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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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26.06.2022

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An interview by Steps to the Left on the Ukraine conflict

In the war in Ukraine there is no side without responsibility, says Rafael Poch-de-Feliu (Barcelona, 1956) in this interview. Poch-de-Feliu was 35 years international correspondent in Eurasia, most of them in Moscow and Beijing for La Vanguardia. He has been an associate professor at UPF Barcelona and UNED. He currently maintains a

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weekly blog dedicated to international issues (rafaelpoch.com) and has just published in Context a booklet entitled "The Invasion of Ukraine".



Rafael Poch-de-Feliu

Who is to blame for the war in Ukraine?

Russia takes the maximum condemnation for having unleashed the invasion in February, violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine with a speech by its president that in fact denies the sovereignty of that country considered "artificial". The Russian liberal opposition and the Western establishment claim that the reason is that the Russian regime seeks to consolidate itself in the internal order with what it believed was going to be a "short victorious war". It makes sense, but this version completely silences the background of the invasion: more than 25 years ignoring Russia's security interests and building a European security scheme without Russia and against Russia. In December Moscow presented a list of points to correct that warning that if it was ignored "military measures" would be taken. The United States and NATO ignored and accepted the war scenario.



The responsibility of the Ukrainian government has to do with its coming to power in 2014. That mixture of popular revolt of a sector of society and regime change operation sponsored by the United States and the European Union, broke the balance between the two national identities that until then coexisted democratically in the country, alternating in their government. The dominant Ukrainian nationalism in western Ukraine, furiously anti-Russian and determined to impose a national identity against Russia and pro-NATO, took power. That had consequences in the use of the Russian language, which was predominant in the country, and in the version of the past as a succession of disasters responsibility of the Russians. Neither the country's large Russian minority, nor other national minorities, nor the Russian-speaking majority in the east of the country, accepted that imposition, which led to varying levels of protests against the new order. In some places, such as Kharkov, they were repressed with little violence, in others with a lot of violence, for example in Odessa and Mariupol, with large demonstrations and deaths, and in others there was an armed uprising, the case of donbas, to which the Kiev government responded by launching an "anti-terrorist operation" that has lasted eight years and caused 14,000 deaths on both sides, with the majority of civilian casualties in populations opposed to the Kiev government.

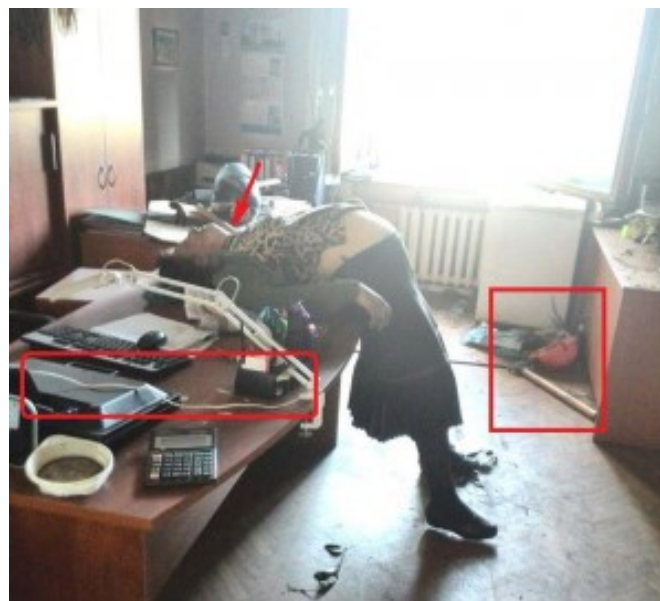
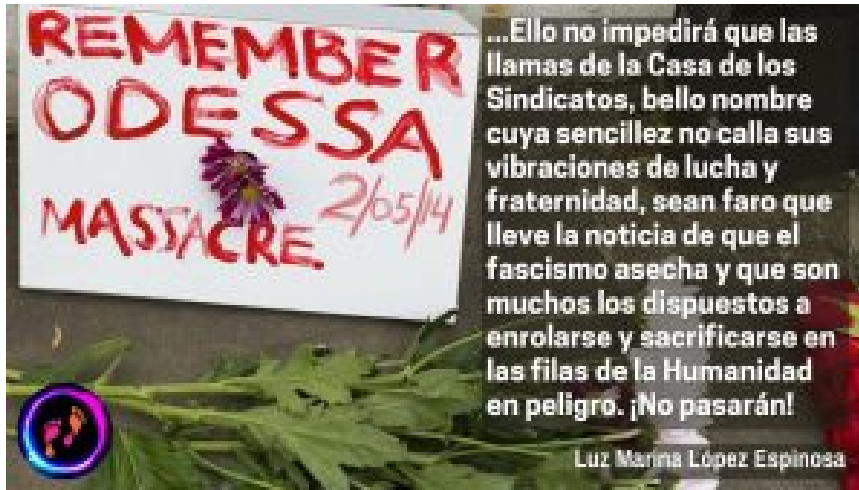


