

# THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN WAR ON RWANDA

*The current Ukrainian-Russian war has far greater-reaching effects than what is typically reported in much of the international news media. The war has significantly impacted African development, which was already harmed during the global Covid-19 pandemic. With the pandemic seemingly over, African nations such as Rwanda hoped for increased economic development. However, the current war in Ukraine sparked increased fuel and food prices throughout the continent, which has impacted expected growth rates. This article reviews the war's impact on the central African nation of Rwanda. It illustrates Rwandan anger about the economic implications of the war and the frustration from the nation's inability to stop its effects.*

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**R**ussia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022<sup>1</sup> signaled too much of the world how past Cold War norms, thought to have ended, are still very much alive. Russia's war against Ukraine has grown from a regional and historical dispute over Ukraine's relations with Russia into a global conflict. Russia and Ukraine's allies, specifically the United States, are enlisting allies to support their strategic goal for the conflict. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited the African nations of Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Republic of Congo<sup>2</sup> with his counterpart, United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken visiting South Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda to rally support.<sup>3</sup> While these overtures to African nations might seem like repetitions of previous Cold War divisions in Africa, there is little for the continent to gain compared to past foreign policies of playing the superpowers against each other. Fundamentally, the recent conflict in Ukraine has become an unwelcome global event impacting African development just as it began recovering from the impacts of Covid-19.<sup>4</sup>

When Francis Fukuyama wrote his now infamous assessment of post-Cold War politics, *The End of History and the Last Man*,<sup>5</sup> during a period from the 1990s and up until the September 2001 World Trade Center attacks when many believed that the future would be significantly more peaceful. The book's central argument was how the 'West,' better explained as democracy and relatively free-market-oriented economic policies guided by the United States and its Western European allies, had won the argument against communist dictatorship and centralized economic planning. Horrific wars would become a historical example of failed international cooperation and past governance and economic development mistakes. As with many critiques of this thesis,<sup>6</sup> it carefully ignored or did not predict horrific events worldwide. For Africa, that included multiple conflicts, with the bloody First (1996-

<sup>1</sup> Anton Troianovski and Neil MacFarquhar, "Putin Announces Start to 'Military Operation' Against Ukraine," *The New York Times*, 23 February 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion.html>

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Yusuf, "Lavrov Visit to Africa Seen as Effort to Counter Western Narratives," *Voice of America*, 25 July 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-visit-to-africa-seen-as-chance-to-counteract-western-narrative/6672953.html>

<sup>3</sup> Landry Signé, "US Secretary of State Blinken to visit Africa as tension with China and Russia intensifies," *Brookings*, 5, August 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/08/05/us-secretary-of-state-blinken-to-visit-africa-as-tension-with-china-and-russia-intensifies/>

<sup>4</sup> Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted Rwandan development by reducing foreign visitors. Rwanda's economic strategy, Vision 2050, relies on continued robust growth from the tourist industry. The near universal shutdown of global tourism caused many businesses in the service industry to shut down with many only recovering by early 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Azar Gat, "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2007). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2007-07-01/return-authoritarian-great-powers>; Megan Gibson, "Francis Fukuyama: We could be facing the end of 'the end of history'," *New Statesman*, 30 March 2022. <https://www.newstatesman.com/encounter/2022/03/francis-fukuyama-on-the-end-of-the-end-of-history>; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994); Robert Kagan, "Michael Burleigh, Return of the Dog Pack: The Return of History and the End of Dreams," *Literary Review* (May 2008). [https://web.archive.org/web/20111002021637/https://literaryreview.co.uk/burleigh\\_05\\_08.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20111002021637/https://literaryreview.co.uk/burleigh_05_08.html)

1997) and Second (1998-2003) Congo Wars, which were outcomes of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsis, commonly known as the Rwandan Genocide.<sup>7</sup> These events were seen as the norm within the Global South, often explained through ‘New Wars theory,’<sup>8</sup> and blips within the large democratizing and economic liberations of much of the world’s economies. Most important for the United States, its primary enemy during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, was no longer a threat. The country collapsed into several independent nations, leading to Constructivism’s rise within International Relations theory.<sup>9</sup> The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and its global impacts illustrate how the old rivalries are still very much a reality, with other nations such as China, India, Iran, and Türkiye playing an essential role in the conflict and global relations.

