



International School for Security Forces (EIFORCES)' Research and  
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## *CRD/EIFORCES Insights*

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### **RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: ORIGINS AND CONSEQUENCES FOR AFRICA**

*On 24 February 2022, what was still described as tension between Russia and the Western world through Ukraine turned into open warfare with the outbreak of the first hostilities on Ukrainian territory. Despite Western warnings, diplomatic efforts and threats of heavy sanctions, the escalation into a conflict could not be prevented. For some years now, an acrimonious climate had been building up around Russian military manoeuvres on the Ukrainian borders. Meanwhile, the Western world in turn failed to prove reassuring and kept creating security uncertainties on Russia's borders through political influence on the Ukrainian government, the desire to integrate Ukraine into NATO, threats of sanctions against Russia, etc. These are some of the ingredients that, taken together, are at the origin of the war between Russia and Ukraine, which is shaping up to be one of the major conflicts of the first quarter of the 21st century, and whose impact will undoubtedly be decisive for world geopolitics in the years ahead. This analytical note explores the distant origins and evolution of this war, as well as its short-, medium- and long-term consequences in Africa.*

#### **An historically driven war**

Although they look at each other as enemies today, Russia and Ukraine are historically and geographically interlinked. The history between these two Eastern European territories dates back thousands of years. Ukraine's capital, Kiev, grew out of the break-up of the "Kievan Rus" into Ukraine and Russia. The conversion to Orthodox Christianity of Vladimir the Great, the pagan prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince

of Kiev, and his baptism in the Crimean city of Chersonese in 988, definitively sealed the proximity between the peoples of the two territories (Conant, 2022).

However, instead of just maintaining harmonious coexistence with its neighbours, Ukraine has instead been the target of multiple covetousness by competing powers since the 12th century. Following the Mongol warriors, the Polish and Lithuanian armies invaded the Ukrainian territory from its western flank in the 16th century. In the 17th century, the territories to the east of the Dnieper came under Russian imperial control, while the right bank fell under Polish occupation. Later in 1793, the Russian Empire annexed the Ukrainian right bank and implemented a programme for Russification of the conquered areas by forcing the inhabitants to convert to the Russian Orthodox religion and prohibiting the use or study of the Ukrainian language, etc.

Later, after the 1917 communist revolution, Ukraine engaged in a civil war that resulted in the country becoming part of the Soviet Union in 1922. The great famine in Ukraine in 1930 led not only to the deaths of millions of Ukrainians, but also to the invasion of eastern Ukraine by millions of Russians and Soviet citizens who, not only did not speak Ukrainian, but also had no real ties to the region (Conant, 2022), encouraged in that by Joseph Stalin, President of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). These events contributed to the creation of divisions among the peoples of Eastern

Europe, mainly between Russians and Ukrainians, and even among Ukrainians within their territory. It can be seen today that Eastern Ukraine has since come under Russian rule, while the West has been for centuries in the hands of European powers such as Poland and Austria-Hungary (Pierre Lorrain, 2019). As a result, inhabitants of the East have stronger ties to Russia and tend to support pro-Russian leaders, whereas the West of Ukraine tends to support pro-Western politicians. Also, the East is more Russian-speaking and Orthodox, while some parts of the West are more Ukrainian-speaking and Catholic.

Since Ukraine's independence in 1991 following the collapse of the USSR, the transition to democracy and capitalism has been painful and chaotic to the point where the country's union seems to be a difficult project to achieve. "The feeling of Ukrainian nationalism is not as strong in the East as it is in the West" (Pifer, 2020). Moreover, some Ukrainians remain nostalgic for the imperial and Soviet era, a memory that is considered a tragedy for others. Yet in the 19th century, the nationalist revival that was fashionable throughout Europe did not spare Ukraine. Many people were forced into exile because of Russia's tsarist policy, which had little tolerance for any idea of Ukrainian nationalism. The Ukrainians who feel most attached to Europe and to the Ukrainian language are mainly present in the west of the country, while a large part of the population in the east and south supports a more Russophile political option, as well as being Russian-speaking themselves.

