

INFO PACK

The Russo-Ukrainian War: Past and Present

Burak Elmalı

TRT WORLD research centre

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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

March 2022

WRITTEN BY

Burak Elmalı

PHOTO CREDIT

ANADOLU AGENCY

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON

200 GRAYS INN ROAD, WC1X 8XZ

LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE, 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

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Introduction

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fifteen states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia gained independence. Ukraine was one of these successor states and constituted a bridge between the West and the East due to its distinct geographical location. The ethnic structure of Ukraine is composed of Ukrainians (77.8%) and Russians (17.3%), the remaining population consists of Belarusian, Moldovan and Crimean Tatars. Although there has been various demands regarding autonomy based largely on linguistic differences in the post-independence period, there was a generally stable national outlook up until 2013. Public unrest, which began with then-President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the final draft of an agreement pertaining to economic integration with the European Union, led to public demonstrations, culminating in what came to be known as the Euromaidan Protests. One month after the Euromaidan, separatist forces supported by Russia in Donetsk and Luhansk (the Donbas region) declared the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), both of which were not recognized by any country at that time. In May 2014, separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk held a referendum regarding whether they should seek independence from Ukraine. The results were not recognized by any country and faced allegations of fraud. For the last eight years, armed clashes have regularly taken place between Ukraine and the separatists supported by Russia. On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Russia's recognition of the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Following this, Russia initiated a large-scale military operation against Ukraine on the morning of February 24, 2022. The ongoing war has garnered significant attention from international community and has paved the way for widespread sanctions against Russia. The Russia-Ukraine war is a complex issue in which multiple international, regional, and local factors come into play. Russia has justified its expansionist actions as being nothing more than the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine. Russia has also claimed that it is acting in order to protect Ukraine's Russian-speaking population, particularly in the Donbas. Ukraine strongly rejects these claims and considers the separatists as terrorists and has emphatically stated that it will stand firm regarding its territorial unity. This Info Pack seeks to examine the Russo-Ukrainian conflict with a particular focus on the historical background, main actors, prospective aims, and strategies. The Russia-Ukraine war is a complex conflict whose origins cannot be reduced to a single factor. Understanding the historical background of the ongoing conflict may help us to ponder on the causal weight of each factor without having a partial or reductionist perspective.



Major cities and regions under Russian attack (Source: TRT World)

Timeline for key events between Russia and Ukraine

Date	Key Events
February 1954	First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev transferred the government of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian SSR.
December 1991	After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine held an independence referendum. 92.3% of voters approved the declaration of independence. Following this, the first presidential elections were held. Leonid Kravchuk became the first president of independent Ukraine.
November 2004-January 2005	Orange Revolution and the election of pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko as the third president of Ukraine.
November 2013	Pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych refused to sign a deal proposing increased economic integration with the EU.
November 2013 - February 2014	Euromaidan protest movements against President Yanukovych's decision started. Yanukovych fled to Russia. 'Revolution of Dignity' in Ukraine took place on February 2014.
February-March 2014	Military operation and annexation of Crimean Peninsula by the Russian forces.
April 2014	Pro-Russian armed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk declared independence from Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) were established. War in Donbas began.
June 2014	The Normandy Format diplomatic talks were initiated with the participation of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, and France. It was a collective effort to find peaceful solutions for the War in Donbas.
September 2014	The Minsk Protocol (I) was signed by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine.[1] It was primarily stipulating the OSCE-monitored ceasefire. The protocol also included that the DPR and the LPR shall have special status.
September 2014-January 2015	Despite the ceasefire attempts under the Minsk Protocol, pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas seized the Donetsk Airport from Ukrainian forces.
February 2015	The Minsk Protocol (II) was signed after the violation of the first protocol. The second attempt prioritized an immediate ceasefire, the establishment of a buffer zone, and provision of a set of constitutional reforms for the separatist states in Donbas.
November 2018	Three vessels of the Ukrainian Navy going from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov through Kerch Strait were captured and fired upon by the Coast Guard of the Border Service of the FSB (the official coast guard branch of Russian military forces), marking the first open confrontation between the two countries.
March-April 2021	Putin ordered the deployment of Russian troops and military equipment to the borders of Ukraine and Crimea, arousing a potential threat of invasion in the eyes of international community.
February 2022	Russia officially recognized the self-declared independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). On February 24, a large scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began.

