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**DAVID M. MALITZ  
SURACHANEE SRIYAI  
(EDS.)**

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**Civil Societies' Reactions of  
East- and Southeast Asian Countries  
to the Russian War on Ukraine:  
Preliminary Observations**

**NO. 135**

**WORKING PAPERS**

**WORKING PAPERS  
ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES**

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**JULY 2022**

UNIVERSITÄT  
DUISBURG  
ESSEN

*Offen im Denken*

## **DAVID M. MALITZ**

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ), Tokyo

**W** <https://www.dijtokyo.org/de/people/david-m-malitz/>

**E** [malitz@dijtokyo.org](mailto:malitz@dijtokyo.org)

## **SURACHANEE SRIYAI**

Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

**W** <https://www.hssriyai.com>

**E** [surachanee.s@chula.ac.th](mailto:surachanee.s@chula.ac.th)

## **Institute of East Asian Studies / Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften**

University of Duisburg-Essen

Duisburg Campus, Forsthausweg

47057 Duisburg, Germany

**T** +49(0) 203 37-94191

**F** +49(0) 203 37-94157

**E** [in-east@uni-due.de](mailto:in-east@uni-due.de)

## **ドイツ日本研究所**

### **Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien (DIJ) Tokyo / German Institute for Japanese Studies**

Jochi Kioizaka Bldg. 2F

7-1 Kioicho Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

102 0094 Japan

**T** +81 3 3222 5077

**F** +81 3 3222 5420

**E** [dijtokyo@dijtokyo.org](mailto:dijtokyo@dijtokyo.org)

ISSN: 1865-8571 (Printed version) / 1865-858X (Internet version)

Download: [https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green\\_series.php](https://www.uni-due.de/in-east/news/green_series.php)

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DAVID M. MALITZ / SURACHANEE SRIYAI (EDS.)

## **Civil Societies' Reactions of East- and Southeast Asian Countries to the Russian War on Ukraine: Preliminary Observations**

WORKING PAPERS ON EAST ASIAN STUDIES, NO. 135, DUISBURG 2022

### **Abstract**

Undoubtedly, the war in Ukraine has far-reaching political and economic implications for many regions of the world, including East and Southeast Asia. The governments' reactions to the war have varied considerably ranging from fully supporting Ukraine in alliance with the United States and the European Union, as Japan and Korea have done, to the full backing of Russia by North Korea and Myanmar. That said, many governments in Southeast Asia remain neutral. Nonetheless, the responses to the war in the public spheres neither necessarily agree with their respective governments' stances, nor are they expected to be homogenous.

This collection of articles serves as a preliminary attempt to take stock of the reactions of selected civil societies in East and Southeast Asian countries to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 by analyzing the respective countries' public sentiment through press and social media. While the reactions of the publics of East and Southeast Asian societies have no direct influence on global society, they will shape their governments' future courses, where they can be expressed and where elections are held. As the long-term consequences of the geopolitical and economic shifts initiated by this conflict will only slowly become fully discernible, their analysis is of great interest.

The papers have been presented and discussed at an online workshop jointly organized by the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen (IN-EAST), the German Institute of Japanese Studies, Tokyo (DIJ), the Chair of Transregional Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt University Berlin, and the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

### **Keywords**

Ukraine, East Asia, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, civil society, public opinions

## INTRODUCTION

**David M. Malitz** *German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo*

**Surachanee Sriyai** *Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok*

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has been a global watershed moment. In Europe, it has resulted in a newfound solidarity with Ukraine and a boosting of relations with the United States. At the same time, long-held political certainties are being abandoned. The German government's rewriting of its defense policy has made the term *Zeitenwende* describing a historical turning point a recognizable term in the international press.<sup>1</sup> Finland and Sweden have given up their policy of neutrality and applied for NATO membership.<sup>2</sup> After Switzerland, a country that have remained neutral even during the Second World War, joined the European Unions' sanction against Russian individuals and entities, the question was raised whether Bern had likewise abandoned its famed neutrality.<sup>3</sup> The war and international sanctions are driving inflation globally, but in the global South, they

are also about to cause mass famine, and have already triggered shortages of essential goods.<sup>4</sup>

Across East and Southeast Asia, the Russian attempt to redraw international borders by force in obvious violation of the UN Charter, based on flimsy historical arguments and claims of ethnic ties, is widely seen as a dangerous precedent.<sup>5</sup> The territorial conflicts in the regions ranging from the Southern Kuril Islands in the North, over the Diaoyu/Senkaku and Dokdo/Takeshima Islands to the South China Sea are internationally-recognized geopolitical issues. In Southeast Asian countries with large communities of Chinese descent, the promotion of a Chinese ethnic nationalism under President Xi Jinping that blurs the distinction between Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese has also become a major concern.<sup>6</sup> Especially so, since the 2019 defense white paper of the People's Republic of China explicitly identifies protecting the 'rights and in-

1 See e.g. Isaac Stanley-Becker, "Russia's war in Ukraine may boost German interest in military service," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/19/germany-military-recruitment-ukraine/>; Claudia Major and Christian Mölling, "Berlin doit reconnaître que la force militaire est un facteur dans les relations internationales," *Le Monde*, March 23, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/03/23/berlin-doit-reconnaitre-que-la-force-militaire-est-un-facteur-dans-les-relations-internationales\\_6118695\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2022/03/23/berlin-doit-reconnaitre-que-la-force-militaire-est-un-facteur-dans-les-relations-internationales_6118695_3232.html).

2 Johanna Lemola, "The leaders of Finland and Sweden say they will jointly submit their NATO applications," *New York Times*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/world/europe/sweden-finland-nato.html>.

3 Tobias Gafafer, "Für Russland ist die Schweiz nicht mehr neutral – der Bundesrat sucht in der Krise seine Rolle", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/schweiz/fuer-russland-ist-die-schweiz-nicht-mehr-neutral-der-bundesrat-sucht-in-der-krise-seine-rolle-id.1678456>.

4 Dominic Faulder, "Asia's food crisis: Ukraine war triggers chain reaction of shortages," *Nikkei Asia*, May 18, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Asia-s-food-crisis-Ukraine-war-triggers-chain-reaction-of-shortages>.

5 The prime ministers of Japan and Singapore were to most outspoken ones in this regard: Fumio Kishida, "Press Conference by Prime Minister Kishida," *Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet*, March 3, 2022, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101\\_kishida/statement/202203/\\_00005.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/statement/202203/_00005.html); Lee Hsien Loong, "The shadow cast by the Ukraine war over Singapore's outlook," *Straits Times*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-shadow-cast-by-the-ukraine-war-over-singapores-outlook>.

6 Amy Qin, "Worries Grow in Singapore Over China's Calls to Help 'Motherland'," *New York Times*, August 5, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/world/asia/singapore-china.html>.

terest of overseas Chinese people' as one of its armed forces' mission.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the government responses to the Russian aggression across the regions varied considerably. With the exception of North Korea, no country voted against the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression and demanding a withdrawal on March 24, 2022 though there were notable abstentions; namely, China and India as well as the former Soviet allies of Vietnam and Laos.<sup>8</sup> When it comes to the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council on May 4, 2022, however, only Myanmar, representing the civilian opposition and not the military junta in power, and the Philippines joined Japan and South Korea by voting in favor.<sup>9</sup> Singapore, on the other hand, is the only Southeast Asian country that has implemented a comprehensive sanction packages against Russia, as Japan and Korea have done in East Asia.<sup>10</sup> As it has been pointed out in a number of international fora, the reliance on Russia to hedge against an assertive China as well as to acquire weaponry and spare parts in combination with economic relations are all factors contributing to an understanding of these more muted official responses in Southeast Asia in contrast to Japan and Korea, who are to a large degree reliant on the United States for their security. Historical ties to the former Soviet Union, as well as the wish to ascer-

tain sovereignty through an independent foreign policy in line with domestic demands, are other contributing factors.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the governments' responses, the publics' reactions in East and Southeast Asian countries have so far received very little attention. This is understandable as they are of little immediate political consequences. Yet public opinion, where it can be expressed, will influence national policies in the future; and therefore, deserves due attention. This is even more so the case because an end to the war is not foreseeable; and its assumingly long-lasting economic repercussions are proving already painful to many countries in the regions. This collection of articles is the first attempt to take stock of the diverse public responses in selected countries across East and Southeast Asia. Noting that the Indo-Pacific has become a widely-shared foreign policy framework, and the economic and political ties between East and Southeast Asia have been intensifying, this collection draws together articles from both East and Southeast Asia.

Nearly all of the countries discussed enjoy robust civil societies and a reasonably free public sphere, allowing for diverse public opinions to be accounted for and shaping their countries' future courses. This is not the case in Myanmar, where

7 The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in the New Era," July 24, 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content\\_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html).

8 UN News, "Ukraine: General Assembly passes resolution demanding aid access, by large majority," March 24, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114632>.

9 UN News, "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," April 7, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

10 Warren Fernandez, "Why Singapore had to take a strong stand against Russia's attack on Ukraine," *Straits Times*, March 26, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/why-singapore-had-to-take-a-strong-stand-against-russias-attack-on-ukraine>.

11 See for e.g. CSIS, "The Ukraine Crisis and Asia: Implications and Responses," March 2, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ukraine-crisis-and-asia-implications-and-responses>; Susannah Patton, "Reading Southeast Asia on Ukraine," *Lowly Institute*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/reading-southeast-asia-ukraine>; Ian Storey and William Choong, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Southeast Asian Responses and Why the Conflict Matters to the Region," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022/24, March 9, 2022; ISIS Malaysia, "War in Ukraine: What does it mean for Southeast Asia?," April 7, 2022, <https://www.isis.org.my/recent-event/war-in-ukraine-what-does-it-mean-for-southeast-asia/>; GIGA, "The War in Ukraine and the Global South: Perceptions, Reactions, and Implications," May 17, 2022, <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/events/giga-forum/war-ukraine-global-south-perceptions-reactions-implications>.

a civil war broke out after the coup d'état on February 1, 2021; but precisely due to the civil war, different opinions exist and can be analyzed. The collection does not claim to be comprehensive; particularly, the omission of cases from South Asia is a weak point. One must furthermore note, though, that the analyses presented here are of a preliminary nature, as the responses in the countries' civil societies are prone to change against the backdrop of the future developments of the conflict as well as of its global and local ramifications. Moreover, this collection also includes an analysis of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which is indeed not a country with its own civil society; but the inclusion of Southeast Asian cases certainly necessitates its inclusion.

The diversity of the countries under discussion is also reflected in the case studies. Nevertheless, one can identify important similarities between case studies. The concern that the Russian aggression in violation of the UN Charter is setting a dangerous precedence is widely shared in the region. This sentiment is particularly salient where territorial conflicts are a major concern as the papers on Malaysia, Philippines, and Japan show. At the same time, the case studies show that local political and economic challenges also shape the stances toward the war in Europe. Economic concerns are an important factor not only in the Philippines, but also in Indonesia and Thailand, respectively. Local political cleavages, furthermore, serve as lenses through which the war in Europe can be perceived and interpreted. This is certainly the case in Myanmar, where the junta has been supported by Russia, and Thailand, where protests against the government originally coming to power through the coup in May 2014 flared

up in 2020/21. Opponents of both governments see the war in Europe mirroring their own struggle for democracy. Anti-Westernism also plays a role. This is especially the case in the Muslim majority countries of Indonesia and Malaysia, where the war between the US-supported Ukraine and Russia is connected to the conflict in the Middle East. Here, the social media savvy Head of Chechnya and militia leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, regarded as a brutal dictator in Europe, is seen by some as a devout Muslim. Finally, there are truly unique factors in the countries under investigation. In South Korea, partition of the Korean Peninsula looms large over the South Korean reactions to the war in Europe. In Malaysia, the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine in July 2014, killing all 283 people on board, is still fresh in the public memory. Similarly, in Japan, the public perception of the war is shaped by the unresolved issue of the southernmost Kuril Islands occupied by Russia since the end of World War II, which has so far prevented a formal peace treaty.

The analysis on Japan, Korea, ASEAN, as well as of the three largest economies in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, were presented online on April 26, 2022 at a workshop jointly organized by the Institute of East Asian Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen (IN-EAST), the German Institute of Japanese Studies, Tokyo (DIJ), the Chair of Transregional Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt University Berlin, and the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. The authors thank **Nele Noesselt** (Director, IN-EAST) and **Franz Waldenberger** (Director, DIJ) for an introduction, and **Claudia Derichs** (Humboldt University, Berlin) for moderating the session.



## STRONG PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE JAPANESE RESPONSES TO THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

David M. Malitz *German Institute for Japanese Studies, Tokyo*

The Japanese government under Prime Minister Kishida Fumio responded swiftly and robustly to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In alliance with the United States and the European Union, Japan imposed far-reaching economic sanctions. Breaking with precedent, Japan delivered protective equipment to Ukraine and allowed the entry of hundreds of Ukrainians fleeing from the conflict. Additionally, fundamental changes to Japanese defense policy are now being seriously discussed. Striking about the Japanese case is that the public has been not only nearly uniformly supportive of Ukraine in the conflict, but also largely very supportive of these response by the Japanese government despite a rapid devaluation of the Yen and rising consumer prices.

This can be explained through a number of factors. First, due to the strained Japanese-Russian relations, the Japanese public did not hold a positive view of Russia to begin with. Second, the invasion is widely seen as having caused a deterioration of Japan's security environment. Third, there is no right-wing populist party that has developed ties with the regime of Russian President Putin or embraced his brand of nationalism. Fourth, Japan has also no party on the left that has a history of alignment with the former Soviet Union.

### Keywords

Invasion of Ukraine, Japan, Japanese-Russian relations, Japanese defense policy, Article 9

### THE JAPANESE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE

In contrast to 2014, when the government of Abe Shinzo attempted to maintain a working relationship with Russia after its annexation of Crimea, the Japanese government reacted swiftly and decisively after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and imposed far-reaching sanctions.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese Self-Defense Forces delivered bullet-proof vests, helmets, drones and other non-lethal equipment

to the Ukrainian military.<sup>2</sup> To do so, the government had to amend its rules on the transfer of defense equipment.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces announced on Twitter that the said shipment was a first for them.<sup>4</sup> Food and other supplies for the civilian population as well

1 日本経済新聞「首相、ロシアへの追加制裁発表 金融機関の資産凍結など」, 2022年2月25日, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOUA2508Y0V-20C22A2000000/>.

2 Japan Times, "In rare move, Japan to send bulletproof vests and helmets to Ukraine," March 4, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/03/04/national/sdf-vests-helmets-ukraine/>.

3 Kyodo News, "Japan to offer protective masks, clothing, drones to Ukraine," April 19, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/00e4cd64dc1c-japan-to-offer-protective-masks-clothing-drones-to-ukraine.html>.

4 Twitter account of the Japanese Ministry of Defense, Self-Defense Forces, 防衛省・自衛隊@ModJapan\_jp, 11:53 pm on March 8, 2022, [https://twitter.com/ModJapan\\_jp/status/1501209547540733952?ctx=HHwWgl-C56aalr9UpAAAA](https://twitter.com/ModJapan_jp/status/1501209547540733952?ctx=HHwWgl-C56aalr9UpAAAA).

as a loan from Japan International Cooperation Agency to support reconstruction are also being provided.<sup>5</sup> Japan has long been criticized for its reluctance to accept refugees. Yet, following the invasion of Ukraine, the Japanese government quickly allowed for the entrance of Ukrainians fleeing the conflict. Twenty of them were flown to Japan on a government plane following Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa's visit to Poland in early April.<sup>6</sup> By April 17, 2022, 661 individuals from Ukraine had entered the country.<sup>7</sup> This is more than half of Japan's total refugee population in 2021.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as fleeing from war does not qualify for refugee status in Japan, entrants from Ukraine are not recognized as 'refugees (*nanmin* 難民)', but are referred to as 'evacuees (*hinanmin* 避難民)'. 'Evacuee', however, is not a clearly defined status under Japanese law; and in practice, it means that short-term but extendable visas allowing for employment are granted.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the refugee status, there is no clear pathway to permanent residency for evacuees.<sup>10</sup> To provide for a sound legal basis, the introduction of a 'quasi-refugee (*jun-nanmin* 準難民)' status is

now being discussed.<sup>11</sup> Assumably, this would ease entry to Japan for other people fleeing conflicts as well.

Shortly after the Russian invasion, former prime minister Abe Shinzo, who is now the leader of the largest faction of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, refloated two ideas pertaining to Japan's defense policy. He advocated to consider 'nuclear sharing' with the United States as well as developing the capability to strike enemy bases abroad.<sup>12</sup> The first would mean abandoning the 'three non-nuclear principles', core principles of Japanese defense policy since 1967.<sup>13</sup> The idea was rejected outright by Prime Minister Kishida. The second one has been already under discussion by the Liberal Democratic Party. Its coalition partner, *Komeito*, shared the concern with the opposition parties that the policy change might allow for preventive attacks on foreign soil, which would be a clear violation of the Japanese constitution.<sup>14</sup> In late April, the Liberal Democratic Party's national security panel proposed instead a 'counterstrike capability' as well as an increase in the defense budget to reach 2% of GDP. *Komeito* has accepted the change of terminology, concluding that preventive attacks are excluded from national defense

5 読売新聞「岸田首相、ゼレンスキー大統領と電話会談…新たに食料品や医薬品の提供伝える」, 2022年5月26日, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/20220426-OYT1T50286/>; JICA, 「ウクライナ向け円借款貸付契約の調印: 軍事侵攻を受けて経済危機に直面するウクライナに対する財政支援」, 2022年5月16日, [https://www.jica.go.jp/press/2022/20220516\\_10.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/press/2022/20220516_10.html).

6 Japan Times, "20 Ukrainian evacuees arrive in Tokyo on government plane," April 5, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/05/national/japan-ukraine-evacuees-arrive/>.

7 NHK, 「ウクライナから日本への避難民661人ことばや就労の支援が課題」, 2022年4月19日, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220419/k10013588121000.html>.

8 UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder," <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=S5yP0q> (accessed April 24, 2022).

9 時事ドットコム「『避難民』位置付け曖昧難民認定・法整備に課題」, 2022年4月2日, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2022040101107&g=pol>.

10 真鍋弘樹「ウクライナ人受け入れは二重基準なのか『難民』と『避難民』の間で」『朝日新聞』, 2022年4月27日, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ4V3QRZQ4TUPQJ00L.html>.

11 時事ドットコム「『準難民』法案の成立急務 送還条項削除に否定的—古川法相」, 2022年4月17日, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2022041700148&g=pol>.

12 Asahi Shimbun, "Abe suggests Japan start 'nuclear sharing' discussion," February 28, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14560003>; 産経新聞「安倍元首相『防衛に努めぬ国と共に戦う国はない』」, 2022年3月25日, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20220325-K4UAOYHIAVNTNOT2NDYRHDKCLAM/>.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Three Non-Nuclear Principles," <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/un/disarmament/nnp/index.html#:~:text=My%20responsibility%20is%20to%20achieve,line%20with%20Japan's%20Peace%20Constitution> (accessed April 25, 2022).

14 Kyodo News, "Japan's ruling LDP to seek enemy base strike capability," April 12, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/4c9a21a17096-japans-ruling-ldp-to-see-enemy-base-strike-capability.html>.

policies, but argued that the increase in defense spending needs further deliberations. Opposition parties remain skeptical about the constitutionality of the new capabilities to be acquired by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces.<sup>15</sup>

## PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Immediately after the war, large demonstrations against the war and in support of Ukraine took place across Japan.<sup>16</sup> Smaller, creative forms of protest were also reported in the press.<sup>17</sup> Donations poured into the account of the Ukrainian embassy with Japanese Internet billionaire, Mikitani Hiroshi, alone giving more than USD 8 million.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the embrace of Russian disinformation about the Ukrainian government remains limited to the fringes of the Japanese cyberspace. According to an analysis of the University of Tokyo, around 90 % of the accounts tweeting such information, had a history of promoting conspiratorial anti-vaccine contents, and nearly 50 % had tweeted QAnon contents.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, one important explanation for the rejection of Russian disinformation as well as pro-Russia stances is that the Japanese public largely shared negative views of the neighboring country to begin with. According to a survey of the Cabinet Office conducted in September 2021, 49 % of the respondents considered the country as rather unfriendly, while 37 % considered Russia as an unfriendly country.<sup>20</sup> This negative attitude can be explained by the history of Russo-Japan relations. The Soviet Union declared war on Imperial Japan in August 1945, proceeding to capture Japan's Northeast Asian possessions as well as the Kuril Islands. While the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956 ended the state of war, a formal peace treaty has never been signed. Until the present, ownership of the four southernmost Kuril Islands, referred to in Japan as the Northern Territories, remains the main hurdle in the negotiations. Former prime minister Abe Shinzo had made improving relations with Russia a key element of his foreign policy agenda with the ultimate goal of normalizing relations. For this goal, he was willing to make considerable concessions, including a muted response to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Both parties had agreed to base future negotiations on the 1956 declaration that promised the return of some of the islands after the signing of a peace treaty,<sup>21</sup> but the 2020 amendments to the Russian constitution that must have had Vladimir Putin's approval then outlawed ceding any territories to a foreign power. The Russian president publicly promised to honor the constitution making a peace treaty thus contingent on the Japanese acceptance of the status quo.<sup>22</sup>

15 NHK, 「公明 北側副代表「反撃能力」に名称変更評価」, 2022年4月28日, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220428/k10013603541000.html>; NHK, 「政治マガジン自民『敵基地攻撃能力』の名称を『反撃能力』に変更案を了承」, 2022年4月21日, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/politics/articles/lastweek/81486.html>.

