



15

Analysis
Paper

THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE, THE WEST'S RESPONSE, AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL ORDER

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On February 24, 2022, the Russian army began what it called a “special military operation” in Ukraine, launched by President Vladimir Putin, whose main reasons were the eradication of alleged neo-Nazi groups, the defense of resident Russian citizens in Ukraine, Crimea and the Donbas region, as well as ensuring that the country never forms part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The conflict and invasion began after the unilateral recognition of the independence of the territory known as Donbas, which includes the provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk, both home to a population of majority Russian origin. This analysis note examines the worsening of the situation between Russia and Ukraine between the annexation of Crimea by the former in 2014 and the start of the armed conflict in February 2022, the response of Western powers through political support and the delivery of military weapons to Kiev, as well as the imposition of economic, immigration, sports and cultural sanctions on Russia, mainly by the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan and the European Union. Finally, we reflect on some of the potential implications of the war on the international stage.

Origins of the current conflict

Since 2014, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine gradually deteriorated. The then

Ukrainian president, Victor Yanukovych, a politician very close to the Kremlin, was overthrown in February 2014 as a result of the Maidan Square protests in Kiev, whose main objective was to exert pressure to achieve the signing of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. On that occasion, the Kremlin blamed the West¹ for the fall of Yanukovych, arguing that it had supported another “color revolution” that led to the collapse of a regime aligned with President Putin and the imposition of one closer to the European Union, in order to negotiate a possible entry into the Union through the signing of the Association Agreement.

Subsequently, in March 2014, Russia began actions to annex Crimea to its territory. First, by holding a referendum on March 16, in which the majority of the population of the peninsula voted for the union of the new entities, the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, with the Russian Federation. Then, based on the result of the referendum, on March 18, the Russian Government and the leaders of the Crimean Peninsula signed an international treaty

[1] “The West” may be defined as the group of countries on several continents, whose languages and cultures originate in Europe.



that formalized the annexation of both entities to the Russian Federation. These acts were interpreted and condemned by the majority of members of the United Nations as an act of territorial annexation—in violation of international law—and as a referendum lacking the minimum standards accepted by the international community, such as the presence of international observers. These criticisms included the fact that the Russian army was involved, even unofficially, in the supposed security and safeguarding of Crimean citizens during the referendum.

The Minsk Agreements

In 2014, a conflict broke out between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian fighters in the east of the country. In order to contain an escalation and put an end to the situation, the

following two years saw several rounds of negotiations under a diplomatic channel known as the Minsk Process, held in the capital of Belarus. The Process was sponsored by Germany, France and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and led to Russia and Ukraine signing the Minsk I and Minsk II Agreements in September 2014 and February 2015, respectively.

The Minsk I Agreement² was established primarily as a roadmap to end the fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk, and normalize the status of the two regions, known jointly as Donbas.

[2] “What are the Minsk Agreements on the Ukraine Conflict?,” in Reuters, February 21, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-are-minsk-agreements-ukraine-conflict-2022-02-21/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).



A 12-point protocol was agreed³ to resolve the conflict, including a ceasefire, OSCE oversight of compliance, and a decentralization of power in the Donbas regions, including through the approval of a Ukrainian law on provisional arrangements of local government. However, this agreement quickly collapsed, because Russia and Ukraine complained about each other's failure to fulfill their obligations. Russia accused Ukraine of not having had the slightest intention of complying with it, while Kyiv accused Moscow of being directly involved in the conflict, providing military support to the separatist militias in Donbas, without openly admitting to it.

Peace negotiations continued and a new ceasefire agreement, Minsk II, was reached in February 2015,⁴ signed by the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine. This second agreement established an immediate and bilateral ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the territory of both sides, a roadmap to hold local elections, and an amnesty for the leaders involved in the conflict. The terms of the Minsk II Agreement also provided for the release of hostages and illegally detained people, as well as a constitutional reform in Ukraine for the adoption of a new Constitution by the end of 2015. For Ukraine, the Agreement implied the

[3] "Los 12 puntos del Acuerdo de Minsk," *La Tercera*, February 10, 2015, at <https://www.latercera.com/noticia/los-12-puntos-del-atrabajo-de-minsk/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[4] "Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk agreements," at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/UA_150212_MinskAgreement_en.pdf (date of access: October 23, 2023).

granting of significant autonomy to Donetsk and Luhansk (representing a real decentralization of its political power), the aforementioned constitutional reform, and the holding of local elections,⁵ among other elements, in exchange for regaining control of its border with Russia.

