

## **The South African Government's Stance on the Russia-Ukraine War as Reflected in the South African Newspaper Media**

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This paper analyses reports in the printed media in South Africa on the Russia - Ukraine war in the period 24 February 2022 to 15 September 2022. It aimed to establish the major issues covered in the media on the war which have a bearing on South Africa in particular. Those reports which provided factual detail on the war (mostly drawn from international media companies such as Reuters) were not included in the analysis. From this qualitative thematic analysis of a total of 524 reports relating to South Africa, several themes were identified. Firstly, the South African government's abstentions on three UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the reasoning behind its decision; secondly, critiques on and support for the government's so-called 'neutrality' stance; thirdly, explanations for the government's stance as reflected in the media; and, lastly, the ways in which the war has an impact on South Africa. The government's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly its abstention from voting on the UN resolutions and its pro-Russian bias, can be traced back to four important principles of its foreign policy. The first of these is its independence or non-aligned stance, and the second, its stress on the peaceful mediation of conflicts, which it has been emphasising throughout the war. Thirdly, there is its solidarity with parties and countries which supported the governing party in its national liberation struggle against apartheid (which explains its pro-Russian bias) and lastly, there is its anti-imperialist drive, which sometimes takes precedence over its commitment to human rights and democracy.

*Keywords:* printed media, South Africa, Ukraine, Russia, war

### **Introduction**

Unlike other devastating wars elsewhere in the world, the Russia-Ukraine war that started on 24 February 2022 has featured prominently in the South African media. Although the atrocities of recent wars in countries such as Afghanistan have been reported in the South African media, these have not generated debates and conflicting views. The media merely provided accounts of the wars and their devastating effects on the citizens. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in more than just reporting on the course of events in the war and the subsequent reaction of, inter alia, Europe, other Western nations and China. The question then arises why the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked considerable attention in the media even though it is a war taking place a remote distance from

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South Africa. South Africa is not threatened by an overflow of refugees, which has been the case in several European countries, nor is it in proximity for a possible spill-over effect of the war. The aim of this chapter is therefore to establish the major issues covered in the South African media on the war which have a bearing on South Africa in particular. By doing so, the considerable media attention in South Africa to the Russian invasion of the Ukraine will become evident.

It is widely accepted, that the South African media have been playing an important political and social role since the end of apartheid in 1994. While playing a watchdog role to keep political power to account through investigative journalism, the media have also contributed to a culture of democratic debate. It has benefitted from strong Constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and a vibrant civil society (Wasserman, 2020, p. 451). South Africa's media freedom is ranked 35<sup>th</sup> of 171 countries (RSF World Press Freedom Index, 2022). The media can publish and broadcast freely, while regulating itself through various mechanisms such as the Press Code.

The current media landscape in South Africa consists of three tiers: public media, commercial media and community media. The public media consists of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (radio and television). No publicly owned newspapers exist. The commercial media is concentrated in the hands of a few big conglomerates. These are Naspers with its news business Media24, an umbrella for a wide variety of newspapers, magazines and online news platforms; Independent Media, which publishes a number of newspapers and magazines nationally, and Arena Holdings, which also publishes some major newspapers in addition to owning broadcast channels. Digital publishing has also been implemented by the news media. Most newspapers have online versions<sup>1</sup>. News publications such as *Vrye Weekblad Daily Maverick* and *GroundUP* only exist online (Wasserman, 2020, pp. 454–455). These are run by independently owned private companies with no affiliation to any other media group.

### **Method of Research and the Main Themes Distinguished**

In analysing the major issues resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine as they relate to South Africa, media reports in this chapter are drawn from the commercial media (explained above). Newspaper reports in South Africa on the Russia-Ukraine war in the period 24 February 2022 to 15 September 2022 have been analysed.

A search was conducted on SA Media, a press-clipping database service, using the key words "Russia" and "Ukraine" and "war". This press-clipping database covers 39 of the mainstream publications in South Africa. Currently it covers 19 daily publications, 17 weekend publications, two weekly publications and one monthly publication (Sabinet, n.d.). A total of 1452 reports on the Russia/Ukraine war were found on the database in the above-mentioned period.

