

## The Role of Identity in the Constructivist School: A Theoretical Study with Application to the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

Tarek Al Tarawneh \* 

Political Science Department, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt.

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\* Corresponding author:  
[tarektarawneh2020@gmail.com](mailto:tarektarawneh2020@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This study aims to scrutinize the role of identity in the constructivist school and the reason for its connection with the constructivist perspective in international relations. It also deals with the impact of the components of the cultural dimension in general and the concept of identity in particular on contemporary international conflicts with application to the Russian- Ukrainian conflict

**Methods:** The study relies on the functional constructivist approach because it helps in the comparative study of political systems and it analyzes international relations from the perspective of the social construction of events.

**Results:** This study concluded that the Ukrainian crisis confirmed Russia's restoration of its natural position as a major, effective and influential power regionally and internationally. This crisis also reflected the desire of the Russian leadership to correct the imbalance of power with the United States to become a more equal relationship between two partners within the framework of a multi-power system that ends American uniqueness in managing international affairs.

**Conclusions:** Ukraine is an arena in which strategic accounts are intertwined with historical roots, as well as political and economic factors are intertwined with cultural ones.

**Keywords:** Constructivism, identity, conflict, Russia, Ukraine, Ukrainian crisis, Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

### دور الهوية في المدرسة البنائية: دراسة نظرية بالتطبيق على الصراع الروسي الأوكراني

طارق الطراونة\*

قسم العلوم السياسية، كلية الاقتصاد والعلوم السياسية، جامعة القاهرة، الجيزة، مصر.

#### ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص دور الهوية في المدرسة البنائية وأسباب ارتباطها بالمنظور البنائي في العلاقات الدولية. تتناول الدراسة أيضاً تأثير مكونات البعد الثقافي بصفة عامة ومفهوم الهوية بصفة خاصة على الصراعات الدولية المعاصرة، مع التطبيق على الصراع الروسي- الأوكراني.

المنهجية: تعتمد الدراسة على الاقتراب البنائي الوظيفي لأنه يساعد في الدراسة المقارنة للأنظمة السياسية، ويحلل العلاقات الدولية من منظور البناء الاجتماعي للأحداث

النتائج: وقد توصلت الدراسة إلى أن الأزمة الأوكرانية أكدت استعادة روسيا مكانتها الطبيعية كقوة كبرى مؤثرة وفعالة إقليمياً ودولياً. هذه الأزمة أيضاً عكست رغبة القيادة الروسية في تصحيح اختلال ميزان القوة مع الولايات المتحدة لتصبح العلاقة بينهما متكافئة داخل إطار نظام متعدد القوى، الأمر الذي يُنبئ التفرد الأمريكي في إدارة الشؤون الدولية.

الخلاصة: تُعد أوكرانيا ساحة تتشابك فيها الحسابات الاستراتيجية مع الجذور التاريخية، كما تتشابك فيها العوامل الاقتصادية مع العوامل الثقافية. الكلمات الدالة: البنائية، الهوية، الصراع، روسيا، أوكرانيا، الأزمة الأوكرانية، الصراع الروسي- الأوكراني.

## 1. Introduction

The last six decades have witnessed the domination of positivist currents with their cognitive and methodological foundations to study political phenomena. The post-cold war period has seen the emergence of some currents that criticized positivist theories. These currents were known as criticism or post-positivism. One of the most important of these currents is the constructivist theory which enables a researcher to provide theoretical foundations of phenomena that may seem separate and have no relationship between them. Consequently, the contributions of constructivism came to be a conceptual bridge capable of linking events and analyzing various international phenomena (Al – Masry, 2014, p. 314)

Identity is related to the theoretical concepts of constructivism because it helps to determine the interest of the actor and to make a state's public policy (Al – Masry, 2014, p. 326). This correlation is evident in the context of the Ukrainian crisis where the Russian and Western intervention in the crisis was because Ukraine includes various races and ethnicities that are closely linked to states intervened in the crisis.

Accordingly, this study deals with the role of identity in the constructivist school and the reasons for its connection to the constructivist perspective in international relations. It also examines the impact of the cultural dimension's components in general and the concept of identity in particular on contemporary international conflicts. Therefore, this paper deals with the Ukrainian crisis as an applied study and applies the research variables on the Ukrainian ethnic reality and the Russian intervention in this crisis and then Russia's annexation of the Crimea peninsula in March 2014.

## 2. Study Problem and Questions:

The research problem revolves around the role of identity in conflicts and the extent of its connection to the constructivist analysis of international relations. The study shows the real interest of international relations in the cultural dimension in a post - Cold War period, and the extent of the impact of culture on international relations. International reality led to interest in issues with cultural dimensions, which became an important and explanatory factor for international relations, and one of the components of power. Transformation in the nature of conflicts in post - Cold War period was the main factor in emerging new trends (post – positivism) that are based on cultural and value dimensions in their explanation of international relations. This was attributed to the fact that traditional theories failed to predict the end of the Cold War without the outbreak of war, and failed also to dealing with conflicts with cultural and civilized dimensions that emerged in a post – Cold War period. This led to the retreat of explanations with ideological, economic and military dimensions in favor of explanations with cultural dimensions in analyzing different international phenomena and events, particularly contemporary international conflicts. Thus, this study seeks to show the role of the cultural dimension in the international relations field in general, and the role of identity in contemporary conflicts theoretically and practically in particular, with application to Russian – Ukrainian conflict, and the role of identity in that crisis. Accordingly, the study will raise several issues in the context of the main question:

Q.1 what is the role of identity in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict according to the constructivist theory perspective?

Sub-questions:

Q1.1. What is the interconnection between identity and constructivism in understanding conflict?

Q1.2. What is the role of identity in the Russian and Western intervention in the Ukrainian crisis?

Q1.3. What is constructivism's vision of the causes of conflict?

