

### **Webinar report:**

## **The Russia-Ukrainian conflict: What does it mean for Africa?**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 – Zoom**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, the [Russia-Africa project](#) of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) hosted a webinar with the Centre for Sustainability Transition (CST) at Stellenbosch University to discuss the Russia-Ukraine conflict and what this means for Africa. The webinar covered the following topics:

- The key factors that define the Russia–Ukraine crisis:
- The immediate reasons for the escalation between Russia and the West; and
- The possible implications these events might have for African countries

Ms. Cayley Clifford, researcher in SAIIA's African Governance and Diplomacy Programme and one of the project leads, welcomed participants and speakers to the event. Ms. Clifford began by contextualizing the topic for the webinar within the broader context of the unfolding conflict in Ukraine, noting recent escalations within the preceding 24 hours.

Ms. Dzvinika Kachur, a researcher at the Centre for Sustainability Transitions at Stellenbosch University, opened the webinar with a presentation on the Russian-Ukraine conflict. Ms. Kachur provided a timeline of the Ukraine-Russia relationship since the independence of Ukraine in 1991, highlighting that Russian aggression since then has pushed Ukraine towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Ms. Kachur discussed Russia's initial use of hybrid warfare during the Crimean occupation. This included para-military forces, disinformation, cyberattacks and energy blockades. From a diplomatic perspective, Ms. Kachur discussed the Minsk Agreement, highlighting the difficulties of its implementation owing to diverse interpretations by Russia and Ukraine respectively. Ms. Kachur also discussed the opportunity this conflict presents for African states to call on permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to give up their right to veto and promote a system of greater equality. Finally, Ms. Kachur commented on the economic impact of this crisis, including increases in fuel prices, challenges to the global grain supply, global uncertainty in addition to a distraction from the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Mr. Paul Stronski, a Senior Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, began by highlighting the broader context of the conflict beyond NATO, asserting that the signing of the economic and trade agreement with the European Union (EU) in 2012 was an instigator of Russian aggression. From an African perspective, Mr. Stronski highlighted that Russian President Vladimir Putin has set a precedent that the people of a country do not have autonomy in the organisation of their state. Secondly, Mr. Stronski highlighted the toxic relations between the EU, the United States and Russia which will bleed into Africa. Mr. Stronski agreed with Ms. Kachur, asserting that it is time for Africa to push for UNSC reform. Furthermore, Mr. Stronski noted that Russia may seek stronger ties with African states to avoid international isolation and that Africa will have to decide whether it wants to conduct business with Russia, which may seek an alternative market following Western sanctions. Finally, Mr. Stronski highlighted the economic

impacts of the conflict, noting that in the short term, food and oil prices will increase, and that the latter could benefit Africa's oil and commodities exports. In the long term, the move towards renewables could be catalysed.

Ms. Irina Filatova, Professor of National Research University Higher School of Economics, began by discussing the variety of narratives on Ukrainian identities, acknowledging the cultural and language ties between Ukraine and Russia. Ms. Filatova noted that despite the ties between countries, every country has its own right to autonomy and sovereignty. Ms. Filatova asserted the unintentionality of NATO's fuelling of tensions, postulating that the escalations are due to President Putin's discomfort with Ukrainian leadership, and his will to dismantle the multilateral world order and restore the bipolar situation which existed during the Cold War. In Africa, Ms. Filatova highlighted the possibility of militarisation in addition to reduced international humanitarian and economic aid.

Mr. Steven Gruzd, Russia-Africa Programme Head at SAIIA, began by highlighting the interconnectedness of the world. Mr. Gruzd noted statements made to condemn Russian aggression by African states including the Kenyan ambassador to the UN, Gabon and Ghana. Mr. Gruzd highlighted the impact of the escalation of conflict in Ukraine on Africa, firstly foregrounding Russia's involvement in certain African states, contending that there is a strong correlation between the recent coups in Western Africa and Russia's presence on the continent. Furthermore, Mr. Gruzd highlighted that wheat and sunflower trade will be impacted. Mr. Gruzd underlined that despite being distant, even South Africans will be impacted by the conflict. Due to the impact on international stock markets, individuals pension funds could be affected, and petrol prices could increase. Finally, Mr. Gruzd noted that this conflict is escalating under the shadow of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan which put pressure on President Joe Biden.

Thereafter, a Q&A session was opened. During this session, the speakers agreed that Turkey is likely to support Ukraine, and heed calls by Ukraine to close the Black Sea waterways to cut off Russian warships. When asked what could be done by international society, Ms. Kachur said that it could learn from this experience and ensure that it confirms information credibly to avoid spreading disinformation. Further, Ms. Kachur highlighted that South African and other African states should be proactive, employing their freedom of expression. Mr. Stronski implored participants to remember the human impacts of this escalation and highlighted the refugee crisis which is likely to emerge. Mr. Stronski further highlighted the autonomy of countries to decide if they want to align with Russia and its values. Mr. Gruzd noted that civilians have an opportunity to share their condemnation through protest, blogs, and social media, asserting that civil society can make a difference. On the possibility of the use of nuclear ammunition, the speakers agreed that this was unlikely, however, Ms. Filatova and Mr. Stronski highlighted the emotive and unpredictable nature of President Putin's actions. The speakers agreed that the current UNSC system is not functioning and with enough political will, reform is possible. When asked if Russians are likely to speak out against Russia's aggressions, the speakers agreed that this is unlikely due to the clamp down on dissent by the Russian government.

The webinar was well attended, with over 200 viewers. The recording of the event is available [here](#).