Minsk II also failed due to the non-compliant conditions of Minsk I. Russia's main complaint was that Ukraine never really intended to grant true autonomy to the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk Republics, and Ukraine argued that it was virtually impossible for it to comply with the agreements, because the majority of the Ukrainian population disagreed with them, in addition to accusing Russia of providing military and logistical support to the independence militias. For these reasons, it may be affirmed that the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine is one of the consequences of the lack of full compliance with the Minsk process.

The disputes between Russia and Ukraine

Regarding the reasons given by Russia to invade Ukraine, we can mention, among others, that the Kremlin intervened in its neighboring country to "denazify" and "demilitarize" it. Furthermore, "as a defense against the widespread threat posed [to Russia] predominantly by the United States and other NATO members, but emanating from Ukraine."⁶ Consequently, one of the main rea-

sons given by Moscow was to prevent Kyiv from joining NATO.

Moscow also stated that "it is acting in collective legitimate defense of the separatist areas of Luhansk and Donetsk, in Ukraine, which its government recognized as independent states three days before its invasion."⁷ Finally, Moscow argued that one of the main reasons behind its intervention "was to prevent the 'genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime' against Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Ukraine."⁸

From the perspective of the West, the Russian defense arguments are weak for several reasons. First, because it does not accept that the government of Ukraine has been overwhelmed by "Nazis," as Moscow claims; second, because it does not accept that Kyiv has carried out a genocide of Russian citizens in Donbas, and, third, in the view of the West, the Luhansk and Donetsk regions cannot be considered states by the international community.

Another line of argument put forward by the West is that President Putin is trying to restore the former Russian empire, which included much of modern-day Ukraine. Similarly, the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), the annexation of Crimea (Ukraine) in 2015, and the current invasion of Ukraine would constitute actions to recover some of the territories lost since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.⁹

Regarding Russian intervention in Ukraine, according to historian Jean Meyer:

[5]
[6]

Idem.
Steve P. Mulligan, *The Law of War and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service (CRS), March 2022, p. 2, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/LSB/LSB10710> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[7]
[8]
[9]

Idem.
Idem.
Fernando Casal Bértoa, "Por qué Putin ha invadido Ucrania," in *Agenda Pública El País*, March 18, 2022, at <https://agendapublica.elpais.com/noticia/17825/qu-putin-invadi-do-ukrania> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

Many Russians do not accept the independence of Ukraine, Belarus,^[10] Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova; and if they accept them, they do not understand them. When the Patriarchate of Moscow does not accept the autonomy of the Orthodox Churches of Estonia, Ukraine and Western Europe, it obeys the same imperial logic that in the religious field was defined by the Orthodox Church in 1872 as a heresy known as “phyletism,” that is to say: the confusion between the national idea and faith.^[11]

Other experts maintain that NATO expansion has been used as justification for the attacks on Ukraine, but it is fear of Western ideas that has driven Russian invasions in the last two hundred years. They add that, in spite of falling back on political excuses that date back to very ancient times, Putin lacks ideas to justify his actions, and that his failure is not psychological or political, but philosophical.^[12] In our analysis, this strikes a chord relating to the differences between Russia and the West. On the one hand, the Kremlin accuses Europe, and consequently Ukraine, of having let its agenda be “controlled” by minorities; on the other, Europe and the United States, among others, hold the

view that Russia fears Western values and that is why it acts aggressively.

For now, there is no solution to the conflict in sight. Some analysts discuss the possibility that the war could last for several years, and consider that Russia is preparing for this eventuality. On the other hand, there is general skepticism in the international community that Russia will accept a political agreement or ceasefire unless it considers that it has achieved sufficient territorial gains to achieve its recalculated objectives in order to present a victorious narrative to its domestic audiences.^[13]

The response of the West and the entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO

A large part of the international community has come to support Ukraine in its moment of crisis after the Russian invasion. The United States is the country that has been most involved in helping Ukrainians, funding it to the tune of over EUR 73 billion^[14] as of January 2023.