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<sup>1</sup>South Africa's internet penetration is quite high, ranking third on the African continent (following the more populous Nigeria and Egypt). In 2022, the share of the total population of South Africa using the internet was 78.6%. (Statista Research Department, 2023).

Around 1119 of these reports, drawn mainly from international news agencies such as Reuters, provided a general account of the war with no relevance to South Africa,<sup>2</sup> while the remaining 333 reports incorporated South Africa (of which 213 centred on the effects of the war on South Africa and an additional 120 on South Africa's stance on the war).

A further search of the media database was conducted using the Afrikaans translation of the three keywords mentioned above (Rusland en Oekraïne en oorlog) to cover the Afrikaans newspapers. In the Afrikaans papers 126 reports (of around 213) pertained to South Africa. *The Daily Maverick* (a South African daily online publication and weekly print newspaper) is not covered by the SA Media database. A search was therefore conducted in its archives (available online) covering the same period as the above searches. In the mentioned period, 321 reports focused on the war, with 65 of these concentrating on South Africa and the war. A total of approximately 524 reports relating to South Africa were analysed.

Through a qualitative thematic analysis of the media reports on the war (pertaining to South Africa), four main themes could be distinguished. Firstly, South Africa's abstentions on voting on three UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its reasons for doing so; secondly, critiques on and support for the government's stance; thirdly, explanations for the government's stance as reflected in the media; and, lastly, the ways in which the war has an impact on the continent and South Africa in particular.

Given the fact that the government's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and much of both the critiques and support for the government's stance can be traced to South Africa's foreign policy, the next section provides a brief overview of the main principles of its foreign policy.

### **Main Principles of South Africa's Foreign Policy**

Over the years, there has been a continuity in the foreign policy outlooks of the governments of Presidents Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa and the influence and impact of the ANC on the country's foreign policy (Zondo, 2017). The focuses of South Africa's foreign policy can be demarcated in the form of concentric circles (Zondo, 2017). The centre of the ANC's framework for international relations is regional (Southern Africa) and African solidarity co-operation and integration. The second concentric circle is South-South cooperation, thus the strengthening of the global South agency and its commitment to building multi-lateral fora for addressing issues facing the South. The third circle is relations with the global North driven by economic interests rather than shared values, ideological orientation, or affinity. In this regard, strategic partnerships exist with key countries such as the UK, US, France and

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<sup>2</sup>Themes covered in these reports include: a daily account of the Russian attacks on Ukraine (Mariupol etc.); the advances of Russian forces; sanctions against Russia (by for example, Europe, the UK and the USA); the Ukrainian need for weapons; Western aid to Ukraine, war crimes by Russians; Finland and Sweden wanting to join NATO; the issue of grain not leaving Ukraine harbours; and McDonald's exiting Russia.

Germany. Strengthening global governance and multilateralism is the fourth circle. Effective global governance is pursued at, for example, the UN, the G20 and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), while the ANC has also pushed for their reform to become more inclusive and representative (particularly the United Nations Security Council and the global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank) (Zondo, 2017, pp. 182–185). The primacy of a circle is determined by the ANC leadership and the contingencies of the time, with, for example, South-South cooperation and Africa emphasised during the Mbeki years, while during the Zuma years, matters related to economic benefits through partnerships with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China) were prominent (Zondo, 2017, p. 184). A strong intensification of economic diplomacy is a major thrust of South Africa's foreign policy under Ramaphosa (Nganje and Ayodele, 2021, p. 19).