16 Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Julia Mio Inuma and Shibani Mahtani, "In Japan and across Asia, an outpouring of support for Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/28/japan-asia-ukraine-russia/>.

17 E.g. Asahi Shimbun, "Blue and yellow: Cities across Japan light up to support Ukraine," March 2, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14561932>.

18 Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Julia Mio Inuma and Shibani Mahtani, "In Japan and across Asia, an outpouring of support for Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/28/japan-asia-ukraine-russia/>.

19 産経新聞「親露アカウントの9割、過去に反ワクチン関連ツイート 東大大学院教授分析」, 2022年4月20日, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20220420-JCFZ2YCNBPWHDLLEES4UJKYA4/>.

20 内閣府「外交に関する世論調査（令和3年9月調査）」, 2022年1月21日, <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/r03/r03-gaiko/zh/z04.html>.

21 Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan*. London: Hurst & Company, 2020, 301–304.

22 Shin Tokiwa, "What is Putin's Strategy on Japan? Vigilance needed on Russia's 'Peace Treaty' Proposal," *JFIR Commentary* No. 136, August 2, 2021, <https://www.jfir.or.jp/en/commentary/3354/>.

Russian actions after the start of the war have likely further worsened the public perception of Russia. In response to the Japanese sanctions, the Russian government formally ended negotiations of a peace treaty, and began military exercises on the Kuril Islands. Former residents are now also banned from visiting the graves of their ancestors.<sup>23</sup> The Russian government's unwillingness to rule out the use of nuclear weapons resonated strongly in Japan due to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>24</sup> In Nagasaki, two organizations of atomic bombing survivors, who are usually at odds, jointly called for a protest in response.<sup>25</sup> Russian attacks on or near nuclear power plants were also regarded with much concern in Japan. Public criticism was amplified by residents of Fukushima, site of the 2011 nuclear disaster, who have since developed ties to Ukraine, site of the Chernobyl disaster, as well as of those of Kyoto, a sister-city of Kyiv since 1971.

The monthly surveys on public opinions conducted by national broadcaster NHK show that the government enjoys broad support. In early May, 68 % of respondents supported its overall responses to the war.<sup>26</sup> The sanctions were supported by 82 % in April. Among these, 47 % supported their further toughening, even though 70 % are feeling the impact of rising consumer prices already.<sup>27</sup>

23 Kamata Tomoko, "Japan-Russia peace treaty talks suspended," *NHK World*, April 5, 2022, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1958/>.

24 Asahi Shimbun, "Hundreds in Tokyo protest Russia's invasion of Ukraine," March 5, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14564817>.

25 毎日新聞「核の脅威へ共闘 82歳『被爆者が束になって』次代へ対立残さず」, 2022年3月24日, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20220323/k00/00m/040/395000c>.

26 NHK, 「NHK世論調査 2022年5月」, 2022年5月9日, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/>.

27 NHK, 「NHK世論調査2022年4月」, 2022年4月11日, [https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2022\\_04.html](https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2022_04.html).

The policy of the Kishida government to grant Ukrainian refugees visas as 'evacuees' has been criticized as insufficient by representatives of the opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan and academics. They have called for acknowledging the reality of the Ukrainians as refugees as well as offering other people fleeing from war the same protection.<sup>28</sup> The more cautious approach by the government has, however, resulted in high support. 76 % of respondents agreed with allowing Ukrainian 'evacuees' come to Japan, while approximately 70 % responded in the survey of a large national newspaper that Japan should allow more Ukrainians to enter Japan.<sup>29</sup>

Former prime minister Abe Shinzo's remarks, arguing for giving up Japan's 'non-nuclear principles' for a policy of 'nuclear sharing', triggered immediate protests. These ended quickly, however, after the government had categorically rejected the idea.<sup>30</sup> The government's proposal to raise the defense spending in contrast was supported by 52 % of respondents to the NHK survey in May, and the acquisition of 'counterstrike

28 Naoko Hashimoto, "OPINION: Japan should not forsake evacuees from countries other than Ukraine," *Kyodo News*, April 13, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/04/40eb3d250232-opinion-japan-should-not-forsake-evacuees-from-countries-other-than-ukraine.html>; 小熊慎司 「ウクライナ難民受け入れで日本の難民政策を変える」『毎日新聞』, 2022年4月19日, <https://mainichi.jp/premier/politics/articles/20220415/pol/00m/010/032000c>; 田島麻衣子 「ウクライナ難民受け入れで豊かになる日本」『毎日新聞』, 2022年5月2日, <https://mainichi.jp/premier/politics/articles/20220428/pol/00m/010/006000c>.

29 NHK, 「NHK世論調査2022年4月」 2022年4月11日, [https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2022\\_04.html](https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/archive/2022_04.html); 毎日新聞「ウクライナ避難民『もつと受け入れるべきだ』69% 本紙世論調査」, 2022年4月23日, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20220423/k00/00m/040/217000c>.

30 Asahi Shimbun, "Abe draws fire from hibakusha for suggesting 'nuclear sharing,'" March 1, 2022, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14560829>.

capabilities' by 55%.<sup>31</sup> This relates to a survey by national newspaper, *Asahi Shinbun*, which reported that the number of people supporting constitutional change has increased from 45% to 56% over the course of the last year.<sup>32</sup> The long held goal of Japan's conservatives to revise Article 9 of the Japanese constitution that denies state the right of belligerence has clearly become more feasible because of the Russian aggression. This reflects the belief that, as a direct result of the Russian invasion, the security situation in East Asia had deteriorated. This was confirmed by 88% in a survey conducted by the Foreign Ministry of Japan in late March.<sup>33</sup>

## UNPOPULAR POPULISTS

Given the strong support for the government's responses to the invasion of Ukraine, there is little opportunity for opposition parties to score political points, as populists both on the left and right discovered quickly.

The right-wing populist party, *Nihon Ishin no Kai* (41/465 seats in the House of Representatives; 10/245 seats in the House of Councillors), strongly condemned the Russian aggression in its official stance, while party co-leader Matsui Ichiro supported former prime minister Abe Shinzo questioning of Japan's 'three non-nuclear principles' banning the stationing of nuclear weapons on its soil.<sup>34</sup> He also attacked the Communist Party of Japan as possibly being on the Russian side given its defense of Article 9

of the Japanese constitution.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, two of his own party members later drew the ire from Japanese netizens for apparently siding with Russia. Suzuki Muneo and Hashimoto Toru made headlines for arguing that Ukraine shared responsibility in the outbreak of the war and that the invaded country should make concessions to end the war as soon as possible. Arming Ukraine would only unnecessarily prolong the war while siding with Ukraine on principle, according to them, was also not in Japan's best interest.<sup>36</sup> The online backlash was swift and harsh with close to no support for their statements on Twitter, forcing the party to publicly distance itself from the 'shameful' statements.<sup>37</sup> Suzuki himself refuted in an interview that he was 'Putin's spokesperson' without changing his positions on his blog. By early May, responses to these entries have fallen significantly, but they remain largely negative.<sup>38</sup>

The progressive populist party, *Reiwa Shinsengumi* (3/465 seats in the House of Representa-

31 NHK, 「NHK世論調査2022年5月」, 2022年5月9日, <https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/>.

32 朝日新聞「『憲法改正』と『9条改正』に温度差ある世論」, 2022年5月14日, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASQ5F3555Q56UZPS003.html>.

33 NHK, 「ロシアなどへの制裁強化との回答は4割 外務省実施の世論調査」, 2022年4月21日, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20220421/k10013591411000.html>.

34 東洋経済「下がる支持率『維新の会』に吹き始めた逆風の正体 注目度が高まるにつれて問われる『党体質』」, 2022年3月3日, <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/535803>.

35 産経新聞「ウクライナ侵攻に『自国を守る決意と覚悟必要』 維新松井氏」, 2022年2月25日, [www.sankei.com/article/20220225-QTQKQZDXFMSNDDY4C-JRS7Z7A/](http://www.sankei.com/article/20220225-QTQKQZDXFMSNDDY4C-JRS7Z7A/).

36 時事ドットコム「『ウクライナにも責任』 維新・鈴木氏、ロシア侵攻めぐり」, 2022年3月13日, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2022031300405&g=pol>; 産経新聞「ウクライナ発言で物議の橋下氏 維新『切っても切れぬ』 距離感に腐心」, 2022年4月8日, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20220408-CJGM3JJTZF-NAHNMUZ7CIWLU3Q4/>; 中日スポーツ『橋下徹さんがウクライナ出身学者と生放送で口論… “国外退去” 発言が物議『じゃあ一体誰が国を護る』『よくこんなの外れなこと言えるな』」, 2022年3月3日, <https://www.chunichi.co.jp/article/428056>.

37 時事ドットコム「維新・松井氏、立民代表を批判 鈴木宗氏擁護—ウクライナ侵攻」, 2022年3月17日, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2022031701354&g=pol>.

38 President Online, 「プーチンの代弁者」ではない…鈴木宗男「私がロシアへの非難決議に賛成票を投じた本当の理由」, 2022年3月31日, <https://president.jp/articles/-/56167?page=1>; 鈴木宗男「鈴木ムネオ日記 5月8日(日)」, <https://ameblo.jp/muneo-suzuki/entry-12741666722.html>.

tives; 2/245 seats in the House of Councillors), meanwhile surprised supporters and opponents alike by not voting for the resolutions condemning Russian aggression in the two chambers of the Japanese parliament on March 1 and 2, 2022. According to the party's statement, the resolution was rejected for being a performative utterance of words only. Nevertheless, *Reiwa Shinsengumi* then condemned the Russian aggression 'in the strongest terms' in a separate statement. At the same time, the party also blamed NATO expansion for the outbreak of the war.<sup>39</sup> On Twitter, few agreed with this stance. Critics either pointed out that the party could have voted for the resolution just as well, given that they had issued their own condemnation, or accused the *Reiwa Shinsengumi* to inadvertently have supported the Russian side.

Hatoyama Yukio, who briefly served as prime minister for the defunct Democrat Party from September 2009 to June 2010 received much less public attention. On Twitter, he first identified the NATO extension as the root cause of the conflict; and then the Ukrainian president for not having worked hard enough for a diplomatic solution as well as having contributed to unspecified massacres in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> His comments were not entirely surprising. Having retired from politics, he accepted an invitation to visit Crimea in 2015 against the explicit recommendation of both his own former foreign minister and the then foreign minister Kishida Fumio, the current prime minister. During his visit, he assessed that the referendum conducted by

Russia had been 'democratic'.<sup>41</sup> Briefly before the war, he also warned in an interview with the Russian news agency in mid-February 2022 that the Japanese government might not understand the situation in Ukraine correctly for being beholden to the United States.<sup>42</sup>

## ANTI-SOVIET AND ANTI-PUTIN COMMUNISTS

Matsui Ichiro of the *Nihon Ishin no Kai* had attempted to link the Communist Party to Russia for their support of Article 9. Yet for the Communist Party of Japan (10/465 seats in the House of Representatives; 13/245 seats in the House of Councillors), posing itself clearly against Russia, posed no problem at all. Japan's oldest political party has long become a Japanese social-democrat party, and has been highly critical of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) as well as of Soviet and later Russian foreign policy.<sup>43</sup> The Socialist Party of Japan that did entertain close relations with the CPSU was dissolved in 1996. The Communist Party's newspaper, *Akahata* (Red Flag), could thus easily demonstrate a long history of the party's stringent opposition to and criticism of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.<sup>44</sup> Yet, it had to concede that

39 れいわ新選組「ロシアによるウクライナ侵略を非難する決議について」, 2022年2月28日, <https://reiwa-shinsengumi.com/comment/11439/>.

40 See the tweets by Yukio Hatoyama (鳩山友紀夫) 鳩山友紀夫 (由紀夫) Yukio Hatoyama@hatoyamayukion at 10:04 am on April 14, 2022, <https://twitter.com/hatoyamayukio/status/1514409147244355590?cxt=HHwW-jlDRoZDGoYQqAAAA> and at 10:22 am on March 1, 2022, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://twitter.com/hatoyamayukio/status/1498468658984910848?cxt=HHwWgID-Q3cvTOMspAAAA>.

41 産経新聞「民主・岡田代表 鳩山元首相を猛批判 『国益に大きなマイナスだ』 普天間移設も『首相が願望言うのは間違い...』」, 2022年3月27日, <https://www.sankei.com/article/20150327-30TNK7RQN-FIC7E55K3S5U3CM4E/>; 日本経済新聞「鳩山元首相、クリミア訪問計画 外相が再考要請」, 2015年3月6日, [https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASFS06H2B\\_W5A300C1EAF000/](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASFS06H2B_W5A300C1EAF000/); 日本経済新聞「クリミアで鳩山氏『住民投票、民主的だつた』」, 2015年3月11日, [https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDE11H04\\_R10C15A3PP8000/](https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXLASDE11H04_R10C15A3PP8000/).

42 TASS, "Former Japanese PM says Tokyo may misjudge Ukraine crisis because of US," February 10, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1401043>.

43 See Peter Barton and Sam Atherton, *The Japanese Communist Party: Permanent Opposition, but Moral Compass* (London: Routledge, 2018).

44 しんぶん赤旗「旧ソ連・ロシアの覇権主義と対決」, 2022年3月16日, [https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik21/2022-03-16/2022031605\\_01\\_0.html](https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik21/2022-03-16/2022031605_01_0.html).

renewed criticism of the party's stance that the existence of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are unconstitutional, made an explanation of the party's defense policy necessary. Since 2000, the official policy of the Communist Party has been to begin a gradual dissolution of the military once the security situation permitted this. Until then, the party does not object to a purely defensive use of Japan's military capabilities.<sup>45</sup> The party's own criticism meanwhile aimed not at the government's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine itself, but at the comments by former prime minister Abe Shinzo, as well as the government's proposed new defense policy.<sup>46</sup> In the *Akahata*, both the increase in defense spending as well as the development of 'counterstrike capabilities' are rejected as fundamentally unconstitutional. The party argues that only a true 'peace diplomacy' based on Article 9 will guarantee the security of the Japanese people.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Under Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, the Japanese government broke with foreign and defense policy precedence by introducing far-reaching sanctions against Russia, permitting the delivery of military-grade protective equipment to Ukraine as well as accepting hundreds of Ukrainian refugees though officially referring to them as 'evacuees'. Surveys show that the public

remains highly supportive of the government's response to the crisis despite these seismic changes. This can be explained, on the one hand, by the concern that the war is deteriorating the security situation in East Asia; and on the other hand, by the already negative view of Russia held by the Japanese public prior to the war. Their view will likely have deteriorated since, with Russian attacks on nuclear power plants and not ruling out the use of nuclear weapons having been particularly sensitive in Japan.

There are also no political groupings in Japan with a vested interest in ties with Russia, who therefore might attempt to rally supporters to a more neutral stance, or even a somewhat pro-Russian position. Netizens' reactions to the two members of *Nihon Ishin no Kai* have also demonstrated that, for the time being, there is nothing to be won by doing so. While Abe Shinzo's proposal to allow for the stationing of nuclear weapons in Japan has been rejected by the government, it has proposed to raise the defense budget and to develop the capability to strike back on enemy targets abroad. This is being heavily criticized by the Communist Party of Japan, but for now there appears cautious popular support. It is too early to tell, however, if this support holds until the upper house elections in July, and if this support will turn into support for revising Japan's peace constitution in the future.

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45 しんぶん赤旗「党の自衛隊政策への非難に反論」, 2022年4月12日, [https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-12/2022041202\\_02\\_0.html](https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-12/2022041202_02_0.html).

46 しんぶん赤旗「平和 9条基づく外交で」, 2022年4月15日 15 April 2022, [https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-15/2022041503\\_01\\_0.html](https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-15/2022041503_01_0.html).

47 しんぶん赤旗「軍事費倍増の自民提言」, 2022年4月28日, [https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-28/2022042802\\_01\\_0.html](https://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik22/2022-04-28/2022042802_01_0.html).



## RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE AND THE RESPONSES FROM THE SOUTH KOREAN CIVIL SOCIETY

Hee Kyoung Chang *University of Duisburg-Essen*

Russia's war on Ukraine is not an unfamiliar story to the Korean people who experienced the Korean War in the 1950s. Both countries, South Korea and Ukraine face similar geopolitical circumstances in that both are located between two strong powers. Therefore, the South Korean government and civil society closely follow the situation in Ukraine to learn lessons on how to deal with the security dilemma under similar conditions. The South Korean government and civil society strongly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and expressed their support to the Ukraine people. The South Korean government actively joined economic sanctions against Russia, while refraining from military support such as providing a missile protection system. The South Korean civil society is divided on the issue based on whether they see North Korea as an enemy or a partner to coexist with peacefully and who will later be part of a unified state. Likewise, the different camps in civil society also differ on how to resolve the North Korean issue that is whether to strengthen South Korea's security capabilities, or whether to resolve it through diplomatic means. Against this background, the liberal camp not only condemn the Russian invasion strongly but also criticize NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. They argue that balancing between Russia and NATO is key for Ukraine to maintain peace. The conservative camp, in contrast, strongly condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine based on the logic of 'anti-communism'. They rarely criticize NATO's eastward expansion policy. They argue that a strong alliance with the US and increased military preparedness are more important to prevent a war on the Korean peninsula.

### Keywords

Invasion of Ukraine, Korea, South-South conflict, *namnamgaldŭng*, Korean-Russian relations

### THE MEANING OF THE RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE IN SOUTH KOREA

For South Korea (hereafter Korea), the war in Ukraine appears as a familiar scenario. Just as Ukraine, Korea is located between superpowers, the continental powers of China and Russia, and the maritime powers of the USA and Japan. The Korean War (1950–1953) is a representative example of a conflict between maritime and continental powers, besides having been an ideological conflict between liberalism and communism. The current complex conflict in Ukraine is similar in that the country is caught between Russia and NATO. Even though the Korean Peninsula is located on the far eastern side of Eurasia, Kore-

ans observe the war on Ukraine closely because it could affect the security environment on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia. In the 1950s, the Korean War had a tremendous impact on the development of NATO and led to the rearmament of Germany supported by the USA.<sup>1</sup> Far-reaching consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the security environment in East Asia are likewise feared. For example, China could be induced to invade Taiwan in the name of unification. North Korea could also increasingly contribute to destabilizing security by developing

1 For more detail see Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, No. 4 (1980): 563–592.

further nuclear and missile technologies. Accordingly, for Korea and the Korean people, the war on Ukraine is not a distant conflict of little significance.

According to a recent public survey, 94.2 % of the respondents were interested in the Russian attack on Ukraine (somewhat interested 46.5 %, very interested 47.7 %) because they were concerned about the innocent civilian refugees and war victims in Ukraine (36.0 %); about the global economic downturn, such as energy prices and stock prices (31.6 %); about the escalation of the war (20.0 %); and about serious challenges of freedom and democracy (12.4 %).<sup>2</sup> Regarding their view on what to do, 61.6 % responded that the Korean government should closely align with the needs of the USA for supporting Ukraine in a relatively passive way rather than 'actively support Ukraine' (26.2 %). Noteworthy, many think that the war on Ukraine will affect North Korea's strategy toward South Korea. 58.1 % of the respondents said North Korea's military threat will increase, and 15.4 % thought military provocation from North Korea will become a reality. In general terms, both the Korean government and civil society strongly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, there are different reactions to understanding the Ukraine due to differing explanations for the causes of the war and possible solutions.