International support for Ukraine has not been limited to military matters. In this regard, many governments have also made commitments to providing economic and humanitarian aid, in some cases for amounts greater than military aid.

- [10] Currently, there is a discussion about the correct name of that country: Belarus or Belorussia. In this regard, the Belarus government itself requested the international community use this name, and not that of Belorussia, see “¿Bielorrusia o Belarús? El nombre de este país causa contradicción en Europa,” in Sputnik, August 30, 2020, at <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/20200830/bielorrusia-o-belarus-el-nombre-de-este-pais-causa-contradiccion-en-europa-1092587175.html> (date of access: October 23, 2023).
- [11] Jean Meyer, “Ucrania en la historia,” in Nexos, May 1, 2022, at <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=67657> (date of access: October 23, 2023).
- [12] Paul Berman, “La catástrofe intelectual de Vladimir Putin,” in *Letras Libres*, no. 281, May 2022, pp. 8-13.

- [13] Andrew S. Bowen, *Russia’s War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects*, Washington D.C., CRS, September 2022, p. 25, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068> (date of access: October 23, 2023).
- [14] “Ayuda enviada a Ucrania durante la guerra ruso-ucraniana a febrero de 2023, por país y tipo (millones de euros),” in Statista, at <https://es.statista.com/statistics/1294251/war-russia-ukrania-type-military-aid-sent-to-ukraine-by-each-country-in-2022/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).



The West has argued that the aid provided to Ukraine is intended to preserve, in addition to its freedom of decision as a sovereign country, Western values in the face of Russian aggression. For its part, the Kremlin argues that Western aid to Ukraine has only served to extend the conflict, and that it is a proxy war between Russia and the West, against the background of Ukraine.

As a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sweden and Finland abandoned their historical status as neutral countries and applied to join NATO in July 2022. The invasion has brought about several changes in the European security environment, the long-term impact of which will only be clear when the war is over and some perspective can be gained. Most experts say that the war has led to a sense of shared insecurity among Europeans.¹⁵ This is the case of

countries such as Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which also have a considerable Russian population within their borders.

In relation to the above, it has been pointed out that:

Sweden and Finland's request to join NATO is simply a manifestation of the growing concern with which the two Nordic nations, geographically close to Russia, view Putin's war. The concern of these two countries about Russian behavior is not new; it dates back at least to the post-World War II period. Now, however, due to the invasion of Ukraine, it has reemerged with sufficient strength to bring about a historic transformation in their respective strategic cultures,

[15] Salvador Sánchez Tapia, "Suecia y Finlandia: algunas reflexiones ante una nueva ampliación de la OTAN," in

Center for Global Affairs & Strategic Studies-University of Navarra, June 3, 2022, at <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/suecia-y-finlandia-algunas-reflexiones-ante-una-nueva-ampliacion-de-la-otan> (date of access: October 23, 2023)

leading them to knock on the door of the Atlantic Alliance, on whose periphery they have remained for decades by choice; they have always maintained a close relationship, while refusing to cross the threshold of full participation.¹⁶

As expected, Russia's reaction to the announcement made by Sweden and Finland was not positive. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov stated that this would not increase security in Europe.¹⁷ Subsequently, President Putin stated that Russia had no problem with these two countries joining NATO, but that it would respond to an increase in military deployment in the Nordic countries.¹⁸

Western sanctions on Russia

In response to the aggression against Ukraine, countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, Australia and Switzerland, as well as the European Union, imposed economic, financial, immigration, mobility, sports and cultural sanctions on Russia, with the aim of reversing its actions and to sanction it for violations of the U.N. Charter on international peace and security, as well as for specifically

violating one of the main precepts of coexistence between nations: "The armed intervention of one State in another without just cause."¹⁹

A distinction must be made between sanctions decreed by the United Nations Security Council, which are mandatory for all member states, and unilateral sanctions, which rely on strictly national legal bases or as part of the regulations of organizations such as the European Union. On this point, there is an international debate regarding the effectiveness and validity of sanctions as a deterrent for a country to modify its actions or its attitude towards another country or towards the international community. On the one hand, there are those who consider that it is an effective instrument that achieves its objectives in the short or medium term, which are to deter, prevent or reverse through coercion the effects of a specific way of behaving internationally. Other countries, by contrast, consider that sanctions are hardly or not at all effective, and impact on ordinary citizens more than the State itself. This latter position is the one that has been raised the most with regard to the sanctions packages imposed on Russia.

