014:1–12). Firstly, the 2008 NATO summit held in Bucharest made an attempt at getting the Ukraine closer to the West. The Summit Declaration stated that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO" and "these countries will become members of NATO".[3] Although further virtual steps were not taken for the military incorporation of Ukraine into the Western alliance, the declaration of intent above may be considered as a direct threat from the Russian point of view. The expansion of the European Union had a similar but more direct effects on the conflict. Following the

launch of its Eastern Partnership Programme in 2008, the European Union planned to sign an association agreement with the Ukraine, which was declined by Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich at the end of 2013. This association would have meant the economic integration of Ukraine in the West. However, this act would have been a hostile action to Russia's interest. Nevertheless, this veto provoked serious protests in the Ukraine that led to the overthrow of President Yanukovich and finally made Russia to respond by military intervention in Ukraine.

Anyway, the structural realist (both offensive and defensive realist) interpretation of the events is straightforward: the Ukraine's incorporation into the Western – either economic or military – institutions would have upset the balance of powers, and Russia could not let that happen. The reason why Putin answered aggressively was not of his personal attitude or irrationality but since the structure of international system made him to act so. As Western actions attempted to alter the status quo of the relative power which would reduce Russia's sense of security, the principles of realists' self-help world forced Putin to react by military means. In this respect, Russian military intervention in the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine served as a radical step towards the recuperation of the balance of powers.

Nevertheless, the explanations given for the Western strategy may differ among – and even within – different realist approaches. The fact that the virtual actor behind the term "West" is not straightforward also complicates interpretation. Although the United States can be considered as a major actor in the conflict, officially it has nothing to do with the European Union's association agreement. Considering the European Union as the main Western actor is also problematic: according to structural realism, states are the only significant players in international politics, moreover, the European Union does not even have an effective common foreign policy. Nonetheless, we ignore these counterarguments and consider that the US (as the leading country of NATO) and the European Union as such were the main actors within the Western alliances.

Regarding NATO expansion, a regular offensive realist argument could suggest that the United States – as a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere – wanted to prevent the emergence of another potential regional hegemon. However, Russia cannot be considered as an aspiring hegemon. In spite of Europe's dependence on Russian energy, Russia is not a prosperous country. Although it has remarkable military capacities, their technology is quite old-fashioned and the country's latent power – based on its economic potential – is also weak. Thus as Mearsheimer claims (Mearsheimer, 2014), Russia is a declining power which implies that the United States need not have to make attempts at containing it by expanding NATO's sphere of interest.

Accepting the above argument, offensive realists might also claim that a miscalculation or simply mistaken decisions were made both in the US and in the European Union. Such actions are more common if the security of the state is not in danger, as then they can pursue further goals besides survival. In this respect, one might claim that overconfidence about their own security made the US and the European Union to move into Russia's backyard without thinking through the consequences of this act.

The Ukraine's Western integration does not fit into the defensive realist theory either. According to them, rational actors temper their appetite for power in order to prevent conflicts. Nonetheless, this did not happen to the West in the case of the Ukrainian crisis, and as a result, instead of maintaining the balance of powers, they upset it.

However, neo-classical realism may provide explanations for these strategically wrong actions. They might claim that American and European decision-makers were influenced by domestic factors (e.g. need for vote-maximization in domestic politics; pressure from the proponents of democracy export and from business interest groups etc.). According to this interpretation, constraints on the anarchic international system were ineffective on Western politicians, who subjected their foreign policy to secondary goals (instead of taking care of the balance of powers).

Though, neo-classical arguments provide a plausible explanation for the behaviour of Western countries, it may shed new light on Russian strategy too. Namely, domestic factors might have influenced Russian President Putin too. Although the idea about a rough Putin who wants to show strength to his own people, come from the liberal schools of international relations, it might be compatible with neo-classical realism too. Nevertheless, this view cannot overwrite the fact – which is a recognized one in neo-classical realism too – that aggressive response was mainly motivated by the crude logic of balance of power.

Conclusions

This paper aims to overview the main characteristics of contemporary realist theories and intended to show their applicability in the globalized world of 21st century. As presented in the case study about the Ukrainian crisis, realism has not lost its explanatory power after the Cold War: the world has not changed and international relations are still governed by great power politics. We also showed that different schools of contemporary realism may perform differently in interpreting distinct aspects of international events but at the end of the day, realism as a bunch of several theories is completely able to explain them.

In the case of the Ukrainian crisis, we claimed that Russian response was primarily motivated by the logic of the balance of powers. Since the West moved into Russia's sphere of interest, Putin was forced to apply his own version of the "Monroe Doctrine" (Mearsheimer, 2014). In this respect, Russia was not driven by "evil intentions", but by the everlasting logic of great power politics.

Notes

[1] For further readings see e.g.: Lebow, 2013, 59–76.; Morgenthau, 1978.

[2] Buck-passing means that states do not act to contain emerging great powers, instead they let other states to do that job.

[3] Bucharest Summit Declaration. Official webpage of NATO, e-Library, 2008, www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

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