Image of the crimes perpetrated by Ukrainian neo-Nazis. Dozens of people were killed at the Odessa House of Trade Unions and more than 100 people were disappeared by Ukrainian neo-Nazis on 2 May 2014. Dozens of people were beaten to death, others burned alive, others threw themselves out of windows seeking to escape the fire and were finished wounded, beaten, in front of a mob poisoned by racism and anti-communism. The pregnant woman in the photograph was hanged with the telephone cable by Ukrainian neo-Nazis.

In this climate of civil war, Russia annexed Crimea, the most dissatisfied and Russian-hostile territory of Ukraine. It was Moscow's consolation maneuver in the face of the serious setback of the loss of Ukraine. Since then NATO has been arming Ukraine for a military revenge against Russia. Without Ukraine being in NATO, NATO was in Ukraine and among other things trained 80,000 Ukrainian soldiers between 2015 and 2020. Kiev

also approved a new military doctrine that provided for the reconquest of Crimea and in September 2021 an alliance with the United States was signed on that script. So when Putin says that "the attack on Crimea and the Donbas was only a matter of time," the matter seems to have merit. They are, we could say, the circumstances of Russia's crime in Ukraine.



The European Union is responsible for refusing to include Russia in the economic agreement it proposed to Ukraine in 2013 in an exclusionary way, despite the fact that 40% of Ukrainian trade was with Russia. The rejection of that agreement triggered the revolt against the Ukrainian government, as corrupt and oligarchic as the one that happened to it (that's why I say that 2014 was a "failed revolution") but that only differed in external discipline. Spurred on by the Baltics and poles, strictly aligned with the United States, the European Union has been unable to formulate an autonomous policy. In 2008 Ukraine was formally invited to join NATO when only 20% of Ukrainians wanted such membership, compared to 35% who preferred a military alliance with Russia and another 30% neutrality. After 2014 France and Germany let languish the Minsk agreements for a peaceful solution to the civil war in the Donbas, agreements that the United States rejected, and, as a consequence, also Kiev, which had signed them... So although the levels of responsibility of each of the participants are different and may be the subject of discussion, I see no innocent part in this conflict beyond the suffering civilian population.

What consequences can this war have for Russia?

I see no positive outcome for Russia. Things can go wrong or very badly for Moscow. In the best of assumptions, if Russia manages to impose itself militarily on the entire southeast of Ukraine, reaching as far as Odessa and leaving Ukraine without access to the

Black Sea, which is a lot to assume, the result will not be stable. The incorporation of more territories into Russia - I am thinking of the Kherson region - or the organization of Russophile administrations will be answered. However small, any armed resistance will force these administrations to exercise repression.

