

LIBERALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN EXPLAINING CONTEMPORARY
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE CASE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Annotation. *International relations theory does not offer absolute truths but provides analytical tools for understanding complex global processes. This article examines how liberalism and constructivism explain contemporary international relations through the case of the European Union. The study argues that liberalism effectively explains institutional cooperation, economic interdependence, and the role of international law, while constructivism reveals the importance of identity, norms, and shared meanings. The development of the European Union demonstrates the practical success of liberal ideas, whereas challenges such as Brexit highlight the limits of institutional integration without strong collective identity. The article concludes that combining theoretical approaches allows for a more comprehensive understanding of global politics.*

Key words: *international relations, liberalism, constructivism, European Union, integration, identity, international organizations, Brexit, cooperation, norms.*

Аннотация. Теории международных отношений не являются абсолютной истиной, а выступают инструментами анализа сложных мировых процессов. В данной статье рассматривается, как либерализм и конструктивизм объясняют современные международные отношения на примере Европейского союза. Показано, что либерализм эффективно раскрывает институциональное сотрудничество, экономическую взаимозависимость и роль международного права, в то время как конструктивизм подчеркивает значение идентичности, норм и общих смыслов. Развитие Европейского союза демонстрирует практическую эффективность либеральных идей, а такие вызовы, как Brexit, выявляют ограничения институциональной интеграции без общей идентичности. Делается вывод о том, что сочетание теоретических подходов позволяет глубже понять мировую политику.

Ключевые слова: *международные отношения, либерализм, конструктивизм, Европейский союз, интеграция, идентичность, международные организации, Brexit, сотрудничество, нормы.*

Introduction

The study of International Relations (IR) theory demonstrates that theoretical frameworks do not represent absolute truths or prescriptive models of how the international system must function.

Rather, they are analytical tools grounded in specific assumptions that enable scholars to interpret and explain the complexity of global politics. As frequently emphasized in contemporary IR scholarship, theories provide structured lenses through which seemingly chaotic phenomena, such as wars, alliances, sanctions, and integration processes, can be understood as patterned and meaningful interactions.

In the absence of theoretical frameworks, international politics appears fragmented and unpredictable. However, theoretical approaches reveal underlying regularities in state behavior, including the conditions under which states cooperate, engage in conflict, violate norms, or voluntarily constrain their sovereignty. In this sense, theory transforms disorder into structured analysis and events into processes. A critical insight derived from the study of IR is that no single theory offers a comprehensive explanation of international reality. Each framework captures only a partial dimension of global politics. Consequently, the ability to combine and critically engage multiple theoretical perspectives becomes essential for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary international relations.

This article adopts such a pluralist approach by examining liberalism and constructivism as complementary analytical frameworks. These theories are particularly relevant due to their shared emphasis on institutions, norms, and social interaction, albeit from different perspectives. The analysis is conducted through the case of the European Union, which represents one of the most advanced and illustrative examples of international cooperation and regional integration in the modern world.

Liberalism in International Relations

Liberalism is often mischaracterized as an overly idealistic approach that underestimates the realities of power and conflict. However, such interpretations oversimplify its theoretical foundations. Rather than denying the existence of war or competition, liberalism seeks to address a fundamental question: *under what conditions can cooperation become more sustainable and conflict less frequent?*¹

The intellectual roots of liberal thought can be traced to early modern philosophy, particularly to the works of Hugo Grotius and Immanuel Kant. Hugo Grotius, in his treatise *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625), was one of the thinkers who laid the foundations of what we now call international law by addressing the legitimacy of war and the limits of acceptable behavior.

The logic here is very “mature”. If wars do occur, the next rational step is to agree on rules so that the world does not turn into endless bloodshed². Another key element of the liberal tradition is Immanuel Kant and his essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795). An important detail is that Kant wrote this text not in a calm era, but against the backdrop of severe European turbulence. Yet he still reasoned as if to say: “yes, *“the state of nature” includes conflict, but human nature also contains something else - the desire to live, to be free, and to prosper, and war contradicts these aspirations*”. Therefore, a society that has achieved a higher level of freedom and material well-being is more likely to “count the cost” of war and to gravitate toward trade and cooperation instead³.

Contemporary liberalism builds upon these foundations by integrating normative values, such as human rights, democracy, and freedom, with practical mechanisms, including international institutions, legal frameworks, and economic cooperation. One of the central arguments of liberal theory is that interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict.

¹Vasiliy Zharkov (2015). “Liberalism in IR”. *PostNauka*.

