
Scope and impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 surprised all Western foreign ministries. Although it is true that the war escalation had not ceased since December 2021, the European Union focused on the use of hydrocarbon supplies (mainly gas) as Moscow's negotiating weapon with Kyiv. However, U.S. President Joseph Biden warned of increased warmongering rhetoric from the Kremlin and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. This "new" post-Soviet conflict comes at a particularly complex time in international relations, in a hyperglobalized and interconnected world that is trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel (in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic) and with new open fronts, such as the global supply crisis, the economic slowdown and hyperinflation.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, asymmetric warfare, global conflict.

Introduction

Since the well-known "Orange Revolution," which took place between December 2004 and January 2005, the rhetoric of conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been continuous. Immediately after taking office, Ukrainian nationalist President Viktor Yushchenko chose to implement legislation perceived by Ukraine's Russian minority as a disgrace to them. These regulations include the imposition of Ukrainian as the only language, the constitutional reform to transform the Republic into a semi-presidential model and the rehabilitation of collaborators with the Nazi invaders, the

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same ones that were mixed with the eternal clash between the western zone, agrarian and rural, compared to the eastern, urban and industrial regions.

Subsequently, the coming to power of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2010, along with the clearly Russophile-inspired "Party of Regions", further exacerbated nationalist sentiments and polarized citizens. The endemic corruption experienced during previous presidential administrations and the controversy over the transfer to Russia of the city of Sevastopol as a naval base for 50 years worsened the situation. In this context, Yanukovych tried to calm things down by signing a cooperation treaty with the European Union. However, the response from Moscow was immediate. This "slap on the wrist" made Yanukovych take a step back and choose to sign a new agreement with Russia, aimed at materializing the creation of the Eurasian Union, which would integrate these two nations together with Armenia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

These events encouraged the "Euromaidan" protest, the same one that sought to end corruption and close Kyiv's dependence on Russian foreign policy. Although these protests caused the resignation of Viktor Yanukovych and his premier, Mykola Azarov, they also incited the actions of pro-fascist groups, such as the sadly "Azov Battalion," and the financing of far-right organizations, such as "Pravii Sektor" or "Svovoda." However, the open war between Moscow and Kyiv began in the eastern regions of the Donbas, mainly in the Donetsk and Lugansk/Luhansk oblasts. These regions declared themselves de facto independent of Ukraine, reorganizing themselves into the territorial entity of Novorossiya ("New Russia") that contained the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Lugansk.

The situation worsened from February 2015 with the clashes in Kramatorsk and Sloviansk, only surpassed in severity by the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014, after a referendum branded a farce by the international community. After that, the war continued uninterrupted in Eastern Ukraine, with events within the country itself, such as the murder of journalist Pavel Sheremets in Kyiv or the attack on writer and journalist Arkady Babchenko, apparently perpetrated by the Ukrainian secret service in order to behead asymmetric warfare groups located in the interior of the country. Even after the coming to power of a more open-minded Ukrainian president like Volodimir Zelensky, the situation did not improve. Zelensky's rhetoric passed for a speech based on the renewal of the state structure and not on open hostility against Russia like that of his predecessor in office, the oligarch and former secretary of the Ukrainian intelligence services, Petro Poroshenko.

The high point would come in February 2022, when Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of the "Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics" under the pretext of protecting Russian citizens from the Ukrainian siege, followed by

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the start of a military operation against Ukraine (using the airspace of an allied country like Belarus) to disarm – in Putin's words – the “illegitimate, Nazi, drug-addled government” in Kyiv. That rhetoric only concealed one fact: Russia began the invasion of Ukraine. As in the case of "Operation Storm - 333" (Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), these events took the world by surprise.