## REACTIONS OF THE KOREAN GOVERNMENT

The Korean government strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine right away. On February 28, the Korean government decided to actively join the international community's efforts to impose economic sanctions against Russia.

2 One of the Korean survey institutes, nownsurvey surveyed 1,000 respondents between 10 and 79 years old between March 16 and 18, 2022, with a 95 % confidence level and a sampling error of 3.10 %. Last modified April 4, 2022, [https://www.nownsurvey.com/board/hotissue/view/wr\\_id/159/ptype/all/stx/](https://www.nownsurvey.com/board/hotissue/view/wr_id/159/ptype/all/stx/).

As part of these efforts, it blocked the export of strategic items to Russia and joined in the exclusion of Russian banks from SWIFT. Furthermore, on March 7, the Korean government imposed an additional prohibition on transactions with the Central Bank of Russia. Meanwhile, the Korean government is very cautious regarding imposing sanctions on Russian oil and natural gas because of the country's high energy dependency.<sup>3</sup> Russian crude oil accounts for 5.6 % of Korea's total imports of crude oil. At the same time, the Korean government plans to increase its humanitarian assistance to Ukraine by providing up to 10 million dollars including emergency medical supplies. In April, the Ukrainian minister of defense requested the Korean government's support for a missile defense system. On April 11, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy delivered a video speech at the Korean National Assembly to appeal for military support in the form of tanks, warships, and missiles. But the Korean minister of defense stated that the export of lethal weapons systems to Ukraine was restricted given Korea's own security situation and the impact the delivery would have on its military preparedness. Furthermore, Korea borders North Korea, which in turn shares borders with both China and Russia. Thus, from the perspective of Korea's security environment, it is crucial to maintain working relationships with the Chinese and Russian governments to ensure peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, according to the Korean minister of defense, the Korean government and even its parliament should take a cautious approach toward providing military weapons to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

3 Most of the crude oil (93 %) in South Korea is provided by imports. Russian crude oil is charged 5.6 % of the total imported oil. See 박정호 외, "우크라이나 사태와 대러 제재의 경제적 영향," *World Economy Today* 22, No. 6 (2022), [https://www.kiep.go.kr/galleryDownload.es?bid=0003&list\\_no=10004&seq=1](https://www.kiep.go.kr/galleryDownload.es?bid=0003&list_no=10004&seq=1).

4 This speech was held in the library of the National Assembly instead of the general hall and almost 60 members of the National Assembly among 300 members attended it.

North Korea, on the other hand, supported the Russian invasion as a measure of self-defense responding to NATO's alleged expansionist policy in Eastern Europe and the USA's hegemonic policies pursuing military superiority and unilateral economic sanctions.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, the North Korean foreign ministry released its official position relatively late, on February 26, which is two days after the Russian invasion had begun. Nevertheless, North Korea appears to understand the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an infringement of the country's sovereignty, and seems to have utilized this for legitimizing its nuclear and missile tests as necessary activities for national self-defense.

### **KOREAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS: LIBERAL VS. CONSERVATIVE**

Korean civil society has a comparably strong influence on Korean politics. Especially after the formal democratization in 1987, civil society organizations have increased in various fields. Korean civil society has also strongly influenced foreign policy decision-making. Generally, most Korean civil society organizations resolutely condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but there are slight differences depending on their respective ideological orientation.

Korean civil society has long been divided based on the question of how North Korea has to be interpreted: is it a neighbor, an enemy, or a partner for making peace on the Korean Peninsula, possibly leading to a unified state? Depending on the interpretation, foreign policy positions toward North Korea and the USA differ. In particular, in Korean politics, the categories of progressive and conservative are based on the stance taken towards North Korea.<sup>6</sup> The so-called con-

servatives see North Korea as the enemy from the Korean War, and a present threat because of its nuclear weapons. Thus, to them the denuclearization of North Korea is the primary policy goal in dealing with North Korea, as well as strengthening the military alliance with the USA for deterrence based on a realist perspective of international relations. The conservatives have also utilized 'anti-communism' to gain support from the public. On the other hand, the liberals tend to see North Korea as a partner to bring about peace and unification on the Korean peninsula. For them the Korean War and the division of Korea must be understood based against the historical context of the Cold War and the conflict between the Soviet Union and the USA at that time. Thus, for the liberals, it is important to achieve stable relations between the two Koreas through diplomatic means such as economic, political, and military cooperation as a way to restrain the conflict. This antagonism between the conservatives and the liberals regarding foreign policy known as the 'South-South conflict (*namnamgaldŭng*)' has become increasingly pronounced.<sup>7</sup>

### **LIBERAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

One of the most noteworthy collective actions of the Korean civil society organizations in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a demonstration on February 28 in front of the Russian embassy in Seoul. In total, 393 Korean non-governmental organizations and 132 individual persons signed a statement that condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and demanded the end of Russian aggression. The participating NGOs were composed of organizations from diverse fields. The majority of the organizations were traditional democratic movement organizations such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD),

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5 뉴시스, "뒤늦게 우크라 사태 입장 낸 北...전문가 "충격 받은 듯," 뉴시스/정치, 동아일보, February 27, 2022. <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20220227/112058296/1>.

6 Kap-Sik Kim. "The South-South Conflict in Korea: Origin, Development, and Characteristics," *Korea and World Politics* 23, No. 2 (2007): 31-59.

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7 For a detailed account of this conflict see Hannes Mosler and Hee Kyoung Chang. "Namnamgaldŭng – Partisan Media Framing of Political Polarization in South Korea," *Korea Observe* 50, No. 3 (2019): 331-354.

and religious groups linked to Catholicism, Christianity, and Buddhism. In addition, various other civil society organizations advocating issues such as human rights, LGBTQ+ and climate change participated. They strongly criticized the Russian invasion of Ukraine for two main reasons. First, they argue that Russia's invasion of Ukraine violated the UN Charter, which stipulates sovereignty, independence, and respect for the territorial integrity of UN member states. According to their understanding, the war on Ukraine is an act that infringes on the principle of the international community that seeks to solve problems through diplomacy, not by force. Thus, they concluded that the international community should provide humanitarian support to Ukraine. Second, they also argued that Russia's invasion was not justifiable with the concern over a possible Ukrainian NATO membership. At the same time, however, the NGOs also made clear that they do see a certain responsibility with NATO, too. The eastern expansion of the alliance had indeed threatened Russia's security. They argued that the USA and other Western countries should have been more careful not to escalate tensions in the region by expanding the military alliance, strengthening military forces, or deploying arms. Fourteen new members joined NATO even though the Cold War had ended, causing a security threat to Russia.<sup>8</sup>

Since the abovementioned press conference, the NGO network has organized peaceful candlelight protests every Friday during March in front of the Russian Embassy in Seoul to put pressure on Russia. Besides these demonstrations, several artists, who were trained by Ukrainian artists, held performances such as dance, jazz, etc. for peace and in solidarity with the Ukrainian people. One Korean jazz pianist, Jeong Eun-Hye, who had studied under the famous Ukraine musician, Vadim Neselovskyi, composed the song *Together We March On*; and performed it during

a concert, stating that the music expressed emotions, beliefs, and social actions and hoped that it would deliver solace to the Ukrainian people.<sup>9</sup> Another set of activities were organized by NGOs from the southwestern city of Gwangju. They arranged several activities in support of the *Koryoin*, ethnic Koreans living in Central Asia as well as Ukraine and Russia. The ancestors of today's *Koryoin* have been deported to Ukraine by an order of Stalin in 1937. The NGOs assist them to escape from Ukraine and settle in Gwangju, the city of democratization in 1987, and have established a village for them. To help the *Koryoin*, the NGOs in Gwangju have raised over 33 million won (\$27,319) in donations during March, which were sent to the *Koryoin Village* from individuals and groups.<sup>10</sup>

### CONSERVATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The conservative NGOs in Korea have also strongly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They also organized a demonstration in front of the Russian embassy on March 7. They criticize Russia as a 'terrorist state' and its invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international law and an uncivilized action. According to them, Russia has crossed a red line and must be held accountable for its crime.<sup>11</sup> What differentiates them from liberal civil society organizations is that they did not criticize the NATO's eastward expansion. Also, they argue that Ukraine was attacked because it did not have either a strong military deterrence nor an alliance with NATO. The conservatives in Korea traditionally advocate for 'liberal democracy', and oppose North Korea,

8 Peoplepower 21. "Stop the war in Ukraine! Give Peace a Chance!" Last modified April 1, 2022, <https://www.peoplepower21.org/Peace/1867320>.

9 Ko Jaeyeol, "Quiet Voices of Artists Praying for Ukraine" Last modified April 2, 2022, [https://www.theapro.kr:441/eng/now/now\\_view.asp?idx=1420](https://www.theapro.kr:441/eng/now/now_view.asp?idx=1420).

10 김우현, "'우크라이나 고려인' 31명 광주가 품는다...첫 집단입국 예정," 매일경제, March 27, 2022, <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/society/view/2022/03/275614/>.

11 김철환, "보수 시민단체 "우크라이나 주권 침해 러시아 규탄"," 민족·국제, OhmyNews, March 8, 2022, [http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/View/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002816489](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002816489).

China and Russia, and other Communist or formerly Communist states or organizations. This 'anti-communism' and 'anti-North Korea' ideology is the main pillar of conservative ideology in Korea. Simultaneously, they are unconditionally supportive of the USA and NATO, which leads them to emphasize a strong alliance with the USA.

## THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE AND THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

When Russia invaded Ukraine, the presidential race in Korea was in full swing. Quickly, the Ukrainian crisis became a hotly contested issue during the campaign.<sup>12</sup> The candidate from the conservative camp, Yoon Suk-yeol, who was elected president, argued that Ukraine was helpless against the attack of Russia not only because they did not have sufficient military capacity to defend themselves including nuclear weapons, but also because they had not joined NATO. He pointed out that the Budapest Memorandum on security assurance, as well as the Minsk accords, had not guaranteed Ukraine's security. From a strongly realist perspective, his camp emphasized the need of strong military capabilities as well as a strong military alliance with the USA to deter any attacks. For the conservative camp, the implication of the war on Ukraine for Korea is the need to increase Korea's defense capacity by acquiring an anti-ballistic missile defense system, known as THAAD, as well as strengthening the military alliance with the USA.

The candidate from the liberal camp, Lee Jae-myung, on the other hand, while also strongly condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and territory argued that the Ukrainian leadership decided to pursue membership in NATO too hastily. He proposed that a diplomatic failure of the Ukrainian government contributed

to the outbreak of the war. Ukraine had not been able to balance between Russian security concerns and their own desire to join NATO. Because of that, Lee argued, Russia perceived Ukraine as a threat to its security. In line with this interpretation of the war in Ukraine, for the liberals, the lesson of the war is that strengthening Korea's military through THAAD and the preemptive strike capability known as the 'kill-chain' would worsen the security crisis on the peninsula. Liberals believe that the conflict on the Korean Peninsula can only be resolved through diplomatic tools, ultimately leading to a peace treaty. Such a peace treaty would then solve the issue of North Korea's nuclear armament.

## CONCLUSION

For the people of Korea, Russia's war on Ukraine is not considered a distant conflict with little significance for their daily lives. Most Koreans as well as civil society organizations observe the developments very closely because of their possible geopolitical effects for the Korean peninsula. Both the Korean government and civil society organizations have strongly condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine regardless of their political leanings. Furthermore, the war on Ukraine could contribute to a deterioration of the security situation in the East Asian region, and in particular on the Korean peninsula. However, depending on the political stances of individuals as well as organizations regarding Korea's relations with North Korea and the United States, there are different interpretations of the reasons that have caused the outbreak of the war as well as of the possible solutions to end the fighting. The liberal camp emphasizes that diplomatic failures can explain at least partly the war in Europe. Diplomatic initiatives should, therefore, be able to prevent the outbreak of a war in East Asia. Conservatives, in contrast, stress the overarching importance of strong military capabilities to deter the attack and a strong military alliance with the USA. For them, it is clear that if Ukraine had had those, the Russian invasion would not have occurred.

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12 The 20th presidential election in South Korea was held on March 9, 2022.



## REMAINING ON THE FENCE? ASEAN AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

**Kasira Cheeppensook** *Chulalongkorn University*

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN has long strived to maintain a united front when confronted with international issues. However, this became increasingly difficult in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine due to the differences among the various member countries' stances on the crisis. Almost all ASEAN members voted for the UNGA Resolution on March 2, 2022. In comparison, ASEAN exercised restraint when the organization had to issue its own joint statement, which was based on its norms of consensus seeking, principled neutrality, and not blaming and naming. As a middle power, ASEAN has potential in conflict transformation. But the different relationships with Russia entertained by the individual member countries have so far prevented realizing this potential. ASEAN's statement contrasts with the actions of civil society organizations in the member countries, who have sought direct contacts with representatives of Ukrainian to demonstrate their support.

### **Keywords**

ASEAN, neutrality, Russia, Ukraine, middle power

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, known as ASEAN, has long been accused of remaining on the sidelines in a number of international conflicts, at times attempting half-heartedly to act as a mediator, or providing perfunctory joint statements. This has especially been the case for domestic crises, regardless of whether their consequences spilled across borders resulting in international humanitarian emergencies. In the past, ASEAN's actions have also been deemed as too little, too late. ASEAN was most vocal when the conflict encroached upon a core normative principle highly regarded by its members, namely national sovereignty. Violations of sovereignty were utterly unacceptable. In the past, ASEAN chose to act after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, becoming active in UN venues such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). However, with increasing interdependency between member states and powers outside of the region, it became increasingly difficult for ASEAN to maintain a united

front as one can observe in the case of the South China Sea. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presented yet again difficulties for ASEAN to come together and issue a strong standpoint. With a decision-making process based on consensus, the result needed to be condoned by all member countries. As it had been the case in the past, this has led to agreements based on the lowest common denominator, with stronger proposals being watered down.

### **VOTING ABROAD AND CONSENSUS AT HOME**

It was clear that efforts at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would be effectively stalled since Russia was bound to veto any resolution tabled to condemn its actions and demand withdrawal of its troops. The system was rigged since it was founded upon an incomplete collective security system at the very beginning, where the deemed aggressor could block the collective efforts should it want to. The activities then moved to the UNGA where an emergency special

session was called by the UNSC. The stalemate at the UNSC also prompted the Veto Initiative co-sponsored by almost half UN member states. The UNGA passed the Resolution in April 2022, so that a veto cast in the UNSC would lead to a UNGA debate.<sup>1</sup> One day before the UNSC voted to call for an emergency special session, ASEAN issued a joint statement by its foreign ministers on February 26, 2022. The tone of the joint statement was mild, mentioning that 'the ASEAN Foreign Ministers are deeply concerned over the evolving situation and armed hostilities in Ukraine'. It called for 'restraint' and 'dialogues' in line with the UN Charter and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC).<sup>2</sup> The reference to the UN Charter matters only for peaceful settlements and is not related to the violation of Article 2(4) regarding the threat or use of force against territorial integrity. ASEAN nonetheless reiterated the responsibility of 'all parties to uphold the principles of mutual respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and equal rights of all nations'.<sup>3</sup>

It was almost as if ASEAN had adopted a position of wait-and-see vis-à-vis the international community with regards to its response. It managed to echo the UNGA's subsequent resolutions, albeit more subdued. On March 2, 2022, Vietnam and Laos, arguably because of a more pronounced reliance on Russia among other things, abstained from the UNGA Resolution condemning Russian invasion. The Resolution also called for Russia's immediate withdrawal of military forces from Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> As can be seen from the table below, ASEAN members did not vote as a bloc, with suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council garnering the least positive votes. This point will be discussed further below.

One day after the resolution on the Russian aggression against Ukraine was passed by the UNGA, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued another statement expressing that they were 'deeply troubled' and called for 'an immediate ceasefire or armistice'.<sup>5</sup> The statement also pledged that

	A/RES/ES-11/1 'Aggression against Ukraine'	A/RES/ES-11/2 'Humanitarian consequences'	A/RES/ES-11/3 'Suspension of the rights of membership'
Brunei	Yes	Abstain	Abstain
Cambodia	Yes	Yes	Abstain
Indonesia	Yes	Yes	Abstain
Laos	Abstain	Abstain	No
Malaysia	Yes	Yes	Abstain
Myanmar	Yes	Yes	Yes
Philippines	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singapore	Yes	Yes	Abstain
Thailand	Yes	Yes	Abstain
Vietnam	Abstain	Abstain	No

1 UN General Assembly, "Resolution 76/262, Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council, A/RES/76/262," April 26, 2022, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/76/262>.

2 Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Situation in Ukraine," February 26, 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ASEAN-FM-Statement-on-Ukraine-Crisis-26-Feb-Final.pdf>.

3 Ibid.

4 UN General Assembly, "Resolution ES-11/1, Aggression against Ukraine, A/RES/ES-11/1," March 2, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290?ln=en>.

5 ASEAN, "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement Calling for a Ceasefire in Ukraine," March 3, 2022, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Statement-calling-for-Ceasefire-in-Ukraine-EN.pdf>.

ASEAN was 'ready to facilitate, in any possible way, peaceful dialogue among parties concerned'.<sup>6</sup> Following the reported killing of civilians in Ukraine approximately two weeks after the Resolution on Humanitarian Consequences of the Aggression against Ukraine had been passed by the UNGA, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers also issued a statement to express condolences, support independent an investigation into alleged atrocities, and reinforced previous calls for an immediate cease-fire.<sup>7</sup> The ASEAN statement kept to the situation in Ukraine without further mentioning Russia.

Some member countries were more vocal about the Russian invasion. For example, Singapore not only condemned Russia but also initiated sanctions on the Russian financial sector. It had done so the last time when Vietnam invaded Cambodia, since it was adamant for a small state to maintain its stance towards violations of the sacrosanct principle of national sovereignty. Generally speaking, however, a more restraint position was favored by the organization's member states. ASEAN wanted a safe approach, one that avoided offending anyone, given that a number of member countries entertained deepened relations with Russia. During the last decade, Russia was one of the most important defense suppliers to Southeast Asia.<sup>8</sup> Russia promised trade and investment plans with ASEAN shortly before it initiated military operations in Ukraine, and signaled that it would continue to do so even with sanctions in place. Arguably, this might be for Russia's domestic audience as well, since Russian share in ASEAN trade is small in comparison to partners like China.

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6 Ibid.

7 ASEAN, "ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Reported Killing of Civilians in Ukraine," April 8, 2022, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ASEAN\\_FM\\_Statement\\_on\\_killing\\_of\\_civilians\\_in\\_Ukraine\\_final\\_8\\_April.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ASEAN_FM_Statement_on_killing_of_civilians_in_Ukraine_final_8_April.pdf).

8 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," last updated March 14, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

## **ASEAN'S POTENTIAL AS A MIDDLE POWER IN CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION**

Questions arose as to how ASEAN could perhaps mediate in the conflict or whether this would be asking too much of the organization. Certainly, ASEAN was not designed to function as a security alliance. It is comprised of members who are skeptical of such alliances, who prefer not to take sides in international issues, and who are careful not to be perceived as doing so. Blatant violation of international legal principles involving territorial integrity usually prompted the organization to act, but concrete contributions as mediator remain elusive.

There have been discussions on the potential of ASEAN as a middle power to break out of its shell to follow up on promises of being a valuable player in maintaining peace and stability in line with its Indo-Pacific vision. Several member countries have long adopted 'neutral' stances in international conflicts involving great powers such as this. But the claim of neutrality alone would not be a satisfactory substitute for muted responses. Member countries of the EU such as Finland and Sweden, long known to be neutral in the sense that they had previously not intended to join a security alliance, had voiced out against Russia in no uncertain terms.

It would be a difficult feat indeed to uphold ASEAN centrality when members remain divisive when challenged with violations of the fundamental legal principle also echoed within the organization's own charter as well as core treaties such as the Treaty of Amenity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Middle power diplomacy has been deemed important in conflict transformation, as ASEAN was once expected to perform. ASEAN has a number of ASEAN-led mechanisms dealing with common interests in the Asia-Pacific regional order in place such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the ASEAN Defense Minister's Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus). These mechanisms already involved Rus-

sia along with powers like China and the United States. Russia also acceded to the TAC in 2004, which explicitly stated the fundamental principle of settling differences or disputes by peaceful means and devoted the whole of Chapter IV to the peaceful settlement of disputes.<sup>9</sup> It is true that Article 13 regarding the constitution of the High Council 'shall apply to any of the States outside Southeast Asia which have acceded to the Treaty only in cases where that state is directly involved in the dispute to be settled through the regional processes', but this also represents the potential that ASEAN could follow through with its pledge of its joint statement on March 3, 2022.<sup>10</sup>

It is undeniable that the Russia-Ukraine war poses implications far beyond the actual theatre. It definitely has ramifications for geopolitics in Asia, where regional power also warily eyed responses from the international community to factor in its own moves in regional hotspots. If aggression was met internationally with swift and strong disapproval backed by collective enforcement measures, there might be second thoughts before any attempts of emulation.

