

CRITICAL FORUM: RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE
GLOBAL SOUTH

Is Russia Losing in Ukraine but Winning in the Global South?

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Abstract

Russia's war in Ukraine has been roundly condemned in the West. NATO members have continued to supply Ukraine with weaponry while the EU, US and their allies have ensured that the Russian economy remains under the most extensive and intensive set of sanctions in history. Yet many leaders of countries in the global south have been far more hesitant to condemn Russian actions. Some have merely abstained in United Nations resolutions criticizing Russia, while others have remained neutral. This paper will endeavor to explain why the global south has such a different perspective from the global north on Russia's war in Ukraine. I argue that this is a result of America's withdrawal from the global south over the last two decades and Russia's reemergence in many parts of the Middle East, Sub Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia.

In February 2022, Martin Kimani, the Kenyan Ambassador to the United Nations boldly condemned Russia's recognition of the independence from Ukraine of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics. He compared Russian actions to Africa's colonial legacy, arguing "this situation echoes our history. Kenya and almost every African country was birthed by the ending of empire."¹ But Ambassador Kimani's perspective may have been more of an exception than the rule when it comes to attitudes and perspectives in the Global South on Russia's war in Ukraine. Where Kenya sides consistently with the United States, Europe, and members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) more generally in strongly supporting and defending international law in opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the picture is rather different in much of the rest of the Global South.

In the first vote in March 2022 in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) immediately following Russia's full-blown invasion of Ukraine, 141 of 193 countries (or about 73%) joined the global north in condemning Russian actions. But the remainder of the countries (51 excluding Russia itself) either abstained, voted against these resolutions (effectively in support of Russia), or did not vote at all, an implicit abstention at best.

This pattern changed only slightly over the successive votes related to Russia's war in Ukraine that took place in the first year of the invasion, although not in favor of the global north. In fact, the list of abstainers shrank over time such that in February 2023,

¹ A partial transcript of Kimani's speech can be found here: Bill Chappell, "Kenyan U.N. Ambassador Compares Ukraine's Plight to Colonial Legacy in Africa," National Public Radio, last modified February 22, 2022 at <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/22/1082334172/kenya-security-council-russia> (accessed June 1, 2023).

in a non-binding resolution demanding an end to the war and that Russia leave Ukraine immediately, the same 141 voted in favor, but even fewer abstained, and more voted against condemning Russian actions than had a year earlier.²

Beyond non-binding votes in the UNGA, however, the Global South also stands in stark contrast to the global north on independent sanctions on Russia and in helping to arm Ukraine. Of the forty-five countries that have either adopted individual sanctions or a combination of US and EU sanctions against Russia, only three are in the Global South (Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan), and are perhaps better thought of as the “global east” at that.³ Those countries that could impose individual sanctions without adopting new domestic enabling laws, but that have not done so include NATO member Turkey, India, long-time US ally Israel, and less surprisingly, China. Other countries that could have created and passed legislation enabling them to sanction Russia outside the UN framework have not bothered to do so. Again, here too many countries in the Global South, especially in Latin America and countries across the African continent, stand out as at best ambivalent about and sometimes supportive of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, often carrying out business as usual with Russia.⁴

Finally, a perusal of the publicly available sources indicates that at the time of writing, twenty-nine countries were actively providing weaponry or military support to Ukraine.⁵ This list is again dominated by countries from the global north, in part because NATO has led the way in arming Ukraine, but it is nonetheless remarkable that not a single country in the Global South has offered arms directly to Ukraine. Representatives of the European Union reportedly asked Brazil’s President Lula de Silva to send weapons to Ukraine and he declined. Indeed, he resorted to a sort of victim blaming, arguing that Ukraine itself in addition to Russia, the US and the European Union were responsible for Russia’s invasion.⁶ But he is not alone. In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa blamed NATO for provoking Russia to attack Ukraine.⁷ The Discord platform leaks in the US also revealed that Egypt, formally an American ally, suggested that its government may have been arranging to send 40,000 rockets to the Russian military, while in the spring of 2023, the US Ambassador in Johannesburg accused South Africa of also providing weaponry to Russia.⁸ At the same time, India has taken advantage of the effects of European sanctions on Russian energy imports to increase its oil imports from Russia by a factor of ten since the invasion of Ukraine began, and the United Arab Emirates and Turkey have been weak at best in enforcing sanctions against