South Africa's foreign policy also consists of key principles. The first is independence and non-alignment. It therefore resists in becoming embroiled in great power conflicts. South Africa also joined the non-aligned movement (NAM) after the ANC came into power in 1994. A second principle is the peaceful resolution of disputes and its involvement in several mediation initiatives as demonstrated by its efforts to resolve several African conflicts, including those in the DRC, Burundi and South Sudan/Sudan (Sidiropoulos, 2022). South Africa's conviction is that positive change in problematic regimes is more likely to be induced through diplomatic engagement rather than through condemnation and coercive measures. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma stated in 2007 that this thinking influenced South Africa's votes in the Security Council in 2007 (Nathan, 2008, p. 4). In its most recent (2022) policy document the ANC criticises international sanctions against Cuba, Russia, Venezuela and Zimbabwe (ANC, 2022, pp. 81–82).

Another core element of the government's foreign policy is that of solidarity with parties and countries that supported the national liberation struggle against apartheid or that are still fighting for their independence (such as Western Sahara and Palestine). Solidarity is therefore "a major part of the strategic calculus by which the country takes its key decisions" and "what the government does in the international environment" (Sidiropoulos, 2022). Zondi (2017, p. 187) elaborates on the element of solidarity and calls it solidarity against "global coloniality that manifests in new forms of imperialism and global asymmetry", which is ingrained in critical institutions in the global South (including liberation movements). The anti-imperialist drive revolves around several themes, including the political and economic imbalance between the North and the South to the detriment of the poor and the need to transform the UN and other international bodies to address global inequalities and South-South cooperation and solidarity. Anti-imperialism sometimes takes precedence over the government's commitment to the promotion of human rights and democracy (Nathan, 2008, p. 5).

The protection of human rights is a fourth important principle of South Africa's foreign policy. However, three considerations are important to South Africa in engaging with human rights issues (Nganje & Ayodele, 2021, pp. 5–6).

Firstly, although South Africa is committed to a core set of values and principles in engaging with the rest of the world, it resists the tendency of Western powers to politicise the global human rights agenda; secondly, human rights are not considered as the overriding consideration – they would be promoted as one of many equally foreign policy objectives; and, lastly, South Africa is not inclined to champion a narrow liberal human rights agenda. Rather, its commitment is to be linked to broader questions of global socioeconomic, political and racial justice. The ANC government frames its human rights campaign role as a part of the Global South's struggle for socioeconomic justice.

The above interpretation means that South Africa is not always a willing ally of the West, as clearly reflected in its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war.

### **South Africa's Abstentions in the UN General Assembly and its Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

A dominant theme in the media since 24 February has been, on the one hand, the government's decision to abstain from three UN General Assembly resolutions in the first six weeks of the war and, on the other, the explanations of members of the government (including President Ramaphosa) for taking the neutrality stance.

The first reaction by the South African government on Russia's invasion was by Naledi Pandor, Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, who called on Russia to "immediately withdraw its forces from Ukraine". She argued that this call was in line with the UN Charter, which emphasises "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states" (*Sowetan Live*, 2022). However, President Ramaphosa contradicted her the next day by stating that it was not the party's position to call on Russia to withdraw, but rather to push for mediation and negotiation. She later backtracked on her statement in a speech in the UN (*Business Day*, 2022; Gerber, 1 March 2022).

The first UN resolution on 2 March demanded that Russia immediately stop its aggression and withdraw its troops from Ukraine. The non-binding resolution was adopted by 141 of the 193 member states, five voted against the resolution and South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mali, Namibia and Mozambique were among the 35 states that abstained from the vote. Particularly significant is the fact (as reflected in the media) that prominent African countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Zambia supported the resolution.

The second resolution on 24 March demanded full humanitarian access and protection of civilians and humanitarian personnel in Ukraine and accused Russia of creating a "dire human rights situation", while the third on 7 April called for Russia to be suspended from the UN Human Rights Council. The three resolutions on Russia's invasion of Ukraine were reported in the media in South Africa as being based on a fundamental principle of the UN Charter, namely "recognising the full sovereignty of all countries and requiring all members to respect this principle" (Jurgens, 2022).