[1] The Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine (also known as the Trilateral Contact Group for the peaceful settlement of the situation in eastern Ukraine) is a group of representatives from Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe that was formed as means to facilitate a diplomatic resolution to the war in the Donbass region of Ukraine.

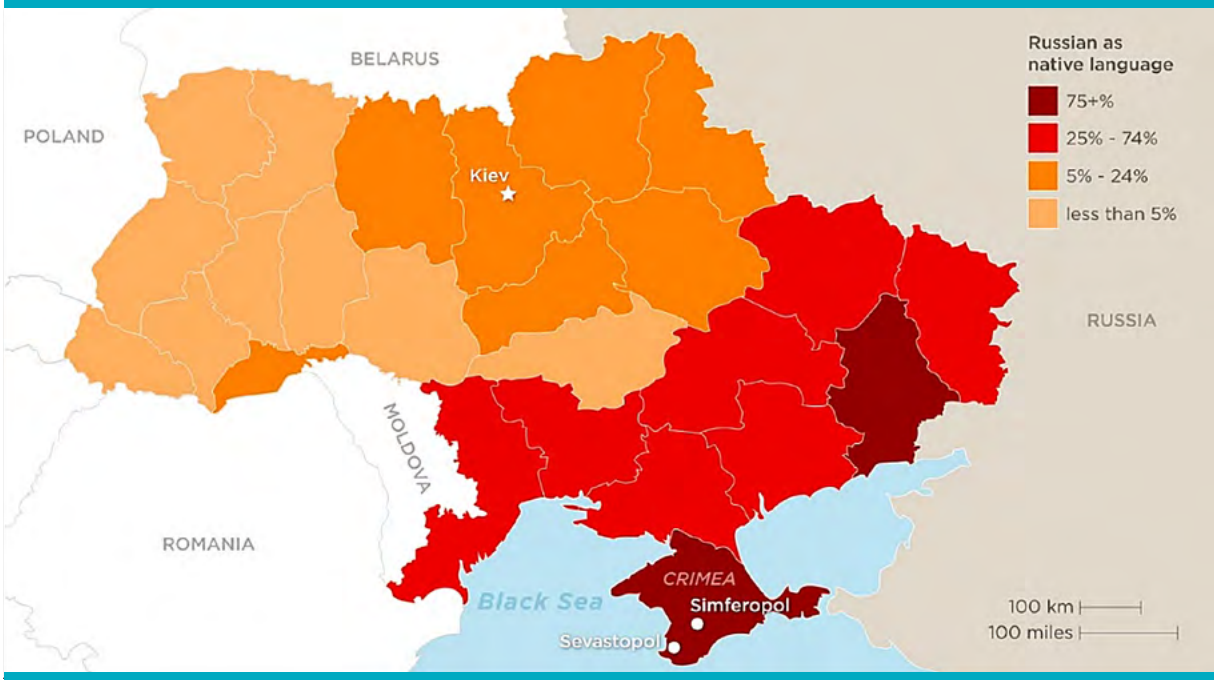
Ukraine: A Divided Nation?

The protagonists to the current conflict hold divergent and largely irreconcilable perspectives on the origins of the conflict. For Russia, Ukraine is a country divided between east and west, separated by sharp ideological and national/ethnic lines. For Russia, it is the Ukrainian 'nationalists', primarily from the western region, have pushed Ukraine towards NATO and the EU. They also hold these nationalist forces responsible for what Russia alleges to be genocide perpetrated by the Ukrainian state against the Russian-speaking population in the East. Similarly, the assumption that the pro-unification movements with Russia truly represent the Donbas region in Southeast Ukraine is part of a rhetoric that Moscow has used to legitimize their war. This view was made clear in Putin's 2021 article on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians. On the other hand, though one can speak about an east-west distinction on particular issues, Ukraine has always stressed that this distinction is not generalizable for the to the whole of Ukraine.