²Hugo Grotius (2007). “On the Law of War and Peace”. *The Constitution Society*.

³Immanuel Kant (1903). “Perpetual Peace”. *University of Glasgow*.



When states are linked through trade, institutional commitments, and shared rules, the costs of war increase significantly, making it both economically inefficient and politically irrational.

Europe after World War II is a powerful example of this logic in practice.

Second, liberalism supports recovery and growth.

The Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods institutions demonstrated that international cooperation can accelerate economic reconstruction and stabilize entire regions. Third, trade increases prosperity.

Multilateral trade rules, such as General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO), helped expand global exchange in goods, capital, and technology, making destructive trade conflicts less

rational and more avoidable. Fourth, liberalism offers ways to address global problems that no country can solve alone. For instance: public health, climate change, environmental degradation and migration.

Examples like the eradication of smallpox or the Montreal Protocol show that collective action can work, sometimes slowly, but with real results. Finally, liberalism relies on the idea that democracies are less likely to fight one another.

The History of the European Union

The European Union is the clearest illustration of liberal logic in international relations. Its emergence and development are rooted in Europe’s traumatic twentieth-century experience. Two world wars that began on the European continent exposed the destructive nature of traditional power politics, built on balancing power, territorial competition, and national rivalry. By the mid-twentieth century, it became obvious that repeating that logic would produce new catastrophes.

European states therefore searched for a different path to security. Not through arms, but through cooperation, interdependence, and durable institutions.

From a liberal perspective, this approach is rational. Peace and stability are achieved not by eliminating competition, but by moving it into legal and institutional frameworks. Instead of constant fear of a potential enemy, states build a system where conflict becomes economically, politically, and morally costly. European integration became a real-world expression of that idea.

The first major step toward a united Europe was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951. Six states joined: Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Italy, and West Germany.

What matters here is not only the membership, but the choice of sectors: coal and steel⁴.

These resources were the foundation of industrial production and crucially, of military industry. Historically, controlling coal and steel meant the capacity to rearm quickly and prepare for war. Integrating these sectors reflected a pragmatic liberal calculation: *“if key resources are jointly managed and transparently monitored, hidden militarization becomes far more difficult”*.

In this way, the ECSC became a mechanism for preventing war through economics, law, and institutional procedures.

Equally important, the ECSC introduced supranational bodies whose decisions were binding for member states. This set a precedent for voluntary limits on sovereignty in the name of collective security an idea that later became central to the European Union.

The next major step was the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which created the European Economic Community (EEC) and Euratom. While the ECSC focused on strategic sectors, the EEC expanded integration across nearly the entire economy of member states. Under the EEC, states removed tariffs in mutual trade, eased the movement of goods, capital, and services, and began building a common market. From a liberal standpoint, this is a logical evolution: *“interdependence raises the cost of conflict and creates stable incentives for peaceful cooperation”*.⁵ When national prosperity depends directly on predictable ties with neighbors, war starts to look irrational. The Treaty of Rome also institutionalized cooperation. Integration was no longer a temporary arrangement. It became a long-term process supported by rules and governance mechanisms. This reflects a core liberal idea: *“cooperation is strongest when it is formalized in institutions and law”*.

In 1967, the ECSC, EEC, and Euratom were merged into a single structure - the European Communities. This strengthened the coherence of the project and made integration more manageable.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Communities expanded. The United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland joined in 1973, followed later by Greece, Spain, and Portugal.⁶ These enlargements showed the attraction of the European model, but they also made decision-making harder. Interests became more diverse, and compromise became more complex. Yet integration continued. In fact, growing complexity became an argument for strengthening institutions and deepening coordination. This supports a liberal insight, the deeper the interdependence, the greater the need for rules and procedures that reduce uncertainty.

The Schengen Agreement, signed in 1985 and implemented in 1995, enabled free movement of people (and easier movement of goods and capital) within much of Europe, while strengthening controls at external borders. For citizens, Shengen became one of the most tangible results of integration. Freedom of movement is not only an economic benefit. It creates social ties, mobility, and cultural exchange. Here the constructivist dimension becomes visible: *“everyday practices change how people perceive borders and belonging”*. When borders stop feeling like walls, the sense of “our” space shifts, national identity is increasingly complemented by a European one.

⁴Augusto Gayubas (2023). “History of the European Union”. *Encyclopedia of Humanities*.

⁵Augusto Gayubas (2023). “History of the European Union”. *Encyclopedia of Humanities*.