As of spring 2023, the European Union has approved ten sanctions packages against Russia. These sanctions are in addition to those already put in place in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, aimed at weakening the Russian currency, finance, technology and economic sectors, as well as key political figures and oligarchs.²⁰

[16] *Idem.*

[17] NIUS Editorial, "El Kremlin dice que la decisión de Suecia y Finlandia de unirse a la OTAN 'no mejorará la seguridad,'" in NIUS Diario, May 16, 2022, at https://www.niusdiario.es/internacional/europa/kremlin-suecia-finlandia-otan-no-mejora-seguro_18_3330871084.html (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[18] Javier G. Cuesta, "Putin afirma que la entrada de Suecia y Finlandia a la OTAN no supone una 'amenaza inmediata' para Rusia," *El País*, May 16, 2022, at <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-16/putin-afirma-que-la-entrada-de-finlandia-y-suecia-en-la-otan-no-supone-una-amenaza-imediata-para-rusia.html> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[19] See the Charter of the United Nations, Chapter I, Purposes and Principles.

[20] Borja Andrino, Kiko Llaneras and Montse Hidalgo, "Todas las sanciones a Rusia, de un vistazo: así actúa la UE para estrangular la economía de Putin," *El País*, March 24, 2022, at <https://elpais.com/economia/2022-03-25/todas-las-sanciones-a-rusia-de-un-vistazo-asi-actua-la-ue-para-estrangular-la-economia-de-putin.html> (date of access: October 23, 2023).



When the conflict broke out, Western countries agreed to freeze the assets of Russia's Central Bank, limiting its ability to access its international reserves (USD 630 billion).^[21] Subsequently, the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom and Canada agreed to exclude certain Russian banks from the International Bank Account Code (SWIFT) financial system, which enables the movement of payments between thousands of financial institutions in 200 countries. In the European Union, the exclusion from SWIFT affects the second largest Russian bank VTB, and six other institutions. In addition to SWIFT, further sanctions have been applied to the Russian financial sector. For example, the assets of the Central Bank of Russia in the European Union, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom have

been frozen, and transactions with the central bank are prohibited.^[22]

This was aimed at isolating Russia from the international financial system, and harming its ability to operate globally. The inability to use SWIFT delays payments Russia receives for oil and gas exports.^[23] For its part, Russia demanded, from April 1, 2023, payment in rubles for all its Russian gas exports, a measure that the West considered "blackmail."^[24]

[21] *Idem.*

[22] European Council/Council of the European Union, "EU response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine," on August 23, 2023, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/> (date of consultation: October 23, 2023).

[23] *Idem.*

[24] Daniela Blandón Ramírez, "Putin obligará a pagar por el gas ruso en rublos; en Europa hablan de 'chantaje,'" in France 24, March 31, 2022, at <https://www.france24.com/es/programas/econom%C3%ADa/20220331-gas-ruso-pago-rublos-europa> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

In other measures, the European Union, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom announced a general ban on Russian flights. Russian planes cannot land, take off or fly over the territory of any of these countries, which means longer travel times. Likewise, in some of these countries, the Russian state media outlets Sputnik News and RT were banned.²⁵

For its part, Germany suspended the permit for the opening of Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in the country. The United Kingdom, the United States and Australia are also imposing financial sanctions on Belarus for its role in the invasion of Ukraine.²⁶