Conflict analysis and possible consequences

Russia took advantage of the end of the military exercises conducted with Belarus, within the framework of Operation Zapad, to use its airborne troops and various *Spetsnaz* GRU detachments (elite special forces commandos of the Russian Federation) to invade Ukraine from the Belarusian border, the “independent” regions of the Donbas and the Crimean peninsula, assaulting strategic cities such as Mariupol, Kharkov and Odessa. However, what they believed would be a military walk to Kyiv (similar to the Western disbandment in Afghanistan, after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021) did not come close to reality. President Zelensky has refused to step down and leave the country, while the Ukrainian army - in many cases - has been holding back the advance of Russian troops through asymmetric warfare techniques, urban warfare or guerrilla assaults. This did not prevent the massive Russian bombardment of the Ukrainian air defense, which was significantly reduced. Meanwhile, the European Council, meeting as a matter of urgency, chose to implement a package of economic, political and even cultural sanctions against Russia, never seen before, demanding the total withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory.

On the one hand, within this group of sanctions stand out the personal sanctions against Russian oligarchs,¹ but also against President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, whose foreign assets were frozen by the United States, the European Union and the United Kingdom. Likewise, the Russian defense minister, Sergei Shoigu, and the head of the Russian security service, Aleksandr Bortnikov, have received a double sanction since their assets have been frozen and the possibility of entering their territories has been vetoed. The same measures have been established against the head of the Russian armed forces, Valery Gerasimov (known for the doctrine that bears his name), who was already on the European Union blacklist in 2014.

Additionally, the European Union has frozen assets and prohibited travel to its territories to the 351 members of the Russian Duma,² while the United Kingdom has only decided to apply sanctions against the members of the Duma and the Federation Council who voted in favor to recognize the independence of Donetsk and Lugansk. Whilst the United States had already imposed sanctions on the head of the Duma, Viacheslav Volodin, whose airspace has been banned by Sweden and Finland.

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On the other hand, the economic sanctions against Russia also stand out. In this regard, the High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security of the European Union, the Spanish socialist politician Josep Borrell, has stated that these sanctions are intended to hit Russia's financial, energy and transport sectors, and include export controls and prohibitions on commercial financing.³ Similarly, Russia will not be able to import complementary technology to update its obsolete crude oil refineries, which have not been renovated since 2003. However, the most hurtful economic sanctions are those that will affect 70% of Russian banks. Immediately after the invasion, German Chancellor Olaf Scholtz sharply halted state permits to activate the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which would link gas infrastructure to Europe through a gigantic corridor between Moscow and Berlin.

Without a doubt, one of the most significant sanctions has been the expulsion of Russia from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), a messaging system used by banks to make secure and fast payments across any national border, thus allowing all types of international trade to be transmitted seamlessly. This sanction was previously applied to the Islamic Republic of Iran, causing it to lose almost half of its income from oil exports and 30% of that country's foreign trade.⁴ Similarly, the application of this sanction would strongly impact the Russian economy, particularly in the short term. Russia relies heavily on the SWIFT system due to its multi-billion-dollar hydrocarbon exports denominated in US dollars.⁵

Russia's use of asymmetric warfare

Russia, despite having a large army and using air superiority to nullify much of the Ukrainian defense, has chosen to employ irregular warfare techniques when it comes to assaulting specific cities or regions, such as Kharkov and Hostomel. To this end, Russia has been deploying the so-called *Kadyrovtsy* (which literally means "Kadyrov's men") in Ukraine. The *Kadyrovtsy* are elite units created between 2000 and 2003 by the former mufti of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria or "independent Chechnya" when he turned against President Aslan Maskhadov and chose to change sides, taking with him several former guerrillas who became paid men of Moscow. Among the best-known *Kadyrovtsy* are Apti Alaudinov, the Yamadayev brothers (Sulim, Ruslan, Dzhabrail and Issa), Idriss Gaibov, along with exiled Chechens such as Said-Magomed Kakiev or Alu Aljánov. All of them are specialists in *zachitski* or "cleansing operations" (a term used by the pro-Moscow Grozny government to designate classic counter-insurgency tactics) and were previously deployed in the 2008 "5-day war" between Georgia and Russia by the rebel enclave of South Ossetia, being integrated into the *Vostok* (East) and *Zapad* (West) battalions of the Russian Defense Ministry.