### **NORMATIVE CONDITIONS: (NON-)SANCTIONS OF ASEAN AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

Although most ASEAN members voted for the UNGA Resolution on March 2, 2022, a different scenario could be observed when it came to the UNGA Resolution regarding the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council (HRC).

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9 Instrument of Extension of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia by Russian Federation, signed November 29, 2004, ASEAN, November 1, 2004, <https://asean.org/instrument-of-extension-of-the-treaty-of-amity-and-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-by-russian-federation/>.

10 ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation, "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," signed February 24, 1976, July 2018, <https://asean-aipr.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Treaty-of-Amity-and-Cooperation-in-Southeast-Asia-1976-TAC.pdf>.

This underlined further difficulties in presenting a united front among ASEAN members. They have been careful to voice their disagreements before in the form of abstentions, negating but not attempting to block the resolutions. Almost every ASEAN member country abstained from the draft resolution asking for suspension of the rights of membership of Russia in the HRC. But Vietnam and Lao PDR voted against it and the Philippines and Myanmar voted in favor.<sup>11</sup> The resolution passed, and Russia chose to resign.

It is interesting to note here, albeit not surprising, that ASEAN civil society responses to the situation between Russia and Ukraine were largely not in line with those of the ASEAN states. The heterogeneity of member states is also reflected here, with some civil society organizations appearing to adopt principled neutrality, a stance that is similar to that of ASEAN member states. An interesting case in point was when representatives from civil society groups in Vietnam chose to contact Ukrainian representatives in the country directly to express their support for Ukraine. Although Vietnam has long established historical ties with Russia and has more or less supported Russia's actions in the past, the press was far less outright pro-Russia and chose to focus on other aspects of the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

For the international community, collective disapproval was necessary following the serious violation of international law by Russian forces. This proved to be difficult for ASEAN as a re-

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11 UN News, "UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council," April 7, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782>.

12 To Minh Son, "Explaining the Vietnamese Public's Mixed Responses to the Russia-Ukraine Crisis," *The Diplomat*, March 18, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/explaining-the-vietnamese-publics-mixed-responses-to-the-russia-ukraine-crisis/>.

gional organization that has long evaded 'blaming-and-naming' as means towards behavioral change. The situation on the ground warranted an inquiry from the Human Rights Council as well as investigations from the International Criminal Court (ICC) regarding the atrocities committed in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> In the future, normative

support from the international community could reinforce Southeast Asian civil society efforts in signaling to governments to take stronger stances. In face of these developments in regard to the Russia-Ukraine war, it has become increasingly clear that going forward, mildly formulated reprimands will not suffice.

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13 United Nations Human Rights Council, "Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine," last modified May 12, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iicir-ukraine/index>; International Criminal Court, "Ukraine," last modified April 1, 2022, accessed May 15, 2022, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/ukraine>.



## INDONESIAN REACTIONS TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR IN 2022

**Patrick Ziegenhain** *President University, Cikarang, Indonesia*

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This article analyzes the reactions of the Indonesian government and civil society in the first month after Russia's military attack on Ukraine. President Joko Widodo and his administration condemned the invasion since it constituted a break of international law. The government, however, avoided to explicitly mention Russia as aggressor and did not support any economic sanctions. This reaction was widely supported by the national media and most commentators from academia and civil society. Only a few asked for more support for the Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. In the online media there was even support for Russia's actions, since many Indonesians have Anti-American attitudes and believe that Russia is fighting against mighty America and an assumed American puppet government in the Ukraine.

### Keywords

Indonesia, Russia-Ukraine War, anti-Westernism, Indonesian public opinion, Indonesian foreign policy

## INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, shocked the world and made headlines worldwide. The reactions of governments, politicians, and the general public, however, were quite distinct in different parts of the world. Whereas in Western countries (USA, Canada, Australia, the EU member states) a strict condemnation of Russian military aggression was the norm, the reactions in Asia were more mixed.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will take a closer look on the public reactions in Indonesia, the biggest country in Southeast Asian and with more than 270 million people the fourth most populous country in the world. I will focus on the reactions of the Indonesian government, the Indonesian academia, but also include the ordinary cit-

izens' responses, particularly in online media. In terms of methodology, I relied on media reports in English and Indonesian language, but also on daily-life observations, such as comments of colleagues, friends and my students around Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia. All translations from Indonesian language into English were done by the author. On April 1, 2022, the author took part in a public online discussion with the former ambassador of Indonesia in the Ukraine (2017–2021), Yuddy Chrisnandi, which was organized by President University in Cikarang, Indonesia.

## DEBATES ABOUT INDONESIA'S RESPONSE TO THE WAR

Directly after the first news about the Russian military attack on the Ukraine became public, Indonesian President Joko Widodo sent the following message on his official Twitter account: 'Stop the war. This war torments humanity and endan-

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1 Sui-Lee Wee, Emily Schmall, and Sameer Yasir, "We Are on Our Side": Across Asia, a Mixed Reaction to Ukraine War," *New York Times*, March 2, 2022, updated March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/asia/asia-russia-ukraine-war.html>.

gers the world'.<sup>2</sup> A few days later, Indonesia was one of the 141 countries that supported the UN General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 on March 2, 2022, that condemned and deplored Russia's invasion of the Ukraine as a violation of Article 2 of the UN Charter and demanded a full withdrawal of Russian forces and a reversal of its decision to recognize the self-declared People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>3</sup> Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno reiterated Indonesia's principled position of respect for international law, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and that all parties must guarantee humanitarian access and safe passage for civilians. Like President Joko Widodo in his initial reaction, the Indonesian government condemned the hostilities but also tiptoed around any pressure to antagonize Moscow, at the behest of Kyiv.<sup>4</sup> President Widodo has so far refrained from making explicit statements criticizing Russian aggression. He and the Indonesian Foreign Ministry, however, have made clear that the 'military attack' was 'unacceptable' and violated international law. Indonesia did not follow other countries by imposing sanctions or sending military support to Ukraine. Academic Teuku Faizasyah explained that the country had no intention of imposing sanctions against Moscow, arguing it would 'not blindly follow the steps taken by another country'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the country seemed to be content with a wait-and-see approach.<sup>6</sup>

2 Jokowi Nugraheny Dian Erika, "Setop Perang, Menyengsarakan Manusia, Membahayakan Dunia," *kompas.com*, February 24, 2022, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/02/24/19163021/jokowi-setop-perang-menyengsarakan-manusia-membahayakan-dunia>.

3 Tommy Kurnia, "Bela Ukraina, Indonesia Resmi Kecam Rusia di Resolusi PBB," *Liputan 6*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.liputan6.com/global/read/4902352/bela-ukraina-indonesia-resmi-kecam-rusia-di-resolusi-pbb>.

4 Dian Septiari, "Putin 'wants' to attend G20 summit despite potential boycott," *Jakarta Post*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/03/23/putin-wants-to-attend-g20-summit-despite-potential-boycott.html>.

The main reason behind Indonesia's careful response was likely economic pragmatism. Russia is not a top trading partner of Indonesia, but there is some economic cooperation and some Russian investment in Indonesia, such as the construction of an oil refinery in Tuban, East Java worth US\$14 billion.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Russia is a major source of Indonesia's imported metals and mineral fuels.<sup>8</sup> There is also some military cooperation between both countries. Russia has, for example, several times sold Sukhoi fighter jets to Indonesia, and in December 2021, Indonesia was the host of the first-ever joint maritime exercise between Russia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.<sup>9</sup>

Many Indonesian commentators have recommended that the country should stay neutral in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but also contribute to its solution. Directly after the beginning of the Russian invasion, the before-mentioned International Relations expert Teuku Rezasyah, said Indonesia as a country that stands 'in the middle' of Russia and Ukraine, should become a mediator and finally end the war between

5 Sui-Lee Wee, Emily Schmall, and Sameer Yasir, "We Are on Our Side': Across Asia, a Mixed Reaction to Ukraine War," *New York Times*, March 2, 2022, updated March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/asia/asia-russia-ukraine-war.html>.

6 I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia, "Indonesia should take a stand with Ukraine," *Jakarta Post*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2022/03/09/indonesia-should-take-a-stand-with-ukraine.html>.

7 Ibid.

8 Dian Septiari, "Indonesia caught in the middle of Russia-Ukraine struggle," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/03/24/indonesia-caught-in-the-middle-of-russia-ukraine-struggle.html>.

9 Sui-Lee Wee, Emily Schmall, and Sameer Yasir, "We Are on Our Side': Across Asia, a Mixed Reaction to Ukraine War," *New York Times*, March 2, 2022, updated March 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/world/asia/asia-russia-ukraine-war.html>.

Russia and Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Such a form of neutrality would be in accordance with the longstanding Indonesian foreign policy principle of *bebas dan aktif* (free and active). This foreign policy approach, which has remained unchanged since the country's independence in 1945, means that Indonesia does not maintain a passive or reactive stance on international issues, but seeks to actively participate in their settlement. Therefore, Indonesia's 'free and active' policy is not a neutral policy, but rather one that does not align Indonesia with any superpower, nor does it bind the country to any military pact.<sup>11</sup>

Another current big topic for the Indonesian Foreign Ministry and the general public was the G20 Summit, which is scheduled to take place under Indonesian presidency in Bali in mid-November 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin had already been invited to the G20 Summit and he intends to be there, Russian Ambassador to Indonesia Lyudmila Vorobieva said in March 2022.<sup>12</sup> Several European countries but also Indonesia's southern neighbor Australia have already expressed reluctance to attend the G20 summit when Putin will arrive there. Indonesian Coordinating Economic Affairs Minister, Airlangga Hartarto, commented that Indonesia should uphold the G20's traditional role as an economic forum. The Indonesian government has no plans to discuss any geopolitical issues, 'which are clearly political and security issues'. 'There are many forums for geopolitical and security issues, such

as the United Nations general meeting and UN Security Council. These are the channels to resolve geopolitical issues in Ukraine', he was quoted as saying.<sup>13</sup> Most commentators agreed on the government's policies and positions.

President University's International Relation expert, I Bagus Dharma Agastia, was one of the few academics who openly criticized the Indonesian government's lukewarm reaction to Russian aggression. Referring to Russia's economic relations, he asked rhetorically: 'Is foreign investment really worth losing moral credibility?' About the typical position that Indonesia should stay neutral and not side with the Western countries, he argued that 'as a middle-power, it is in Indonesia's interests to see international law and order be upheld. Without it, Indonesia may have long been subjected to the throes of great power politics. By choosing not to act, Indonesia betrays its commitment to the "active" principle.' Agastia also demanded that Indonesia should clearly convey its opposition to the invasion at the international and domestic level by naming the aggressor and calling it an unjustified and unwarranted invasion. In addition, Indonesia should consider economic sanctions and also to formulate regional action within ASEAN against Russia.<sup>14</sup> The former ambassador of Indonesia in the Ukraine (2017–2021), Yuddy Chrisnandi, also made clear that he expected a more critical reaction of the Indonesian government. In an online debate, he demanded that President Jokowi and the Foreign Ministry should not hide behind slogans of *bebas dan aktif* and instead uphold basic principles of international law. He also questioned the rightfulness of Indonesia's neu-

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10 Dwi Andayani, "Hanya Indonesia yang Dinilai Mampu Akhiri Invasi Rusia ke Ukraina," *Detik.com*, February 25, 2022, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5958072/hanya-indonesia-yang-dinilai-mampu-akhiri-invasi-rusia-ke-ukraina>.

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia, "Indonesia's Foreign Policy," accessed May 20, 2022, [https://kemlu.go.id/washington/en/pages/kebijakan\\_luar\\_negeri\\_ri/716/etc-menu](https://kemlu.go.id/washington/en/pages/kebijakan_luar_negeri_ri/716/etc-menu).

12 Dian Septiari, "Indonesia caught in the middle of Russia-Ukraine struggle," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/03/24/indonesia-caught-in-the-middle-of-russia-ukraine-struggle.html>.

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13 Norman Harsono, "Indonesia stands firm on G20 economic agenda," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2022/03/24/indonesia-balks-at-pressures-to-add-ukraine-war-to-g20-agenda.html>.

14 I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia, "Indonesia should take a stand with Ukraine," *Jakarta Post*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2022/03/09/indonesia-should-take-a-stand-with-ukraine.html>.

trality since it was obvious for everybody which country is the aggressor and which country is the victim.

How did the Ukraine and Russia react to Indonesia's response? Both governments, represented by their ambassadors in Indonesia's capital Jakarta expressed their unhappiness with the Indonesian response, but also requested further support from Indonesia's government and society. The Ukrainian government considered Indonesia's reaction in response to Russia's invasion as too weak because it did not name Russia as the aggressor and did not impose any economic sanctions on Russia. The Ukrainian Ambassador to Indonesia, Vasyl Hamianin, issued a letter requesting public support from the Indonesian citizens. He described Indonesia as a free and democratic country, as a strong and brave nation, fighting for truth, freedom, peace and justice. He referred to the long Indonesian struggle for independence against Dutch colonial rule and added that the Ukraine has not bowed to the threat of death, just as Indonesia did not surrender in their war of independence in 1945.<sup>15</sup> On March 4, 2022 Indonesian and Ukrainian citizens gathered in front of the Russian Embassy in Jakarta to protest Russia's invasion in the Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Russia was disappointed that Indonesia has become one of the supporters of the resolution at the UN General Assembly demanding that Russia immediately end the attack on Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> However, the Russian ambas-

sador to Indonesia, Lyudmila Vorobieva, showed also some relief that 'fortunately and different from many other countries the Indonesian government does not support the international anti-Russia campaign' and added that Russia hopes 'that the Indonesian government will not succumb to the terrible pressure imposed by the West'.<sup>18</sup> Russian as well as Ukrainian embassies tried to convince not only the national government from their positions but also the Indonesian society. Both sides organized meetings with leading figures of Indonesia's Islamic community, for example with Muhammadiyah or the chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama, Yahya Cholil Staqf. The latter, however, refused to be siding with one of the two countries.<sup>19</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR

Beside the topic of how the Indonesian government should react to Russia's invasion in the Ukraine, the economic consequences of the war between Russia and Ukraine were a big topic in Indonesia's media. It was often speculated that the conflict would rattle financial markets and drag down the Indonesian gross domestic product (GDP) thereby endangering the recovery after the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Both countries, Russia and Ukraine, were usually portrayed as major commodity exporters and analysts predicted spikes in commodity prices, spikes in

15 Basuki Eka Purnama, "Ukraina Minta Dukungan Indonesia," *Media Indonesia*, March 02, 2022, <https://mediaindonesia.com/internasional/475092/ukraina-minta-dukungan-indonesia>.

16 Yudha Baskoro, "Indonesians, Ukrainians Protest Against War Outside Russian Embassy," *Jakarta Globe*, March 6, 2022, <https://jakartaglobe.id/vision/indonesians-ukrainians-protest-against-war-outside-russian-embassy>.

17 Valdy Baraputri, "Ukraina dan Rusia kecewa sekaligus berharap pada Indonesia: Wawancara dengan Duta Besar Ukraina dan Rusia," *BBC News Indonesia*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-60746748>.

18 Marcheilla Ariesta, "Dubes Rusia: Reaksi Barat Terhadap Operasi Militer di Ukraina Tidak Proporsional," *Medcom.id*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.medcom.id/internasional/asean/1bVqzy7N-dubes-rusia-reaksi-barat-terhadap-operasi-militer-di-ukraina-tidak-proporsional>.

19 Dian Septiari, "Indonesia caught in the middle of Russia-Ukraine struggle," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/03/24/indonesia-caught-in-the-middle-of-russia-ukraine-struggle.html>.

20 Norman Harsono, "Indonesia stands firm on G20 economic agenda," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2022/03/24/indonesia-balks-at-pressures-to-add-ukraine-war-to-g20-agenda.html>.

energy prices, and supply chain shocks.<sup>21</sup> And indeed, the war led to a surge in product prices, which directly affected ordinary consumers. Particularly, cooking oil was impacted but also wheat, corn and barley, and products composed of them.<sup>22</sup> President Widodo stated on March 11, 2022 that the Ukraine crisis might tip the balance of domestic price stability as the war exacerbates a rally in global commodity prices. He stated that government subsidies have upheld price limits on crude palm oil, cooking oil, beef, fuel and cooking gas. In this context, the Indonesian President admitted that supporting these prices was becoming increasingly difficult.<sup>23</sup> Other government officials tried to play down fears of an economic downturn in Indonesia. Coordinating Economic Affairs Minister Airlangga Hartono, for example, stated that Indonesia expected the Ukraine war to have minimal effect on the domestic economy in the mid-term, as trade and investment between Indonesia and Ukraine-Russia was less than one percent. He did, however, acknowledge that the war might strain fiscal health in the long run as rising commodity prices, especially oil, might force the government to spend more on energy subsidies.<sup>24</sup>

Other economic experts even pointed out rising export opportunities for Indonesia. When Europe must adapt to the new reality of the scarcity of vegetable oils, it might reverse its anti-palm oil ideology into more pragmatic views and import palm oil from the world's largest palm oil producer, Indonesia.<sup>25</sup> In a similar direction went the proposal to economically benefitting from the war by strengthening Indonesia's exports of non-alloy steel products to European and Asian countries.<sup>26</sup> Whereas many Western European countries considered reducing their oil and gas imports from Russia, Indonesia openly voiced interest in increasing them. The president director of state-owned oil and gas company Pertamina, Nicke Widyawati, stated that Pertamina had approached several Russian sellers to buy crude oil and gas for testing at Pertamina's refineries. She told members of House of Representatives Commission VI overseeing trade, industry, and investment that she sees an opportunity to buy oil from Russia at a good price at the moment.<sup>27</sup>

This and the other reactions of the Indonesian government showed a sort of economic pragmatism that ignored the violation of basic international rules and Russian atrocities in Ukraine. In this regard, Indonesian strong nationalist and benefit-seeking attitude seemed to be more important than a foreign trade policy based on ethical principles.

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21 Firman Hidranto, "Perang Rusia Vs Ukraina dan Perekonomian Indonesia," *Bisnis.com*, March 6, 2022, <https://ekonomi.bisnis.com/read/20220306/9/1507157/dampak-perang-rusia-vs-ukraina-terhadap-perekonomian-indonesia>.

22 Damiana Cut Emeria, "Efek Perang, Harga Pangan, Sandang, dan Papan RI Beterbangan," *CNBC Indonesia*, March 07, 2022, <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/news/20220306235020-4-320418/efek-perang-harga-pangan-sandang-dan-papan-ri-beterbangan>.

23 Vincent Fabian Thomas, "Jokowi raises alarm on domestic inflation amid Ukraine crisis," *Jakarta Post*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2022/03/14/jokowi-raises-alarm-on-domestic-inflation-amid-ukraine-crisis.html>.

24 Norman Harsono, "Indonesia stands firm on G20 economic agenda," *Jakarta Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2022/03/24/indonesia-balks-at-pressures-to-add-ukraine-war-to-g20-agenda.html>.

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25 Edi Suhardi, "Ukraine crisis dampens Europe's anti-palm oil sentiment," *Jakarta Post*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2022/03/31/ukraine-crisis-dampens-europes-anti-palm-oil-sentiment.html>.

26 Pradnyawati, "Opini: Konflik Rusia-Ukraina dan Potensi Ekspor Indonesia," *Bisnis.com*, March 15, 2022, <https://ekonomi.bisnis.com/read/20220315/9/1510670/opini-konflik-rusia-ukraina-dan-potensi-ekspor-indonesia>.

27 Divya Karyza, "Pertamina turns to Russia for oil amid energy price hike," *Jakarta Post*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/business/2022/03/29/pertamina-turns-to-russia-for-oil-amid-energy-price-hike.html>.