In Donbas, a consultative referendum was held in 1994 in order to address various constitutional issues such as the status of Russian language and federalization. While all questions obtained over 50% of approval by the people, none of them were adopted by the Ukrainian government. After the economic turmoil of 1990s, Donbas began to grow its industrial capacity and become a major industrial base in Ukraine. Discussions on the official status of Russian language, demands for autonomy and federalization continued for approximately 20 years. After the Euromaidan Protests and the 'Revolution of Dignity', President Yanukovych fled to Russia and the separatist movements in the region resurfaced. In Donetsk and Luhansk, seperatists held a referendum on independence from Ukraine in May 2014. According to separatists' statements, 89% of the voters in Donetsk and 96% in Luhansk voted in favour of independence. Russia stated that it respected the election results. However, neither Russia nor other any other country officially recognized the results as legitimate. In addition, independent observers stated that the polls were fraudulent in terms of voter turnout and marked by irregularities, and therefore lacked legitimacy.

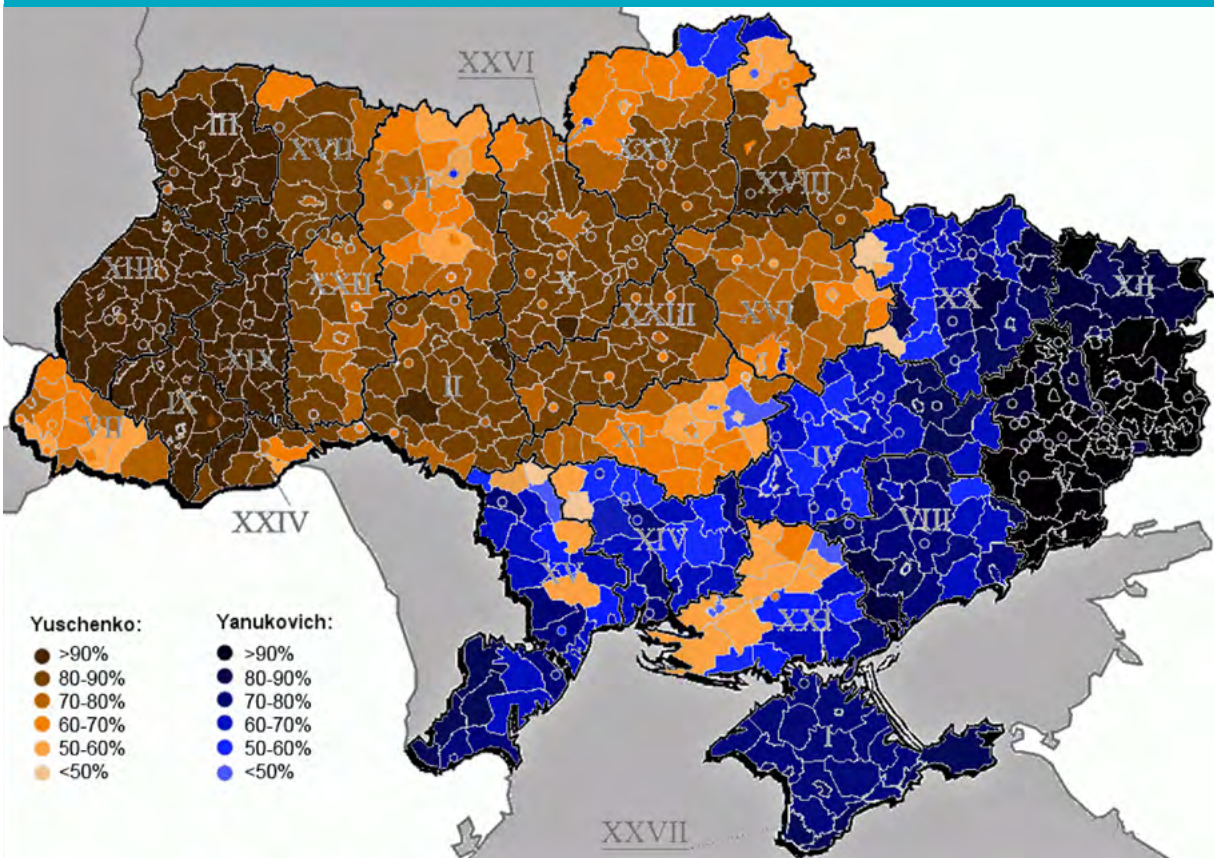
The differences between Ukraine's regions is perhaps most visible with regards to voting patterns in previous general elections. While the Western part of the country had mostly favoured candidates whose political commitments are generally associated with pro-Westernism in terms of political, economic, and security-based integration with European institutions, the Eastern part of the country has voted predominantly for candidates who aspire to maintain closer ties with Russia.