## 3. Objectives of the Study:

The study aims to demonstrate the role of identity in particular and cultural factors in general and their increasing impact on international relations, especially in the post – Cold War phase. Consequently, the study affirms that the dominant and main source of contemporary conflicts became a cultural source, and that cultural identity would have increasing importance in the future, and that Future conflicts will occur along cultural division lines, especially those that separate civilizations from one another. This study affirms that the main source of conflicts in a post – Cold War world would not be ideological or economic as it was during the Cold War. In reality, evidence strongly indicates the existence of major differences and divisions among human beings, most of which will be cultural divisions, so that the cultural dimension will become the most important and prominent dimension in the interpretation of new conflicts. Changing the nature of conflicts has given

preference to the cultural dimension in the interpretation of new phenomena related to cultural and civilizational conflicts in post-Cold War conflicts. Therefore, culture became one of the most significant components of power, and it transformed from the margin of the study of international relations to its heart, leading to considering the cultural dimension an explanation for international relations.

#### **4. Significance of the Study:**

##### *4.1 Scientific Significance*

The study examines the role of identity in the constructivist school, especially with the return of the cultural dimension in the light of a wave of value theories, to create a new perspective such as the constructivist respective to study, analyze and interpret various political phenomena and international conflicts, especially current ethnic, religious and cultural conflicts. Currently, it is difficult to find a theory in international relations that neglects the cultural dimension for two reasons: first, any theory is seeking to keep pace with the changing reality. Second, any theory is trying to renew itself to prove the continuity of its ability to explain international developments. The first reason relates to reality and its developments, and the second relates to academic and scientific necessities.

##### *4.2 Practical Significance*

The practical study is represented in the extent of its ability to answer its main and sub questions, so that it could provide an objective vision on the relationship of theorizing with international reality by proposing a dual vision that combines the cultural factor as an original dimension in international relations, and the cultural factor as an explanation of contemporary tensions and conflicts. The interpretation and analysis of contemporary conflicts no longer accept and subject to material concepts only without returning to value concepts, which may be more in-depth and appropriate than other traditional concepts, so that current international issues can be understood and interpreted.

#### **5. Limitation of the Study**

There are three limitations of the study:

*5.1 Thematic:* the study is located in the field of international relations as it deals with the role of identity in the constructivist school, with applying to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

*5.2 Spatial:* the place of study is Ukraine, which is located in Eastern Europe.

*5.3 The time frame:* the study includes the period from 2004 (the year in which the Ukrainian presidential elections were held resulting in the political division in the country) to 2014 (The year in which the Russian military intervention in the Ukraine crisis occurred).

#### **6. Methodology of the Study**

The study seeks to answer its main research question by adopting the functional constructivist approach, as it helps in the comparative study of political systems and it analyzes international relations from the respective social construction of events. Consequently, the interpretation of material power cannot take place without the social content of the research to formulate a theoretical framework through which the subject of the study is analyzed and explained, with application to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This approach is selected by the researcher because the study includes two dimensions: theoretical and applied. Then, this approach is the most appropriate to answer the research question.

#### **7. Review of Related Literature**

Alexander Wendt, in his book entitled: "The Social Theory of International Politics" developed basic assumptions for constructivism theory, as he focused on the process of identity formation through the relationship and interaction between the actor and the construction. He believed that constructivism is a structural theory of the international system, and that states are the basic units for the analysis of international political theory, and that states' identities and interests are an important part formed by social structures (Wendt, 2006). According to Christian Royce Smith, constructivism is characterized by a focus on the importance of both normative and physical structures, and on the role of identity in shaping political action and clarifying the relationship of mutual formation between actors and constructs (Smith, 2014).

The study of Lawrence Freedman showed the roles played by the actors during the Ukrainian crisis, which were represented by Russia, Ukraine and the European Union supported by the United States. The study dealt with the

calculations of each party during this crisis in line with its vision and in a way that serves its goals and interests in this region (Freedman, 2015). The study of Abu Hamdan explained the reasons for the international intervention in Ukraine and the effect of this intervention on the structure of the international system. The study also showed the legality of this intervention, which ultimately led to the secession of Crimea and its accession to Russia (Abu Hamdan, 2017).

Compared with previous studies, what distinguishes the current study is that it sought to present somewhat new knowledge and research addition in a way that appears different and in an analytical and sequential manner. It is a study that combines the theoretical and the practical, as it deals with the role of identity in the constructivist school through application to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The theoretical framework has been linked to the title of the study through its interpretation of some theories related to the content of the study and the review of the most important principles and arguments on which those theories are based, especially the constructivist theory and its interpretation of the phenomenon of conflict, as well as addressing the role of identity in conflicts, by applying to the case of the study.

## 8. Theoretical Framework

### 8.1 *The constructivist theory*

The constructivist theory appeared in international relations in 1980s. This theory criticized the then prevailed positive trends. This term was first used by Nicholas Onuf in his book entitled "World of our making" where the book focused mainly on criticizing the constructivist realist theory. According to Onuf, individuals are the ones who make states, societies and the world through their interactions with the construction. The essence of constructivism is that individuals make society or vice versa. This reciprocal process between society and individuals is the focus of the attention of constructivism. (Al-Masry, 2014, p. 318). The supporters of constructivism believe that the mutual influence between the individual and society must start from the middle, that is, from the mechanism of influence between the two parties. Therefore, the constructivists present the notion of the base that links the individual with society.

In his article titled "Anarchy: What states make of it?" Alexander Wendt held that anarchy is a vision resulting from a process of social interaction of practices of the actors in the international system that affected and affected by the structure of this system. Put differently, states' visions of the nature of the international system and the consequences of this are the product of processes and social relations between the actors (Wendt, 2006, pp. 240-248).

Nicholas Onuf defines constructivism as "an approach of studying social relations whatever its type. It provides a general explanation of what people do, why societies differ, and how does the world change? Constructivism, thus, develops a theory about matters and issues that seem disconnected from each other". According to Wendt, constructivism is a structural theory in the international system that has several features, as the structure of the international system is characterized by the interaction between more than one element, as well as international units and interests are established in the context of social structure (Odeh, 2013, p. 220).