## PRO-RUSSIAN VOICES

While the large majority of the TV and newspaper reports remained somewhat balanced in their coverage of the Russian war against Ukraine, the public debates in the online community, particularly in social media, showed an astonishing degree of sympathy if not support for Russia's position. Usually, the Indonesian general public tends to sympathize with the smaller countries that became victims of aggression by bigger powers. The most important examples for this attitude are the popular support for Palestinians in the Middle East conflict or the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. Both cases are, however, influenced by the fact that the attacked minorities are Muslims, which is stressed and sometimes instrumentalized by influential Muslim organizations from all kinds of shade in Indonesia.

Russia is not particularly known for its pro-Islamic stance and has in the past brutally suppressed the Muslim community in Chechnya and occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s. International Relations scholar, Radityo Dharmaputra, however, reported that in the last few years, Russia has undertaken concerted efforts to portray Russia as a friend and ally of Islam in social media. He refers to a popular Indonesian-language YouTube channel, Rabbanians.id. This channel has a very popular video with nearly 900,000 views at the end of March 2022, which described Russia as corresponding to the 'Rum' people described in the holy Quran. The online report explains in a very empathic way that this people follow Christianity at the moment, but will align themselves with Islam at the end of days.<sup>28</sup> Many Indonesian newspaper and online reports also extensively covered Islamic Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, and his military support for Vladimir Putin. In an article for *Republika*, for example, he was por-

trayed as a gentle person who loves the Prophet and the Islamic community (*umat*) and nevertheless is a fearless fighter in defending Islam from its enemies.<sup>29</sup> The photo of Fayadh's report depicting Ramzan Kadyrov, whom Western media often describe as a brutal warlord, in a devout Islamic praying position, certainly appealed to millions of pious Indonesian Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

Another explanation for the pro-Russian stance of many Indonesians is more evident: Anti-Americanism or a refusal of the policies of the allegedly imperialist, capitalist, immoral, and Islamophobic Western culture and their representatives in the pro-Western governments. From this perspective, the Ukraine or more precisely the Ukrainian government under President Zelenskyy is described as a puppet of the Americans (or the CIA, or the World Jewish Community). In so far, it is absolutely justified by the Russians to raise their weapons against US imperialism and capitalism in self-defense, because otherwise the already dominating USA will further increase their control of the world. Hikmahanto Juwana, professor of international law at the University of Indonesia stated that Russia's President Putin was right in his argumentation that Russia is threatened by Ukraine's announcement to join NATO.<sup>31</sup> He voiced his regret that Indonesia supported the UN resolution against Russia and criticized that Indonesia blindly followed the USA and their Western friends. In his opinion, it would

28 Radityo Dharmaputra, "Why do so many Indonesians back Russia's invasion of Ukraine?," *University of Melbourne*, March 9, 2022, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/why-do-so-many-indonesians-back-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

29 Faisal Abu Fayadh, "Sosok Presiden Chechnya: Kadyrov, Sekutu Rusia yang Muslim," *Republika*, March 3, 2022, <https://retizen.republika.co.id/posts/64193/sosok-presiden-chechnya-kadyrov-sekutu-rusia-yang-muslim>.

30 George Grylls, "Notorious Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov rises up the ranks," *The Times*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/notorious-chechen-warlord-ramzan-kadyrov-rises-up-the-ranks-5qhm0t8l7>.

31 Antara News, "Hikmahanto jelaskan dua narasi terkait konflik Rusia-Ukraina," *Antara News*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.antaranews.com/berita/2724813/hikmahanto-jelaskan-dua-narasi-terkait-konflik-rusia-ukraina>.

be better to remain neutral by keeping in mind that Indonesia also was accused by Western countries of occupying another country, namely Timor Leste, in the past.<sup>32</sup> Anti-Western resentments came also from another Indonesian public figure. Military expert, Connie Rahakundini Bakrie, explained publicly that the USA is the main responsible force behind the escalation of the conflict since the Americans pushed Russia's neighbor countries like the Baltic states and recently the Ukraine to join NATO. This aggressive American behavior of course caused tensions with Russia that could only be resolved by war.<sup>33</sup> In the same direction went Achmad Munjid from the Muslim organization Nahdlatul Ulama who accused the Americans of systematically betraying the Russians by expanding their military tool, the NATO, more and more into Eastern Europe, what led to the Ukraine crisis. The author avoided the word 'war' for Russia's military attack and portrayed the USA as the sole culprit for the humanitarian tragedy taking place in Ukraine as part of the American geo-strategic strategies, which are not only directed against the Palestinians but also the Russians. Indonesia should not listen to US demands to condemn Putin, but instead invite him to the G20 summit and try to find a diplomatic solution for the 'crisis'.<sup>34</sup>

Another aspect is that the conflict between two countries is personalized as a struggle between two personalities. And by doing so, there is a clear preference for Vladimir Putin over Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Putin has long been portrayed by Indonesian media and influential persons as a hypermasculine, strong, and assertive long-term leader who is smart and has a cool background as a former intelligence agent.<sup>35</sup> These features have a highly positive appeal among many ordinary Indonesians. The preferences for a strong, ultra-nationalist leader became already visible in the two Presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, in which former general and alleged war criminal Prabowo Subianto operated quite successfully with this image in order to win votes. Many ordinary Indonesians agreed when in 2018 Prabowo's close ally Fadli Zon argued that Indonesia needs 'a strong, brave, visionary, smart, and authoritative leader like Putin'.<sup>36</sup> In sharp contrast, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is often ridiculed in Indonesian social media, not only because of his Jewish religion but also because of his previous life as a TV comedian. In one article, for example, it was stated that as a former comedian, Zelenskyy seems driven by his own feelings of wanting to get applause from America and the West in his 'resistance' against Russia. America and the West will continue to support him as a 'puppet' to prolong the conflict with Russia.<sup>37</sup>

Radityo Dharmaputra sums up convincingly why pro-Russian positions dominate in Indonesian online debates: The lack of profound expertise and knowledge on Eastern Europe is 'filled by latent anti-American and anti-western perspec-

32 Arief Ikhsanudin, "Guru Besar UI Sayangkan RI Setujui Resolusi PBB soal Rusia: Ngekor ke AS dkk," *Detik.com*, March 03, 2022, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5966346/guru-besar-ui-sayangkan-ri-setujui-resolusi-pbb-soal-rusia-ngekor-ke-as-dkk>.

33 Sigit Nugroho, "Konflik Rusia-Ukraina: Amerika Heboh 'Manas-Manasin', Tapi Pas Kejadian Kemana?," *Fajar Indonesia Network*, March 3, 2022, <https://fin.co.id/read/90219/Konflik-Rusia-Ukraina-Amerika-Heboh-Manas-Manasin-Tapi-Pas-Kejadian-Kemana>.

34 Achmad Munjid, "Krisis Ukraina dan Kebohongan Internasional," *Media Indonesia*, April 2, 2022, <https://media-indonesia.com/opini/482735/krisis-ukraina-dan-kebohongan-internasional>.

35 Radityo Dharmaputra, "Why do so many Indonesians back Russia's invasion of Ukraine?," *University of Melbourne*, March 9, 2022, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/why-do-so-many-indonesians-back-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

36 Kompas TV, "Fadli Zon Ingin Pemimpin Indonesia Seperti Putin," *Kompas TV*, March 31, 2018, <https://www.kompas.tv/article/23270/fadli-zon-ingin-pemimpin-indonesia-seperti-putin>.

37 Arjuno Welirang, "Beranikah Bekas Walikota Solo Itu Mendepak Rusia Dari Forum G20?," *Kedaipena.com*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.kedaipena.com/beranikah-bekas-walikota-solo-itu-mendepak-rusia-dari-forum-g20/>.

tives, the idealization of strong leaders like Putin, religious arguments suggesting Russia is an ally of Islam, and pervasive pro-Russian public diplomacy and propaganda'.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The reactions of the Indonesian government on the Russian invasion of the Ukraine were careful and somewhat reluctant. On the one hand, the government supported the UN resolution and condemned Russian aggression, but on the other hand never mentioned Russia as an aggressor in an official statement. The Indonesian government also did not impose any (trade) sanctions on Russia and did insist on Russia's participation at the G20 summit in Bali at the end of 2022.

Most commentators in TV and media underlined the alleged necessity to remain neutral, which

was only questioned by a few academics. In social media, in contrast, many Indonesians posted Pro-Russian slogans, in which they blamed the USA for the outbreak of the war. It is very difficult to estimate in how far these voices are representative for many Indonesians or if they are just a loud minority. More than 90 percent of the Indonesians have never left their home country and are not particularly familiar with the geographic and historic conditions in Eastern Europe, let alone the Ukraine. In so far, it matters how the Russian invasion is framed by opinion-makers in the traditional (press, TV, radio) and new digital media. The large majority of the Indonesian population does not really bother with the situation in this far away region. The economic impact of the war on their daily lives, such as price hikes for daily goods, seems to have a higher priority for ordinary Indonesians than the thousands of victims of Russia's war against Ukraine.

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38 Radityo Dharmaputra, "Why do so many Indonesians back Russia's invasion of Ukraine?," *University of Melbourne*, March 9, 2022, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/why-do-so-many-indonesians-back-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

## MALAYSIANS AND THE 2022 RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT: UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES AMONG NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS IN MALAYSIA

Wan Elis Regina Wan Ahmad *Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

The Malaysian government's reaction to the conflict has been described as 'muted' by both domestic and international observers. Based on the coverage of the conflict in the Malaysian press, the author identifies four different stances on the war in the Malaysian public sphere. The government's response follows Malaysia's traditional policy of non-alignment which has gained support by many Malaysians who are not interested in a politically and geographically distant war. However, there are also vocal commentators in Malaysia in support of either one of the two sides in the conflict. Those who advocate for a stronger response in favor of Ukraine are also motivated by the downing of a Malaysian airplane in 2014 by pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, and due to concerns that Russia's actions will set a dangerous precedence for the South China Sea. Those supporting Russia online are fueled by strong anti-Western and anti-Semitic sentiments and/or due to a perceived Islamic 'solidarity', as Ukraine is being supported by NATO and governed by a Jewish president.

### Keywords

Invasion of Ukraine, Russia, Malaysia, public opinion, MH17, South China Sea, anti-Westernism, neutrality

## INTRODUCTION

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has been described in various ways, among them: a 'humanitarian disaster' by various NGOs, a 'war of aggression' by Ukraine and NATO members, and even a way to 'de-escalate the ongoing Eastern Ukraine conflict' by a Russian spokesperson. The conflict has drawn numerous reactions from the international community, largely against Russia and in support of Ukraine. This included a historic UN resolution on March 2, 2022 to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and demand the latter's unconditional withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> Other notable actions include sanctions and punitive measures

against Russia by countries and private sector corporations, especially from the West. Throughout the world, many notable celebrities, civil society activists, politicians, experts, and ordinary people have also condemned Russia's actions.

In Malaysia, the government has joined most of the international community by voting to condemn Russia in the UN resolution. However, *Wisma Putra* (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) has publicly stated that it did not agree with every word of the resolution, but voted for it to uphold the principles of 'sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of States – principles which are sacrosanct to Malaysia'. It added that Malaysia would welcome dialogue and other peace-

1 The Guardian, "UN Votes to Condemn Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Calls for Withdrawal," March 2, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/united-nations-russia-ukraine-vote>.

ful means of solving the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Malaysia has also refused to impose sanctions on Russia for the foreseeable future. However, within the Malaysian public sphere, the conflict has elicited a plethora of opinions that range from strong condemnation of Russian actions and sympathy for Ukrainians to support for Russia and denunciation of Western actions in the conflict. These reactions are not only visible in social media but also in major national newspapers (online and printed), press statements and even in Malaysian parliamentary circles.<sup>3</sup> People who have commented on the conflict include politicians, experts from think tanks, members of civil society and ordinary Malaysians. Furthermore, there have also been mixed reactions towards the responses of the Malaysian government. While some have criticized the 'non-aligned stance' adopted by the Malaysian government, others have defended the government's position.<sup>4</sup> Within each of the above-mentioned segments, opinions on the conflict continue to vary. For example, Member of Parliament Ong Kian Ming had hoped the Malaysian government would take a stronger and clearer stance on the conflict.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, P. Ramasamy, the Deputy Chief Minister of Penang II has implicitly defended

Russian aggression.<sup>6</sup> Both politicians are from the same party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) who are part of the opposition bloc.

There are four main stances in the Malaysian public sphere on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the atrocities committed during the fighting, as well the reactions by the Malaysian government, and the consequences that the war has for Malaysia. They can be classified as pro-Ukraine or pro-West, pro-Russia, neutral, and as disinterested. There are a multitude of reasons why different Malaysians may be inclined to take one of the above stances. These include memories of the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in 2014, concerns about tensions in the South China Sea, pervasive anti-West sentiment, or even a general disinterest of distant affairs. Sometimes, there are overlapping reasons why some Malaysians adopt a particular stance. This essay attempts to illustrate these major stances towards the war in Ukraine and tries to explain them.

## **MH17, THE SOUTH CHINA SEAS, AND SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE**

There are many commentators in Malaysia who have expressed support for Ukraine and condemnation of Russia in the wake of the invasion. This includes political figures from both the opposition and the government coalitions.<sup>7</sup> Some civil society organizations such as the Malaysian Bar have also condemned the invasion.<sup>8</sup> Many

2 The Star, "Malaysia Votes in Favour of UN Resolution to End Russian Aggression in Ukraine," March 3, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/03/03/malaysia-votes-in-favour-of-un-resolution-to-end-russian-aggression-in-ukraine>.

3 Borneo Post Online, "Malaysia's Parliamentary Panel Condemns Russia for Hostilities against Ukraine," February 26, 2022, <https://www.theborneopost.com/2022/02/26/malaysias-parliamentary-panel-condemns-russia-for-hostilities-against-ukraine/>.

4 Teh Zi Yee, "How Should Malaysia React to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict?," *The Diplomat*, April 1, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/how-should-malaysia-react-to-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/>; Azril Mohd Amin, "Malaysia Must Remain Non-Aligned and Neutral," *New Straits Times*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/columnists/2022/03/782314/malaysia-must-remain-non-aligned-and-neutral>.

5 Ong Kian Ming, "MP Speaks: How Russian Invasion of Ukraine Will Affect Malaysians," *Malaysiakini*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/612520>.

6 P. Ramasamy, "Letter: Explaining Russian Aggression Is Not an Endorsement," *Malaysiakini*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/612704>.

7 Free Malaysia Today, "Netizens Cite MH17 Tragedy in Call for Solidarity with Ukraine," February 2022, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/02/25/netizens-cite-mh17-tragedy-in-call-for-solidarity-with-ukraine/>.

8 A.G Kalidas, "The Malaysian Bar Condemns the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Malaysian Bar*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/about-us/president-s-corner/presstatements/press-release-the-malaysian-bar-condemns-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

commentators on international relations and academics have likewise called for solidarity with Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> The same applies for Malaysian netizens on Twitter, who have expressed their support for Ukraine and/or their disagreement with Russia's actions.<sup>10</sup>

One of the biggest reasons why Malaysians show solidarity with Ukraine is the downing of MH17 in July 2014. For example, on February 25, 2022, one Malaysian twitter user, '@aima015', said 'We should absolutely stand with Ukraine' as Malaysians were also affected by the Russian military after 'they shot down MH17'.<sup>11</sup> Another Twitter user named 'Nor' said that MH17 was the only reason to stand with Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Other commentators such as MP Ong Kian Ming and MP Kas-thuri Patto had also brought up MH17 as a reason to take a stronger diplomatic stance against Russia.<sup>13</sup> Even now, the downing of the Malaysian Airlines plane in 2014 has remained deeply etched in the memory of many Malaysians.<sup>14</sup> 43 Malaysian lives were lost when the plane was shot down over the Donetsk region, a disputed area in Ukraine, by Russian-backed separatists. To this day, Russia has denied any responsibility for the incident.

Other than MH17, another reason why many Malaysians condemn Russia's actions is because of the wide-ranging domestic and international economic effects of the conflict. Domestically, the World Bank has lowered the expected GDP growth for Malaysia from 5.8 percent to 5.5 percent largely due to the economic consequences of the conflict on the global economy. Other important effects include the global food shortage, as Ukraine is an important food exporter, and the subsequent rise of food prices in Malaysia.<sup>15</sup> Goh Lim Thye from the University of Malaya and Ong Kian Ming have argued that the Malaysian government needs to take more action in pressuring Russia to end the conflict because of the economic impact.

The legal and geopolitical ramifications of the conflict also concern Malaysians. A press statement released by the Malaysian Bar denounces Russia's violations of the 'Charter of the United Nations, principles of international public law, and international humanitarian law'.<sup>16</sup> Others have noted that the Russian invasion could set the tone for the conflict in the South China Sea (SCS).<sup>17</sup> Malaysia has had long-standing territo-

9 Lim Thye Goh, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Should Malaysia Be Bothered?," *Sin Chew Daily Malaysia* 星洲网, March 8, 2022, <https://mysinchew.sinchew.com.my/20220308/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-should-malaysia-be-bothered/>.

10 Free Malaysia Today, "Netizens Cite MH17 Tragedy in Call for Solidarity with Ukraine," February 2022, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/02/25/netizens-cite-mh17-tragedy-in-call-for-solidarity-with-ukraine/>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ong Kian Ming, "MP Speaks: How Russian Invasion of Ukraine Will Affect Malaysians," *Malaysiakini*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/columns/612520>.

14 Ahmad Suhael Adnan, "Five Years on, Flight MH17 Remembered," *New Straits Times*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/07/505203/five-years-flight-mh17-remembered>.

15 Malay Mail, "Agriculture Minister: Measures Taken to Control Food Prices Due to Russia-Ukraine Conflict," March 20, 2022, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/03/20/agriculture-minister-measures-taken-to-control-food-prices-due-to-russia-uk/2048483>.

16 A.G. Kalidas, "The Malaysian Bar Condemns the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Malaysian Bar*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.malaysianbar.org.my/article/about-us/president-s-corner/pressstatements/press-release-the-malaysian-bar-condemns-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

17 Keertan Ayamany and Ashman Adam, "Here's How the Russia-Ukraine Conflict Affects Malaysia and Why We Should Care," *Malay Mail*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/02/26/heres-how-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-affects-malaysia-and-why-we-should-ca/2044005>; Guido Benny, "Russian Invasion May Embolden China, Spelling Trouble for ASEAN," *MalaysiaNow*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.malaysianow.com/opinion/2022/03/16/russian-invasion-may-embolden-china-spelling-trouble-for-asean/>.

rial dispute in the resource-rich SCS with other claimant states, including China. The conflict in Ukraine sets a dangerous, modern-day precedent of an illegal invasion and annexation of parts of a country by a major world power. Some Malaysian commentators therefore believe that Malaysia should take a sterner stance to defend the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

### **SUPPORTING RUSSIA AS AN EXPRESSION OF ANTI-WESTERNISM AND ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY**

However, the opposite also holds true. A recent study conducted by Benjamin Y.H. Loh and Munira Mustaffa found that many Malaysian netizens who have participated in online discussions of the conflict have expressed support for Russia.<sup>18</sup> This has included Facebook users posting memes disparaging Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and using the Russian battle cry 'Ura!' and the letter Z, which stands for za, the Russian word meaning 'for', in comment sections of Ukraine-related posts.<sup>19</sup> Another common trend amongst netizens was to condemn Western and NATO's actions in the conflict. Others have placed the blame on the US and NATO for provoking Russia. These views about Russia and the West are deeply rooted in Malaysia's prevailing sentiments about other issues: a strong and recurrent anti-Western perspective and an enmity towards Ukraine as a strong ally of Israel.<sup>20</sup> Many Malaysians have been disillusioned by the West due to rising Islamophobia in the West following the 9/11 attacks and Western involvement in

conflicts in the Middle East that involve Muslim people like the Yemeni Civil War.<sup>21</sup> They believe NATO is a tool for Western geopolitical ambitions. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, there is a widespread belief amongst netizens that an active attempt by NATO to recruit Ukraine was responsible for the conflict. Furthermore, many Malaysians have a deep distrust of the Western media, which was further bolstered by disinformation and fake news propagated by Russian-affiliated media like RT.<sup>22</sup>

This has facilitated the narrative that Malaysia and Russia shared the West as their common enemy, and that Russia can serve as an alternative to Western hegemony. Here, support for Ramzan Kadyrov, the Muslim leader of Chechnya installed by Putin, also comes into play. As one Facebook commenter wrote, 'Kadyrov is with Z, so I stand with Z. Go to hell America!'.<sup>23</sup> Such comments in support of Kadyrov demonstrate how Malaysian opinions on the war in Ukraine are shaped by anti-West sentiments and a pervasive narrative of Islamic solidarity against Ukraine as a close ally of Israel. Malaysia has no diplomatic ties with Israel due to the occu-

18 Benjamin Loh and Munira Mustaffa, "Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022, No. 41, April 22, 2022, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2022\\_41.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_41.pdf).