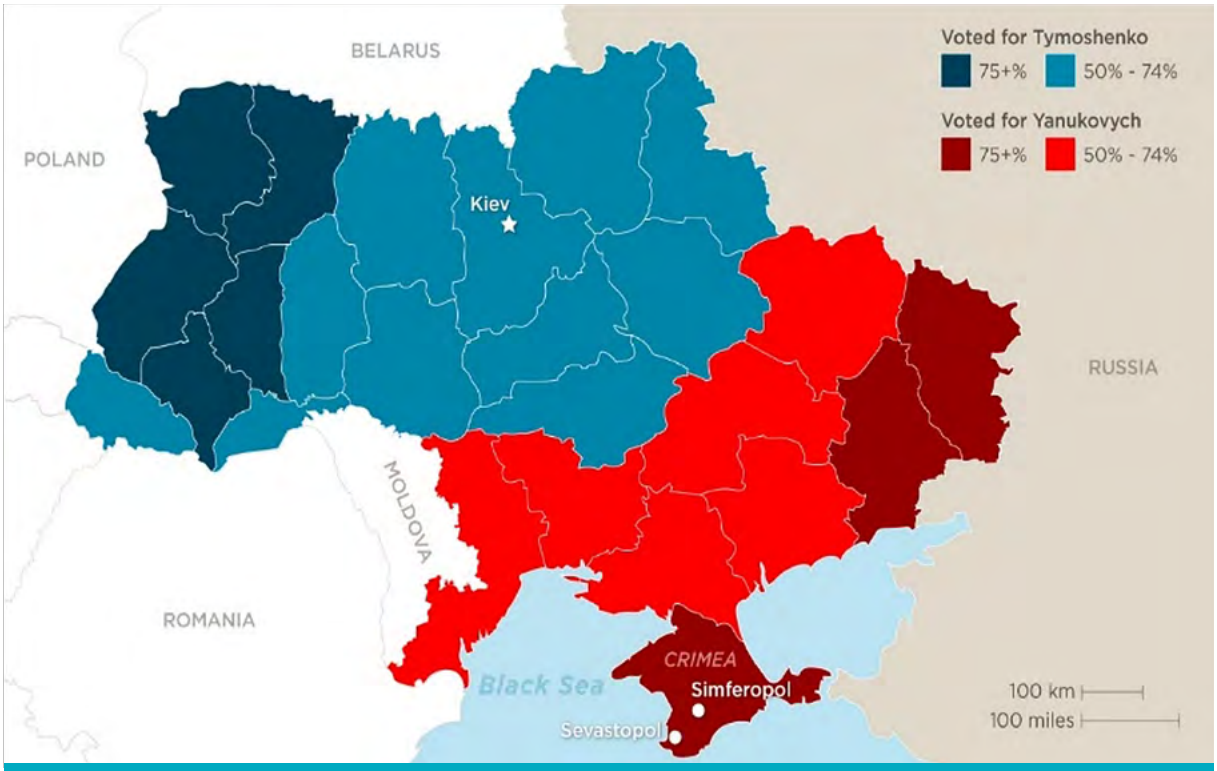
Russian as native language in Ukraine



Source: 2001 Ukraine Census

2004 and 2010 Presidential Elections in Ukraine





Source: Ukraine Central Election Commission

Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation

The Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 can be considered as reflective of its *irredentism*[2], which envisages the territorial reintegration of countries that gained independence in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially those with Russian-speaking populations, either into what Russia perceives as its natural sphere of influence or into its current national borders. We have also seen a provocative element parallel to this expansionist strategy in the statement of Vyacheslav Nikonov, Deputy of the Duma, last year, that the territory of Kazakhstan is a "Russian gift". Although Russians represent 20.2% of Kazakhstan's population, the fact that it was previously part of the USSR has made it a target of Russian irredentism. Considering the fact that the Crimean Oblast was given to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954, the annexation of Crimea can also be seen as an expression of Russian irredentism. Besides seeing the annexation of Crimea as a part of this expansionist strategy of Russia, we can understand the issue from a broader perspective if we examine domestic political atmosphere before the invasion, the most significant being the Euromaidan protests. The Euromaidan Protests, which started with President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign the economic cooperation and integration deal between Ukraine and the EU in November 2013 started in Kyiv and spread to many cities. It was the largest public demonstration since the Orange Revolution in 2004. President Yanukovych's rejection of the deal, which was accepted by the Ukrainian parliament by a majority vote and establishing closer ties with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union were seen as an unacceptable decision