Government explanations on South Africa's abstention from voting on the three resolutions that were widely reported in the media are the following:

- On the first resolution the Department of International Relations and Cooperation issued a statement justifying the government's decision. The media highlighted the following reasons: that the text of the resolution was not welcoming the commencement of negotiations between the two parties and that "the text in its current form could drive a deeper wedge between the parties rather than contributing to a resolution of the conflict" (Stolz, 2022).
- President Cyril Ramaphosa's defence was that the Russia-Ukraine conflict should be resolved through mediation (Nonyukela, 2022). According to Ramaphosa, the resolution did not "foreground the call for meaningful engagement". According to him "the call for peaceful resolution through political dialogue is relegated to a single sentence close to the conclusion of the final text". For him, achieving world peace should be through negotiation and not force of arms, which is a principle on which South Africa has been consistent since the advent of its democracy, and which remains part of the government's foreign policy orientation (Njilo, 2022).

On the second resolution demanding humanitarian access and support to Ukrainians South Africa sponsored an alternative resolution calling for the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine but avoided mentioning Russia's role in the conflict. The resolution was rejected (*The Citizen*, 2022, p. 6). This rejection led to newspaper headings such as: "SA on thin ice in diplomatic arena" (*The Witness*, 23 March 2022, p. 2) and "Ukraine shames South Africa on global stage over proposed UN resolution backed by Russia" (Gerber, 26 March 2022).

Regarding the suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council, South Africa's ambassador to the UN, Xolisa Mabhongo, told the assembly that the vote was premature as an investigation into allegations of war crimes had yet to be completed (Thaw, 2022). The defence of the Foreign Minister was that South Africa is not indifferent to the suffering of Ukraine citizens: "An unaligned position doesn't mean that we condone the military action of Russia in Ukraine"; however, the government did not believe the current approach by the UN General Assembly would help end the conflict. Pandor also said that here needed to be consistency in the approach of the international community to all countries violating international law, citing Israel, which has launched sustained offensive military operations against the Gaza, killing hundreds of civilians: "We don't see Palestinians as different from Ukrainians. But the way that the world community is reacting, suggests that Palestinian lives matter less than the lives of Ukrainians. And this is something that concerns us" (Gumede, 2022) This type of reasoning was reiterated by several politicians.

It was also argued that the ousting of Russia from the UN human rights council would make matters worse. In Pandor's words: "Constantly poking a bear that is injured merely serves to make the bear more angry and more reckless" (Subramoney, 2022; *Weekend Post*, 2022.).

During the first six months of the war, government officials made various statements about the war that received wide media attention. These statements,

which also indirectly provide justification for the South African government's stance, are the following:

- The UN Security Council has failed the world in the war between Russia and Ukraine and “cannot be relied upon to preserve peace and security”. South Africa will give greater attention to member states of the non-aligned movement and work with them to actively shaping the reform deliberations within the UN system (Minister of International Relations and Co-operation in her budget speech (Deklerk, 2022).
- Deliberations and negotiations are still the way to go – President Ramaphosa regularly maintains that negotiations are what assisted South Africa near the end of apartheid-era and the country's decision to democracy (Mokati, 2022; *The Witness*, 28 April 2022).
- Ramaphosa consistently refers to the ‘conflict’ in Ukraine, never using the words ‘war’ and ‘invasion’ in relation to what Russia terms as a “special military operation” (*The Witness*, 23 March 2022).
- Russia is not the only country to blame for the war in Ukraine – the conflict involves two members of the UN. It is the responsibility of the UN to take decisions that will lead to a ‘constructive outcome’ conducive to the creation of sustainable peace between the parties (Mapisa-Nqokula, Speaker of the National Assembly) (Patel, 2022).
- The war could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from among its own leaders over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less instability in the region (Ramaphosa in Parliament) (Patel, 2022).

In a telephonic conversation with Ramaphosa on 10 March the Russian president explained his reasons and goals of the special military operation in Ukraine. The two leaders also reaffirmed their commitment “to further develop the bilateral strategic partnership, noting in particular, their readiness to expand trade, economic and humanitarian cooperation”. Both also underscored the importance of continuing interaction within the BRICS framework and other international venues (Nemakonke, 2022).