² The two countries that moved from abstain in March 2022 to against in February 2023 were Eritrea and Mali, joining a rogue’s gallery of nations in support of Russian actions that included Belarus, Nicaragua, Syria, North Korea, and the Russian Federation itself.

³ These data come from Castellum AI. See Peter Piatetsky, “What Are Countries Doing to Counter Russia’s War?,” *Castellum.AI*, last modified March 22, 2023 at <https://www.castellum.ai/insights/which-countries-are-taking-action-on-ukraine> (accessed March 27, 2024).

⁴ Piatetsky, “What Are Countries Doing to Counter Russia’s War?” and Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (London, 2023), 296.

⁵ Piatetsky, “What Are Countries Doing to Counter Russia’s War?”

⁶ Jack Nicas, “Brazil Says It Won’t Be Sending Weapons to Ukraine, Despite a U.S. Push for More Support for Kyiv,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2023, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/10/world/europe/brazil-lula-weapons-ukraine.html> (accessed March 27, 2024).

⁷ Tim Cocks, “South Africa’s Ramaphosa Blames NATO for Russia’s War in Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 18, 2022, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/safricas-ramaphosa-blames-nato-russias-war-ukraine-2022-03-17/> (accessed March 27, 2024).

⁸ Chao Deng and Stephen Kalin, “Intelligence Leaks Spotlight US and Russia Rivalry in Middle East,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2023, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/intelligence-leaks-spotlight-u-s-russia-rivalry-in-middle-east-eb9351e0> (accessed March 27, 2024); and on South Africa see for example, “South Africa to Investigate US Allegation of Arms Shipment to Russia,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2023, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-africa-investigate-us-allegations-arms-shipment-russia-2023-05-28/> (accessed March 27, 2024).

Russia.⁹ This, of course, actively undermines the goal of the international sanctions regime designed to cut off revenue to Putin's war machine.

All of the foregoing represents a puzzle for many observers and diplomats in the US, Europe, and the global north more generally: why are the perspectives of leaders and citizens in the Global South on Russia's war in Ukraine so different from the global north? There is, of course, no single clear explanation of an evident north/south divide on Ukraine, but there are some distinct possibilities worth considering briefly.

First, some of the Global South's perceptions of what the global north views as a clear war of aggression (or even a colonial war) contrary to the UN charter is due to a desire for multi-polarity rather than a unipolar world largely controlled by the United States. The US, for these countries, has been displaced as a reliable international partner by China, and for some, by Russia. Second, in some parts of the Global South, Russia has embarked on a diplomatic and aid offensive over the last decade. Where this has been successful, Russia is viewed as a willing and able trading partner relative to the US, for example, interested more in business than in values. Finally, some citizens and leaders in the Global South view the war in Ukraine as a problem that does not really affect them politically or economically. They point, rightly, to other conflicts closer to their borders where the global north seems to turn a blind eye. Why, then, should they care about Ukraine? I review each of these explanations very briefly in what follows.

The Preference for a Multi-polar World

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the end of the Cold War that had ordered international politics into a bipolar contest between communism and capitalism, the US emerged as the unrivalled hegemon in a new system of unipolarity in international relations. China's rapid economic growth and increasing international influence created a serious challenger to unipolarity, and Russia under twenty-four years of Vladimir Putin's rule has also used what it has to challenge the west in the Global South. After a war in Iraq that won the US few friends abroad, and the protracted and ultimately unsuccessful war in Afghanistan ending in the retrenchment of the Taliban, combined with policies under the Obama administration of "leading from behind" and under Donald J. Trump of "America First," American global hegemony can no longer be taken as a given. And, as the US has withdrawn from international leadership, like water running into cracks in cement during a storm, China and Russia have moved in.