Subsequently, the *Kadyrovtsy* were sent as support troops to the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria, after the Syrian Arab Army retook the city of Aleppo between

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October and November 2016. In Ukraine, along with these units or columns, are also the so-called pro-Russian battalions already known since the beginning of the conflict in 2014. Within these pro-Russian battalions are the Special Forces of the "Donetsk Republic", the "Sparta Battalion", the "Somalia" detachment and the "St. George" unit. This last unit is made up of ethnic Ossetian fighters trained in combat after more than two decades in low-intensity conflict against Georgia.

With regard to the Ukrainian army, being infinitely fewer in number compared to the contingent, they chose to create self-defense militias, militarizing the entire male population between 18 and 65 years of age, along with requesting help directly from the European Union and surreptitiously to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Additionally, President Zelensky has ordered the entire Ukrainian diaspora to return to the country, take up arms and defend the nation against the Russian onslaught. They are joined by citizens of different nationalities who have offered themselves to the Ukrainian government as volunteers for combat.⁶ It is curious that during Christmas 2021, the best-selling book in Ukraine was the classic essay by Swiss Army Major Hans von Dach (1927 - 2003), entitled "Total War: A Guerrilla Manual for Anyone on foot", which could indicate that in the collective imagination, the invasion was taken for granted before the current events.

By way of conclusion: Not very encouraging scenarios

After 2020 was marked by the global chaos generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and 2021 was characterized by the assault on the seat of the United States Congress and the withdrawal from Afghan territory without errors being assumed or thought in the aftermath, the prospects for the year 2022 were not very encouraging. The year 2022 began with a conflict little commented on and generated by the political crisis and social protests in Kazakhstan due to the patronage and nepotistic network of former shadow president Nursultan Nazabayev. The increase in gas prices in that Central Asian country had an impact on a population that demanded economic reforms and the end of a political dynasty that has existed since its independence in 1991. President Kassym Tokayev's response was to order the OMON (special police forces) to shoot to kill the protesters whom he accused of being "fundamentalist Afghan terrorists and mercenaries", in addition to requesting "Russian aid" which translated to the deployment of troops linked to the common defense and security pact of the Eurasian Union, direct heir to organizations now extinct such as COMECON or the Warsaw Pact.

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, two factors marked the future of the year 2022: the supply crisis and the possible "energy blackout", a hypothetical phenomenon that would eliminate the entire world energy network and with it the internet in a brief period of time. In relation to Russia, little is said about the Kremlin's complaints regarding the transpacific route, which implies diplomatic clashes with

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Japan regarding the controversial sovereignty of the Kuril Islands, as well as the new "silk route" in Central Asia that makes its alliance with China necessary and that frightens world stock markets greatly. Faced with such complex scenarios, in a hyperconnected world in what Marshall McLuhan called in 1968 "The Global Village", the world cannot believe in excessive optimism, but rather in how to prepare to contain "rogue nations" or actors not that can challenge - even more - the current delicate *pax Romana* or the longed-for economic recovery after strong crises experienced in the last two decades.

Endnotes:

¹ "La lista de sanciones para asfixiar la economía de Rusia por invadir Ucrania", *elEconomista.es* (February 28, 2022), <https://www.eleconomista.es/economia/noticias/11640679/02/22/La-lista-de-sanciones-para-asfixiar-la-economia-de-Rusia-por-invadir-Ucrania.html>

² Name given to the lower house of the Russian legislature.

³ Michelle Toh, Junko Ogura, Hira Humayun, Caitlin McGee, Isaac Yee, Eric Cheung, Sam Fossum y Niamh Kennedy, "La lista de sanciones mundiales a Rusia por la guerra de Ucrania", *CNN* (February 25, 2022), <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2022/02/25/lista-sanciones-mundiales-rusia-guerra-ucrania-trax/>

⁴ María Shagina, "How Disastrous Would Disconnection From SWIFT Be for Russia?," *Carnegie Moscow Center* (May 28, 2021), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/84634>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ María Miret García, "Voluntarios de los países europeos se movilizan para ayudar a Ucrania", *Euronews* (February 28, 2022), <https://es.euronews.com/2022/02/28/voluntarios-de-los-paises-europeos-se-movilizan-para-ayudar-a-ucrania>