### **Critiques and Support (Direct or Indirect) of the Government's Stance**

The first set of criticisms raised against the government that received wide media attention was the initial contradictory statements (or mixed messages) by the president and the foreign minister on the Russian invasion, which were described as confusing and embarrassing. These statements, it was argued, painted a picture of a cabinet that does not communicate among itself, with the one hand not seeming to know what the other is doing (*Sowetan*, 2022, p. 10). In an editorial in the *Cape Times* (2022, p. 6), on the other hand, the government's ‘flip-flopping’ on the Ukraine-Russia crisis and the contradictory statements were described as having “exposed the folly of South Africa's incoherent and vague foreign policy”

(*Cape Times*, editorial, 2022, p. 6), while it was also questioned whether the president and the minister understood SA's foreign policy differently (Mngomezulu, 2022).

The divisions among South Africans over the government's stance towards Russia's invasion of Ukraine were also reflected in editorial and commentaries by, inter alia, opposition political parties, religious groups and academics that received wide media attention.

Critiques of the government's stance as published in the media revolved around two issues and were sometimes conflated – on the one hand, criticism of its neutral stance, and, on the other, accusations that it was not neutral but sided with Russia. The media also focused on those who openly sided with Russia without acknowledging the government's stance.

The South African government has been roundly criticised for its decision to abstain from voting on the three UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For many it was not a question of taking sides, but the fact that South Africa is not consistent in its application of its principles of human rights and sanctity of borders. In this regard, the head of politics and international relations at Rhodes University, Dr Siphokazi Magadla, for example, was quoted in the *Sowetan* (Nonyukela, 2022) as saying that it's not a matter of supporting one country over the other, but about supporting South Africa's principles. For her, South Africa's neutral position reflected an absence of values and a governing party that is really in crisis. All nations should condemn invasion of a sovereign country as South Africa condemns the invasion and occupation of Palestine by Israel. In a similar argument, the South African government is accused of hypocrisy and double standards – again, comparing South Africa's stance on Israel's occupation of Palestine and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Sonno, 2022).

Newspapers also carried the statements made by the opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance, which also slammed the ANC's stance on the war, arguing that the ANC “has tarnished SA's international image by failing to condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine, choosing to remain ‘neutral’ in the face of gross human rights violations and loss of lives”; the world should know that it's not SA that is supporting the war in Ukraine but the ANC; “the ANC is standing by and watching as the war threatens to send Africa to the brink of a food crisis. – Putin should be pressurised to allow the opening up of Ukraine ports to allow the exports of grain and wheat that is trapped there” (Deklerk, 2022).

Several foreign diplomats to South Africa (Germany, Denmark, the USA, Finland and the EU) also expressed their dismay over South Africa's decision to abstain and they questioned the reluctance of the country to take a firm stand, which, as some argued, is not doing South Africa any favours (Khoza, 6 March 2022, p. 8; Boonzaaier, 2022). Religious leaders such as the Archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba, also called on the government to “condemn unequivocally” the Russian invasion, which he said is a flagrant violation of a central tenet of the UN Charter, namely the use of force against any state (Mlamla, 2022).