On the other hand, everything Russia was looking for; moving NATO's infrastructure and borders away from its territory, demilitarizing Ukraine, downgrading the Ukrainian government's hostility to Russia, and eroding the far-right's influence in the (what they call "denazification"), all of this has gotten worse. It is clear that what remains of Ukraine will be even more hostile to Russia than there was. Finland provides 1300 kilometers more of direct border with NATO. If all that is a disaster, the unprecedented discrediting of Russia in the West and the reinvigoration of that NATO in "brain death" (Macron dixit), even more so.



Sanctions against Russia are unprecedented for such a large and important country and will do a lot of damage to it but I don't think they will bend it. The cases of Cuba, North Korea and Iran suggest that sanctions do harm but do not bend. And the worst thing is that they are not focused on a negotiation, but they are unconditional. The president of the European Commission, the incompetent and staunch Atlanticist Ursula von der Leyen, has said that the aim of the sanctions is, "to dismantle, step by step, the industrial power of Russia." The West wants regime change in Russia and it will get it. Not because Putin is going to jump, his popular support is 70% although it may be ephemeral, but because the Russian regime is going to harden, definitively reformulating its international alliances. The sanctions are going to change the life of the Russian middle class, a certain consensus

of the youth with the Kremlin towards the thesis that this war is a response of the country to an "existential threat", the reaction to the unusual Russophobia prevailing in Europe, all that, will transform the life and mentality of many Russians in a very negative direction. That is going to be the real regime change in the medium term. In short, Russia has definitely lost Ukraine and, surely, in the longer term, we are witnessing the beginning of Putin's end.

How can the European Union be left after all this?

Much more subservient to the United States in foreign and defense policy. The EU maintained a fluid energy trade with Russia, was China's main trading partner and NATO was "brain dead". Now all that has been reversed thanks to the war. We are witnessing the end of Russia's integrative purposes in Germany, as well as what remained of the French will for greater European external and military autonomy. It consolidates an axis of the vassals of the United States in Europe, with England, the Baltics, Poland, etc., alternative to the timid Franco-German autonomist impulses. As a result, a subaltern European Union of NATO, hurt by its own sanctions against Russia and much more involved in Washington's geopolitical pressure against China. For the first time, the German chancellor's first Asian visit was not to China, the EU's main trading partner, but to Japan. Now in June, NATO will definitively incorporate military preparations for war against China in its "new strategic concept" to be approved at the Madrid summit.

What can you say about China's attitude?

When they signed their grand "no limits" deal with Russia in February, aimed at containing U.S. influence. In the US, the Chinese did not know that Putin was preparing an invasion of Ukraine. Faced with the situation created, Beijing has stressed respect for the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine and at the same time opposes the "security against Russia and at the expense of Russia" that has been installed in Europe. His deputy foreign minister, Le Yucheng, has said that "NATO should have kept its promise not to expand to the East" and that "small countries should not be used as pawns by the big ones." At the UN he has abstained and does not support the vetoes against Russia, without recognizing the referendums in Crimea and Donbas, for fear that one day there will be a similar referendum in Taiwan that will turn against it.

China has not yielded to European pressure to join the sanctions against Russia that the EU demanded of it at the tense summit on April 1. Chinese TV presenter Liu Xin summed

up the us-European Union's request this way: "Help me fight your Russian partner so that I can then concentrate better against you." A month after that summit, President Xi Jinping told Foreign Minister Olaf Scholz that "European security must be in the hands of europeans," a pressure to emancipate itself once and for all.

Western punishment of Russia is a mirror for China, but China is something else. It has an economy ten times larger than russia's, but less self-sufficient and tightly integrated with the rest of the world. Sanctions may do much more harm, but they would also hurt those who impose them and the 120 countries that maintain intense trade relations with it. It would be a global shock. China has the world's largest foreign exchange reserves: \$3.25 trillion, much of it stored in the United States and the EU. They can be confiscated, as they have done with the 300 billion Russians, but with what consequences? In twenty years, China's dollar reserves have been preemptively reduced from 79% to 60% of the total, but it is not easy to quickly reduce the amount of dollar reserves or build alternative payment systems outside the scope of Western sanctions. With all these unknowns uncleared, the Western military escalation around Taiwan is confirmed. All very worrying.