19 Hadi Azmi, "How Russia and Ukraine Are Trying to Win the Battle on Malaysia's Social Media," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3171049/ukraine-war-battle-malaysia-social-media-propaganda-tool-russia-and>.

20 Benjamin Loh and Munira Mustaffa, "Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022, No. 41, April 22, 2022, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2022\\_41.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_41.pdf).

21 Hadi Azmi, "How Russia and Ukraine Are Trying to Win the Battle on Malaysia's Social Media," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3171049/ukraine-war-battle-malaysia-social-media-propaganda-tool-russia-and>.

22 Benjamin Loh and Munira Mustaffa, "Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments," *ISEAS Perspective* 2022, No. 41, April 22, 2022, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2022\\_41.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_41.pdf).

23 Hadi Azmi, "How Russia and Ukraine Are Trying to Win the Battle on Malaysia's Social Media," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3171049/ukraine-war-battle-malaysia-social-media-propaganda-tool-russia-and>.

pation of Palestinian territory and has routinely criticized Israel for their actions in Palestine. Also, according to the Anti-Defamation League, over 61 percent of Malaysians harbor anti-Semitic beliefs and attitudes.<sup>24</sup> This has shaped the perspective of many Malaysians, especially Muslims, against Ukraine, which is viewed by them as a 'Zionist' country. Tan Sri Abdul Hadi Awang, the President of the Malaysian Islamic Party, for example has accused Ukraine of being a Zionist country and claimed, that the war was a ruse to coerce Jewish Ukrainians to flee to Israel to strengthen the country.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, he also made anti-Semitic comments about President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

### **SUPPORTING NEUTRALITY AND NON-ALIGNMENT AS MALAYSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY PARADIGM**

Another notable view about the conflict within the Malaysian public sphere are comments calling for Malaysia to maintain its neutrality and non-alignment. Azril Mohd Amin, CEO of the think-tank Institut Masa Depan Malaysia stated, that it was Malaysia's interests to remain neutral and not be aligned with any particular country.<sup>26</sup> Ibrahim Suffian of the Merdeka Centre, an opinion research firm, pointed out, that Malaysia wanted to 'chart an independent route'.<sup>27</sup> Similar

comments can also be found amongst Malaysian netizens. In a video about Ukrainians protesting outside the Russian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, many commentators advocated for Malaysia to remain neutral and not get 'involved' in the conflict by neither supporting Russia nor Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> This advocacy for non-interference reflects Malaysia's long-standing principle of 'neutrality' as a foreign policy. This usually meant 'avoiding conflicts to maintain regional stability and creating an international environment in which all countries are interested in good relations with each other'.<sup>29</sup> With very few exceptions, Malaysia has largely refused to take sides in other global conflicts like the 2017 Qatar Diplomatic Crisis. Furthermore, the conflict is in a geographically distant region. These netizens would feel that it is not in Malaysia's interest to meddle in the conflicts of faraway nations.<sup>30</sup>

### **WIDESPREAD APATHY AND DIS-INTEREST**

Arguably, the most common of the four stances of Malaysians on the conflict is apathy and indifference. According to a study by Ipsos Malaysia, a global market research and consulting firm, only 49 percent of Malaysians are closely following the events of the conflict which implies the conflict is not an important topic for the respondents.<sup>31</sup> This is low in comparison to the global

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24 ADL/Global 100, "Malaysia: ADL / Global 100," April 28, 2022, <https://global100.adl.org/country/malaysia/2014>.

25 Ashman Adam, "PAS Chief Accuses Ukraine of Being Zionists, NATO of Intentionally Provoking Russia," Malaysia | Malay Mail (*Malay Mail*, April 6, 2022), <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/04/07/pas-chief-accuses-ukraine-of-being-zionists-nato-of-intentionally-provoking/2052061>.

26 Hadi Azmi, "How Russia and Ukraine Are Trying to Win the Battle on Malaysia's Social Media," *South China Morning Post*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3171049/ukraine-war-battle-malaysia-social-media-propaganda-tool-russia-and>.

27 Fazleena Aziz, "Experts: Malaysia's Stand Is Neutral and Non-Aligned," *The Star*, March 5, 2022, <https://www.the-star.com.my/news/nation/2022/03/05/experts-malaysia-stand-is-neutral-and-non-aligned>.

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28 The Star Malaysia, "Ukrainians Protest Outside Russian Embassy in KL," *YouTube*, February 28, 2022, <https://youtu.be/RkFBLU0BQNU>.

29 Farzana, Kazi Fahmida, and Md. Zahurul Haq, "Malaysia's Political Orientation in Diplomatic Neutrality," *Journal of Islam in Asia* (E-ISSN 2289-8077) 16, No. 3 (2019).

30 David Hutt, "Ukraine Conflict: What's behind Southeast Asia's Muted Response?," *DW*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraine-conflict-whats-behind-southeast-asias-muted-response/a-61039013>.

31 Ashman Adam, "Study Finds Less than Half of Malaysians Care about Impact of Russia-Ukraine Conflict than Covid Economic Recovery," *Malay Mail*, April 27, 2022, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2022/04/27/study-finds-less-than-half-of-malaysians-care-about-impact-of-russia-ukrain/2055880>.

average of 79 percent. Also, around 59 percent of Malaysians believe that the conflict does not concern Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> This could be due to the belief that the impact of the conflict is minimal. Malaysia does not have strong direct economic nor diplomatic ties with either Ukraine or Russia. And government officials including Finance Minister Zafrul Aziz have stated that the Ukraine conflict would have a 'very marginal' negative economic impact. The World Bank has reduced their forecast of Malaysia's expected GDP growth by only 0.3 percentage points.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Defense Minister Hishammuddin Hussein had reassured Malaysians that the maintenance of the 30 Russian Sukhoi Su-30 airplanes that are operated by the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) and the sale of Russian Metis-M portable anti-tank guided missile systems would not be affected by sanctions placed on Russia.<sup>34</sup> This gives the perception that immediate security implications of the conflict for Malaysia are minimal.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the Malaysian respondents in the Ipsos survey believed that Malaysian economic resources should be spent on alleviating the dire financial consequences of COVID-19 rather than ameliorating the effects of the conflict.<sup>35</sup> It can be argued that the effects of COVID-19 are far more tangible compared to the conflict. Although the conflict has resulted in rising food prices and lower economic growth for Malaysia, COVID-19

has increased the absolute poverty rate from 5.6 percent to 8.4 percent.<sup>36</sup>

The relative lack of interest in the conflict among Malaysians can also be explained by socioeconomic factors. A global survey by Ipsos found that 'people over 50, business decision-makers and those who went to university' are much more likely to keep up with the events in Ukraine.<sup>37</sup> The tertiary enrollment rate in Malaysia was 43 percent in 2019.<sup>38</sup> An estimated 20.7 % of Malaysia's population is above 50 years old.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Malaysian responses to the war in Ukraine are varied. For nearly half of the country's population, the conflict is too far away to be of any consequence; and they therefore show little interest. The stances of those who do follow the war, are shaped by their preexisting attitudes. Anti-Western anti-Semitic sentiments are very common in Malaysia leading to the embrace of pro-Russian narratives. They blame NATO for the outbreak of hostilities and disparage Ukraine and its president as Zionist, as the latter is Jewish. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's support for the Russian military serves as one link between the war in Europe and the conflict in the Middle East for Malaysian Muslims. Malaysians supporting

32 Ibid.

33 Oliver Telling and Eleanor Olcott, "Ukraine War Offers Malaysia a Chance to Reduce Debts, Says Finance Minister," *Financial Times*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/53555493-3781-4aa3-9e54-ab8000a4495d>.

34 Martin Carvalho, "Russia-Ukraine War Won't Affect Our Strategic Assets, Hisham Tells Dewan Rakyat," *The Star*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/03/16/russia-ukraine-war-won039t-affect-our-strategic-assets-hisham-tells-dewan-rakyat>.

35 Ipsos, "Global Public Opinion about the War in Ukraine," April 19, 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/war-in-ukraine-april-2022>.

36 Yiswaree Palansamy, "Covid-19: 580,000 M40 Households Fall into B40 Category, Absolute Poverty Rises to 8.4 PC, Says PM," *Malay Mail*, September 21, 2021, <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/09/21/covid-19-580000-m40-households-fall-into-b40-category-absolute-poverty-rise/2007310>.

37 Ipsos, "Global Public Opinion about the War in Ukraine," April 19, 2022, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/war-in-ukraine-april-2022>.

38 "School Enrollment, Tertiary (% Gross) – Malaysia," World Bank Data, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=MY>.

39 Knoema, "Malaysia Population Aged 50+ Years, 1950–2021," accessed April 27, 2022, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Malaysia/topics/Demographics/Age/Population-aged-50-years>.

Ukraine in contrast are motivated by the concern that the Russian invasion poses a dangerous precedent for the South China Sea, where Malaysian and Chinese territorial claims overlap. But the shooting down of a Malaysian airplane by pro-Russian separatist in Eastern Ukraine in

2014 has also contributed to siding with Ukraine. Finally, for some prominent commentators, continuing Malaysia's policy of non-alignment with any foreign power outweighs any specific merits of either siding with Ukraine or Russia in the ongoing war.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I am indebted to my supervisor Thomas Benjamin Daniel for his advice and comments on an earlier draft.



## DIFFERENT REACTIONS IN MYANMAR TOWARD THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

*Sirada Khemanitthathai* Chiang Mai University

In Myanmar, significantly different reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine exist among different stakeholders. They are directly linked to the political situation in Myanmar after the 2021 coup. This essay is divided into three sections according to the three main actors in Myanmar that have strong stances toward the invasion. First, Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw, which formed the junta called the State Administration Council (SAC) after staging the coup, has explicitly justified and defended Russia's actions. Second, the anti-Tatmadaw political forces led by the government-in-exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), have expressed their support for Ukraine. At the international stage, the NUG also repeatedly expressed its solidarity with the Ukrainian people and utilized the situation to call for international attention to the people of Myanmar. Similarly, Myanmar netizens – the third actor discussed in the essay – relate their own suffering after the 2021 coup to the experience of the people of Ukraine and point out the strong ties between Russia and Tatmadaw. While Myanmar netizens feel empathy and sympathy toward the Ukrainians, negative sentiment has also grown among them against the international community due to the higher level of global attention and support that Ukraine receives.

### Keywords

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Myanmar, NUG, SAC, Russian-Myanmar Relations

### INTRODUCTION

In Myanmar, the divided reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine are directly linked to the polarized politics in the wake of the military coup of February 1, 2021. In one corner, Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw, which formed the junta called the State Administration Council (SAC) after staging the coup, has explicitly opted to support Russia. The Tatmadaw's response is due to its long-term military relationship with Russia, particularly arms trade, and Russia's previous stances at the United Nations (UN) in defending Myanmar's coup in 2021. In the other corner, anti-Tatmadaw political forces led by the government-in-exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), have expressed their support for Ukraine. The NUG has issued several official statements showing its solidarity with Ukraine and has also backed the stances of Myanmar's permanent

representative to the UN, who was appointed by the previous civilian government, in condemning Russia. Public opinion in Myanmar is full of empathy and sympathy toward the Ukrainians. Most Myanmar netizens' strong sentiments on the situation in Ukraine can be attributed to their comparing it to their own suffering after the coup especially from the SAC's military operation against civilians, and due to the fact that Russia is the primary source of military hardware used for attacking the Myanmar people. However, negative sentiment has also grown among Myanmar netizens against the international community as they realize the distinct levels of global attention and support. Based on the explanations above, this essay is divided into three sections according to three main actors in Myanmar that have expressed strong stances toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The first section summarizes the responses of Myanmar's military regime in

support of Russia. The second one explains the reaction of the NUG and Myanmar's official votes at the UN. Finally, public opinion in Myanmar's online communities is examined.

## THE TATMADAW

Unlike other countries that maintain their reluctance and ambiguity in supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the military junta of Myanmar has explicitly justified and defended the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Since independence, the Tatmadaw has extended its political and military power, bringing Myanmar under the control of authoritarian military regimes before the country went through a political transition to a quasi-civilian government and hybrid regime during the 2010s. Led by its supreme leader Min Aung Hlaing, the Tatmadaw seized power from the civilian government at the beginning of February 2021 and formed SAC, a military government. The reactions of Myanmar's current military government cannot be separated from this context. A close alliance between the Tatmadaw and Russia has led to the straightforward support of Russia by the SAC despite the former's aggressive actions. The military junta's support of Russia was made through its spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun, appointed as the Deputy Minister of Information of SAC. In a special interview on Voice of America (VOA), broadcasted through its Burmese-language service, Zaw Min Tun clearly stated that the SAC perceives Russia's invasion of Ukraine as an appropriate response. He justified Russia's actions by claiming that Russia strives to secure its sovereignty and show its powerful status on the world stage.<sup>2</sup> This reaction

of the junta has undeniably caused by the strong ties between the Tatmadaw and the Russian government. The most visible reason is that Russia has been a leading arms supplier of Tatmadaw since 2018.<sup>3</sup> The Burmese army agreed to purchase radar equipment, missile systems, and surveillance drones from before the 2021 coup. After the 2021 coup, this relationship has become more important for the Tatmadaw due to Western countries' arms embargo against Myanmar's military government. Russia abstained from the UN General Assembly's (UNGA) resolution demanding the end of weapon exports to Myanmar.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Russian military hardware has enhanced Tatmadaw's military capacity to attack civilians.

Moreover, Russia and the Tatmadaw have maintained their connections through several official visits.<sup>5</sup> The presence of the Russian deputy minister of defense in Myanmar's Armed Forces Day ceremony was the first sign of Russia's recognition of the SAC's legitimacy. In June 2021, Min Aung Hlaing made his second foreign trip as the chairman of SAC to Russia a few days after the UN's resolution condemning Tatmadaw. Some other top military generals of both countries also reportedly visited, such as the Myanmar armed forces' deputy commander-in-chief and the Russian navy's deputy commander-in-chief. Military-to-military relations also include army training and scholarships that Russia has of-

1 The Star, "Myanmar's junta says Russia good for 'world peace', supports Ukraine invasion," last updated February 26, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2022/02/26/myanmar039s-junta-says-russia-good-for-039world-peace039-supports-ukraine-invasion>.

2 VOA Burmese Service, "Myanmar's military council supports Russia's invasion of Ukraine," last updated February 25, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-s-military-council-supports-russia-s-invasion-0f-ukraine/6458527.html>.

3 Justice for Myanmar, "Russian arms companies requiring sanctions for supplying the Myanmar military," accessed March 27, 2022, <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/russian-arms-companies-requiring-sanctions-for-supplying-the-myanmar-military>.

4 Michelle Nichols, "United Nations calls for halt of weapons to Myanmar," *Reuters*, last updated June 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-chief-urges-general-assembly-act-myanmar-2021-06-18/>.

5 The Irrawaddy, "Myanmar regime backs Russia's invasion of Ukraine," last updated February 25, 2022, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-backs-russias-invasion-of-ukraine.html>.

ferred to at least 7,000 Tatmadaw officers and military-related scientists.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from maintaining strong ties with Russia, the Tatmadaw-government has also utilized the Ukrainian case for domestic legitimacy. Tatmadaw has devalued the Ukrainian leader in parallel with its political opponents. Its opinion was reflected in a two-page commentary, written in Burmese, in one of its mouthpiece newspapers called *Myanma Alin*. In the commentary titled 'Past lessons from wars of aggression (the fifth): A lesson from Ukraine with an unsatisfactory past', published on February 27, 2022.<sup>7</sup> The writer praises Putin for his leadership while blaming Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy for his incapacity to protect Ukraine from destruction and casualties. The commentary claimed that the Ukrainian people must also take responsibility for selecting the 'poor leader'. The writer compares the characteristics of the Ukrainian leader with Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's former State Counsellor and de facto leader of the ousted civilian government. The commentary strongly criticizes Zelenskyy and Aung San Suu Kyi, arguing that both have used western values to deceive their peoples. The piece's agenda is to denounce Aung San Suu Kyi through the assumed comparison more than commentating on the situation in Ukraine as such. The writer also attempts to convince Burmese readers to focus on the importance of national interests and national security rather than on human rights and democracy.<sup>8</sup> The statement demonstrates the military regime's intention to use the

Ukrainian case for its propaganda. Moreover, pro-Tatmadaw media channels have portrayed the casualties of Ukrainian civilians to discourage its opponents and stress the inescapable victory of the mighty.

## THE NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT (NUG)

The NUG's stance in backing Ukraine has been shown through its statements and through its representative's votes at the UN. The NUG, Myanmar's civilian government-in-exile, was formed in April 2021 by a group of elected members of parliament from the National League for Democracy (NLD) and certain ethnic minority parties, and some representatives from ethnic civil organizations and armed groups. Despite fragmentation and diversity among its members, the NUG is seen as the representative leader of the anti-Tatmadaw and anti-coup political forces. Fighting to be the sole legitimate government of Myanmar, the NUG's legitimacy is officially recognized by the European Parliament.<sup>9</sup> At the UN, Myanmar's permanent representative, Kyaw Moe Tun, has become the voice of the NUG. He was appointed by the overthrown NLD government and has repeatedly expressed his resistance against the 2021 coup. His continuity in the position after the coup was based on the UN's decision to reject the SAC-appointed representative. Kyaw Moe Tun has thus legitimately maintained his seat in the UN even though the military junta discharged him from the position and charged him with high treason.<sup>10</sup>

6 Bertil Lintner, "Russia's war means fewer arms for Myanmar," *Asia Times*, last updated March 22, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/03/russias-war-means-fewer-arms-for-myanmar/>.

7 Myint Myat, "ကျွန်းကျော်စစ်ပွဲများမှ အတိတ်သမိုင်း သင်ခန်းစာများ (၅) မကျညွှန်တဲ့အတိတ်သမိုင်းနှင့်အတူ ယူကရိန်းကပေးတဲ့ သင်ခန်းစာ," *Myanma Alin*. February 27, 2022, 8–9.

8 Tin Htet Paing, "Myanmar junta reiterates support for Putin's war on Ukraine," *Myanmar Now*, last updated March 1, 2022, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-junta-reiterates-support-for-putins-war-on-ukraine>.

9 Sebastiaan Strangio, "EU parliament voices support for Myanmar's opposition government," *The Diplomat*, last updated October 11, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/eu-parliament-voices-support-for-myanmars-opposition-government/>.

10 Marc Perelman, "Myanmar's UN envoy Kyaw Moe Tun: 'I'm proud to have been charged with high treason by junta,'" *France 24*, last updated March 18, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-interview/20210318-myanmar-s-un-envoy-kyaw-moe-tun-i-m-proud-to-have-been-charged-with-high-treason-by-junta>.

An official statement of the NUG released on February 25, 2022 denounced Russia's violation of international law and stressed Myanmar's solidarity with the Ukrainian people.<sup>11</sup> Also, it called for the respect of 'the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Ukraine'. Another NUG statement on March 8, 2022 expressed its agreement with the UN Human Rights Council's 'urgent debate on the situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression, and the adoption of its corresponding resolution'.<sup>12</sup> At the UN, the NUG-aligned permanent representative of Myanmar firmly stood in support of Ukraine. On March 2, 2022, Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun voted yes to the UN resolution condemning Russia's actions at the UNGA's emergency special session on the situation in Ukraine. Likewise, the permanent representative voted in favor of the UN resolution on 'humanitarian consequences of aggression against Ukraine' on March 24, 2022. In another emergency special session held on April 7, 2022, Myanmar repeatedly called for the halt of Russian aggression and attacks against Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Apart from voting, the NUG also played an active role in the resolution by co-sponsoring all draft resolutions. Kyaw Moe Tun's official statements at the UN reiterated their solidarity with the Ukrainian people. For example, the statement on March 2, 2022 stated that 'Myanmar understands and shares more than others the suffering that

the people of Ukraine are encountering. The people of Myanmar are facing similar suffering resulting from the inhumane acts, atrocities, crimes against humanity committed by the Myanmar military.'<sup>14</sup> Similar messages appeared on March 24's statement: 'We fully share the sufferings of the people of Ukraine. We stand firm and in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. The people of Myanmar are experiencing similar manmade tragedies, and humanitarian crisis resulted from the military's atrocities, crimes against humanity, indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks against its people.'<sup>15</sup>

This solidarity is also aligned with the NUG's demand for international attention to Myanmar's severe situation. The statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun on March 24, 2022 contained a message calling for 'the international community to provide humanitarian assistance to the people in need in Myanmar transparently and inclusively and to help the people of Myanmar in our efforts to end the military's atrocities and the military dictatorship in a timely and effective manner'.<sup>16</sup> Sim-

11 National Unity Government Myanmar, "Statement on Ukraine," *Twitter*, published February 25, 2022, <https://twitter.com/nugmyanmar/status/1497202143152984065>.