The second theme receiving attention in the media around the government's stance are the accusations that the South African government had chosen to take the side of the "oppressor". Several incidents sparked such viewpoints, which were carried in news reports. The first was the attendance of the defence minister of a cocktail function at the home of the Russian ambassador to South Africa (Ilya Rogachev) on the day Russia invaded Ukraine (Shange, 2022, p. 2). Other members of the ANC also attended an event held by the Russian consulate in Cape Town on 28 February when the invasion was in full swing. Also, in a tweet on 5 March the Russian embassy thanked South Africa for its "solidarity" with Russia's fight against Nazism in Ukraine (Boonzaaier, 2022, p. 4). The third is Ramaphosa's phone call to Putin within days of the war, while he called Ukrainian president Zelensky only seven weeks later (*The Citizen*, editorial, 2022, p. 12; *The Citizen*, 2022; Naki, 2022). After the phone call between Ramaphosa and Putin it was widely reported that Ramaphosa in a tweet said that "President Putin appreciated our balanced approach", which was also interpreted as support for Russia in the war (Khoza, 10 March 2022). Further 'evidence' reflecting government bias towards Russia (described as such in the media), is the visit of the Minister of Defence, Thandi Modise, to Moscow on 14 August to attend a conference on security in Moscow and the existing perception that the ANC government is not siding with the citizens of Ukraine but rather with the "invaders" the Russians (see for example, Stolz, 2022; Hartley and Mills, 15 August 2022). This was barely a week after hosting the US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, in Pretoria, where amidst discussions of shared values the foreign Minister Naledi Pandor included the platitude "We are appalled by war". She also said that "on the matter of Russia and Ukraine, there is no one who supports war. We've made that very clear" (Mills & Hartley, 15 August 2022). However, she also made it clear to Blinken that SA "would not be bullied" to choose sides in the war (Zeeman, 2022).

The above incidents contributed to editorial and other comments in newspapers on South Africa's bias towards Moscow, which, as argued, has also severely damaged South Africa's reputation as a truly non-aligned country and "probably ruined any chance we may have had of taking the 'honest broker' position as a peace negotiator" (*The Citizen*, editorial, 2022, p. 12; *Citizen Saturday*, editorial, 2022, p. 12).

A last theme receiving wide coverage in the media is the unequivocal support expressed for either Russia or Ukraine, which reflect the divisions among South Africans and among political parties. Opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) and ActionSA have openly come out in support of Ukraine (see for example, Zulu, 2022 and O'Regan, 2022). This support is not limited to political parties but also includes ordinary South Africans who joined several protest marches across the country in solidarity with Ukraine.

On the other hand, former president Jacob Zuma has come out in support of Russia, projecting Putin as "a victim of western countries bullying tactics" and that Putin is "a man of peace" (Ndou, 2022). The opposition Economic Freedom Front also support Russia's invasion, with its deputy leader Floyd Shivambu arguing that there is "nothing wrong" with Russia preventing the spread of NATO and that

they will “never forgive NATO for the killing of Brother Leader Muammar Gaddafi”. He added that the USSR and particularly Russia helped South Africa in the struggle against apartheid – Russia was “a true friend’ of South Africa. Like Putin, Shivambo also referred to the war as “military operations” (Gerber, 15 March 2022).

Some commentators quoted in newspaper articles also supported Ramaphosa’s stance in blaming NATO for what is happening in Ukraine (*The Citizen*, 2022; Zinets, 2022). Specific reference was made to the fact that NATO had 12 members when it was established, while it has since recruited 14 countries that were former members of the Soviet Union. It was also contemplating inviting Ukraine to join it. Russia thus started to try to push NATO back into Europe and away from Russia (Sokutu, 2022, p. 3).

### **Reasons for the Government’s Apparent Support of Russia**

The government’s stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the divisions among South Africans, as reflected above, have inevitably also resulted in a wide range of commentaries explaining the reasoning behind its stance. The most common explanation is the ANC’s strong ties with the former Soviet Union, which trained and supported anti-apartheid activists during the Cold War (Ferreira & Tandwa, 2022). From the early 1960s to the late 1980s the anti-apartheid struggle was assisted by arms, military training, education, weapons, diplomatic support and medical care, among other things. Russia’s past generosity, it is argued, explains the government’s reluctance to name or condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Lynd, 2022, p. 5). South Africa therefore owes Russia for its historical support. For the *Sunday Times* editor, Msomi (2022), the gratitude many older South Africans feel for the historical assistance should not be underestimated. Although Ramaphosa has made no reference to Moscow, other government leaders such as the Minister of Social Development, Lindiwe Zulu, have made it clear that “Russia is a good friend” (Davies, 2022).

