

Dialectic of Russia's war in Ukraine: between geopolitics and energy welfare

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ABSTRACT: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has clearly shown how fragile the global geopolitical order is, in particular regarding the energy and food systems. International media picture a human tragedy of war *intertwined with* discussions of food and energy security. In addition, subjective fears of a decline in the quality of life and consumer welfare in developed European economies are voiced. The article aims to describe this specific dialectic related to the war as it reaches beyond warfare itself and increasingly affect the social welfare of European countries. Results of surveys conducted in ten European countries confirm the dominance of respondents' concerns for their own socio-economic situation and their desire to end the war as soon as possible, even at the expense of Ukrainian concessions to Russia. These social attitudes are decisive when it comes to whether the Ukrainians may further be supported or not. Moreover, these sentiments must be taken into account by those in power in individual European countries. Ultimately, such attitudes may exert the pressure that could contribute to ending the war.

KEYWORDS: war in Ukraine, Russia's invasion, energy welfare, social welfare, geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The notion of dialectics, i.e. seeing reality as a dynamic process developing based on the emergence and overcoming of opposites, fits the characterisation of the Russian war in Ukraine. Hence, the war itself, seemingly most significant for a number of reasons (e.g. human tragedy or the geopolitical shift of influence of one of the military powers to the west), has consequences—probably unintended on this scale—for,

among other things, the social welfare of European states and the food security of countries in North Africa and the Middle East (Belkaïd, 2022). These consequences, in turn, constitute public attitudes towards the war and its aftermath. These, consequently, shape the official foreign policies of states while these secondarily influence the course of the military action itself (through financial and military aid, sanction of Russian hydrocarbons, etc.). In order to understand the differing political positions of European governments towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which adopt stances that are (a) unequivocally supportive of the defending Ukrainians, (b) declaratively supportive but in reality distanced and (c) pro-Russian, it is necessary to take into account some economic issues and their perceptions reflected by public opinion. Dependence on Russian energy resources is an essential component of this dialectic but it is not the only one. Citizens of countries heavily dependent on Russian hydrocarbon imports differ in their opinions on the war, as do those in countries with relatively diversified energy policies. However, it is the advocates of a quick end to the war, even at the cost of losing part of Ukraine's territory, who dominate (we will refer to these people, following Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard (Krastev & Leonard, 2022), as a Peace camp, as opposed to those who argue that only a Russian defeat can bring peace—a Justice camp).

The article has been organised as follows: the next section takes a closer look at energy welfare in the context of the broader phenomenon of social welfare. I then present the results of a survey commissioned by the ECFR on attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. A discussion and conclusions section outlines the dimension of the dialectic of the war in Ukraine in a broader perspective.

ENERGY WELFARE AS PART OF (NATURE-BASED) SOCIAL WELFARE

Nowadays, stable access to (especially: clean) electricity is an essential determinant of social welfare, allowing basic and more sophisticated individual and collective needs to be met (Schlör, Fischer, & Hake, 2012). Access to electricity in general marks the divide between developed and developing countries because, as recently as 2016, 13 per cent of the world's population did not have any access to electricity (cf. Figure 1). We should bear in mind that electricity is “crucial for poverty alleviation, economic growth and improved living standards” (Ritchie & Roser, 2020) and therefore affects both the economy as a whole and the living conditions of individuals. Regarding the latter, the literature on energy inequalities or energy poverty provides sophisticated theoretical and empirical studies (Bardazzi, Bortolotti, & Paziienza, 2021; Chakravarty & Tavoni, 2013; Karpinska & Śmiech, 2020; Romero, Linares, & López, 2018; Sovacool & Dworkin, 2012; Thomson, Snell, & Bouzarovski, 2017).

Although the number of people without access to electricity is decreasing steadily, as can be seen in Figure 1, even in affluent countries, there are “new questions concerning the affordability of energy and the fact that certain households, especially the poorest ones, are facing difficulties to satisfy their basic energy needs” (Dubois & Meier, 2016, p. 21).