The United States has prohibited its citizens from making any type of investment in Russia. It also imposed sanctions on several state-owned companies and targeted two of the country's largest banks: a complete block on Sberbank, which holds a third of Russia's total banking assets, and Alfabank, Russia's largest private bank. The United Kingdom joined the measures against Sberbank and pledged to end all imports of Russian coal and oil by the end of 2022. For its part, starting in 2022 the 27-member European Union imposed a ban on the purchase, import or transfer of coal and other solid fossil fuels from Russia. In addition, the European Union prohibited access to the ports of its member states to ships registered under the Russian flag, and prohibited any Russian

or Belarusian transport company from transporting goods by road within the Union, even in transit. Ultimately, a complete transaction ban was imposed on four key Russian banks, representing 23% of the market share in the Russian banking sector.²⁷

The objectives of the sanctions are clear. As Russia continues to wage war in Ukraine, Western countries are seeking to prevent President Putin from receiving funds from oil sales, typically his main source of export revenue and a cornerstone of the Russian economy. On the other hand, in the view of some experts, actions against oil are part of an effort to curtail Moscow's ability to take advantage of its role as an energy supplier to Europe.²⁸

Added to the above is the departure from Russia of some of the world's most emblematic companies, such as Apple, Microsoft, Coca-Cola and Pepsi, McDonald's, Adidas, Nike, IKEA, Starbucks, Netflix, Mastercard, Visa, among others. It is difficult to conceive that the younger generations of Russian citizens, born after 1991 and completely assimilated to the Western way of life, connected to social networks, eating in the best-known fast food restaurants, and traveling to the world's top tourist destinations can renounce all this without resentment, resistance, or protest.

However, over a year and a half since the start of the conflict, the Russian economy seems to be bearing the sanctions, which have not fulfilled their purpose of changing the

[25] "European Council/Council of the European Union," *op. cit.*
 [26] European Council/Council of the European Union, "European Union restrictive measures against Belarus," August 7, 2023, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-belarus/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[27] European Council/Council of the European Union, "European Union response..."

[28] B. Andrino, K. Llaneras and M. Hidalgo, *op. cit.*



Kremlin's policy.²⁹ On the other hand, due to the high level of dependence on Russian gas, which in 2021 represented more than 50% of total consumption, many members of the European Union have been seriously affected.³⁰

Effectiveness of sanctions

Due to the secrecy of the Russian Government, it is difficult to assess with certainty the extent of the sanctions imposed by the West. According to a Euronews report:

[29] Arnold Khachaturov, "Why We Shouldn't Expect the Russian Economy to Collapse Tomorrow," in *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, March 15, 2023, at <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/03/15/why-we-shouldnt-expect-the-russian-economy-to-collapse-tomorrow-en> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[30] "Estos son los países de Europa que más dependen del gas ruso," *El Financiero*, April 27, 2022, at <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/mundo/2022/04/27/estos-los-paises-de-europa-que-mas-dependen-del-gas-ruso/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

Economists note that the short-term effect of the sanctions was not as severe as expected. The Russian economy contracted by -2.1% last year (2022), while the International Monetary Fund's forecasts even suggest growth of 0.7% in 2023. Energy played a big role in this: the volume of Russian exports fell steadily in 2022, but prices rose faster, so that in the end, according to the Russian Central Bank, the Kremlin made even more money from sales of gas to Europe in 2022 than in 2021.³¹

Although there is a general consensus that Russia has coped well with the sanctions, this does not mean that they have had no impact. According to some experts, the sanctions have worked and their effect is very notable. However, they add that it is not the International Monetary Fund's fault that the Russian economy is still afloat, and suggest that it is crucial to understand that the West's economic influence over Russia is not all-powerful, and that even if more effective measures are implemented, expectations must be kept realistic.³²

For Moscow, which has found itself isolated from most countries in the international community, the role played by its allies has been extremely important, since they have counteracted the effects of the sanctions to some extent. China and India, for example, have benefited from Western sanctions imposed on Moscow by purchasing oil and gas at more affordable prices. This

[31] Amaranta Zermeño Jiménez, "¿Funcionan realmente las sanciones de Occidente a Rusia?," in *Euro-news en español*, June 28, 2023, at <https://es.euronews.com/2023/06/28/do-they-really-work-the-sanctions-from-the-west-to-rusia> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[32] A. Khachaturov, *op. cit.*



has also favored the Russians, who have found an outlet in Asia for their energy exports, which were previously directed towards the European Union.