However, as also highlighted in several reports, the historical support argument has some flaws, in particular the fact that at that stage the Soviet Union also included Ukraine, which also played an important part in the apartheid struggle, and that the Cold War loyalties between the ANC and Moscow “are increasingly irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (*The Citizen*, editorial, 2022, p. 12). Ukraine’s role in the apartheid struggle includes its mission to the UN, which in 1985 endorsed comprehensive sanctions against South Africa; many members of the exiled ANC studied in Ukraine and Umkhonto we Sizwe soldiers who went to the Soviet Union mostly went to Ukraine (Lynd, 2022, p. 5). However, Ukraine’s role has been played down in the media (by some), with arguments referring to the racist treatment of African nationals who were left stranded in Ukraine while their white counterparts were allowed to exit the country (see for example, *Daily News*, 2022, p. 10; *Cape Argus*, 2022, p. 13; *Sunday Times*, 2022, p. 14).

A further explanation for South Africa and Russia’s friendship is their stance on anti-imperialism (*Daily News*, 2022, p. 18). Besides the support from the USSR

to the ANC during the apartheid struggle, for many the struggle against apartheid was part of a larger struggle against colonialism and imperialism associated with the West. Should it stand against Russian aggression South Africa would be seen as a Western lackey (Mills & Hartley, 17 March 2022). The fact that Russia challenges the West, makes Russia a representative of what the West is not – anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist. As argued, Russia never had colonies in Africa, was never part of the slave trade in Africa and never took part in the Berlin conference in 1815 where the colonisation of Africa took off in earnest. Russia is popular in Africa because it is regarded as an advocate of decolonisation (Van der Westhuizen, 2022, p. 2). Yet, as has been argued, the Soviet Union was itself an imperialist power which colonised Ukraine and killed four million Ukrainians in a campaign of mass starvation (Jurgens, 2022).

Much attention has also been paid in the media to economic reasons in explaining South Africa's affinity to Russia, particularly the fact that the two countries are economic partners in the BRICS bloc (together with Brazil, China and India) (Lynd, 2022, p. 5). South Africa's ambivalence on the Ukraine issue may be motivated by concerns about offending China and Russia. However, in 2021 South Africa's trade with its political allies totalled R15.7 billion, while trade with NATO countries came to R1.131 trillion (de Wet, 2022). Nonetheless, it is argued that for political reasons it is important for South Africa to "maintain very direct, resolute, and absolute relations with the BRICS members, specifically Russia and China because of their permanent membership of the Security Council, which makes it important to be on the side of the BRICS countries" (Makwakwa, 2022, p. 1).

Media reports have also showed that is not possible to make a rational case for South Africa's support for Russia on economic grounds when it comes to trade between Russia and South Africa. For example, in 2021 Russia imported R1,3 billion worth of products from South Africa and exported products to South Africa to the value of approximately R458 million. Russia is not even in the top 14 trading partners with South Africa. The relationship between Russia and South Africa is unbalanced, with South Africa having R77 billion worth of investments in Russia while Russian investments in South Africa amount to about R23 billion – less than one third of South Africa's investments in Russia (Davis, 2022; *Daily News*, 2022; *Cape Argus*, 2022).

### **Effects of the Russia-Ukraine War on South Africa**

Media reports on the effects of the war on South Africa roughly followed a sequence. The first set of reports, which appeared a day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, assessed the risks and likely effects of the war on Africa and on South Africa in particular. South Africans were warned that they would have to brace themselves for the higher cost of fuel due to the sudden rise of the oil price on 24 February to more than \$100 a barrel (the highest in more than seven years) and the South African Rand losing ground against major currencies; that Russia and Ukraine are among the world's 10 top exporters of wheat and that South Africa

imports wheat, buck wheat and dried legumes among other food products from Ukraine and is dependent on Russia for, among other things, nitrogenous fertiliser, chemical fertiliser and coal briquettes. Over the past five years, South Africa sourced around 30% on average of its wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine (Van der Walt et al., 2022, p. 1; Dlodla, 2022, p. 9). Reports also highlighted the likelihood of a rise in food prices because of the disruption of trade in the significant producing region of the Black Sea (Mabuza, 2022; Sihlobo, 2022). Headlines in South African newspapers include “What Putin’s war will cost you” (Kaiser & Opperman, 2022, p. 3) and “War ‘Dire’ for SA Economy” (*Saturday Independent*, 2022, p. 1).