The US too is viewed by some in the Global South as hypocritical in preaching the superiority of democracy, while its own electoral system is questioned by a majority of registered Republican voters. Scenes of armed protesters attempting to disrupt the certification of a legally elected President by Congress on January 6, 2021, are not helpful in convincing leaders in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa of the superiority of liberal democracy. Further, some in the Global South also see hypocrisy in US foreign policy—preaching about the brutality of the Russian military in Ukraine while supporting Saudi Arabia's war and possible war crimes in Yemen over almost ten years of war there.¹⁰ And even more recently, President Biden's strong support of Israel's muscular response in Gaza to the brutal Hamas attacks that killed 1200 Israelis on October 7, 2023 has done little to change the perception in parts of the Global South that the US is inconsistent in its foreign policy.

⁹ "India's Russia oil imports jumped tenfold in 2022, bank says," *BBC News*, May 10, 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-65553920> (accessed March 27, 2024).

¹⁰ See for example, Joyce Sohyun Lee, Meg Kelly, and Atthar Mirza, "Saudi-led Airstrikes in Yemen Have Been Called War Crimes. Many relied on U.S. Support," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2022, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2022/saudi-war-crimes-yemen/> (accessed March 27, 2024).

And so, while in the US and European Union Russia's war in Ukraine is often framed as one of democracy against autocracy, or a rules based order (guaranteed by the US and Europe on the one hand) versus a non-rules based international order (advocated by Russia and China on the other hand), American support for Ukraine in parts of the Global South is instead regarded as a drive to maintain western dominance, this time over Russia. The fact that Putin's regime is a consolidated and increasingly repressive autocracy is evidently less important or completely irrelevant.

This perspective is borne out by differences in the global north and Global South regarding the causes of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022. In a poll of twenty-two countries conducted in late summer of 2022, 30% of respondents from OECD countries (a proxy here for the global north) indicated that they agreed with the statement "Russia is justified in wanting to have greater influence over its neighbor Ukraine than the west has." In non-OECD countries (a proxy for the Global South), that proportion of respondents jumped to 44%. More specifically, while 78% within the United Kingdom disagreed with the sentiment that Russia is justified, 49% of South African respondents, 54% of Nigerian respondents, and 56% of Indian respondents agreed that Russia is justified in wanting more influence in Ukraine.¹¹

Perhaps, given the global decline in democracy that has been tracked by Freedom House and V-Dem since 2006, we should not be surprised that defense of democracy from autocracy is no longer the axis along which countries now align their foreign policies.¹² The frame of the conflict as one where the US is defending freedom by arming Ukraine clearly does not resonate in the Global South. Further buttressing this perspective, Timothy Garten Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard reported in a different multi-country poll in February 2023, a year after the war began, that 51% of respondents from India, ostensibly a democracy still, indicated that they viewed authoritarian Russia as "an ally that shares our interests and values."¹³

Finally, Matias Spektor has argued that in the Global South, many political leaders recall the immediate post-cold war period of unipolarity as a time of instability and violence—American led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and a flood of capital that fueled wealth inequality and economic volatility, not growth and the spread of stable democracies.¹⁴ A multipolar international order where the US, China, and Russia compete with one another could force an international realignment that may create economic and political opportunities for countries of the Global South as they play the Big Three off one another.

What Has Russia Got that the Global North Does Not?

In the last decade Russia has come to be viewed rather differently, and often more positively, than it is in the global north. Russian policy makers do not come to countries in the Global

¹¹ All of these data are from Open Society Foundation, *Fault Lines: Global Perspectives on a World in Crisis: Polling 22 Countries on Key Issues Facing the World Today*, September 2022, 10, at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/fault-lines-global-perspectives-on-a-world-in-crisis> (accessed, May 30, 2023). Methodology by YouGov is on p. 20. The poll took place between July 22 and August 15, 2022 and included 21,413 respondents in the following 22 countries: Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Moldova, Nigeria, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Singapore, South Africa, Turkey, the US, and Ukraine.