Since 1991, the alternation between "pro-Western" and "pro-Russian" presidents in the Republic of Ukraine has always been a source of various tensions. These tensions reached their peak in 2004 when large-scale demonstrations in the streets of Kiev forced the Ukrainian authorities to re-run the presidential elections described as fraudulent and which had pitted the "pro-Western" Viktor Iouchchenko against the pro-Russian Leonid Kuchma.

## **2008 Bucharest Summit: the steps towards the 2022 escalation of war**

It is worth recalling that one of the catalysts for the warlike escalation of 2022 was the NATO summit in April 2008 at which US President George W. Bush proposed a roadmap for the integration of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. In response, the Russian President

Vladimir Putin fiercely opposed this and described the US move as a "direct threat" to Russia's security.

In 2014, pro-Russian President Viktor Ianoukovych, in power since 2010, refused to join the European Union (EU) and terminated the EU Association Agreement in favour of cooperation with Russia. This led to an uprising of the "pro-Westerners" in Kiev. Following a police crackdown orchestrated by the government, the President was dismissed and the 'pro-Westerners' regained power on 22 February 2014, giving the killed protesters and militiamen the status of national martyrs (Nicholas, 2022).

Responding to this uncertain situation, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the opportunity to annex Crimea, a strategically important peninsula on the Black Sea. This initiative was strongly welcomed by the Crimeans, with over 96 per cent of the population votes in a referendum condemned by the Western powers, members of NATO, who opposed the Russians' action in Crimea. (Teurtrie, 2021). The effect of the annexation of Crimea in the region was to awaken the hitherto dormant pro-independence tendencies of certain Ukrainian provinces of Dombass, notably Donetsk and Lugansk. The referendums organised (judged "illegal" by Ukraine and the Western NATO powers) allowed Donetsk and Lugansk to self-proclaim their independence as "People's Republics" while affirming their proximity to Russia. To put an end to the crisis between Ukraine and the autonomous regions of Dombass, the protagonists finally met on 12 February 2015 to sign the Minsk agreement, which provided for the withdrawal of heavy armaments, the release and exchange of all prisoners and constitutional reforms in Ukraine, Donetsk and Lugansk. The Ukrainians showed reluctance to implement the Minsk agreement, particularly because it implied recognising the legitimacy and special status of the separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk.

### Ukraine and its border with Russia



Source: Pierre-Albert Josserand / Franceinfo.

Since then, tensions between Russia and Ukraine have been rampant. Thus, for most Ukrainians, the threat of wider Russian intervention in Ukraine is just the latest episode in an endless eight-year war, despite the signing of the Minsk Agreement in September 2014 between Ukraine and Russia, under the auspices of France and Germany. Since 2014, this ongoing tension between the parties has resulted in approximately 14,000 deaths (Goujon, 2021: 147).

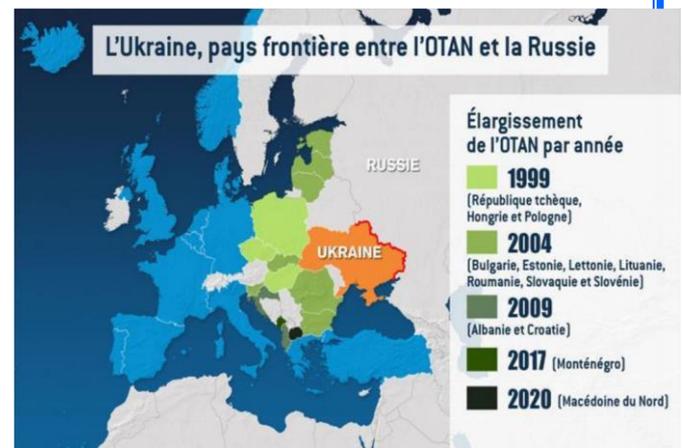
In November 2021, tensions were heightened when Washington demanded an explanation from Moscow for troop movements deemed "unusual" on the Ukrainian border. Yet in April, Russia was already showing military muscle by amassing troops and war material on the eastern, northern and southern borders of Ukraine, especially in Crimea, before withdrawing them under Western pressure. In January 2022, Russia returned to the charge by encircling Ukraine once again, despite the protests of the West and the UN.