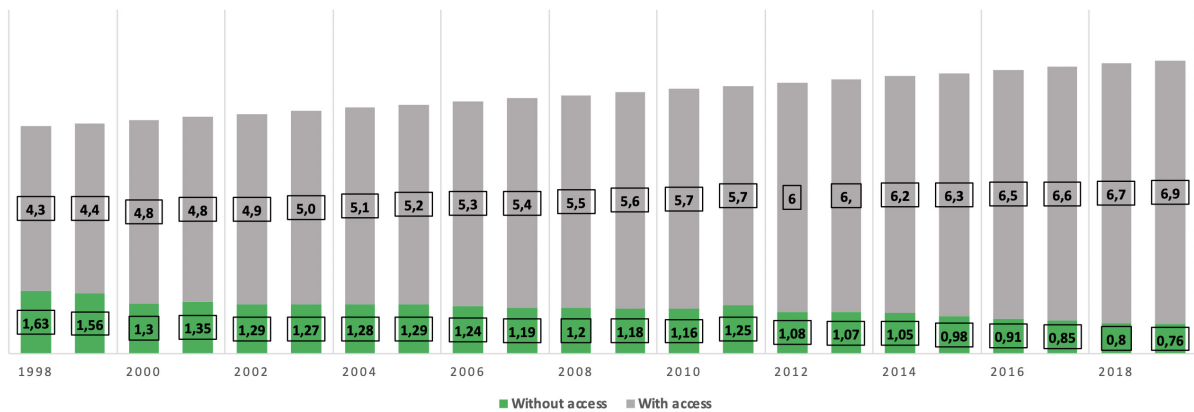


Figure 1. Number of people with and without electricity access 1998-2019 (in billions)
Source: author's own elaboration based on Our World in Data published by the World Bank.

<https://ourworldindata.org/energy-access>

In addition, it is by no means an insignificant issue what resources electricity is generated from. Economically developed countries use clean energy sources, steadily increasing the share of renewables in the energy mix. Countries with weaker economies rely on coal-fired power generation, which has high health and environmental costs (burning coal emits CO₂, among other things). In the first case, we have an energy policy that fits into nature-based social welfare (Baranowski, 2021a), i.e. generating social welfare by respecting the environment. In the second case, on the other hand, energy needs are met with technologies and raw materials that have a negative impact on the health of society and the natural environment. Indigent people experience the negative consequences of energy inequalities, which is part of the more general phenomenon of discrimination. According to Joseph Stiglitz, “in many societies, those at the bottom consist disproportionately of groups that suffer, in one way or another, from discrimination” (Stiglitz, 2012, p. 159). In contrast, “the extent of such discrimination is a matter of societal norms” (ibidem).

Some stipulate that Russian aggression against Ukraine, the geopolitical motivations of the Kremlin aside, did not intend to wage a long-lasting war, on the contrary it reckoned with a quick end (Antonova, 2022). Its consequences, however, affect the social welfare of, among others, European countries due to high electricity and fuel prices and, in a more holistic setting, high levels of inflation.

EUROPEANS' OPINIONS TOWARD WAR

The war taking place in Europe currently and its aforementioned socio-economic consequences are influencing public opinion and secondarily affecting the positions of politicians. On the old continent, energy-related topics dominate, as the rise in the price of energy affects the costs of goods consumed and the electricity bills paid by households. The prospect of an approaching winter on top of the already high expenditure linked to inflation additionally focuses public attention on the war in Ukraine (“Electric shock,” 2022; “Winter is coming,” 2022). Further, issues, like a potential

food crisis, as Ukraine and Russia are large global exporters of agri-food products, is less of a focus for European residents. Nevertheless, the worldwide rise in food prices requires a political intervention due to media pressure because, as Chris Harman noted long before the Russian aggression, “food security suddenly joined energy security as a concern for governments” (Harman, 2010, p. 322).