12 National Unity Government, "Urgent debate on the situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression," last updated March 8, 2022, <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2022/03/08/urgent-debate-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-ukraine-stemming-from-the-russian-aggression/>.

13 Myanmar Mission to UN, "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun at the 11th ESS of UNGA on the situation of Ukraine," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, New York*, last updated April 7, 2022, <https://www.myanmarmission-newyork.org/post/statement-by-ambassador-kyaw-moe-tun-at-the-11th-ess-of-unga-on-the-situation-of-ukraine>.

14 Myanmar Mission to UN, "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun at emergency special session of UNGA on situation in Ukraine," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, New York*, last updated March 2, 2022, <https://www.myanmarmissionnewyork.org/post/statement-by-ambassador-kyaw-moe-tun-at-emergency-special-session-of-unga-on-situation-in-ukraine>.

15 Myanmar Mission to UN, "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun at 11th ESS of the UNGA on the situation in Ukraine," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, New York*, last updated March 24, 2022, <https://www.myanmarmissionnewyork.org/post/statement-by-ambassador-kyaw-moe-tun-at-11th-ess-of-the-unga-on-the-situation-in-ukraine>.

16 Myanmar Mission to UN, "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun at 11th ESS of the UNGA on the situation in Ukraine," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, New York*, last updated March 24, 2022, <https://www.myanmarmissionnewyork.org/post/statement-by-ambassador-kyaw-moe-tun-at-11th-ess-of-the-unga-on-the-situation-in-ukraine>.

ilarly, April 7, 2022's statement compared the tragedy in Bucha, a city in Ukraine, with several attacks conducted by the military junta against Myanmar people and children.<sup>17</sup> Here, it is also interesting to note that the NUG never mentioned that Ukraine has also supplied arms to Myanmar. According to a *Justice for Myanmar's* report, some state-owned Ukrainian arms manufacturers have reportedly sold arms and crucial military hardware to Tatmadaw-linked companies since 2015.<sup>18</sup>

## PUBLIC OPINION

The Myanmar people mostly link the Russian invasion of Ukraine to what has been happening in Myanmar. In Myanmar, at least 1,700 people have been killed, and more than 500,000 people have been displaced. Mass atrocities and human rights abuses are widespread throughout the country. The Tatmadaw also conducts airstrikes against civilians and has burnt many villages. As the people of Myanmar can relate to the war in Ukraine, it is much discussed in Myanmar online communities. Myanmar netizens see both themselves and the people of Ukraine as fighting for freedom from aggressive authoritarian regimes. One can find two main dimensions of public opinion among Myanmar netizens: solidarity with Ukraine and international attention. The sentiment of solidarity has developed from the people of Myanmar's empathy toward the Ukrainians, who they believe share their suffering and struggle. Most

comments under Ukraine-related online news and articles praise the fighting spirit of the Ukrainians and pray for their safety and triumph. Some Myanmar netizens compare the struggle of the Ukrainian people with themselves and the People's Defence Force, the anti-Tatmadaw armed group which was founded three months after the 2021 coup. Furthermore, the solidarity that Myanmar people feel for the Ukrainians is also intensified because of Russia's involvement in the military operation of Tatmadaw after the coup. In their opinion, the victory of Putin would unavoidably strengthen the material power of the SAC to oppress Myanmar civilians.

Public opinion in Myanmar has also been provoked by the higher degree of global attention that Ukraine has received in comparison with Myanmar. The international community could promptly make their material and financial resources available to support Ukraine and impose more and stronger punitive measures against Russia. But several Myanmar activists and civil society organizations, such as Thinzar Shunlei Yi, Linn Thant and the Chin Human Rights Organization, are also aware of Ukraine's domination of international attention, which might distract from Myanmar's catastrophe.<sup>19</sup> Although it is understandable for some Myanmar people that the world focuses on the situa-

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17 Myanmar Mission to UN, "Statement by Ambassador Kyaw Moe Tun at the 11th ESS of UNGA on the situation of Ukraine," *Permanent Mission of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the United Nations, New York*, last updated April 7, 2022, <https://www.myanmarmission-newyork.org/post/statement-by-ambassador-kyaw-moe-tun-at-the-11th-ess-of-unga-on-the-situation-of-ukraine>.

18 Justice for Myanmar, "Ukraine is arming the Myanmar military", last updated September 8, 2021, <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/ukraine-is-arming-the-myanmar-military>.

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19 Bangkok Post, "Myanmar's plight still a global issue," March 6, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2274547/myanmars-plight-still-a-global-issue>; David Hutt, "Myanmar's message to the EU amid Ukraine crisis: 'Don't forget about us,'" *Euronews*, last updated March 16, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/03/15/myanmar-s-message-to-the-eu-amid-ukraine-crisis-don-t-forget-about-us>; Salai Za Uk Ling, "Why it's time to talk about the aid void on the India-Myanmar border," *The New Humanitarian*, last updated March 22, 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/03/22/aid-void-India-Myanmar-border-Chin>; see also the tweets by Thinzar Shunlei Yi from March 6, 2022, <https://twitter.com/thinzashunleiyi/status/1500364691281158147?s=20&t=vQwKg4L04EPDqivBt2LydQ>.

tion in Ukraine, they cannot stop campaigning for more tangible responses and assistance from the international community. This sentiment is related to the desire for more international attention by Myanmar's opposition since the first day of the 2021 coup. The practice of Myanmar netizens to post the same set of hashtags and statements under Myanmar-related news exemplifies their struggle for the world's attention. Moreover, it was widely hoped that the UN and the international community would impose the Responsibility to Protect principle and launch a military intervention in Myanmar. However, the hope rapidly evaporated. Due to Western countries' rapid efforts to enhance Ukraine's military capacity, some Myanmar netizens recalled their former expectation and have criticized the international community for its neglect and unwillingness to fully help the people of Myanmar and their defense forces.

## **CONCLUSION**

The significantly different stances towards the war in Ukraine that exist in Myanmar reflect the political situation in Myanmar after the coup of February 2021 and the civil war between the Tatmadaw's junta and the NUG. The division in opinions is intimately linked to the Tatmadaw's strong military and diplomatic ties with Russia. Oppositional forces in Myanmar see the war in Ukraine mirroring their own fighting and suffering. The NUG and its supporters will therefore continue to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and resist the Russia's military cooperation with the Tatmadaw. And having seen how differently the international community has responded to the fighting and the atrocities committed in Ukraine and Myanmar, oppositional forces, political activists and netizens from the Southeast Asian country will keep demanding more international attention.

## PHILIPPINES TAKING SIDES ON BEING NEUTRAL: DISCURSIVE CONTESTATION ON THE UKRAINE INVASION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Manuel R. Enverga III *Ateneo de Manila University*

The significance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was not lost on the Philippines, which was in the midst of the campaign period for its presidential elections. The ten presidential candidates were asked for their opinions on the matter during debates and news interviews. Their positions have broadly coalesced around two opposing perspectives: (1) that the Philippines should remain neutral on the issue, and (2) that the country should condemn Russia's aggression towards a sovereign nation-state. A similar polarization has also been observed on social media, where candidates' positions have been supported and debated by their supporters and detractors. This article understands candidates' and social media users' articulations on the issue of Philippine neutrality as discursive. That is to say, they represent a particular way of understanding and talking about reality. Implied in this definition is the possibility that multiple discourses can exist on a topic, and that they can be in competition with one another. The clash between varying discursive articulations is referred to as discursive contestation. This article examines the discursive contestation on Philippine neutrality, and approaches it from two levels. First, it presents statements from Philippine presidential candidates whose statements have been the most prominent arguments for or against neutrality. Second, the article presents articulations from social media that discuss the issue. It is argued that both the pro and anti-neutrality positions are built on different understandings about the nature of Philippine foreign policy and its capabilities as a geopolitical actor.

### Keywords

Invasion of Ukraine, 2022 Philippine election, discursive contestation, Philippine foreign policy

## INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022, the military forces of the Russian Federation entered Ukrainian territory engaging in what Vladimir Putin, its President, referred to as a 'special military operation'.<sup>1</sup> The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, described the incursion as a treacherous attack, like what 'Nazi Germany did in [the] WW2 (World War 2) years'.<sup>2</sup> The attack has resulted

in thousands of military and civilian deaths.<sup>3</sup> It has also displaced millions of refugees.<sup>4</sup> One of the responses to the incursion has been the implementation of severe economic sanctions against Russia, which has contributed to rising

1 Reuters, "Russia invades Ukraine: Political, military leaders' reactions," last updated February 25, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/leaders-key-quotes-after-russia-invades-ukraine-2022-02-24>.

2 Ibid.

3 Al Jazeera, "UN resolution against Ukraine invasion," March 3, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/unga-resolution-against-ukraine-invasion-full-text>.

4 BBC, "How many refugees have fled Ukraine and where are they going?," accessed on March 14, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>.

oil and gas prices, as well as surges in inflation throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

The significance of the Ukraine invasion was not lost on the Philippines, despite the fact that news outlets and social media have primarily been focused on the country's presidential elections. The first Russian military incursions coincided with the official campaign period in the Philippines, and the ten presidential candidates have been asked for their opinions on the matter during debates and news interviews. Their positions have broadly coalesced around two opposing perspectives: (1) that the Philippines should remain neutral on the issue, and (2) that the country should condemn Russia's aggression towards a sovereign nation-state. A similar polarization has also been observed on social media, where candidates' positions have been supported and debated by their supporters and detractors. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok became virtual battlegrounds over the topic of Philippine neutrality on the Ukraine invasion. Such a spillover from candidates' statements to debates on social media is to be expected considering that online platforms have long been used by Philippine politicians and private companies to promote themselves or harass their opposition online.<sup>6</sup> As a politically contentious issue, the topic of Philippine neutrality on the Ukraine invasion was argued about in cyberspace, supporters defending the positions of their preferred candidates, while simultaneously attacking the arguments of their political opponents.

This article takes the approach that candidates' and social media users' articulations on the issue of Philippine neutrality are discursive. That

is to say, they represent a particular way of understanding and talking about reality.<sup>7</sup> Implied in this definition is the possibility that multiple discourses can exist on a topic, and that they can be in competition with one another.<sup>8</sup> The clash between varying discursive articulations is referred to as discursive contestation, and is exemplified in the way that neutrality over Ukraine has been debated by presidential candidates in their statements, and by social media users in cyberspace.<sup>9</sup> This article examines the discursive contestation on Philippine neutrality, and

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5 David J. Lynch, "Soaring oil prices will hurt global economy as Ukraine war disrupts Russian supplies," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/03/11/oil-price-global-recovery-russia-ukraine/>; James Stavridis, "Ukraine conflict will have a significant impact on Asia," *Nikkei Asia*, February 24, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Ukraine-conflict-will-have-a-significant-impact-on-Asia>.

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6 Rob Shields, *The Virtual*. London: Routledge, 2003; Samantha Bradshaw and Philipp N. Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," *Oxford Internet Institute Computational Propaganda Research Project Working Paper*, July 18, 2017, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:cef7e8d9-27bf-4ea5-9fd6-855209b3e1f6>; Manuel Enverga III, "Helpful partner or infringing interloper? Examining discursive contestation in the engagements on the EU delegation in the Philippines' Facebook page," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00216-4>; Shibani Mahtani and Regine Cabato, "Why crafty Internet trolls in the Philippines may be coming to a website near you," *The Washington Post*, last updated July 26, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html); Sean Williams, "Rodrigo Duterte's Army of Online Trolls," *New Republic*, January 4, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/138952/rodrigo-dutertes-army-online-trolls>.

7 Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. London: Sage Publications, 2002; Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, "The discourse-historical approach," in: *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 87–121, London, UK: Sage, 2009.

8 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1977; Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.

9 Chaewoon Oh (2019), "Political economy of international policy on the transfer of environmentally sound technologies in global climate change regime," *New Political Economy* 24, No. 1 (2019): 22–36; Chaewoon Oh, "Discursive Contestation on Technological Innovation and the Institutional Design of the UNFCCC in the New Climate Change Regime," *New Political Economy* 25, No. 4 (2020): 660–674.

approaches it from two levels. First, it presents statements from Philippine presidential candidates whose statements have been the most prominent arguments for or against neutrality. Second, the article presents articulations from social media that discuss the issue. It is argued that both the pro and anti-neutrality positions are built on different understandings about the nature of Philippine foreign policy and its capabilities as a geopolitical actor.

## DEBATES OVER NEUTRALITY AMONG PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

During a debate organized by CNN Philippines, the participants present were asked whether or not they agreed with the Philippine Secretary of Defense that the country should take a neutral stand regarding the Ukraine invasion. Three presidential aspirants responded affirmatively to the question: (1) former Presidential Spokesperson Ernesto Abella, (2) Manila Mayor Francisco Domagoso, and (3) businessman Faisal Mangodato.<sup>10</sup> Mayor Domagoso justified his stand by saying that the invasion of Ukraine had no direct impact on ordinary Filipinos, and that the focus of the government should be on mitigating the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. To the three who stood by neutrality, one can add Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. who eventually emerged victorious after votes were cast on May 9. He was not present at the debate, but expressed his opinion in a separate occasion. When clarifying his position, Marcos' initial response was that the Philippines did not 'need to take a stand'. He went on to say, 'We are not involved except for our nationals'.<sup>11</sup> Three days later, he altered his

position the issue, calling on 'Russia to respect Ukraine's freedom and its citizens' democratic way of life'.<sup>12</sup>

There were six candidates who argued against the Philippines taking a neutral stance. These were: (1) activist and labor leader Leodegario de Guzman, (2) former Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales, (3) Senator Panfilo Lacson, (4) physician and lawyer Jose Montemayor, Jr., (5) Senator Emmanuel Pacquiao, and (6) Vice President Maria Leonor Robredo. When asked about her position on the Ukraine issue, Robredo condemned the violence against Ukraine, adding that, 'it is a moral imperative to stand against bullying and unprovoked aggression'.<sup>13</sup> Lacson, for his part, explained that as a member of the United Nations (UN), and a signatory to its Charter, the Philippines had to take a stand on the crisis. He added, 'there's nothing wrong with standing alongside peace-loving nations so that our voices could be among those who condemn because it's really an aggression, invasion'.<sup>14</sup>

Examining the two sides of the neutrality debate, one finds that each side's reasoning is based on different assumptions about the nature of Philippine foreign policy. Arguments in favor of Philippine neutrality were underpinned by the idea that the Ukraine conflict was geographically distant, and that ordinary Filipinos were not directly impacted by the invasion. Condemning Russian actions would not benefit the Philippines, and as such, the country should be neutral. On the other hand, candidates who called on the gov-

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10 CNN Philippines Staff, "Should PH remain neutral in Russia-Ukraine conflict? Candidates weigh in," *CNN Philippines*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/2/27/PH-neutral-Russia-Ukraine.html>.

11 Rex Remitio, "Marcos-Duterte duo takes neutral stand on Ukraine-Russia conflict," *CNN Philippines*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/3/2/bongbong-marcos-sara-duterte-ukraine-russia.html>.

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12 Marlon Ramos, "Marcos flip-flops on Ukraine," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 5, 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1563623/marcos-flip-flops-on-ukraine>.

13 Helen Flores, "Robredo condemns violence vs. civilians in Ukraine," *Philippine Star*, on March 7, 2022, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/03/07/2165375/robredo-condemns-violence-vs-civilians-ukraine>.

14 CNN Philippines Staff, "Should PH remain neutral in Russia-Ukraine conflict? Candidates weigh in," *CNN Philippines*. Accessed on February 27, 2022, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2022/2/27/PH-neutral-Russia-Ukraine.html>.

ernment to take a stand on the issue articulated themselves in terms of abstract principles, such as the need to resist bullying. Furthermore, the Philippines is a signatory to international conventions that oppose the use of force. It is on these bases that anti-neutrality candidates advance their positions.

## DISCURSIVE CONTESTATION ON CYBERSPACE

A similar contrast in reasoning is also evident when one examines articulations on social media. The topic of the Ukraine invasion was so prominent that news articles reporting candidate's positions on the issue received very high levels of engagement.<sup>15</sup> One example is an article from the Philippine Daily Inquirer, a newspaper with a Facebook page. Its post received 46,400 reactions, 8,000 comments, and 6,000 shares. Another article from the online news site Rappler got 35,000 reactions, 3,400 comments, and 2,500 shares.

For this paper, the writer performed a content analysis of comments responding to a Facebook post from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, which presented the government's official position, which was articulated during the Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine. The post received 3,900 reactions, 336 comments, and 3,500 shares. Although its numbers are modest compared to those received by media outlets, data was obtained from this post because it was

posted by a government agency, and is expected to be non-partisan. As such, it would attract commenters who belonged to all segments of the political spectrum, instead of just a specific audience, as is the case with news outlets. The comments analyzed for the paper were collected and archived on March 15, two weeks after the post was first published on Facebook. Patterns were then sought following an inductive thematic analysis approach.<sup>16</sup> One of the recognized limitations of the approach used in this paper is that it draws all of its data from comments written in response to one post. Granted, it may not be fully representative of the opinions of the entire Philippine population, but the articulations written by Facebook users is highly informative of the discourses on both sides of the issue. The 336 comments were sufficiently numerous and diverse that clear patterns could be found in the articulations supporting or opposing Philippine neutrality. What emerged from the analysis were more nuanced positions on the issue of neutrality, with some commenters drawing on different rationales than the presidential candidates.

For example, some articulations supporting Philippine neutrality remarked that the Philippines should take a neutral stance because the country would be in trouble, if it took the side of Ukraine against Russia and the latter retaliated. Those that articulated in this manner deployed their knowledge about the Philippines' limited military capabilities, and pointed out that the country would be unable to defend itself against Russian attacks. They also accused commenters who opposed neutrality of being warmongers, and facetiously invited them to volunteer to fight for Ukraine. Another assumption that underpinned articulations supporting neutrality was that the conflict was in faraway Europe, and that

15 Bobby J. Calder, B.J., Mathew S. Isaac, and Edward C. Malthouse, "How to Capture Consumer Experiences: A Context-Specific Approach to Measuring Engagement Predicting Consumer Behavior across Qualitatively Different Experiences," *Journal of Advertising Research* 56, No. 1 (2016): 39–52; Linda Hollebeek, "Exploring customer brand engagement: Definition and themes," *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 19, No. 7 (2011): 555–573; Kim A. Johnston, "Toward a theory of social engagement," *The Handbook of Communication Engagement*, eds. Kim A. Johnston and Maureen Taylor, 17–32. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2018.

16 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, No. 6 (2006): 77; Hannah Frith and Kate Gleeson, "Clothing and Embodiment: Men Managing Body Image and Appearance," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 5, No. 1 (2004): 40–48.

the Philippines, being a Southeast Asian country, should not be involved. As one commenter mistakenly remarked, only Singapore and the Philippines supported Ukraine, while the rest of ASEAN wisely avoided getting involved into a European conflict. The factual error in this line of argument is that most ASEAN members actually voted in favor of the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion.<sup>17</sup> Another variant of this theme were comments that stated that it was a Russia-Ukraine issue, and that the two countries should resolve the issue on their own.

A third justification given for being neutral in the conflict is that condemning Russia would mean supporting what they view as the wrong side. Comments that used this line of reasoning dovetailed with Russian propaganda that claimed its incursions into Ukraine were either a response to the threat of NATO expansion, or that its 'special military operation' was done to de-Nazify the Kiev government, and protect ethnic Russians in the Donbass region from mistreatment.<sup>18</sup> Articulations such as these indicate that some Filipino commenters believe Russian propaganda, and that the information they received impacted how they thought the Philippines should respond to the Ukraine invasion.