⁶World History Edu (2023). “Formation of the European Union: History and Major Facts”

A turning point came with the Maastricht Treaty, signed on 7 February 1992 and entering into force on 1 November 1993. It officially created the European Union and gave integration a new quality. Maastricht moved far beyond economics.⁷

States agreed to develop a common foreign and security policy, cooperation in justice and home affairs, and an economic and monetary union. In other words, integration touched sensitive elements of sovereignty.

From a realist perspective, this level of integration can look unlikely, because states usually resist sharing control over security and foreign policy. Liberalism, however, explains this step through long-term gains, institutional trust, and reduced uncertainty. Shared rules and procedures stabilize the system and make partners' behavior more predictable.

After the Cold War, the EU entered a period of major enlargement. Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined in 1995. In the 2000s, twelve Central and Eastern European states joined, including Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Baltic states, and others. In 2013, Croatia became the most recent member. This enlargement had a strong political meaning.

The EU became a pan-European framework rather than a "Western-only" project. But it also intensified uneven development and differences in political cultures. That is why solidarity mechanisms and redistribution became increasingly important, otherwise the common market and shared rules could deepen inequality and fuel tensions.

The European Union is a complex institutional system that makes integration real rather than symbolic. The European Council is the highest political body. It sets strategic directions and shapes the EU's overall political course. The European Parliament performs legislative and representative functions, providing democratic legitimacy.

The European Commission manages daily governance, proposes initiatives, and ensures treaty compliance. The Court of Justice of the European Union guarantees consistent application of EU law and resolves disputes between states and institutions.

Together, these institutions make the EU a unique political-legal entity. Member states voluntarily transferred part of their authority to the supranational level in exchange for predictability, stability, and efficiency. This fits liberal logic rules and institutions restrain arbitrary power and reduce the risk of conflict.

The creation of an economic and monetary union became the culmination of economic integration. The euro was introduced as a non-cash currency in 1999, and banknotes and coins entered circulation in 2002. Not all EU members adopted the euro, but the eurozone remains a symbol of deep integration and mutual dependence. The EU's economic model is built not only on competition, but also on solidarity. The EU budget is funded through member contributions, customs duties, and other sources, and a significant portion supports less developed regions.

Poland, for example, has historically received more from the EU budget than it contributes, illustrating the redistributive nature of the system. From a realist angle, this can seem irrational.

Why should stronger states help weaker ones? Liberalism explains it as an investment in systemic stability. Weak regions can generate risks for the common market, while development convergence reduces social tension and strengthens integration.

⁷Soliyev R.A. (2015). "History of International Relations and Foreign Policy"

Constructivism in International Relations

Liberalism explains the EU's economic and institutional foundations convincingly, but constructivism is crucial for understanding its stability and its internal crises. Constructivism argues that international politics is shaped not only by material interests, but also by ideas, norms, and identities. Interests are not fixed forever. They are formed through interaction

The relationship between France and Germany is a powerful example. For centuries, these states were rivals and sometimes enemies. After World War II, however, mutual perceptions gradually changed. Economic cooperation, shared institutions, and constant political dialogue created a new image of the "other", not an enemy, but a partner. This is difficult to explain through material benefit alone. It reflects a transformation of identity.

EU symbols, its flag of twelve stars, the anthem based on *Ode to Joy*, and the motto "*United in Diversity*" are not just decoration. They act as elements of a shared political culture, shaping a sense of community and creating a collective imagination in which Europe is seen as a single value-based space. This is especially visible among younger generations, for whom mobility, education programs, and a shared legal environment are part of everyday life. As a result, European identity often complements national identity and sometimes competes with it.⁸

International Organizations

Liberalism is visible not only in the EU but also in the broader system of international organizations that emerged after World War II. A key pillar of this system was the United Nations, founded in 1945. After the most devastating war in human history, the international community recognized the need for institutional mechanisms that could reduce anarchy and prevent global conflict from repeating itself. Representatives of 50 states gathered in San Francisco to draft the UN Charter, signed on 26 June 1945 and entering into force on 24 October after ratification by key powers. From the beginning, the UN was designed as a universal platform for dialogue, collective security, and peaceful dispute resolution. The liberal logic is clear: "*instead of unilateral action, states gain procedures for negotiation, rule-making, and collective decisions*"⁹.

Today the UN continues to play an important role in maintaining international peace and security, delivering humanitarian assistance, protecting human rights, and developing international law. At the same time, its agenda has expanded. The *2030 Sustainable Development Goals* represent an attempt to create a shared language and framework for addressing poverty, inequality, and climate challenges. Criticism of the UN remains valid, veto power, politicization, and limited effectiveness in acute crises reveal the limits of institutional approaches. Still, the very existence of a universal forum remains a stabilizing factor in world politics.