As a result of the sanctions on Russian hydrocarbons (Cortright, 2022), many European countries are returning to—until now systematically extinguished—coal-fired power plants. Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Austria and several other countries are doing so. The paradox of the situation is that, in addition to gas (43 per cent) and oil (29 per cent), prior to the war, Russia supplied almost 50 per cent of EU coal and lignite imports (if solid fossil fuel is included collectively, it was 54 per cent, cf. Eurostat (2022)). This, in turn, threatens the implementation of the Glasgow Climate Pact of 26 November 2021 because, as *Nature’s* editors noted, “since February’s invasion of Ukraine, Europe’s leadership (...) has mostly been silent on its climate ambitions” (Editorial, 2022, p. 8).

The survey of residents of ten European countries (see Figure 3), which I refer to below, was conducted between 28 April and 11 May 2022 on behalf of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), with a total sample of 8,172 respondents. The main objective of the survey was to segment respondents into voter camps. The “Peace” camp included respondents who favoured the option “The most important thing is to stop the war as soon as possible, even if it means Ukraine giving control of areas to Russia”. The “Justice” camp included respondents who chose the option “The most important thing is to punish Russia for its aggression, even if it means that more Ukrainians are killed and displaced”. And those who opted for the option “Neither of these” or “Don’t know” were, based on a set of additional questions, assigned to “Swing” voters or The rest, the latter being the group with the least specific opinions (Krastev & Leonard, 2022).

Thirty-five per cent of respondents from the ten countries surveyed supported the Peace camp, 22 per cent the Justice camp (Figure 2), while the rest were so-called Swing voters and the rest (43 per cent in total). These results show that supporters of the Peace camp predominate among respondents with a clear view of the war in Ukraine.

Data on the detailed breakdown of respondents by camp in each country is provided in Figure 3. It is evident that the Peace camp dominates in the three largest economies of the European Union and Romania, while the Justice camp is almost exclusively found in Poland, a country representing Central and Eastern Europe.

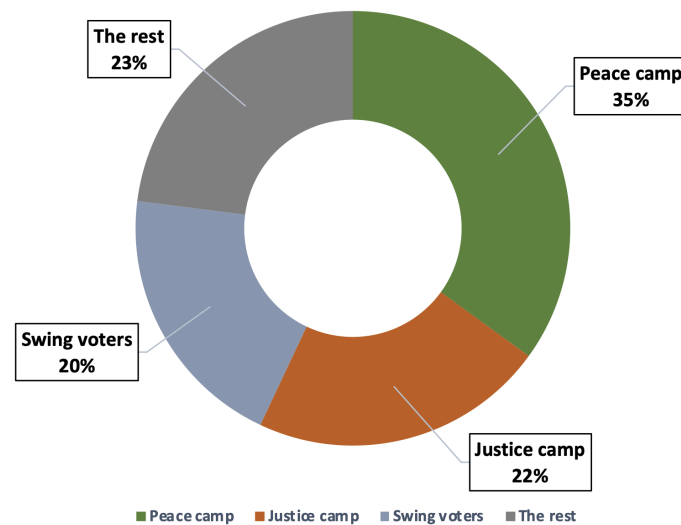


Figure 2. Europe's voter camps in response to Russia's war on Ukraine (per cent)

Source: author's own elaboration based on data from Datapraxis and YouGov, May 2022

Taking energy welfare as a potential factor (co-)shaping the survey results, let us consider the dependence on Russian gas in Italy, Germany, France and—for the record—Romania. According to 2020 data from the European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators, Germans and Italians are the most dependent on Russian gas. Specifically, the former dependence is estimated at 49 and the latter for 46 per cent of their needs. France imports only 24 per cent of its gas from Russia, bearing in mind that as much as 70 per cent of its energy is produced by nuclear power plants there (Mazzucchi, 2022, p. 841). Romania imports 10 per cent of its gas needs from Russia. In comparison, Poland, the leader of the Justice camp, depends on Russian gas for 40 per cent. Finland imported 94 per cent of its gas from the Russian Federation in 2020.