In this manoeuvre, Russia accused NATO countries of supplying arms to Kiev and conducting "provocative" military exercises in the region. Vladimir Putin considered that it was Russia's duty to defend itself, judging that the redefinition of the security architecture in the region was unfavourable to Russia. To ease the tension, Putin demanded written "guarantees" from Washington, including the assurance that Ukraine would never join NATO. But this situation was deemed unacceptable by NATO's Western promoters.

### About Ukraine and NATO

The core of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine lies in the question of Ukraine's membership of NATO, since full membership of NATO in the event of

definitive accession represents a major security concern for this major ex-USSR country. Indeed, if NATO member, Ukraine would be able to counter the growing influence of Russia on its territory and even in the sub-region since the end of the USSR in 1991. After a failed accession process in Bucharest in 2008, the 2014 events and above all the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the option of Ukrainian membership of NATO has been increasingly brandished without becoming a reality. Cooperation between Ukraine and NATO has even been revived since 2020 when Kiev became one of the six partner countries of this organisation, thereby reinforcing its cooperation with the West. In spite of this, President Volodymyr Zelensky's ambition for Ukraine to become a member of NATO has been increasingly asserted. But for Russia, Ukraine represents a last line of defence against NATO's expansion to the east.



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Unfortunately, the outbreak of war through the invasion of Ukraine since 24 February 2022 will certainly not allow the fulfilment of such a dream, at least not in the nearest future. The Russian advance into Ukrainian territory is driven by a clear desire to overthrow the regime of Volodymyr Zelensky. Moreover, President Putin stated on Russian state television that he had taken the decision to launch a "military operation" in Ukraine, officially at the request of the leaders of the Dombass separatist regions. In response, US President Joe Biden called the Russian attack on Ukraine "a premeditated war that will bring a catastrophic loss of life and human suffering" (Smolar, 2022).

### The real idea behind Russian operations?

Despite the many warnings from Western countries and in the face of diplomatic efforts and threats of heavy sanctions against Russia in the event of an attack on Ukraine, Vladimir Putin proved deaf and went on the

offensive. Russian bombing and troop movements have been effective in Ukraine since 24 February 2022. In response, the Ukrainian president declared a Martial Law and armed volunteers willing to fight for their homeland, Ukraine. Against this, the Russian offensive received varied condemnation from the international community, which was divided on the best way to retaliate against Vladimir Putin. Moreover, Putin has remained vague about his war aims, making mention just of a "special operation" to "protect" the pro-Russian population of Donbass. The other objective is to "demilitarise and denazify Ukraine", which for him would represent a threat to Russia's security. Putin's stated goal "has always been to make Ukraine a de facto province of Russia, just like Belarus" (Grant, 2022).

Specifically, it would not be a total invasion, as the Russians could be satisfied with a part of Ukrainian territory, given that in recognising the separatist regions, Vladimir Putin failed to mention the borders within which he considered them (Seibt, 2022). This could be the territories currently under the control of pro-Russian troops, or the regions claimed in 2014, both of which make sense and arguably provide him with a war aim. On closer observation, this war rhetoric from the Kremlin does not suggest a full-scale invasion, followed by occupation. "All the propaganda has been centred on the suffering inflicted on the pro-Russian populations of Donbass. The Ukrainians were also presented as victims of their leaders' actions. In this context, it is difficult to justify to the Russian population a large-scale war against individuals presented as victims" (Fridman, 2022). Moreover, repatriating part of the current Ukraine to Russia under NATO's nose would be enough to achieve Vladimir Putin's goal of 'restoring Russia's glory on the international scene' (Fridman, 2022).