The emergency of constructivism in international relations coincided with the end of the Cold War, at a time when many theories, particularly the realist theory, failed to predict the end of this war peacefully, therefore, the end of the Cold War contributed to the legalization of constructivist theory because both realist and liberal theories failed to predict the end of this event without a military confrontation. Moreover, both realism and liberalism were not able to explain this event while constructivism has an explanation for it. According to constructivism, the central issue in a Post-Cold War world is how different groups perceive their identities and interests. Although the constructivist analysis does not exclude the variable of power, constructivism is based basically on how ideas and identities arise, and how they interact with each other to form states' visions of different situations and respond to them accordingly (Griffiths, 2012, p. 67).

### 8.2 *Conflict Theory*

Understanding the content of the international conflict requires addressing it through some theoretical approaches. The psychological approach links the aggressive tendency with the human nature, and can express what is called the theory of failure or frustration, and also focuses on the nature of the national character and national beliefs as a cause of the conflict. The ideological approach is based on the assumption that ideological contradictions between states are the cause of the conflict, and that a correct understanding of its dimensions can only be achieved through a class classification of its forces and parties.

The conflict is also explained through the interest approach, which depends on the states' interpretation of their interests and the extent of contradiction these interests with others, which makes them seek to increase their resources of force. Another important approach is the geopolitical approach that relates to the pressures created by the geographical location on the struggle for survival and growth. The political system approach assumes that the international political system based on the principle of national sovereignty constitutes the main source of all forms of chaos and international conflicts. The social approach is based on an analysis of the class struggle of Marx and Engels, or on the theories of social evolution by Darwin, or on the totality of social and economic conditions as seen by Max Weber (Makled, 1991, pp. 223-224).

### *8.3 Realism*

Issues related to conflicts, especially the most extreme and violent conflicts represented in wars, are considered one of the most important topics that are raised on the agenda of international relations, but they differ and from one theory to another. Realism is concerned with wars a lot, and the issues of conflicts and wars attach to special importance in its agenda, as force is the focus of this theory. However, constructivism interprets issues of wars and conflicts differently. This is due to the fact that both theories differ in their view of the nature, structure, and distribution of global power in terms of the actors, tools and processes of power (Al-Bahi, 2014, p. 23).

Realist theory imposed itself strongly in the interpretation and analysis of the international reality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which witnessed two world wars, leading to the inevitability of the international conflict. Therefore, realism is one of the most important trends that dealt with and explained the conflict phenomenon based on the parameters of that era, and according to the vision of realist theory based on its arguments. The theory is based on a set of basic concepts, the most important of which is that the state is the main actor in the international system. It also links the two concepts of power and national interest with each other, but with the distinction between power as a tool or as a driving motive, or as a political product related to the power of the state to bring about a change in the behavior of other countries in a way that suits the interests of powerful states only. Consequently, a realistic analysis of the nature of international relations is based primarily on the concept of national interest, which is a major goal that the state seeks to achieve. The interest is the end of the foreign policies of states, regardless of the means used to achieve this end. Realism views relations within the international system as a state of continuous conflict in search of increasing power and achieving national interests (Odeh, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Realism, however, does not show any interest in values, ideals and ethics. Realism sees that morals and values cannot be determined for international politics, as relations between states are based on power and interest, and states are struggling to preserve their strength and gains, so we find that power was and still the basic concept of the realist theory (Farag, 2007, pp.171- 175). Realism, with its various trends, whether traditional or new, clings to its three basic elements, namely: the state is the main actor, ensuring its survival as a top priority for state leaders, and finally self-reliance in light of an anarchic system and the absence of a world government. These three elements together form the angles of the realist triangle (Burkan, 2010, p. 35).

Realism, with all its different trends, tried to provide reasonable explanations for what is happening in international relations and the impact of international environment parameters on the behavior of external actors, but it has different visions in clarifying and explaining the fact that internal and external policy are separated, and that the internal determinants of the state, as external determinants, are important and influencing in the understanding of external behavior ( Odeh, 2013, pp.22-30).

Accordingly, the role of realism in international relations regressed because it failed to predict the end of the Cold War peacefully without a military confrontation, and it also failed to explain this event, in contrast to the constructivist theory that explained it. However, the facts of reality still indicate that power and national interest are still the main engine and motivation for the behavior of states' foreign policy. This matter is evident in the subject of this study represented in the Russian and Western behavior at the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis that led to the conflict and then direct Russian intervention militarily in the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea to Russia. Identity played an important role in igniting this conflict between Russia on the one hand, and Ukraine and the West on the other. This crisis occurred in light of the geopolitical challenges Russia faces, affecting its regional and international role, as well as its national security, a

matter that Russia has not and will not allow being tampered with, whatever the price and sacrifices it costs.

## 9. Conceptual Framework

### 9.1 Identity

The identity of a thing consists of those features that determine it as this thing or this kind of thing rather than some other. But, referring to mere differences is not enough because everything differs from everything else in countless aspects. Differences also might be not important and inform us of nothing about the human entity in question. The individual identity has three dimensions: first is personal identity. Humans are unique individuals, distinct centers of self-consciousness, have different bodies, an inner life that cannot be estimated and a sense of selfhood or subjectivity. Second is a social identity where human beings are characterized by social embeddedness. They are members of different ethnic, religious, cultural, national and other groups, who are related to others in countless formal and informal ways. These groups define and distinguish themselves, and are distinguished and defined by others by belonging to one group or more. Third is the humanitarian dimension, where human beings belong, and know that they belong, to a distinguished species, define themselves and decide how they should live and conduct as human beings ( Parekh, 2013, pp.30-31).

Identity, based on the constructivist theory, determines the behavior of the actor, which in turn is determined through the interaction between the actor and the construction. Identity helps in determining the interest of the actor, and it is also important for making the state's general policy. It is not easy to change identity, except in very large cases that necessitate the emergence of a new identity at the expense of other identities. In other words, identity for constructivists does not change easily unless there is a major change that makes the active units enter into new social relations that contribute to defining a new identity, such as World War II for Europe ( Al-Masry, 2014, pp. 326-327).