¹² See Freedom House, *Freedom in the World, 2023* for data and reports demonstrating what their analysts describe as democratic backsliding, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf (accessed April 10, 2024); and see Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 141–55.

¹³ Timothy Garten Ash, Ivan Krastev, and Mark Leonard, "United West, Divided From the Rest: Public Opinion One Year into Russia's War on Ukraine," *European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief*, February 22, 2023, at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/united-west-divided-from-the-rest-global-public-opinion-one-year-into-russias-war-on-ukraine/> (accessed March 27, 2023).

¹⁴ Matias Spektor, "In Defense of Fence Sitters: What the West Gets Wrong About Hedging," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023): 8–16, here 14.

South with an agenda of democratization or attempt to impose a cure for corruption. Instead, they come offering trade deals and selling advanced weapons systems and nuclear power plants throughout the Global South. Further, and in contrast to the global north, beyond the strategic use of its anti-gay, traditional family values perspective to appeal to leaders (and societies) in countries that already share similar attitudes (as, for example, in parts of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa), the Russian regime's goal is not to "export" a particular ideology or developmental model. At most, Putin's Russia has over the last decade in particular used conservatism as merely a mechanism with which its policy actors may try to distinguish their country from the overly permissive, liberal democratic west.

Under Putin, Russia's foreign policy in the Global South has also capitalized on former Soviet era links. The Soviet Union had a vast network of military, political and diplomatic ties throughout much of post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, and policies like Soviet era debt forgiveness have helped to revive some of these old ties. But Russia has also actively pursued policies to gain friends in the Global South. Some of Russia's biggest companies have projects in Africa, including some that are state-owned or very closely tied to the state like Gazprom, Lukoil, Alrosa, Renova, Rusal, RosAtom, and Norilsk Nickel, among others. Such projects exist in South Africa, Libya, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo, Botswana, Nigeria, Ghana, and Namibia. Large projects have focused on diamond extraction in Angola, gas pipeline construction in Nigeria, nickel mining in Botswana, oil extraction in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, precious mineral mining in South Africa, and oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea.

Similarly, Putin's Russia has rebuilt Soviet-era relationships and established new partners in Latin America. Beyond Cuba, the Soviet Union was not all that active in the region during the Cold War, but after the global financial crisis of 2008, clear signs of Russian engagement in Latin America emerged. These relationships continued to blossom in the decade that followed, and especially as Russian companies sought to avoid isolation in the wake of US and European sanctions after 2014. In 2017, Rosneft signed agreements with Brazil for a controlling stake in drilling for oil in the Amazon Basin, and Brazil has become almost completely dependent on Russia for supply of fertilizers to support its agricultural sector, crucial to the Brazilian economy. Since the imposition of sanctions against Russia initially in 2014, other countries in Latin America like Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile have increased their sale of agricultural products to Russia.

In 2000, total trade between Russia and all of Latin America was only about \$3 billion; Russia's imports were largely agricultural and food products, while it supplied Latin American militaries with new tanks, helicopters, and surface-to-air missiles. This changed with Russia's re-engagement with the region; such that according to one estimate, little more than ten years later Russian-Latin American trade had grown to as much as \$24 billion.¹⁵

In addition, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group of countries has also provided an additional bit of leverage and support for Russian interests in the Global South. For Brazil and South Africa, membership in BRICS gives their economies the opportunity to be part of an economic club that includes access to markets in China and India in particular—the world's two most populous countries. In 2023, even with Putin under indictment by the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed in Ukraine and unable to attend the BRICS meeting in South Africa in person, the organization welcomed a flood of new applications for membership. The global north has nothing similar to offer.