by the long-standing pro-Western public opinion in the country. The protests received great support and participation mostly in the capital Kyiv. According to a survey carried by R&B Group on January 2014, 44% of the population was in favour of Euromaidan, while 51% was opposed. While major cities in the Western part of the country showed 86% support for the protests, 81% of the residents in the Eastern cities held the opposite opinion. Public protests and demonstrations lasted for 3 months and ultimately ended with the 'Revolution of Dignity'. President Yanukovych was ousted and fled to Russia and the Azarov Government resigned. Petro Poroshenko was elected as the President of Ukraine with a landslide victory, and the return to the constitutional amendments that was initiated in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in 2004 was undertaken.

Considering this background, the annexation of Crimea can be seen a strategic response by Russia to Ukraine's Western orientation. In other words, through its annexation of Crimea Moscow has made it clear that they will not tolerate the pro-Western political orientation of the country. From Russia's perspective, however, the people of Crimea used their fundamental right to self-determination under international law. Therefore, Russia opposed the use of "annexation" to describe the military operation in February 2014. In order to provide a legitimate basis for the operation, a referendum was held in March 2014 and 96.7% of the voters approved of joining Russian Federation. However, the referendum was widely marked by allegations of fraud. According to Crimean Tatar leader Refat Chubarov, the referendum was held under the threat of violence from pro-Russian separatists. Moreover, according to Chubarov, the results of the referendum were effectively 'predetermined'. The majority of states and transnational bodies did not recognize the results as legitimate and imposed sanctions on Russian and Crimean officials and politicians as a result.



(Bülent Doruk - Anadolu Agency)