### **NATO, the West ...**

One thing remains constant: Russia's war in Ukraine is undoubtedly a direct consequence of the wait-and-see attitude of the Western powers in NATO. After the war in Georgia in 2008 and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO did not sufficiently understand the urgency of maximising its military presence in Eastern Europe, which could have allowed to counter the Russian advance in their ambitions to break up this Organisation, a dream nurtured but never realised by the USSR in its time. With the war now open, and unable to intervene directly to protect the non-NATO Ukraine, the only

option left to the West is diplomacy and/or sending arms and ammunition to the Ukrainian army to assist them in their fight against their common enemy, Russia, and its West Ukrainian proponents. NATO could also consider establishing a no-fly zone over its member countries.

Faced with the stalemate at the UN due to the use of the Russian veto and the active solidarity of China in the Security Council, the European Union and the United States of America have taken a range of sanctions against Russia. These include economic and financial sanctions, ranging from the total or partial exclusion of Russia from the SWIFT system to the embargo on Russian gas and oil. However, as France, Germany and Italy have huge economic interests in Russia, these sanctions, if they result in a real shield, will be very disabling for both sides. Also, since 2014, Russia had been working to increase its reserves in sensitive areas such as foreign exchange and gold, which would allow the country to withstand the shocks created by possible sanctions.

Vladimir Putin for his part threatened the West with "consequences [never before experienced]" in the event of intervention to help Ukraine. This is a way of threatening the West with the use of nuclear weapons in the event of direct intervention on Ukraine's side. It is worth noting that this war is also the result of Washington's provocative geopolitics since the end of the Cold War. The 2008 offensive awakened an end of the Cold War that was still not well digested by the former KGB member Putin. The Medvedev-Putin sleight of hand has always been part of building the leadership of a post-bipolar Russia that would never again bend its back to anyone.

### **What implications for Africa?**

From the first hours of the Russian attacks in Ukraine, South Africa and Kenya voiced their opinion through their respective presidents, calling for dialogue. The next day, it was the turn of the current Chairperson of the African Union, Macky Sall, who is also the President of Senegal. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission also called for an end to the escalation and a return to dialogue. In a joint statement, these African leaders expressed "their extreme concern about the very serious and dangerous situation in Ukraine". They called on "the Russian Federation and any other regional or international actor to imperatively respect international law, territorial integrity and national

sovereignty of Ukraine" (Vendrely, 2022). However, given Africa's political influence on the international scene, these calls are unlikely to be heeded.

Economically, however, the impact of the war on the African continent is likely to be considerable. It is feared that the price of oil will soar, which will inevitably have an impact on transport costs, just as the rise of the dollar against other currencies could put further pressure on African currencies and increase the cost of living. This is all the more worrying from an inflationary point of view as the prospects of a fall in cereal production raise fears of a price hike, given that several African countries import most of their wheat from the two countries now at war. Egypt and Cameroon import almost 90% of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine, Libya imports 43% of its total wheat consumption from Ukraine and Kenya imports the equivalent of 75% of its wheat from Ukraine and Russia (FAO, 2021). The reality is that as soon as the war started, the price of wheat on the international market rose dramatically. On Euronext, the price of a tonne of milling wheat soared to 344 euros on 24 February (+12% in less than 24 hours).

Although the price of oil rose above \$100 a barrel in the immediate aftermath of Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the situation could boost South African palladium exports if the production of its main competitor, Russia, is affected by the conflict. South Africa is the world's second largest producer of this metal, which is highly valued by the automotive and technology industries, just behind Russia (Vendrely, 2022)

In human terms, tens of thousands of African students are studying in both Ukraine and Russia. The war, given the insecurity it generates, could put an end to their studies in these countries, which would be an enormous loss for their countries of origin and the continent as a whole. In addition, tens of thousands of students benefit from scholarships, and represent the largest number of African nationals in Ukraine today.