In relation to the above, China has avoided condemning the invasion, although it has reiterated its defense of the principle of territorial sovereignty of Ukraine. Its own peace plan to resolve the conflict has not been well received by the West, which cites the closeness between Moscow and Beijing.

For its part, India has expressed an abstentionist stance on the conflict, although on occasion it has expressed its disagreement with the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, calling for an end to the war and peace negotiations.

The food corridor

Due to the war, Ukraine was prevented from making grain exports by the Russian blockade of its ports. In response to this situation,

Türkiye and the United Nations put forward an agreement so that Kyiv could continue to send its agricultural output abroad. The objective of this agreement, signed on July 22, 2022, was to restore Ukrainian grain exports, facilitate shipments of Russian cereal and fertilizers, and alleviate the food crisis that has hit the most vulnerable countries, especially in Africa.

One of the lingering criticisms of the grain deal is that, after the blockade ended, more developed countries, including several in the European Union, have received more grain from Ukraine than countries in poorer regions.³³

The agreement has been important to regulating global prices for the principal grains, in

[33] Arthur Sullivan, "¿Ha funcionado el acuerdo de cereales entre Rusia y Ucrania?", in DW, March 16, 2023, at <https://www.dw.com/es/ha-funcionado-el-acuerdo-de-cereales-entre-rusia-y-ucrania/a-65018647> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

addition to being a sign that it is possible to negotiate around some of the edges of the conflict. This helped alleviate the looming food crisis in Africa, although the situation has not yet been completely resolved.

The internal situation in Russia

President Vladimir Putin's popularity stood at 83% in April 2023,³⁴ almost a year and a half after the start of the war in Ukraine. Before the Ukrainian conflict it was between 60% and 65%. It is important to note that these surveys were carried out by the Levada Center, which is independent of the government. Although it is difficult to know the real popularity of the Russian president, these figures provide a sounding on the population's support for the war.

The legitimacy of Putin's government rests largely on remembering the country's heroic past and promoting Russia's interests abroad. The Russian president has resorted to the notion of restoring patriotism as a formula for social cohesion. He has stated that "[In Russia] we do not have a national idea other than patriotism, [...] there cannot be any other," a concept that "is neither ideologized nor associated with the work of a party or a social structure."³⁵ This vision, together with an alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as the defense of

"traditional values," constitutes the basis of President Putin's legitimacy.³⁶

It is worth noting that the situation of the political opposition within Russia is highly precarious. The arrests of former oil magnate, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and the leading opposition figure, Alexei Navalny, have attracted the attention of Russian and foreign human rights organizations.³⁷ The awarding of the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize to the Russian human rights organization Memorial, as well as the Belarusian political activist Ales Bialiatski and the Ukrainian human rights organization Center for Civil Liberties, has been interpreted in Russia as a prize implicitly directed against the Kremlin.³⁸ Indeed, Memorial, an organization that had already been designated a "foreign agent" by the Russian Government in the past, was shut down in December 2022.³⁹ It has been argued that the

[34] Levada Center, Popularity of President Putin in April 2023, at <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[35] George Peremitin, "Putin: 'El patriotismo es la única idea nacional posible en Rusia,'" in *Russia Beyond Español*, February 5, 2016, at https://es.rbth.com/pol%C3%ADtica-y-sociedad/politica/2016/02/05/putin-el-patriotismo-es-la-unica-idea-nacional-posible-de-rusia_565311 (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[36] "Valdai Discussion Club Meeting," in President of Russia, October 21, 2021, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66975> (date of access: October 23, 2023); "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 18th Annual Meeting," in Valdai Discussion Club, October 22, 2021, at <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-meets-with-members-of-the-valdai-discussion-club-transcript-of-the-18th-plenary-session/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[37] "Russia," in Human Rights Watch, at <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/russia> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[38] Anton Troianovski "Founded to Shed Light on Soviet Oppression, Memorial Is Targeted by Putin," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/07/world/europe/russia-memorial-nobel-peace-prize.html> (date of access: October 23, 2023); "Memorial: Nobel prize is a tribute, but struggle gets no easier," in Reuters, October 7, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/memorial-nobel-prize-is-tribute-struggle-gets-no-easier-2022-10-07/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[39] "The Nobel Peace Prize is awarded to Belarusian activist Ales Bialiatski, the Russian Memorial Center and the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine," in RT, October 7,



legislation on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” has been used extensively to intimidate political dissent.⁴⁰