Alongside the UN, liberal architecture includes economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. The WTO aims to replace trade wars with rules and legal procedures, moving disputes into a legal framework and reducing uncertainty in the global economy. Yet it has clear weaknesses too, especially under rising protectionism and the politicization of trade. The IMF serves as a mechanism of financial stabilization, offering support during economic crises. It is often criticized for strict conditions and asymmetries of power, and this criticism should not be ignored.

⁸ **Megan E. Huber** (2020). "The Franco-German Relationship: From Animosity to Affinity". *Beyond Intractability*.

⁹ **Jacques Fomerand** (2026). "United Nations (international organization)". *Britannica*.

Still, from a liberal perspective, the IMF functions as a tool to prevent systemic collapse.



Overall, these organizations help create a world where cooperation is more predictable and conflict less destructive, even if no institution can eliminate conflict completely.¹⁰

Brexit

The United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union became one of the most serious challenges to the European integration project. Brexit, formally completed on 31 January 2020, was the first case of a state leaving the EU after decades of membership. It showed that integration is not irreversible and that even sophisticated institutional structures remain vulnerable to domestic political and social change.

Formally, the decision was made in the 23 June 2016 referendum, when about 52% voted to leave.¹¹ But the causes of Brexit cannot be reduced to a single factor. Economic debates (budget contributions, common market regulations) were deeply intertwined with migration, sovereignty, and national identity.

Euroskepticism in the UK grew long before the referendum. Intra-party conflict in the Conservative Party, rising nationalist sentiment, and the role of the UK Independence Party helped shape a durable image of the EU as an external force restricting national freedom. In this context, David Cameron’s 2013 promise to hold a referendum was meant to manage domestic political pressures, but it ultimately triggered a strategic rupture. The 2016 campaign revealed two competing narratives. Remain supporters emphasized the benefits of the single market and economic stability. Leave supporters appealed to the slogan of “taking back control”¹², focusing on sovereignty and independent trade policy. Migration also played a major role, especially after the 2015 crisis intensified fears within parts of British society.

The withdrawal process was long and painful. After Article 50 was triggered in March 2017, negotiations with Brussels became difficult and politically divisive. Prime Minister Theresa May faced strong parliamentary resistance, internal splits, and the particularly complex issue of Northern Ireland. The dispute over the “backstop” designed to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland, became a symbol of the tension between economic rationality and political fears.

Repeated parliamentary defeats, protests, and prolonged crisis showed how deeply Brexit divided the UK. The process was completed only after Boris Johnson’s 2019 electoral victory gave him a clear mandate to deliver withdrawal.

¹⁰Sakshi Gupta (2025). “World Trade Organization (WTO), History, Functions and Significance”. *StudyIQ*.
¹¹European Medicines Agency (2020). “Brexit: the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union”.
¹²Jeff Wallenfeldt (2026). “Brexit, United Kingdom referendum proposal”. *Britannica*.

From a constructivist perspective, Brexit is primarily a crisis of identity. Despite economic costs, a significant part of British society did not see the EU as “their” project. European identity never became dominant in Britain’s political imagination; it was overshadowed by the self-image of a sovereign and independent state. This case illustrates a key point: even the most effective institutions cannot function sustainably unless they are supported by shared norms, values, and a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that contemporary international relations cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical framework. Both liberalism and constructivism offer valuable insights, yet each captures only part of a complex reality.

The European Union serves as a compelling example of the strengths and limitations of liberalism. On the one hand, it illustrates how institutions, economic interdependence, and shared rules can foster peace and cooperation, even in regions historically marked by conflict. On the other hand, the EU also reveals the importance of ideational factors emphasized by constructivism.

Integration is not sustained by economic benefits alone; it requires shared norms, identities, and a sense of community.

Similarly, international organizations such as the United Nations, the WTO, and the IMF reflect liberal efforts to structure global politics through rules and cooperation. While imperfect, these institutions contribute to reducing uncertainty and mitigating conflict.

Ultimately, the key conclusion of this study is that theoretical pluralism provides the most comprehensive understanding of international relations. Different theories highlight different dimensions of global politics: power, interests, norms, identities, and structures.

Rather than seeking a single “correct” theory, scholars and practitioners should aim to combine complementary perspectives in order to achieve a more nuanced and realistic analysis. In this context, the future of international relations theory lies not in theoretical exclusivity, but in analytical synthesis. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of global processes and enhances the capacity to respond effectively to contemporary challenges.

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