Of the EU's major economies, the German and Italian economies are the most dependent on gas supplies from Russia, with France standing in a sharp contrast to them. In addition, Germany's massive dependence on Russian gas (with nuclear power stations being phased out) and, at the same time, its enormous demand for gas means, as the *Financial Times* points out, that Germany "must cut its gas use by a fifth to avoid a crippling shortage this winter (...) as businesses and households brace themselves for Europe's biggest energy crisis in a generation" (Chazan, 2022).

Differences in public perceptions of Russian aggression against Ukraine are apparent, particularly when considering the three socio-economic dimensions perceived as war-related risks. The most significant concerns of respondents from all ten countries concerning the war involve the rising living costs and energy prices (Figure 4). The economic downturn, loss of jobs, or the influx of refugees from Ukraine into the country appear of much lesser concern.

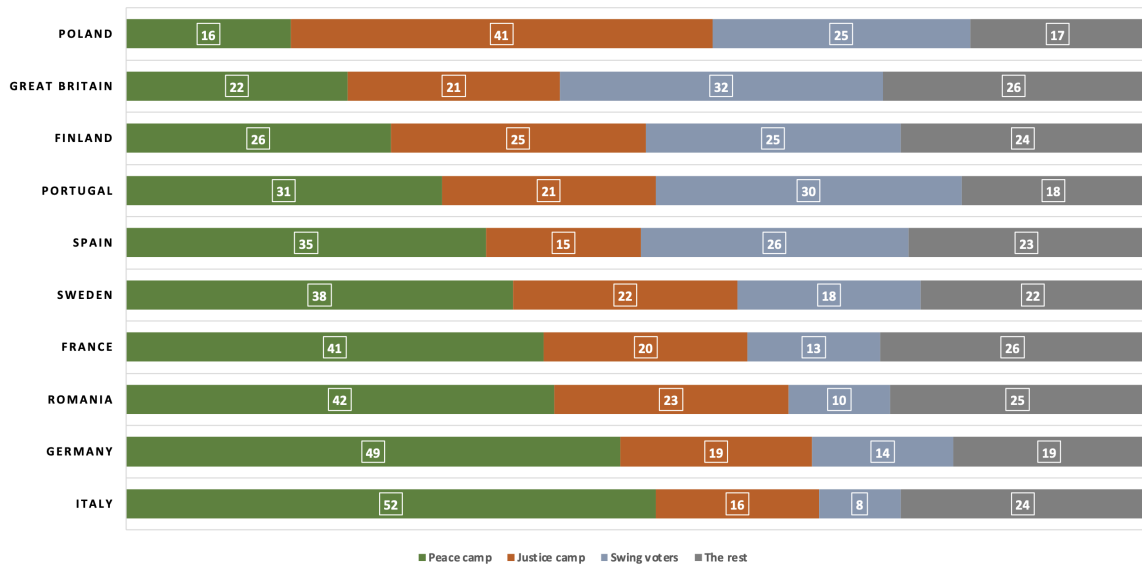


Figure 3. Europe’s voter camps in response to Russia’s war on Ukraine (per cent)

Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from Datapraxis and YouGov, May 2022

Fears of the rising living costs and higher energy prices are most elevated in Portugal (69 per cent), Italy (67 per cent), France (65 per cent) and Spain (64 per cent). This indicator is also high in Germany and the UK (60 per cent of indications each) and Finland (58 per cent).