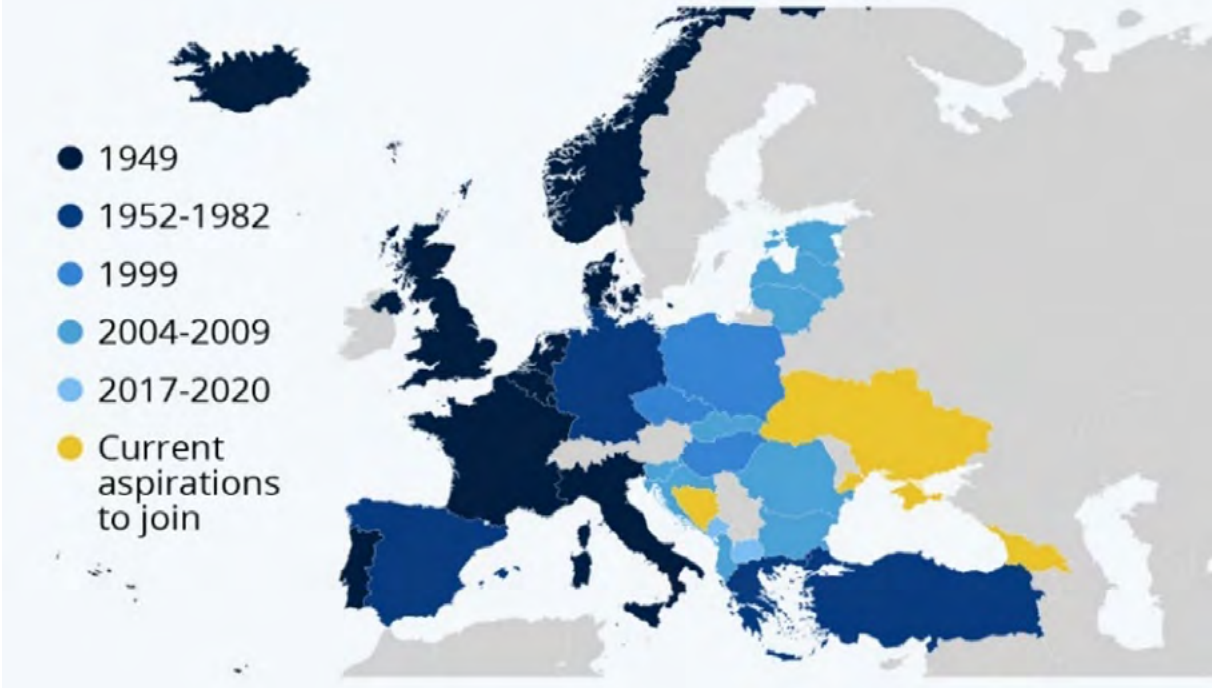
2 Irredentisim refers to a particular type of expansionism with which one nation has a territorial claim over the other on a national, ethnic, or historical basis.

Actors and Interests: Who Wants What?

In addition to Russia's military power, pro-Russian separatist forces in the de facto republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, and forces affiliated with the head of the Chechnya Autonomous Administration of Russia, Ramazan Kadyrov, also support Russia. The European Union and NATO alliance continue to provide humanitarian, economic, and military assistance to Ukraine. The main strategy followed by Russia can be viewed as one of balance of power politics[3]. Accordingly, Russian strategy has focused on balancing the growth of a democratic power on its border that is seeking deeper diplomatic relations with Western institutions such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). These efforts are perceived as intolerable acts by Russia. Russia's security demands given to NATO in December 2021 were to receive a commitment that neither Ukraine nor any former-Soviet Union country would be admitted to the alliance. In addition, Russia has demanded an end to the NATO military presence in Eastern Europe. While Putin's speech about the underlying reasons for invasion was centred on an ambiguous *casus belli*[4] to "de-nazify Ukraine" accompanied by demilitarization, his former discourses were precisely emphasizing the constant threat from modern Ukraine which has to do with the country's growing ties with the Western world. The general expectation held by Russia is to reintegrate Ukraine into the Russian sphere of influence that has been gradually narrowed by the NATO enlargement since 1999. Ukraine, however, seeks to protect its territorial integrity as a unitary state and act in accordance with international law. In that sense, both the annexation of Crimea and the military operation against Ukraine are seen as violations of international law.

NATO's Eastward Expansion

European countries by year they joined NATO



Map excludes NATO members the United States and Canada

Source: NATO

[3] Balance of power is a concept used in international relations that describes the ways of balancing the competitor nation's power by increasing one's own power or by pursuing a policy of alliance with other nations. In this way, as each nation follows balance of power politics, the international system is kept balanced.
[4] In the international Relations terminology, casus belli is a term used to describe the reasons that justify the declaration of war against a country.