Are there possibilities for a reasonable-term peace negotiation in Ukraine, or is the war going on for a long time?

For this there should be military interest and clarity. Russia will only negotiate when it reaches a minimum of objectives on the battlefield, for example full control of the Donbas, from which it is no longer so far away. The United States and the European Union for the moment prefer to put efforts into bleeding Russia into a long war of attrition. U.S. aid of \$53 billion to Ukraine, almost equivalent to the Russian military budget, sends an unequivocal signal in this regard. The Ukrainian government, which right now is being defeated in full rule in eastern Ukraine, cannot negotiate without being accused of treason by the nationalist far right. In other words, at the moment we have several months of guaranteed war ahead of us.

Russia is being blamed for aggravating the fragile food situation of many southern countries by preventing the export of Ukrainian grain by the military blockade of Black Sea ports

Russia and Ukraine supply 30% of global wheat exports. Both are also major exporters of barley, corn, sunflower seeds and sunflower oil. Much of this export goes to the South, in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, where some of the poorest

countries in the world are located, which were already at the limit due to the effects of price increases, the stresses produced by the pandemic and the usual scourges; war, corruption, inequality, mismanagement... NATO says that the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports is the reason for the quantitative increase in hunger predicted by the UN Food Programme: 47 million more hungry people, bringing their total number from 276 million this year to 323 million. But Russia exports much more than Ukraine: 20% of wheat, flours and derivatives, compared to 8.5% of Ukraine. That is why what NATO, the EU and the US do not say. The US – and with them the bulk of our media – is that at the genesis of that danger Western sanctions against Russia are much more significant than the Russian blockade of Ukrainian ports.

Sanctions prevent the export of Russian grain. Ships cannot access the Russian port of Novorossiysk, on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, from which 50% of Russian grain is exported, because insurance companies do not cover the traffic of those ships and those flying the Russian flag cannot use port infrastructure in the West. In addition, Russia cannot charge for that grain trade, because payment systems are blocked and international banks closed for their activity. A second aspect of the fact that sanctions aggravate the situation has to do with fertilizers. Their price has increased because of the increase in the price of the gas with which they are produced. Russia and Belarus are the world's first and sixth largest producers, respectively. Together they represent 20% of global production. And both are subject to sanctions.

So it cannot be said, as the EU/NATO and the US claim. In the US, let Russia be responsible, or only Russia.

It is more accurate to say that Western sanctions against its geopolitical adversary in this conflict are a factor of increasing hunger more important than the blockade of Ukrainian ports. Despite that, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, - again this disastrous character - said on May 24 in Davos that "Russia is bombing silos in Ukraine, blocking Ukrainian cargo ships full of wheat and sunflower and hoarding its own food export as a form of blackmail. That is using hunger and grain as a resource of power." Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly has said that "we must ensure that those cereals are sent to the world, otherwise millions of people will go hungry." If they are so concerned about hunger, they should start by rethinking their sanctions...

What is actually making its way with these statements is a campaign to militarily break with warships the Russian blockade of the Ukrainian coast, claiming "humanitarian catastrophe". That is, again the well-known resort of the "humanitarian catastrophe" to promote a military escalation.

How do you see this war in the context of today's world?

I always say it's a dramatic waste of time. The problems of the century, first of all global warming, are not static, but increase over time if they are not addressed. Instead of mobilizing their societies to meet the challenges of the century and the preservation of the planet, elites are mobilizing them to fight their geopolitical rivals. The consequence will be that the increase in temperature exceeds two degrees this century, which announces great catastrophes All that is brewing now with the current wars so it is a dramatic waste of time.

Rafael Poch de Feliu

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

Source: [Rafael Poch de Feliu](#) – Blog, February 24, 2022

Posted in [Steps left](#), Thursday June 21st, 2022

La Pluma.net 24.06.2022