The articulations against Philippine neutrality, for their part, were underpinned by different assumptions from their pro-neutrality counterparts. One set of comments justified taking a

stand on the matter based on moral principle and international law. As they put it, the Philippines is a UN member state and has the duty to oppose acts of military aggression, such as what happened in Ukraine. Corollary to the need to respect international law were comments that referred to the existing territorial dispute between the Philippines and the People's Republic of China over islands in the South China Sea.<sup>19</sup> These articulations emphasized that Russia's actions set a precedent for the acceptability of invasion as an instrument to resolve territorial disputes. By supporting Ukraine, the Philippines would have moral authority to call on other countries for support should its territory be invaded by China in the future.

A third group of comments were made in response to calls for neutrality. These articulations referred to the decision of Switzerland, a country widely known for its neutral stance on global political issues, to impose sanctions on Russia. The Swiss government's position has been reported in the news, and commenters emphasized that if the famously neutral state acted, the Philippines should also articulate a position on the Ukraine conflict.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Shannon Tiezzi, "How did Asian countries vote on the UN's Ukraine Resolution?," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/how-did-asian-countries-vote-on-the-uns-ukraine-resolution>.

18 Andrew Osborn and Polin Nikolskaya, "Russia's Putin authorises 'special military operation' against Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24>; Olivia B. Waxman, "Historians on what Putin gets wrong about 'Denazification' of Ukraine," *Time*, March 3, 2022, <https://time.com/6154493/denazification-putin-ukraine-history-context>.

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19 Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy and Security Conflicts*. Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2014; Katie Hunt, "South China Sea: Court rules in favor of Philippines over China," *CNN*, last updated July 12, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/12/asia/china-philippines-south-china-sea/index.html>; Katie Hunt, "South China Sea: Court rules in favor of Philippines over China," *CNN*, last updated July 12, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/12/asia/china-philippines-south-china-sea/index.html>; Clive Schofield, "Untangling a Complex Web: Understanding Competing Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," in: *The South China Sea Dispute: Navigating Diplomatic and Strategic Tensions*, eds. Ian Storey and Cheng-Yi Lin. Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016.

20 Corinne Gretler, "Swiss follow EU to implement further sanctions on Russia," *Bloomberg*, last updated March 5, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-04/switzerland-follows-eu-to-implement-further-sanctions-on-russia>.

## CONCLUSION

This article examined the discursive contestation among Filipinos who debated whether or not the Philippines should condemn Russia or remain neutral regarding the invasion of Ukraine. To do this, it presented data from (1) among presidential candidates, and (2) from among Facebook users. The findings from both levels indicate that the assumptions underpinning both positions are different from one another. Those who support Philippine neutrality on the issue do so because for them the conflict was too distant and did not affect ordinary Filipinos, or because the country could become a target for Russian retaliation, or because a condemnation would mean allying with the wrong side.

Politicians and commenters who were against neutrality argued based on principles, emphasizing that military aggression was wrong and should be opposed vocally. Corollary to that point

was the argument that the Philippines was in its own territorial dispute, and neutrality would communicate to its larger neighbor, China, that military invasion was a legitimate foreign policy tool. Finally, there were commenters who argued that even traditionally neutral states, like Switzerland, had broken their neutrality. As such, the Philippines had no reason to take on a neutral stance.

Having won the presidential elections, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will become the Philippine President at the end of June 2022. During the campaign, he was initially in favor of neutrality, but later adjusted his stance towards condemnation of the invasion. It is unclear at this point how his administration will respond to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. His victory notwithstanding, this paper indicates how the debate over neutrality became significant within the Philippines, and how the positions taken by politicians influence the comments by ordinary citizens online.

## THAILAND'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

*Surachanee Sriyai* Chulalongkorn University

This essay focuses on two key perspectives of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in Thailand: the official stance and the general public's reactions. The first part of this essay reports on the official responses to the war from the Thai government and the observable responses from the Thai general public, particularly those in the online sphere. The article then speculates on the reasons for the discrepancies between the two. As such, Thailand's perspectives on Russia's aggression against Ukraine appeared to be mixed. The Thai government's reserved stance on the invasion, which has been widely criticized, seem to be backed by grounded concerns about the economy and trade. Public opinion, on the other hand, is not so much informed by knowledge of the conflict and its background, but has been shaped by narratives from both sides of Thailand's polarized political spectrum.

### Keywords

Invasion of Ukraine, Thailand, Thai-Russian relations, Thai foreign policy, Thai democracy movement, political polarization

### INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, it has been three months since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As the fighting intensified, millions of Ukrainians were forced to become internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees. The international community's reactions to Russia's aggression has varied, however. While some countries quickly condemned Russia for invading another country's territory and violating its sovereignty and have supported Ukraine, others have simply called for negotiations to end the conflict; many remain silent. This essay first focuses on two key perspectives on Russia's aggression against Ukraine in Thailand: the official response to the invasion by the Thai government and reactions from the Thai general public; particularly in the online sphere. The article then speculates on the reasons behind the discrepancies between the two.

### THE OFFICIAL RESPONSES FROM THE THAI GOVERNMENT

A few days after Russia invaded Ukraine, Thailand remained reluctant to condemn Russia despite the pleas of 25 foreign ambassadors posted in Thailand, who reportedly met with the permanent secretary of the Foreign Ministry of Thailand on February 28, 2022.<sup>1</sup> Thailand's first official statement about the war came in the form of its vote in the emergency session of the United Nation General Assembly to pass a UN Resolution 'calls [calling] to end the ongoing bombings and attacks on civilians in Ukraine and for all parties to respect the principles of the Charter of the United Nations, especially provisions on security and peace among coun-

<sup>1</sup> Bangkok Post, "Neutral on Russia-Ukraine: PM," March 2, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2272191/neutral-on-russia-ukraine-pm>.

tries'.<sup>2</sup> On that day, Thailand voted in support of the Resolution alongside with 141 other countries. Interestingly, there was no mentioning of Russia in either its statement or Explanation of Vote (EOV) delivered to the General Assembly despite the session being about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Rather, Thailand cited its adherence to 'the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and those of international law, in particular respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the non-use of force against States' as the reasons behind its decision to vote in favor of the resolution.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that the government of Thailand prefers to maintain a relatively neutral stance on the issue of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, its abstention from the vote to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council alongside a handful of ASEAN countries, notably Singapore, who had initially been a strong critic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, underlies the Thai government's wish to further distant itself from the issue.<sup>4</sup>

## REACTIONS OF THE THAI PUBLIC

Unlike the government's lukewarm reaction to the incident between Russia and Ukraine, the general public, and in particular Thai netizens, have been quite vocal. An image from Google Trends in Figure 1 shows that since the time when the conflict sparked on February 24, there is an observable surge in web searches on key-

words like 'Russia' and 'Ukraine' in Thailand. This indicates the wish to obtain more information about the conflict in faraway Eastern Europe among Thai people. It is obvious that they are searching for these keywords because of the Russian invasion since the peak interest time-frame matches the time of the war. There had been little interest in these countries during the previous twelve months. Several pro-democracy movements in Thailand, for example FreeYouth, have posted about the war to show support for Ukraine, openly condemning Russia for violating the sovereignty of another country. Those posts have garnered thousands of likes and retweets, which show that many Thai netizens sympathize with the plight of the Ukrainians.

As it has been the case in other cities across the globe, many Thais joined Ukrainian expats to show their solidarity when they protested against the invasion in front of the Russian Embassy in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup> Some Thai citizens with a military background also signed up to fight in Ukraine as the country has called for volunteer soldiers to join its International Legion of the Territorial Defense Force.<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, imperative to note that the sentiment of the Thai public about this issue is far from being unanimous. In fact, there are also people who have expressively sided with Russia on the matter. The split views in the public opinion seem to superimpose on the preexisting political ideologies and political polarization in Thailand. Specifically, Thai conservatives tend to

2 UNGA Secretariat, "As Russian Federation's Invasion of Ukraine Creates New Global Era, Member States Must Take Sides, Choose between Peace, Aggression, General Assembly Hears," March 1, 2022, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/ga12406.doc.htm>.

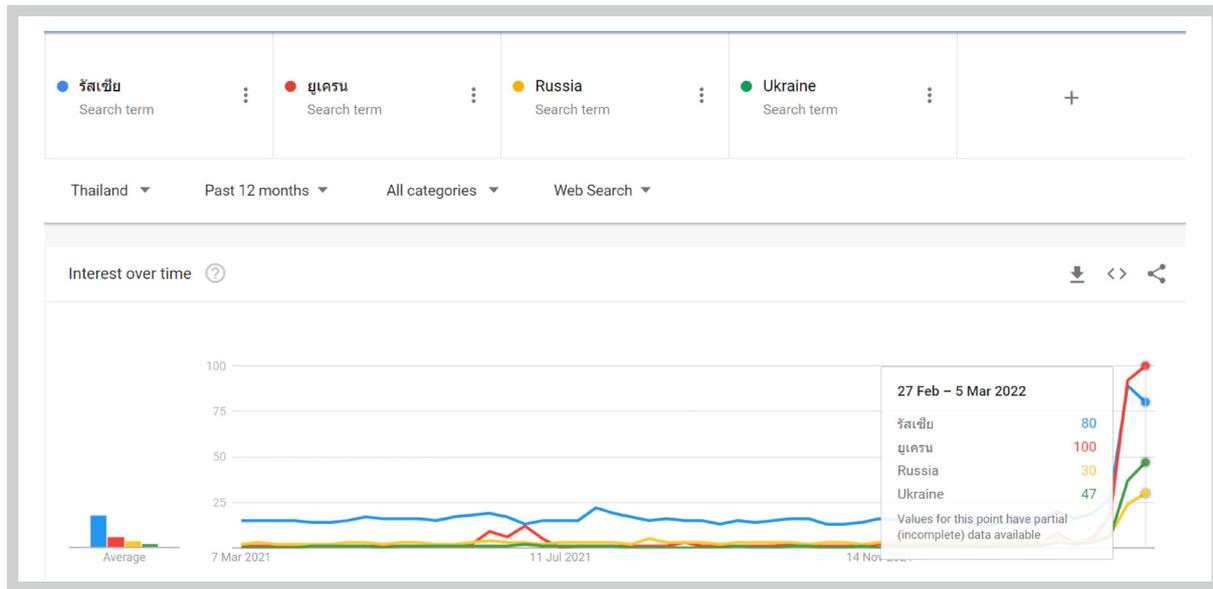
3 Suriya Chindawongse, "Explanation of Vote after the Vote at the 11th Emergency Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand*, April 7, 2022, <https://www.mfa.go.th/en/content/eov-7april22-2?cate=5d5bc-b4e15e39c306000683e>.

4 Al Jazeera, "UN Suspends Russia from Human Rights Body: How Your Country Voted," April 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted>.

5 Wassayos Ngamkham, "Rally against Russian Invasion of Ukraine in Bangkok", *Bangkok Post*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2270815/rally-against-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-in-bangkok>; *The Nation*, "Ukrainians hold anti-war rallies across Thailand," February 28, 2022, <https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/40012842>.

6 Panu Wongcha-um and Jiraporn Kuhakan, "Thai 'Tyranny' Fighters Volunteer for Duty in Ukraine – Taipei Times," *Reuters*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/thai-democracy-activists-sign-up-fight-tyranny-ukraine-2022-03-03/>.

**Figure 1: Google Trends Search Volume on “Russia” and “Ukraine” from Thailand over the Year (In Both English and Thai)**



side with Russia, while liberals side with Ukraine. In terms of their understanding of the war, both groups seem to interpret it from the same angle, that of patriotism. But they have entirely different views regarding the question, which side in the conflict is the righteous one. While conservatives praise Putin's leadership and the Russian armed forces display of patriotism in 'protecting his [their] territory', liberals view Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion as patriotic as well as a fight for democracy.<sup>7</sup>

**ANALYSIS: DIVERGENCE AND CONVERGENCE IN PERSPECTIVES**

The enduring approach of the Kingdom of Thailand's diplomacy has been to be like 'bamboo bending with the wind', a delicate yet pragmatic and grounded hedging strategy. This strategy has been credited to have contributed to the country's success in overcoming major threats to its national security, such as European colonization in the 19th century, the Japanese occupation during the WWII, and, notably, the spread

of Communism in Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Therefore, generations of career diplomats have passed down the art of Thai-style's 'bamboo diplomacy' and would default to it even though things have changed in the world since the end of the Cold War in 1989. That said, there should be no surprise that neither Thailand's statement to the UNGA nor its EOV have demonstrated any strong gesture against Russia. Like aforementioned, it did not even mention Russia. Furthermore, if one were to read between the lines a bit more, it is clear to see that those documents, in fact, were aimed to reprimand both parties to the conflict, Ukraine included. I speculate that this stance is driven not only by the nature of Thai diplomacy but also by economic concerns. According to a recent report by the global financial group ING, which analyzes Asian markets vulnerability to the Russia-Ukraine conflict through key indicators such as trade, energy dependence, and price effects, Thailand ranks second behind only Vietnam in terms of its economic exposure to this conflict.<sup>8</sup> And Russia is

7 Atiya Achakulwisut, "Ultra-Royalist pro-Putin Stance a Worrying Sign," *Bangkok Post*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2271795/ultra-royalist-pro-putin-stance-a-worrying-sign>.

8 Robert Carnel, "The Asian Economies Most Exposed to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," *ING Economic and Financial Analysis*, March 3, 2022, <https://think.ing.com/downloads/pdf/article/the-asian-economies-most-exposed-to-the-russia-ukraine-conflict>.

a much larger trade partner for Thailand than Ukraine. Last year, the figures reached \$2.7 billion and \$386.47 million, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Understandably, then, Thailand must tread carefully and avoid picking side as much as possible.

Thailand's abstention from the UNGA's vote on Friday, April 8, 2022 is also noteworthy. Although it can be perceived as a reflection of the country's economic interests, it is also equally possible that Thailand is avoiding taking a strong position on human rights-related issue in fear of receiving a backlash about its own human rights track record. To be fair, this concern is not unique in the region as it might also be the case for the other five ASEAN countries that have either voted against or abstained from the resolution.

As for the general public, their motivation to rally either behind Ukraine or Russia appears to be ideologically driven rather than being based on concerns about the economic implications of the conflict for Thailand. The younger generations, who have mostly a liberal political outlook appear to feel a connection with the Ukrainians fighting a 'tyrant'. For them, Ukraine's resistance against Russian aggression is foremost a fight for democracy. Several Thai volunteers signing up to fight in the Ukrainian International Legion explicitly mentioned in interviews their wish to fight for 'democracy' as their motivation.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, none of the recent posts from the Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Thailand mention 'democracy' when calling for volunteers.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Freedom House categorizes Ukraine

as a Transitional or Hybrid regime as Ukraine receives a Democracy Percentage of only 39% in the *Nations in Transit* report.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it appears that the Thai volunteers and Thai liberal netizens interpret the war in Ukraine by projecting their own struggle into it. This is similar to the interpretation of the war by the ultra-right wing in Thailand. As mentioned above, based on Ukraine's desire to join NATO, they have embraced the reasoning that Putin is preemptively defending his country from the threat that NATO expansion allegedly poses for Russia.

**Figure 2: Photoshopped Image of Putin**



Source: BBC Thai

Moreover, another strand of Thai conservatives, devoted royalists, justify Russia's violation of another state's sovereignty through the unfounded claim that Putin's admired the late King Bhumibhol of Thailand.<sup>13</sup> For instance, the photoshopped image of Putin holding up a photo of the late King in Figure 2 has been shared on conservatives' Facebook pages, linking the Russian president to the Thai monarchy. However, it was soon uncovered that Putin was in fact holding a photo of his own father in the original image.

9 The Nation, "Thailand Assessing Russia-Ukraine Conflict's Impact on Trade amid Fuel Fears," February 26, 2022, <https://www.nationthailand.com/business/40012791>.

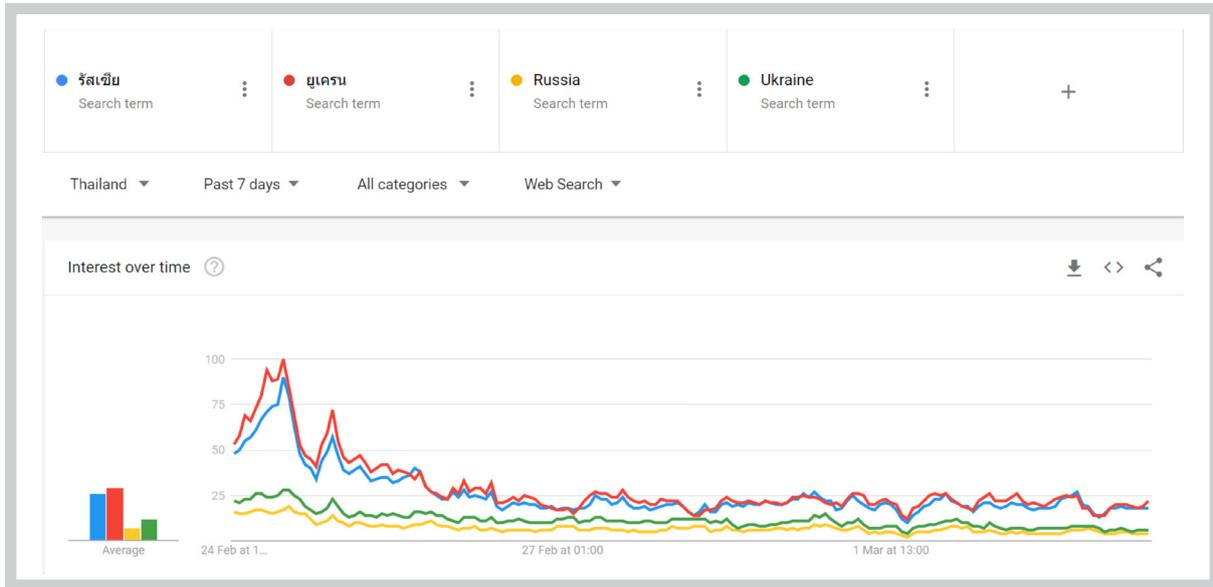
10 Panu Wongcha-um and Jiraporn Kuhakan, "Thai 'Tyranny' Fighters Volunteer for Duty in Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/thai-democracy-activists-sign-up-fight-tyranny-ukraine-2022-03-03/>

11 Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Thailand, "Посольство України в Таїланді / Embassy of Ukraine in the Kingdom of Thailand."

12 Freedom House, "Ukraine: Nations in Transit 2021 Country Report," last accessed May 20, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/nations-transit/2021>.

13 Atiya Achakulwisut, "Ultra-Royalist pro-Putin Stance a Worrying Sign," *Bangkok Post*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2271795/ultra-royalist-pro-putin-stance-a-worrying-sign>.

**Figure 3: Google Trends Search Volume on “Russia” and “Ukraine” from Thailand over the Week (In Both English and Thai)**



Overall, then, it appears that Thai public opinion about the Russia-Ukraine is based on their projection of Thailand’s political polarization on the conflict rather than on attempts to understand the conflict, its history, as well as its geopolitical context. As mentioned above, a Google Search Trend has shown that there was little interest in the two countries among Thais before the war erupted. As Figure 3 shows, this public interest is fickle. The interest of Thai netizens in the war in Ukraine is gradually decreasing based on the number of google searches for the countries’ names. There are two possible key implications from this observable change in Google Search Trends. First, the war might very well soon lose the public’s interest and be replaced by something more topical. Second, there appears not to have been a desire for a more profound understanding of the war, its causes, and its consequences beyond to begin with among Thai netizens.

**CONCLUSION**

In Thailand, there appears to be three main perspectives regarding Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. The Thai government’s reserved response to the war, while widely criticized, ap-

pears to be based on grounded concerns about the consequences of the war for the Thai economy. Public opinion about the war is as polarized as Thai society is as a whole and appears to be easily influenced by narratives from both sides of the political spectrum. Here, however, it is important to note that comments by Thai netizens may not be representative of the Thai population but simply are more visible. Certainly, they are informative, because they provide an overview of the different opinions across the political spectrum in Thailand. The difference between the official stance of the Thai government and the liberal, young netizens is due to their divergent perspectives and values, which result in very different interpretations of the war. In contrast to the economic rationales behind the official reaction of the Thai government, the support of Ukraine by younger netizens is driven by the latter’s humanitarian values. They see the war as a struggle for democracy and against authoritarianism, which is closely related to their own criticism of the Thai government. Even the convergence between the official stance and conservative Thai netizens is based on different reasoning, since most conservatives seem to support Russia online because of either the nationalistic or royalist narratives rather than economic ones.



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**DOI:** 10.17185/duepublico/76781

**URN:** urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20220906-102925-2

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