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared Russia's recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk. In his statement, Putin stated a *casus belli* that Russian-speaking population in the Donbas region were subjected to humiliation and what he called 'genocide' by Ukraine. Before the invasion, the U.S., and the U.K. publicly shared intelligence that Russia was planning an attack on Ukraine. Russian officials repeatedly denied and described these allegations as "hysteria". In spite of all these allegations and denials, Russia decided to initiate a large-scale military operation against Ukraine on the morning of February 24, 2022. The four main directions of Russian advance to the Ukrainian territories are as follows: through Belarus to the north of Ukraine and to capital city Kyiv, through its territory to the northeast of Ukraine and to Kharkiv, to the east of Ukraine through the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), and to the south of Ukraine, through the annexed Crimea.

Advancement of Russian troops in Ukraine



Source: Rochan Consulting, The Institute for the Study of War with AEI's Critical Threats Project.

Responses from the International Community

The ongoing military operation has been severely and widely condemned by the international community and has seen the imposition of many sanctions to Russia. The European Union, for instance, announced that seven Russian banks would excluded from the SWIFT system. The removal of some banks from SWIFT, which functions as a common system of money transfer network for countries involved in international commercial transactions, is held to be one of the most severe economic sanctions that can be imposed. Accordingly, timing and costs of Russian commercial and financial transactions are expected to increase. International financial credit rating agencies have also announced that they have reduced Russia's financial credit rating. For instance, Fitch Ratings downgraded Russian credit rating from B to C, meaning that Russia will face a sovereign default problem in servicing its debts. Moreover, the assets of Russian oligarchs residing in the US, Canada, and European countries, have been frozen and moves have been made to have them seized in some instances. Many countries, especially members of NATO and the EU, have provided military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. NATO countries have stated that they would continue to provide anti-tank and air defence missiles and large quantities of small arms and ammunition. EU countries also stated that they will provide arms support worth 450 million Euros and protective equipment worth 50 million Euros. In addition to the political and economic costs of the military operation to Ukraine, Russia has faced both official and unofficial sanctioning in the arts, sports, and cultural activities. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) issued a statement that banned the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions. Similarly, FIFA and UEFA suspended the participation of Russian football teams from competition.



The Human Cost of the Conflict

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has already brought about severe burdens on Ukrainian civilians. According to the latest statement by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 596 civilians, 27 of whom were children, lost their lives and 1067 civilians were injured in conflicts in which explosive weapons with a wide impact area are used. As long as the clashes continue, it is certain that the number of civilian casualties and the number of injured will increase. Ukraine has called on the international community to send humanitarian aid including health equipment and hygiene materials. Another major cost of the conflict has been with a huge wave of refugees. Over 1.3 million people have fled the country thus far, with more than half escaping to Poland.



Civilians stay in Kyiv's metro due to Russian attacks. (Diego Herrera Carcedo - Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion: The Fog of War

The trajectory of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine remains highly uncertain. In the world of complex interdependency, the negative impacts of the war have already been felt on a global scale. The economic ramifications of the war continue to grow as sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its invasion start to bite. There is particular concern regarding rising energy and food prices, especially in regions that are already vulnerable to such shocks. The increase in energy prices have broken a 14 year record. Gasoline prices have also risen by 17% in the US since the invasion. Considering that Russia and Ukraine together account for 30% of total world wheat exports and 20% of total corn exports, it is well within the realm of the possible that the ongoing war will lead to serious disruptions in food supply. The political impacts of the war are also profound, raising questions about to what extent NATO may become involved in the conflict and how it will affect NATO's approach to cohesion and enlargement. According to some analysts, NATO may ultimately emerge more united with an increasingly negative threat perception of Russia. The risk of escalation continues to raise fears of serious economic, political, and human consequences.

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