### 9.2 Constructivism

Constructivism is a method of studying social relationships. Alexander Wendt believes that constructivism is: "a structural theory in the international system, and that the distinctive structure of the international system is the interaction between more than one element, and that international units and international interests are created in the context of a social structure." Wendt focused on the process of identity formation through the relationship and interaction between the actor and the construction. He also acknowledges that states are the basic units for the analysis of international political theory, and that states identities and interests are an important part formed by social structures. The constructivists see the structure of the international system as a social structure that includes a set of values, rules and laws, and that this structure affects the identity and interest of the actors ( Wendt, 2006).

### 9.3 Conflict

Social researcher Lewis Coser defined conflict as: "a competition for values, power, and resources. The goal of competitors is to neutralize, eliminate, or harm their opponents." While Ahmed Fouad Raslan believes that the international conflict is: "the phenomenon of incompatibility or contradiction in interests, values and national goals between the active powers in the international system, which is characterized by the inevitability of interaction between its units that are different in their capabilities, and their contradictory value and ideological bases " (Mosbah, 2002, pp. 151-153).

### 9.4 Crisis

According to Holsty: "the crisis is one of the stages of the conflict. It is a sudden, unexpected event from one of the parties that raises the level of tension and threat to the point that forces decision-makers to choose one of the two alternatives, either war or peace." Michael Brentcher defined the crisis as: "dangerous deterioration in the relations between two or more countries as a result of a change in the external or internal intention of the parties. This deterioration leaves the decision-makers with an awareness of the external threat to the main values and objectives of their foreign policy, and increases their awareness of the possibilities of involvement in acts of military hostility, and increases also their awareness of the pressures of the limited time available to respond to this threat " (Denfer, 2019, pp. 11-13).

## 10. The relationship of identity with constructivism.

The concept of identity is important to constructivists because it helps to define the interest of the actor and formulate a state's public policy. Constructivists assume that identity determines the actor's role in international relations. Thus, the

actor act according to what he deems appropriate for this role.

Constructivists also focus on factors that determine the identity of the actor and how these factors change. Therefore, constructivists are close, to some extent, to the supporters of post-modernism because they describe the other and employ the method of analyzing and describing identity. This method depends on the existence of a contradiction to each identity or the existence of a standard opposite to it, as the absence of the other eliminates the existence of the ego ( Al-Masry, 2014, pp. 326-327 ). Thus, culture and values play a fundamental role in constructivist theory, and states' identity and interests arise from values and cultures that characterize these states.

#### **11. Transformation of Conflicts in the Post- Cold War Period**

The collapse of the bipolarity system created major changes in the core of conflicts that existed during the Cold War, which were characterized by the containment and adaptation of various international and regional conflicts. With the beginning of the 1990s, the world entered a new phase called "new international system", where a set of principles and concepts such as sovereignty, right of self-determination and human rights, which control the course of international relations, have been changed. It is the phase of the national, ethnic and religious emergence that Eastern Europe and Central Asia witnessed, in addition to civil wars in many regions of the world. This confirms the transformation of conflicts from international to internal conflicts (Al-Saadi, 2006 p. 88).

The nature of conflicts in the world changed after the Cold War, as conflicts transformed from international conflicts to internal ones. With the end of the Cold War, the West employed new mechanisms through which conflicts were managed, and also employed racial, ethnic and religious conflicts that no state is free from. These mechanisms aim to fragment and divide the nation-states (Al-Maeni, 2009, 167). However, the Western aim clashed in the beginning with international principles and covenants such as respect for the sovereignty of states and non-intervention in their internal affairs.

There is a contradiction in the interpretation of intervention among international law jurists, and their interpretation was purely political according to interests and circumstances in each case (Kissinger, 2002, p. 238). With the beginning of the 1990s, intervention is to be confirmed by explicit legal texts that allow the right to intervene, where the European countries, in the Paris Conference on Security and European Cooperation in 1990, affirmed their commitment to the principles of democracy based on human rights and fundamental freedoms. Also, the Berlin Conference on Security and European Cooperation in 1991 confirmed the right of member states to intervene to put an end to any violations of human rights and international laws. This conference constituted the most important step towards eliminating the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, or at least this principle has been restricted (Al-Musa, 2004, p. 24). The right to intervene was a means to control the behavior of the Eastern European countries separated from the former Soviet Union and an attempt to intervene in their internal affairs through the principle of human rights to restructure them politically within Western liberal democracy, and economically following the free market economy ( Hadi, 1992, p. 209).

International conferences adopted an approach based on deepening the right to intervene in countries' domestic affairs. This approach was consistent with the project adopted by the United States after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as the United States was trying to impose the Western democratic model on other countries and to set new standards of international relations. The United Nations and its various agencies contributed to establishing and consolidating this approach, where the United Nations was employed for this purpose by legitimizing the right to intervene and completing the project of eradicating sovereignty and not considering it a barrier to international intervention (Khalifa, 2000, p. 15). This issue of the right to intervene was raised through the annual report of the former UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar on 6 September 1991. In this vein, the report of the former UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, at the Security Council summit on January 31, 1992, stated that restricting sovereignty and unleashing the right to intervene are Mechanisms to expand the powers of the UN Secretary-General and to strengthen the role of the Security Council authorized to maintain international peace and security and to consolidate democracy and human rights (Al-Magzoub, 1992, p. 18).