In the recent past, figures such as Mikhail Kasyanov and Navalny attempted to create an alliance of opposition parties to form a democratic coalition, but the initiative did not prosper due to an apparent clash of personalities.⁴¹ The case of Navalny is an example of the Kremlin’s hardening attitude towards opposition leaders. For more than a decade, he has been a strong critic of the government’s policies, leading a campaign to denounce corruption. He became the

most prominent leader of the Russian opposition, and was sentenced to nine years in a “strict penal colony” for a fraud case that his followers claim was fabricated by the government. Navalny was detained after returning to Russia in 2021, after surviving a poisoning that he blamed on the Kremlin. He was already serving three and a half years in prison for violating bail conditions when he was hospitalized in Germany.⁴²

On the other hand, in Russia there is no doubt whatsoever that President Putin will seek re-election in 2024 and 2030. Most Russian citizens associate Putin with stability and prosperity, and dislike the chaos of the 1990s and radical changes.⁴³

2022, at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/443985-otorgan-premio-nobel-paz> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[40] Amnesty International, “Russia,” at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/russian-federation/> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[41] Editorial, “Líder opositor ruso propone alianza de liberales para regresar a la Duma,” *La Vanguardia*, September 11, 2016, at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20160911/41239790412/lider-opositor-ruso-propone-alianza-de-liberales-para-regresar-a-la-duma.html> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[42] Editorial, “Alexei Navalny: condenan al líder opositor ruso a 9 años más de cárcel en un juicio tildado de ‘farsa,’” in BBC News, March 22, 2022, at <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-60838682> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[43] Joaquín Pastrana Uranga and Edgar Rebollar Sáenz, “Rusia actual: aspectos económicos y políticos,” in *Revista Mex-*

The media war between Russia and the West

The “media war” between Russia and the West dates back to the Russian complaint first raised in 2008 for non-compliance with the NATO non-expansion agreement towards Russia’s former zone of influence, the events in Crimea in 2014, in Donbas in 2015, and the Kremlin’s alleged “intervention” in the 2016 US presidential election.

The conflict with Ukraine aggravated the situation. On the one hand, Russian media such as RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik News, which serve as instruments of the Kremlin, and on the other, the Western press, especially from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and the European Union, make it difficult to obtain reliable information about internal events in Russia and its actions on the international stage. As a result, RT and Sputnik broadcasts have been banned in the West, amid the imposition of other sanctions on Russia.^[44] For their part, the Russians complain that they are always presented as the “bad guys in the movie,” giving partial views of reality to the detriment of their country.

In terms of violations of the rules of war, Ukraine has held Russia responsible for the murders of civilians in numerous cities, which have occurred since the beginning of the invasion, and for the attack and bombing of civilian targets such as hospitals. The West has indicated that if they

are proven, accusations of “war crimes” could be raised against the government of the Russian Federation.^[45] For its part, the Kremlin has denied its participation in these events, stating that they are “setups” by the Ukrainians.

Russia as a world power and the perspective of a new international scenario

During Barack Obama’s presidency, the United States classified Russia as a regional power. However, the Russians consider their country a global power, as they are the only country that maintains nuclear weapons parity with the Americans.

Russian interventions in recent years in places such as Syria and Ukraine indicate the Russian Federation’s intention to position itself as a leading global power. In modern history, the country has been a determining actor in international relations, with an active presence in the decision-making processes that have transformed the world system. After a brief period of reorganization following the dissolution of the USSR, today Russia seeks to regain its leading role, challenging the United States and the European Union.

In the view of Arta Moeni and Coleman Hopkins,

Russia is considered a power, regional by some, and global by others, with a long history with deep cultural ties with its neighboring countries, many of them Orthodox and Slavic. In the view of some experts, when Moscow articulated its clear

icana de Política Exterior, no. 115, January-April 2019, pp. 7-26.

