

Brief

The phenomena of secessionist conflict, struggles for independence, and state creation have received a growing amount of academic, journalistic, and public attention in recent years. This is particularly due to the continued surfacing of these issues in real-life arenas of International Relations – for instance, in the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Studies of these international political acts and practices almost unanimously find that they do not happen in a ‘vacuum’. Secessionism does not only have an effect on wider international circumstances, but is also influenced by and dependent on these international structures and discourses.

Over the last couple of years, however, scholars of international politics have started to observe a general shift – perhaps even a crisis – in the make-up of international order. Especially since 2016, when Donald Trump was elected as US President and Great Britain voted to leave the European Union, it has been increasingly alleged that international order is attaining a post- or anti-liberal character. Presumably, such a transition of international order would have a bearing on the nature of secessionist conflict and state creation as well.

This theme was explored last week in an online workshop – organised in cooperation with the ECPR Research Network on Statehood, Sovereignty, and Conflict – called *Secession and (Post-)Liberal International Relations*. This workshop strived to intersect debates over the crisis of liberal international order with scholarship of secessionism. It was premised on the idea that secessionism is unlikely to be immune to challenges against the liberal international order, because acts of secession themselves tend to lay bare the discrepancies of this (supposed) order. Secessionism has been explained and justified in reference to liberal concepts (e.g. human rights, liberty, self-determination), but has also been condemned as a violent and anti-liberal disruption enacted by power-hungry self-serving profiteers.

The workshop, therefore, aimed to bring out the tentatively liberal or non-liberal features of secession and international order. Several experts of secession, *de facto* statehood, state recognition, and conflict resolution came together to discuss these questions.

Ryan Griffiths’s ‘keynote’ speech, based on [his latest work](#), provided numerous engaging starting points, outlining several potential future international ‘sovereignty games’ for secessionist movements. Besides hypothesizing possible scenarios for future international order, other contributors took on a more theoretical approach. [Lucas Knotter](#) conceptually explored three tensions found both in liberal internationalism and in secessionism (peace/violence, equality/individuality, particularity/universality), while [Janis Grzybowski](#) critically scrutinized the very assumption that world politics and secessionism are going through a clear shift from liberal to ‘less’-liberal international order. [Marc Sanjaume i Calvet](#)

challenged secessionist theories based on abstract liberal morality, instead presenting a *political* theory of secession.

Others zoomed in to more specific cases. [Shpend Kursani](#) outlined how Kosovo's and Palestine's quest for international state recognition not merely leads to stronger state features, but also forces them to compromise and moderate their existing state-building projects. [Irene Fernández Molina](#) and [Dimitris Bouris](#) explained why the EU's approach to Israel-Palestine is not replicated towards Morocco-Western Sahara, and why this differentiated approach is accentuated by the crisis of liberal international order.

Still others investigated certain shifts in more general international practices of secession and state creation. [Sophie Gueudet](#) offered a detailed account of the transnational solidarities *between* different (post-Soviet) *de facto* states, and the informal diplomatic networks that have materialized between them. [Argyro Kartsonaki](#) (together with Aleksandar Pavković) categorized four different types of justifications used in declarations of independence, unveiling how certain types became more prevalent with the onset of liberal international order. Finally, [Eiki Berg](#) analysed new modes of dealing with territorial disputes – via swapping, annexing, or buying territory – postulating whether such modes would become more prevalent in a transitioning international order.

In conclusion, all contributors agreed that the secession-liberalism nexus raises more questions than providing answers, and requires a deeper and more centered critical assessment. This workshop, therefore, will certainly not be the last meeting to discuss what the ostensible crisis of liberal international order might mean for practices and theories of secession.