In his book titled "America and Good Opportunity, ex-American President Richard Nixon raised the issue of the necessity of amending the UN Charter to contain provisions that allow humanitarian intervention to protect minorities by

saying that the UN Charter neglected the rights of minorities such as the Kurds and citizens of Tibet. Thus, leaders should address this deficiency as soon as possible (Nixon, 1993, P.15). Also, the former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali, in his report submitted to the United Nations in January 1992, affirmed that human rights and the protection of minorities became international issues that require cooperation and coordination among the members of the international community and that the stability of the world will be enhanced by a commitment to human rights, especially minorities, and increasing effectiveness of United Nations' mechanisms (Ghali, 1995, p. 7). Thus, the international community became responsible for human rights issues and the protection of minorities that are no longer among a state's internal issues. The danger lies in making human rights and the protection of minorities a pretext for international interference in a country's internal affairs and then violating the national sovereignty of this country (Youssef, 1992, p. 130). The UN General Assembly issued declarations on the rights of ethnic minorities, calling on states to protect minorities and their ethnic identities. The General Assembly also called for the adoption of legislative measures to ensure that minorities can exercise all their fundamental rights and freedoms. In this regard, the General Assembly adopted on 14 December 1993 the Universal Declaration of Minority Rights, meaning that transferring the issues of minorities from the legitimacy of countries to international legitimacy. This means that protecting the ethnic identity culturally and linguistically, or protecting the religious beliefs of any minority in any country in the world is no longer a matter of the internal affairs of that country, but rather an international affair (Al-Sammak, 1998, p. 210).

Consequently, the ideological conflict was faded, and national and ethnic conflicts and identities were revived in many regions of the world, as some groups within some countries were searching for their national identity and cultural specificity. This led to the disintegration of several countries. National sentiment also robustly returned in many parts of the world, and several repressed national and sectarian conflicts extremely erupted, where they returned more catastrophically than they were in the past, and associated with ethnic hardness and religious extremism. This created cultural partiality, violence, and ethnic cleansing, as well as made the world vulnerable to division. For these reasons, many international relations specialists argue that ethnic and religious conflicts are the main focus of tension in the world political landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is due to the new revolutionary dimension of the concept of the right to self-determination, which may make many nationalities the largest political force internationally. Then, many national identities failed to integrate the identities of different groups and failed also to integrate the cultural boundaries of groups within the geographical boundaries of the state (Al-Saadi, 2006, pp. 90-91).

## **12. Constructivist Interpretation of Contemporary Conflicts in International Relations**

According to constructivism, there is a reciprocal relationship between identity and internal conflicts. Also, different cultural identities are not the only reason for clashing ethnic groups. Rather, ethnic conflicts are the result of four interrelated stages: Firstly, the ethnic policy of a state, as a state's pursuit of homogeneity may coincide with the possibility of the outbreak of conflict, particularly when a state imposes a particular ethnicity with the majority by force on the rest of the ethnic groups. Secondly, interactive relationships existed between different ethnic groups within the state, where violence may arise as a result of differences in cultural values between identity groups. This means that there is a deep desire among the members of an ethnic group to protect their values from the real threats that another group's different culture may pose, which may lead to conflict. Thirdly, ethnic issues are to be politicized within the state's borders. Fourthly, the external forces such as global economic shifts and the communication revolution increase the capacity of these groups for mass mobilization. The constructivist analysis is mainly based on how ideas and identities arise, and how they interact with each other to form the way through which states view different conflict situations and respond to them accordingly. In the post-Cold War world, feeling identities has been increasingly focused and ethnic conflicts driven by identities have been emerged. However, constructivism also does not exclude the power variable and material factors in its analysis of contemporary conflicts (Burkan, 2010, pp.55-56).

Constructivism sees that actors are not limited only to states, but also include international organizations, transnational actors, and social movements, including ethnic and national movements. In reality, constructivism does not separate between the internal and international environment in its analysis of the behavior of political actors. This is evident in its



rejection of the classical concept of interest. According to it, interest does not stem only from the nature of the international community, but also from the nature of the value and social construction of political units (Hamaidi, 2005, p.33).

By applying to the Ukrainian crisis, the relationship between identity and constructivism can be explained, as identity played a pivotal role in that crisis. Ukraine suffers from identity crisis and a geographic, political and ethnic division. The people of the west of Ukraine speak the Ukrainian language and see themselves as part of Europe, and belong to the Catholic Church. The people of the east and south, on the one hand, speak Russian language and belong to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, as they admit that their identity is the eastern Russian identity and not the western one, in addition to the people of Crimea who also acknowledge that they belong to Russia. Thus, identity has a great and effective role in making Ukraine one of the divided societies, as it is a multi-ethnic and linguistic society. Arguably, the outbreak of some conflicts and wars, especially after the end of the Cold War, is no longer limited to political, ideological or geopolitical goals only, but has emerged and developed what is called "identity politics", whereby local and partial identities, marginalized by nation-states, play a role in demanding the right to self-determination, whether those identities are national, ethnic or religious (Al-Bahi, 2014, p. 2).

In sum, constructivism does not deny the role of internal factors, in addition to its great interest in cultural dimensions in its interpretation of conflicts. Constructivism takes into account the identity of each party and how that identity contributes to its behavior. Therefore, constructivism presents a coherent view about the relationship between identity and behavior. Therefore, constructivism was able to explain a number of conflicts and wars, which major theories failed to explain, especially conflicts in which one of the parties is a political entity that does not enjoy international recognition. Constructivism does not see only states as the main actors in international relations, in contrast with realism.

Accordingly, the new trends of science remain capable of explaining not only the direct causes of that conflict, but also the pattern of this conflict between Crimea and Ukraine on the one hand and Russia against Ukraine and the West on the other hand. Thus, constructivism emphasizes the possibility of the outbreak of war due to the desire of one or both parties in order to establish or recognize a new identity (Al-Bahi, 2014)

### **13. The Ukrainian Crisis**

#### *13.1 Ukraine*

Ukraine occupies a strategic and sensitive position due to its geographical location between Russia on the one hand, and the European Union and NATO on the other. It constitutes more than half of the area of the eastern gate leading to Europe. Historically, this gate is the source of threats, where Ukraine is located in the eastern region of the European continent, bordered to the east by Russia, to the south by the Black Sea and Azov Sea, to the west by Poland, Slovakia and Hungary, to the southwest by Romania and Moldova, and the north by Belarus. It is the second-largest country in terms of area in Europe after Russia. The importance of its geographical location stems from the fact that it is a link between the two Asian and European continents. Its area amounts to 603700 k<sub>2</sub>.