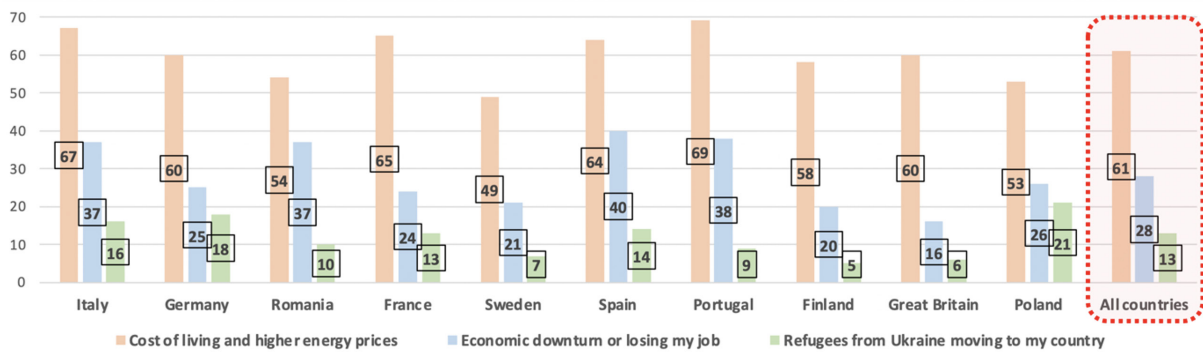


Figure 4. What are your biggest concerns in regards to the war in Ukraine? (per cent)

Source: author’s own elaboration based on data from Datapraxis and YouGov, May 2022

Respondents are relatively less concerned about the economic downturn, losing their jobs, and the influx of refugees from Ukraine. The Russian war in Ukraine came just after the shock of the coronavirus pandemic, which contributed to an economic downturn and many job losses (Doleschel & Manu, 2021). This post-pandemic economic recovery may have a moderating effect on perceptions of the consequences of the war in Ukraine. As for refugees, according to The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 10.6 million Ukrainians have already left their country since the outbreak of war on 24 February (Table 1). From a sociological point of view (Lekkai, 2020), it is interesting to note that despite the mass migration of Ukrainians—even in Poland, which has received more than one million people—the

public does not see this as a significant concern. On the contrary, residents of southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Italy) and Romania most often point to the influx of refugees from Ukraine as a major problem.

Country	Data Date	Individual refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe	Refugees from Ukraine registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes	Border crossings from Ukraine*	Border crossings to Ukraine**
Russian Fed.***	2022-08-02	1 968 127	Not applicable	1 968 127	Data not available
Poland	2022-08-09	1 274 130	1 274 130	5 269 285	3 259 225
Rep. of Moldova	2022-08-09	89 302	Not applicable	565 543	199 141
Slovakia	2022-08-09	87 030	86 834	668 195	401 945
Romania	2022-08-08	83 827	50 857	998 516	645 691
Hungary	2022-08-11	27 861	27 861	1 151 781	Data not available
Belarus	2022-08-09	11 121	Not applicable	16 685	Data not available
Suma		3 541 398	1 439 682	10 638 132	4 506 002

Table 1. Countries neighbouring on Ukraine

Source: UNHCR, Government (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>)

* The figure for individual refugees recorded in the country is an estimate as potential further movements or returns cannot be factored for the time being

Undoubtedly, of the three socioeconomic concerns highlighted above, the one related to the cost of living and rising energy prices plays a crucial role in the perception of the war in Ukraine. Recommendations for the coming months are not optimistic, as, for example, “analysis by the IMF suggests that Britain’s poor are particularly exposed to this price shock, because they tend to spend a bigger share of their budget on energy than the rich” (“Electric shock,” 2022, p. 19). The mood is not at its best in the EU’s largest economy either, despite new agreements with Qatar, Algeria or the United States, primarily because of “a temporary switch back to coal for electricity generation that should enable Germany to get through the winter without rationing and with minimal reliance on Russian gas—say 20% of the full capacity of the Nordstream 1 pipeline” (“Schafft Deutschland das?,” 2022, p. 16). However, as the author of the article notes, “if the winter is particularly cold, though, or if flows from Russia cease completely, further measures will be needed” (ibid.). Needless to say, a difficult winter also awaits European industry, which is dependent on regular energy supplies. This raises potential competition issues in the global market and, therefore, also affects labour markets.