[44] State Department Center for Global Engagement (GEC), *Kremlin-funded media: RT and Sputnik’s role in Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem*, Washington, D.C., GEC, January 2022, p. 3, at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Kremlin-Funded-Media_January_update-19.pdf (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[45] A.S. Bowen, *Russia’s War in Ukraine: Military and Intelligence Aspects*, Washington D.C. CRS, April 2022, [p. 2] at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47068> (date of access: October 23, 2023).



red lines, Washington should have listened. By failing to recognize or address Russia's security concerns (e.g. expansion of NATO), the United States and its closest European allies made a grave mistake—a miscalculation that innocent civilians are now paying for since Putin abandoned diplomacy and invaded Ukraine.^[46]

The fact is that by openly intervening in the current internal conflict in Syria and taking the lead on chemical weapons disarmament there, the annexation or accession of Crimea, and military action in Ukraine, Russia has returned to the international stage with a similar weight to that of the United States, the European Union, or China.

It is important to note that since national security is a cross-cutting issue for all public policies in the Russian Federation, the invasion of Ukraine is seen as a response to the perceived threat posed by NATO's proximity to its borders, in countries that used to be part of the USSR; something that according to Russian leaders the West had promised would never happen.^[47]

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has led some analysts to talk about the end of globalization as we know it. The emergence of two blocs is foreseen: one in the West, under the leadership of the United States and followed by the European Union, Australia and Canada, among others; and a Eurasian one led by Russia, China and India, countries that have

[46] Arta Moeni and Coleman Hopkins: "America Needs Strategic Empathy in a Multipolar World," in *The National Interest*, May 2, 2022, at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-needs-strategic-empathy-multipolar-world-202160> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

[47] "Putin: no es Rusia quien está colocando misiles cerca de las fronteras estadounidenses, sino es EE.UU. quien está en nuestras puertas," in RT, December 23, 2021, at <https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/414648-putin-eeuu-esta-colocando-misiles> (date of access: October 23, 2023).

even, for some time now, proposed eliminating the dollar and euro as the dominant currencies for their trade, and that have advocated the creation of a new multipolar world order.

At a global level, the interests of Russia and China converge in their mutual desire to act as a counterweight to what they perceive as the preponderant and hegemonic influence of the United States. Both countries are powers that aim to challenge the principles of the international system. The two countries consider that U.S security and defense policies in space and cyberspace undermine global stability, in particular that of the geographical areas where they aspire to have greater influence: China in the Pacific Rim, and Russia in the post-Soviet space.

In this view, the new international scenario would have three poles: United States, Russia, and China. However, in practice it is likely that there would only be two, similar to the Cold War context: The United States and its Western allies would be on one side, while Russia, China and their allies—as well as countries seen as not aligned with the West—would be on the other.

Conclusions

Since 2014, the bilateral relationship between Russia and Ukraine has deteriorated, leading to the current situation. Russia blames the West and its neighbor, arguing that the “special military operation” it is carrying out in Ukrainian territory, in addition to seeking to protect the population of Russian origin, constitutes a defensive action to avoid later aggressions by NATO.

For its part, the West rebukes Russia for the annexation of Crimea, the failure to comply with the Minsk agreements, and the military action against Ukraine begun in February

2022, as well as the alleged war crimes that have taken place in several Ukrainian cities.

The situation is a paradoxical one for Russia. Rather than preventing NATO from approaching its borders, the armed conflict has led Finland and Sweden to request entry into this alliance. On the other hand, although there are signs of considerable support for the Russian Government, bound up in sentiments of patriotism and international prestige, the call for partial mobilization of the population to reinforce the armed forces has led to the emergence of a broader opposition movement open to war with Ukraine. The June 2023 rebellion of the paramilitary organization known as the Wagner Group, which fights alongside the Russian army, despite its failure and its leader Yevgeni Prigozhin dying in an apparent plane crash in August of the same year, has been interpreted as a significant challenge to the Kremlin leadership.

There is currently an impasse, the consequences of which are unclear. The eventual duration of the conflict is unknown, there is no immediate or lasting solution in sight, and there is even talk of the emergence of a new world order, whose implications and consequences for international relations remain to be seen.

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