#### *13.2 Crimea and its Strategic Importance*

Crimea was part of the Russian Empire and later became part of the Soviet Union. Russia officially annexed Crimea in 1783. In 1920, the government of the Soviet Union declared the autonomy of the Republic of Crimea. During World War II, Stalin exiled Tatars from Crimea to Siberia owing to their alliance with the Nazis. They returned to Crimea in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1954, Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev re-annexed Crimea to Ukraine, which enabled citizens to return to their lands.

Former US national security adviser, Brzezinski, says "Russia and Ukraine are forming an empire and Ukraine's separation from Russia ends the Russian "empire". This statement by a US foreign policymaker reflects the strategic importance of Ukraine to Russia, especially Crimea (Ashraf, 2016, pp.7-8).

Crimea is an autonomous republic that was part of the Republic of Ukraine. It is located in the south of Ukraine. It is surrounded by the Black Sea from the south and west, bordered to the east by the Sea of Azov. According to the 2001 census, its population was about two million people. Crimea's area was about 26.000 K<sub>2</sub>. Its most famous city is Simferopol, the capital, which was previously famous for the occurrence of the Crimean War in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Crimea was associated

with the Ottomans for more than three and a half centuries from 1430 until its fall at the hands of the Russian Empress, Catherine II, in 1783. Tatars constituted the majority of the population of Crimea during the beginning of the last century (Hegazy, 2016). However, the occurrence of many wars in the region and the Policies of Stalin based on Tatars' exile and displacement led to a reduction in their numbers. As a result, Tatars turned into a minority and they became approximately 18% of the population, the Russians were 58%, and the Ukrainian origins were 24% of the total population that estimated at two million people. According to statistics, about 77% of the population of Crimea speaks the Russian language, which is their mother tongue, approximately 12% speak the Tatar language, and 10% speak the Ukrainian language. Besides, the language used in governmental institutions in Crimea is the Russian language. The coastal city of Sevastopol is the most important in Crimea for Russia due to its vital and important geostrategic location on the shores of the Black Sea, where there is a Russian naval base on which the fleet of the Russian Black Sea locates. This base is the only one of its kind that has access to warm water (Hegazy, 2016, 26-30). Therefore, Russia has immediately and directly intervened in the Ukrainian crisis to protect its strategic bases in the Crimea region, as this naval fleet is considered one of the most important and largest Russian naval fleets and it is a maritime link between Russia and the Mediterranean.

Accordingly, Russia did not wait for diplomatic and political options as alternatives to solve the Ukrainian crisis, but rather Russia immediately and directly intervened in Crimea due to its strategic importance for Russia. Additionally, the internal Ukrainian situation grew seriously hard that prompted Russia to direct military intervention in the Ukrainian crisis. The majority of Crimea's population welcomed this intervention, and the population of eastern and southern Ukraine supported intervention too, as most of them are of Russian origin. Thus, Russia intervened in Crimea to protect its citizens and at the same time to preserve its security and its vital and strategic interests in the region, which in turn will directly affect its national security, the matter which Russia will never allow to be achieved.

Thus, The people of Crimea, in addition to the people of eastern and southern Ukraine, supported the Russian intervention as a result of the Russian identity of the inhabitants of those regions, as the Eastern Russian identity played a major role in igniting the conflict and urged the Crimean population to demand separation from Ukraine and joining Russia.

### *13.3 Causes for the Ukrainian Crisis*

The strategic geographical location of Ukraine is a double-edged weapon as it is a link between two great powers, eastern Russia and western European Union, which is an ally of the United States. The social division in Ukraine led to the emergence of a political division between the two eastern and western parties. The Eastern part's political orientation tends toward Russia, but the Western part's political orientation tends toward the European Union with its liberal ideas.

Consequently, Ukraine was suffering from an identity crisis and a political, geographical and ethnic divide between its west on the one hand, and its east and south on the other, and was disputed by two identities that were totally different, so that they could not harmonize or coexist with each other.

The internal polarization began in 2004, when presidential elections were held between two candidates, Viktor Yanukovich of Russian origin and eastern orientation, and Yushchenko of Ukrainian origin and liberal orientation. Viktor Yanukovich won the elections, which ignited the anger of Yushchenko's supporters and announced the suspicions of fraud in the electoral process. They staged a sit-in in the squares to protest the election's results, and used the orange color of the Yushchenko party's slogan as a symbol for them; therefore, these protests are called the Orange Revolution (Ashraf, 2016, pp. 8-9).

The divisions and demonstrations spread in the squares of the capital, Kiev. Demonstrators demanded the recognition of Yushchenko as a legitimate president of the country. As a result, the Ukrainian Supreme Constitutional Court ordered re-election. Then, elections were repeated with the presence of international observation and Yushchenko won elections. The Ukrainian cleavage continued until the date of the 2010 presidential elections, in which the opponent of the existing regime, Viktor Yanukovich, ran for and won elections. Yanukovich pledged to make reforms to improve the deteriorating economic conditions in the country. The Ukrainian economy was negatively affected by internal conditions. Therefore, Ukraine tended to external support from Russia and the European Union to revive the country's economy under these bad circumstances. However, the economic situation did not change after the victory of Yanukovich in the 2010 election.

Therefore, Russia supported the new system to impose its hegemony on the Ukrainian arena, as Russia wanted to limit European influence in Ukraine. But, the Ukrainian opposition rejected this relationship between Ukraine and Russia that comes at the expense of European rapprochement. Most Ukrainians, especially the western part of the country, see that their identity is European and that the European Union is more entitled to partnership agreements with Ukraine than Russia. Therefore, citizens cling to these ideas in the hope of joining the European Union (Ashraf, 2016).

The opposition demanded the departure of President Yanukovych, leading to aggravating the crisis and turning it into a political crisis. Tension reached a boiling point after Western intervention under the pretext of imposing respect for human rights. Western forces, the European Union and the United States, fully supported the opposition forces, leading to the removal of President Yanukovych by the parliament, forming a new government by the members of the opposition, and appointing the president of the Ukrainian parliament as the country's interim president (Ashraf, 2016, pp. 9-11).