### **More cooperation opportunities with Africa still possible though**

The war and the effects of Western sanctions on Russia could, contrary to some expectations, provide an opportunity for Russia to consolidate its presence on the African continent, taking advantage of the growing Russian sentiment in Africa south of the Sahara, which is not so different from the case of Ukraine.

### ***Opportunity for consolidating a growing Russian presence***

Russia has positioned itself as a reliable and serious partner for Africa in recent years. The effect of Western sanctions on its economy will certainly push Russia to strengthen its presence on the African continent. Already active in several sectors of activity, Russia will deploy efforts to sell turnkey contracts or to provide energy, services, political advice and military equipment through a galaxy of public or private companies. To date, its presence is visible in hydrocarbons through companies such as Rosneft, Gazprom or Lukoil, both in the Maghreb and in sub-Saharan Africa. The mining and metallurgical sectors are also privileged through Rusal in bauxites, Nordgold, Vi Holding in platinum, Alosa in Angolan diamonds or Renova for South African manganese. (Koffi, 2022). Nuclear power is not to be outdone. It is the third sector which Russia wishes to develop in Africa. In Egypt, Rosatom has signed an agreement to build a nuclear power plant in El-Dabaa. In Rwanda, a nuclear research centre is to be built. The company is also present in Ethiopia, Ghana and Zambia (Koffi, 2022). Moscow also offers IT solutions such as MyOffice, which is present in Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, including within the government. This economic breakthrough goes hand in hand with a geopolitical objective, as shown by its presence in the Central African Republic, Mali, etc. in recent years, to the detriment of France.



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### ***Ukraine as well...***

Like Russia, but less powerful, Ukraine has developed strong trade relations with a number of African

countries since the Soviet era. These include Nigeria, Guinea Conakry, Angola, Uganda, etc. Kiev supplies African countries with agricultural equipment, metal products, etc. The war could be a serious handicap for both sides. Also, Ukraine is a destination of choice for African students, especially for training in the field of medicine and medical engineering. The African diaspora in Ukraine is currently estimated at around 76,000 individuals, mainly students (Koffi, 2022). Morocco, Nigeria and Egypt are three of the ten major countries of origin of foreign students in the country.

*Ultimately*, what is happening to Ukraine should eventually draw the attention of Africans, who are predominantly pro-Western political leaders, to what would look like a 'Putin-like territorial greed'. One of Moscow's dreams since the end of the Second World War has been to have Africa satellised in one way or another. This is reflected in the Russia-Africa summits, which should also be seen as a strong signal (Pountougnigni Njuh, 2019: 12-16). The Russian presence in Africa is welcomed by the so-called 'pan-Africanist' or anti-Western revolutionary masses. But caution should be exercised in fleeing the fire of neo-colonialism only to end up drowned in the ocean of blind love. Basically, Africans should go beyond speeches of condemnation and mainstream commentary to become aware of the extent to which irredentism and other land-grabbing and market-conquering processes of the great powers are likely to play out in geopolitical games in the years to come. In short, it is a confrontation between giants (NATO versus Russia) in relation to which Africa should also be vigilant and think about the possibility of being able to rely on its own resources to be developed in the event of the globalisation of this war.

In conclusion, it should be noted that from a geopolitical and strategic standpoint, Russia's attack on Ukraine can be seen as a return to or an ambitious reconfiguration of the Cold War-era USSR. It is the geopolitical resurrection of the USSR carried by a man (Vladimir Putin) whose ambition has always been to bear a resemblance to Stalin, the great architect of the USSR (Teurtrie, 2021). This war is also part of the logic of completing the work begun in 2014 when Russia occupied Crimea. Finally, it appears that the war unleashed since 24 February 2022 reveals an ambition to

reposition the world order. This is a very complex geopolitical issue which UN, as the guarantor of world peace, is unfortunately powerless to address. Consequently, it would be important and primordial for the whole international community to better grasp the issue in order to bring solutions that will avoid humanity the experience of a third world war or some such a war.

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