India's official policy of "neutrality" on Russia's war in Ukraine is more complicated. On the one hand, India has considerable dependence on Russia for military equipment and servicing. But on the other hand, Prime Minister Modi still asserts that India is a democracy and that it respects democratic values and also the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. Yet after the February 24, 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, India has been far from

¹⁵ Kathryn Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order* (Oxford, 2021), 107.

neutral in its support of the Russian economy. As noted earlier, India has increased dramatically its purchases of Russian energy—a much needed boost to Russia’s budget given the loss of European markets for much of its oil and natural gas, and continues to purchase weapons from Russia.

Other countries have security concerns that better explain their stance on Russia’s war in Ukraine. For officially neutral China, Xi Jinping evidently believes that a Russian defeat in Ukraine (however defined) is a potential win for the US, and therefore not good for China. Although China so far (as far as we know) has resisted Russian requests for ammunition and appears to be mostly not openly violating international economic sanctions on Russia, Chinese companies continue to invest in Russia and maintain extensive trade ties, especially in energy. This has helped to insulate the Russian economy from the full force of the American and European sanctions regime.

Turkey has some geopolitical vulnerability and historical experience with Russia. Although its long-serving President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has articulated support for Ukraine and supplied drones to its military, he must balance Russian influence to Turkey’s east (Georgia, where Russia occupies two territories, and the ongoing battle between Armenia and Azerbaijan) and along Turkey’s southern border with Syria, where Russia controls the airspace and is more supportive of the Kurdish population there than Turks would like.

Ukraine Is a “You” Problem, not a “We” Problem

For other countries in the Global South and east, the war in Ukraine is but one of many global crises. Although data are scattered on global opinions broken down by country, and we must treat what exists with care, at least one multi-country poll conducted since the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine illustrates this point well.¹⁶ Tellingly, respondents from the developing south were far more likely to agree with the statement that the west was prioritizing the Ukraine conflict excessively over others (69% in non-OECD countries vs. 58% in OECD), while 68% and 51% respectively thought “too much money” had been spent on the Ukraine crisis.¹⁷

Further, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was more pronounced as a top concern for citizens in eastern Europe and the G7 than in India, for example, as well as in Nigeria, Brazil, or Colombia.¹⁸ In the south, citizen concerns were more about climate change and its effects on food supply and economic hardship than the war in Ukraine. In Mexico, climate change ranked as the most important concern for almost 50% of respondents; in Turkey, it was 40%, and in Senegal and Nigeria it was about 35% of respondents.¹⁹

Poverty and the cost of daily living were ranked as of prime importance in much of the Global South. In the same poll, respondents were asked to what extent, if at all, they agreed with the statement, “I often worry whether my family will go hungry.” In Latin America, 64% of respondents across the continent either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement; while 60% did so in Sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 38% in Asia. In the global north, however, 22% in the US and 15% in western Europe indicated they worried about hunger often.²⁰ Perhaps then, it should be less of a mystery as to why Putin consistently blames western sanctions on Russian exports of wheat for food insecurity in Africa.

Aside from concerns about climate change, poverty, and meeting basic daily needs, citizens of the Global South point to other conflicts and insurgencies closer to home than Ukraine that have caused tens of thousands of deaths, and mass migrations across continents. Why

¹⁶ Open Society Foundation, *Fault Lines*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

worry about a distant war in a European country when there are so many problems nearby about which the global north appears to care little or not at all?²¹

Moreover, Putin's Russia has extended its web of political, economic, and strategic contacts in new and distinct ways worldwide, frequently doing so in direct opposition to American and European interests. Russia has for some presented an alternative to the global north as a trading partner and does not worry about pushing democratic values or imposing a particular developmental model. Thus, Russia's reentry into the Global South over the last decade or so helps to explain the often very different perspectives between leaders and citizens there than in the global north regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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²¹ Ramani, *Russia in Africa*, 296.