Accordingly, Russia saw that Western intervention in Ukraine is a direct threat to its national security and destabilizes its regional periphery. Russia also rejected the decision to dismiss the president, as it hosted and protected him. Consequently, these events led to the necessity of intervening in this crisis by both powers, directly or indirectly, to protect their interests and international status.

#### **14. The Russian role in the Ukrainian crisis**

Russia intervened in the Ukrainian crisis to preserve its international status, to protect its borders, to maintain its national security, and to preserve its strategic and vital interests in the region. Russia cannot leave Ukraine to become part of the Western security and economic system. Therefore, Russia cannot abandon its close and wide neighborhood, as Russia has political, economic, security and military interests in Ukraine. Russia achieves these interests through the subordination of Ukraine to it. Thus, Russia must work with its full capacity to keep Ukraine in the circle of its orbit. In reality, Russia knows the size of risks that will surround it if Ukraine got out of its grip. For this, the Russian reaction was expected and strong (Abu Hamdan, 2017). Consequently, Russia backed up the Yanukovych regime and even tried in vain to negotiate with the new leadership in Ukraine after the overthrow of Yanukovych. Indeed, the new Ukrainian leadership signed the partnership agreement with the European Union and refused all forms of negotiation with the Russian side. This led to a strong and direct Russian intervention in the Ukrainian crisis by annexing Crimea to it and then igniting the fuse of the civil war between the Russian east and the Ukrainian west. To preserve its strategic interests, Russia firmly fronted the new Ukrainian regime to send a strong message to the West supporting the Ukrainian regime (Abu Hamdan, 2017, p. 279). Accordingly, Russia intervened in the Ukrainian crisis and responded to the West by taking and implementing many measures, the most important of which are:

1. Initially, Russia annexed Crimea, emphasizing its Russian origin and protecting the majority of its Pro-Russian population
2. Protecting its military base and huge naval fleet (the Russian Black Sea Fleet) located in the coastal Sevastopol city on the shores of the Black Sea.
3. Russia held a referendum for the people of Crimea on 16 March 2014. The referendum gave Crimea's people the freedom of choice between separating from Ukraine and joining Russia or staying under the Ukrainian Umbrella and its legal sovereignty. The referendum's results showed that the majority of Crimea's people were in favor of joining Russia with a rate of more than 95%. The result of the referendum is the largest evidence of the Russian identity of the Crimean population, as the identity was the motivation for the Crimean population to request secession from Ukraine and joining Russia. Identity was the spark that ignited the fuse of the conflict and was the main cause of the Ukrainian crisis.
4. Russia also backed up dissidents in Eastern and Southern Ukraine and supported their autonomy.
5. Russia tried to establish new Russian gas lines to export it to Europe without passing it through the Ukrainian lands. Thus, Russia signed an agreement with Turkey for the passage of Russian gas through Turkey, and then from Turkey to European countries to be an alternative to the line that crosses Ukrainian lands. In this vein, Russia raised the price of Russian gas exported to Ukraine to punish the new Ukrainian regime, harming the economic interests of Ukraine, and sending a message to Ukraine's regime and its supporters that Russia is an indispensable country.
6. Russia imposed sanctions on the West and adhered to the principle of reciprocity. It banned commercial activities

with Europe, as it prevented importing and exporting food products from the European Union and vice versa, including Ukraine. It also stopped working in the Ukrainian free market. Also, Russia prepared a list of western citizens' names to ban their entry to Russia which increased the tension between the two parties.

7. Viktor Ozerov, the chairman of the defense and security committee of the council of the Russian Federation, threatened to withdraw from the strategic weapons treaty on 12 May 2016.

8. Russia promoted its regional blocks by strengthening its ties with its regional allies, as these allies support Russia in the face of the West represented in NATO and the European Union (Abu Hamdan, 2017, pp. 279-283).

#### *14.1 Reasons for Russia's intervention in the Ukrainian crisis*

Various reasons prompted Russia to intervene in the Ukrainian crisis that will be discussed in the following section.

**Politically**, Russia is a country of strategic stature, as it was the heart of the Soviet Union and a superpower. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the Russian role and the eastern camp declined, and the Western camp becomes the most dominant and influential. However, with the advent of president Putin, the situation has completely changed, as Putin has rebuilt the state and restored its status as a world power. As a result, Russia began to extend its influence over its neighboring countries, especially those countries with common interests and historical background. Therefore, President Putin sought to establish a union known as the "Russian Federation" to increase trade and economic exchange between member states, in addition to forming a political entity among its members. Thus, this union is an expansion of economic and commercial orientation. Russia was also concerned about the Western countries' attempt to annex Ukraine to NATO. This matter poses a security and strategic threat to Russia due to the geographical proximity between it and Ukraine (Ashraf, 2016, pp. 11-13).

**Economically**, Russia is the main source for supplying Ukraine with energy sources. Ukraine is one of the largest Russian energy consumers in Europe and it depends considerably on Russian natural gas. Ukraine's production of natural gas meets 16% of domestic demand, while the remaining relies mainly on Russia's imports. Moreover, there is a large commercial exchange between Russia and Ukraine. Trade between them is one of the main sources of the Ukrainian economy, as Russia imports from Ukraine spare parts for war products and the components of the Russian Global Navigation Satellite System (Glonass). Ukraine is also the main crossing for passing gas to Europe, as gas is one of the most important sources of the Russian economy. Through this crossing, distances and high transportation costs are shortened. Also, the percentage of 80% of Russia's natural gas exports to Europe passes through gas pipelines extending into Ukraine. This percentage represents more than 20% of natural gas. Besides, Ukraine is considered an outlet for Russia on the Black Sea, which is being used by the Russian naval fleet in Sevastopol city according to an agreement concluded between the two countries. With the advent of the Ukrainian President, Yanukovich in 2010, this agreement was extended with Russia until 2042 (Ashraf, 2016, pp. 11-13).

**Strategically**, there are security reasons for Russia's intervention in the Ukrainian crisis where western countries desire to annex Ukraine to NATO. This would pose a direct threat to Russian national security. In particular, the Western countries continued to adopt a strategy based on deploying a missile shield in Eastern European countries. This will threaten Russian national security and put Russia under the fire of NATO from its nearest point (Abu Hamdan, 2017).