The effects of the war on Africa’s food supplies were widely carried. Various reports (for example, Kholonyane and Nkala, 2022) highlighted the major role that both Russia and Ukraine (particularly the latter) play in the global agricultural market and specifically in Africa. As one columnist put it, “Wheat and grains are back at the heart of geopolitics following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine” (Sihlobo, 2022).

Most reports highlighted the importance of Ukraine and Russia in terms of wheat and oil exports – for example, that Ukraine is “the breadbasket of the world” since it supplies a tenth of global wheat exports and was projected to produce at least 80 million tonnes of grain in 2022. About 95% of these exports leave the country through the Black Sea ports, which were blocked by Russia. Ukraine is also a leading producer and exporter of sunflower oil. Ukraine’s sunflower oil exports accounted for 40% of global exports in 2020. Several newspapers highlighted the fact that failure to open these ports could result in famine in Africa. Before the war more than 20 sub-Saharan African countries imported most of their wheat and oil from Russia and Ukraine. Major importing countries were Egypt, which accounted for nearly half of imports, followed by Sudan, Nigeria, Tanzania, Algeria, Kenya, South Africa and Ethiopia. Ukraine supplied more than a third of Ethiopia’s grain before the war (Sihlobo, 2022; Mills, 2022; Pechonchyk, 2022).

Towards the middle of the year the emphasis in reports was placed on the fact that Russia refused to accept the threat of famine and its responsibility in creating the risk (Mills, 2022). Furthermore, that Russia was trying to convince African nations that global food shortages caused by its invasion of Ukraine are not its fault and that this was merely Western propaganda. Russia therefore refuses to take blame for the food crisis. Nevertheless, Russia and Ukraine reached a deal on 22 July to allow grain exports to resume by sea (Baker, 2022; Zinets, 2022).

The third theme covered in the media is the actual rise in food prices in South Africa because of the war. Since the invasion of Ukraine, the price of maize, for example, was up by over 40% in April and vegetable oil prices by 75% (Mills, 2022). Besides the rise in food prices, South Africa’s fruit exports to Russia and Ukraine have also been compromised and South African farmers had to find new markets. Reports indicated that the country annually exports 11 million cartons of citrus fruit to Russia and Ukraine and 5 million cartons of pears and prunes to Russia (Mochiko, 2022, p. 4).

## Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has been receiving ongoing coverage in the South African media. Although accounts of the progression of the war, the reaction by European and other Western countries and by Putin, among other things, received wide coverage in the country's media, these were not analysed since they were mainly drawn from international media companies such as Reuters and had little direct bearing on the country. These reports merely provided factual detail on the war. Instead, the focus of this chapter was on media reports that pertained to South Africa. In this regard over 500 reports were analysed.

Several themes were identified in the media reports. Firstly, the government's abstention from three UN resolutions and the reasoning behind its decision. This so-called 'neutrality' position taken by the government resulted in strong support as well as strong condemnation by South Africans – both were carried in media reports. A second theme revolved around the government's apparent pro-Russian support and possible explanations for its Russian bias, while a third theme highlighted the effect of the war on South Africa.

The South African government's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, particularly its abstention from voting on the UN resolutions and its pro-Russian bias, can be traced back to four important principles of its foreign policy. The first of these is its independence or non-aligned stance, and the second its stress on the peaceful mediation of conflicts, which it has been emphasising throughout the war. Thirdly, there is its solidarity with parties and countries which supported the governing party in its national liberation struggle against apartheid (which explains its pro-Russian bias) and lastly, there is its anti-imperialist drive, which sometimes takes precedence over its commitment to human rights and democracy. In the Russia-Ukraine war it became obvious that the government was, for example, not a willing ally of the West. It was also quick to blame NATO for the war in Ukraine.

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