All these elements, together with underlying processes, will essentially influence public opinion in Europe, which will secondarily exert some impact/pressure on governmental positions towards the Russian war in Ukraine. A significant deterioration in social welfare caused by high energy prices and rising inflation more broadly, together with the phenomenon of indifference (apathy) towards war messages, will most likely result in public pressure on individual governments to end the war. The outcomes of the surveys cited above already show the dominance of the Peace camp in most of the countries that provided the data, and these attitudes will intensify as winter approaches.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As presented in this article, the dialectical nature of the Russian war in Ukraine goes beyond the “sterile” juxtaposition of Russia’s geopolitical goals and the welfare of European societies. This by no means undermines the thesis that citizens’ opinions—to a greater or lesser extent—translate into the decisions of governments. Whereas the governments through the ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 2014), largely shape these views. Nor does the dialectical nature undermine the perception of the war in Ukraine by citizens of European countries through the prism of their welfare, strongly influenced by electricity prices that are a consequence of policies implemented by “energy states” (Dawson & Gómez-Barris, 2022). By using the term “sterile”, I meant that the dialectical logic of war transcends one-dimensional analyses and interpretations (Bitunjac, 2022; Lekki, 2020). Not only does the energy war in Europe co-occur with a possible food crisis in North Africa and the Middle East, but it includes issues of critical raw materials such as rare earths that are rarely present in media discourse. Therefore, Olivia Lazard (2022) stated that “the war in Ukraine must be analysed in parallel with Russian manoeuvres in Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, and East Asia. It must also be analysed in light of a transitioning world destabilised by climate disruptions and geoeconomics competition”.

The dialectic of the title also encompasses the control of these essential critical raw materials, necessary, after all, for the implementation of the European Green Deal by 2050 (Leonard, Pisani-Ferry, Shapiro, Tagliapietra, & Wolff, 2021; Wolf, Teitge, Mielke, Schütze, & Jaeger, 2021). These, however, are much less present in the press discourse. In this perspective, the Russian invasion may be seen in an entirely different light. It requires an in-depth and detailed analysis of the realisation of the Kremlin’s geopolitical goals far beyond the battle zone on Ukrainian territory. It is, therefore, not only about Ukraine’s precious mineral-rich regions but above all about Africa, Asia and South America. The threat to the supply of grain products from Russia and Ukraine is part of Putin’s broader strategic game, which involves the critical minerals needed to implement the European Green Deal and therefore Russian control over the countries of the old continent after the planned energy revolution.

Particularly in the context of the survey results cited above, as well as the upcoming energy revolution, it is important to remember that “each social transformation contains a disruptive component that implies a destruction of existing patterns of social interaction and institutional structures, and creation and emergence of new patterns and structures” (Otto et al., 2020, p. 7). This also applies to the political dimension of the forthcoming change in energy and, more broadly, in the prevention of climate crises (Grandclément & Nadaï, 2018; Klitkou, Bolwig, Hansen, & Wessberg, 2015).

In this optic, the war in Ukraine, among others, is part of a much more extensive effort on the eve of the spread of renewable energy sources, which will change the balance of power in the world with momentum. According to Chris Harman, it is not without reason that the concept of energy security has a “double meaning when used by governments. It can mean protecting the energy input of domestic and industrial use. But it can also mean operating policies that allow added pressure to be applied

to other states” (Harman, 2010, p. 319). Let us then ask what soft forms of pressure on European countries Russia will have at its disposal once the European Green Deal is implemented.

Let us also not forget that wars are fought by capitalist countries and within other capitalist economies, and their specific new spirit of capitalism impregnated with contemporary new forms of communication and data (Baranowski, 2021b, 2022; Parenti, 2010) is able to produce a “novel ideological configuration” (Boltanski & Chiappello, 2007, p. 24). The intersection of geopolitics and energy welfare in the context of Russia’s war in Ukraine does not fully reflect the multidimensional spectrum of an ideological configuration that includes, in addition to the elements described above, the significant interests of—to use Harman’s term (2010, p. 168)—military-industrial complexes. The dialectic of war is thus not only a dynamic phenomenon but, above all, a hidden way of realising ideological and economic interests on a global scale.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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