There are other reasons for Russia's intervention in the Ukrainian crisis, which can be summarized as follows:

1. The geographical location of Ukraine is distinctive and strategic. This location made Ukraine a buffer zone and the last strategic fortress separating Russia and the West. Ukraine also is the only outlet for Russia on the Black Sea to be able to access to the warm water through it.

2. Russia also wanted to protect its borders, as Russia's goal of intervening in the crisis is to maintain its security and stability by ensuring that there are no armed and fighting groups and factions along its borders with its near and wide neighborhood.

3. Russia did not want a regime opposed to its policy where this opposed regime will be supported by the West and NATO, posing a direct threat to Russian national security.

4. Russia desired to protect its Russian citizens inside Ukraine so that any Ukrainian regime loyal to the West could not

persecute and marginalize them. Therefore, Russia sought and fought with all its might to protect its citizens and guarantee their rights, and preserve its vital interests in Ukraine.

5. Russia wanted to maintain its investments in Ukraine, where the existence of a regime in Ukraine hostile to Moscow may hinder the work of Russian companies by imposing high taxes on them or setting conditions and restrictions on these investments (Abu Hamdan, 2017, pp. 276-281).

6. Ukraine desired to sign the partnership agreement with the European Union. Thus, Russia intervened in Ukraine's crisis to cancel or suspend this agreement. Russia raised concerns about the European-Ukrainian rapprochement, which could negatively affect its relations with Ukraine. Furthermore, the European partnership agreement will have dire repercussions on the Russian market and economy.

7. Russia wanted Ukraine to be joined the Customs Union as an alternative to the European Union. Customs Union includes Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Russia wanted Ukraine to be annexed to the Customs Union, which will be a nucleus of the Eurasian Customs Union which is parallel to the European Union in the region.

8. Russia has always been afraid of the European-Ukrainian rapprochement. This rapprochement will increase western hegemony over the region and lead to the decline of Russian influence negatively affecting Russia's vital and strategic interests (Ashraf, 2016, p.13).

Russia's intervention in the Ukrainian crisis and its entry into a direct military confrontation with Ukraine, which is supported by the West, means that it has established its identity as a major power, just as it has added a new identity to the Crimean region by separating and annexing it to Russia though Crimean's annexation was not internationally recognized .

## **15. Conclusion**

The study has sought to answer its main question: what is the role of identity in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict according to constructivist theory perspective? To answer this question, the constructivist approach has been employed in this study because this approach studies the relationship between theorizing and changing reality and analyzes international relations in terms of the social construction of events, and then the approach's application to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Accordingly, the study has reached many conclusions, the most important of which are: Firstly, the Russian response to the Western intervention in Ukraine, led by the United States, resulting in the decline of the American hegemony. The Western intervention, on the other hand, achieved some positive results. For example, the western countries signed the European Partnership agreement with Ukraine to be an alternative to the Customs Union agreement with Russia. Secondly, Western intervention did not achieve the desired Western goals and interests. It did not enable the West to impose its absolute control over the whole of Ukraine. For instance, Crimea has separated from Ukraine and annexed to Russia, and at the same time, Eastern and Southern Ukraine have also gone out of the control of the pro-Western Ukrainian regime and remained loyal to Russia. These events happened as a result of the Eastern Russian identity of the inhabitants of those regions. They believe that their original identity is an Eastern Russian identity not a Western one. The Ukrainian population with Russian origin constitutes more than 17%. Therefore, they always feel nostalgic for their motherland. In particular, their living and economic conditions deteriorate, and they are persecuted in the aspects of political and social life. Thirdly, the Western intervention in Ukraine harmed European economic interests as a result of imposing Western sanctions on Russia, which badly affected trade exchange between Europe and Russia. As for the European Union, the Ukrainian market will not be an alternative to the Russian market. Fourthly, despite all Western external threats, Russia was able to defend its interests and allies, and also imposed its will in the face of all Western pressures and threats. We found how Russia annexed Crimea to it and extended its influence and imposed its control over Eastern Ukraine. Consequently, it protected its borders and national security. It also preserved the separation wall and the last fortress that separates it from the West and its allies. Fifthly, the Ukrainian crisis reflected Russia's return to its natural position to be one of the most significant and influential major powers in the international arena. Despite the disappearance of the ideological contradiction between the West and Russia in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but cultural contradiction still exists between them. This led to competition and conflict between them over the spheres of influence in the world, especially in areas of influence and the vital sphere of Russia, where the strategic importance of this region lies in the fact that it is the second-largest oil

reserves in the world after the Middle East region, represented by the Caspian Sea region. Sixthly, the Ukrainian crisis confirmed the shifts in the international system, as it began to establish a new multi-polar international system that ends the American uniqueness in managing international affairs.

**In conclusion**, identity played a significant role in the Ukrainian crisis according to the constructivist perspective. Identity is related to the theoretical concepts of constructivism because it helps to define the interest of the actor and to make a state's public policy. This correlation is evident in the Ukrainian crisis, as the Russian and Western intervention in the crisis was because Ukraine includes different races and ethnicities that are closely related to states which intervened in the crisis, Russia and Western countries. Therefore, the identity factor was influential in Ukraine's crisis. In addition to political, social, economic, and strategic that pushed Russia and Europe to intervene in this crisis, identity also was the engine for Russian and Western intervention. Eastern Russian identity, for example, made the citizens of Ukraine with the Russian origin biased in favor of their motherland, Russia. They see that their original identity is an Eastern Russian identity. This was evident in the referendum held by Russia on Russian Crimea citizens' joining Russia and their separation from Ukraine, where the majority voted in favor of joining Russia by more than 95%. Ukraine's citizens of Western origin, on the other hand, were biased towards their Western identity. They see that their original identity is a Western European identity, not an Eastern one. In essence, Ukraine is an arena in which strategic accounts are intertwined with historical roots, as well as political and economic factors are intertwined with cultural ones.

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