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### ***The Economic Consequences of the Ukrainian-Russian War for Rwanda***

The conflict has produced little for Africa beyond its adverse effect of increased energy prices and food shortages. Since returning to Rwanda in December 2022 until March 2023 to conduct fieldwork for a separate project,<sup>10</sup> Rwandans complained about rising inflation for food and petrol prices. All of which they blame the current conflict in Ukraine for producing. At the primary market in Rwanda’s capital city of Kigali, Kimironko Market, food sellers complained about how the conflict has led to higher energy prices which trickle down to higher food prices and smaller profit margins. One commented:

[President Vladimir] Putin went to war with Ukraine. Why he did it has no[thing] to do with us [Rwandans], but we are paying part of the costs. If Ukraine becomes Russia again or Ukraine wins, others will celebrate. But the damage is done to us. Food costs more, travel costs more, [and] everything costs more.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gerard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Kaldor, “In defence of new wars,” *Stability: International journal of security and development*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2013): p. 1-16.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Hopf, “The promise of constructivism in international relations theory,” *International security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1998): p. 171-200.

<sup>10</sup> UK Research and Innovation, “Military Strategies During the Genocide Against the Tutsis in Rwanda,” UK Research and Innovation, <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FW001217%2F1>

<sup>11</sup> Unnamed Rwandan merchant, interviewed by the Author, December 2022.

While riding with a motorcycle taxi driver at a traffic light near a petrol station, he pointed towards the tower containing regular petrol and diesel prices. Before the conflict, petrol was roughly around Rwf 1000<sup>12</sup> per liter. However, now the price has increased to Rwf 1580.<sup>13</sup> For many Rwandans, this price increase caused a severe financial burden that continues. The driver pointed at the petrol prices, “thank you, Russia, thank you, Ukraine.”<sup>14</sup>

These quotes illustrate some of the frustration felt by Rwandans. Most telling is the separation between those directly involved in the conflict and those in the periphery. While Rwanda is not dependent on Ukraine for food resources, like many other African nations,<sup>15</sup> it nevertheless is experiencing the cost of food issues thanks to the conflict. Rwanda is a landlocked nation which leads to imports costing, on average, an estimated forty percent.<sup>16</sup> The significant additional charges stem from trucks traveling from the seaports of Mombasa and Der-es-Salaam to Kigali, around 1500 kilometers away. Despite the country’s relatively good internal road network, the topographical nature of Rwanda, nicknamed the country of a thousand hills, leads to higher transportation costs as trucks need to circumvent multiple hills throughout the country. Thus, the increase in the price of petrol and diesel leads to more substantial transportation costs.

While the costs of fuel and food impact nearly all Rwandans, the rising costs also affect other industries. One entrepreneur owning a household shop commented about how the recent conflict has affected her business. It, along with the continued Covid lockdown in China, led to increased difficulties in shipping her goods from China to Rwanda. Additionally, her clients are now more hesitant to spend as growing food leads to more significant financial concerns and considerations.<sup>17</sup> The increase in Rwanda’s middle class is seen by its government as necessary to promote its macroeconomic plans within Vision 2050. Akin to the previous Vision 2020, this economic plan is intended to transform Rwanda into a middle-income economy. The intention for economic growth is not only for national development but is part of a more comprehensive policy to prevent another genocide by increasing economic interdependency between Rwandans.<sup>18</sup> There are other fears that the large amount of attention Ukrainian receives from Rwanda’s donors, specifically the United States

<sup>12</sup> As of writing this piece on 11 January 2023, Rwf1000 equated to roughly US\$0.93.

<sup>13</sup> As of writing this piece on 11 January 2023, Rwf1580 equated to roughly US\$1.48.

<sup>14</sup> Unnamed Rwandan motorcycle taxi driver, interviewed by the Author, January 2022.

<sup>15</sup> James Tasamba, “Wheat prices in Africa up 60% due to Russia-Ukraine war: AfDB,” *Anadolu Agency*, 27 April 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/wheat-prices-in-africa-up-60-due-to-russia-ukraine-war-afdb/2573858>

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Beloff, *Foreign Policy in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Elite Perceptions of Global Engagement*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2021): p. 211.

<sup>17</sup> Unnamed Rwandan merchant, interviewed by the Author, January 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Beloff, “Foreign Policy,” p. 181-203.

and the European Union, might lead to a reduction of foreign assistance in terms of grants, loans, and direct aid. Despite some organizations discussing their concerns,<sup>19</sup> there is little to indicate this outcome.

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*“There are of course no guarantees that democratization will occur; nor is the process of democratization necessarily peaceful. Increasingly ruthless oppression, spasms of violence, expulsions, and even civil strife are all possible.”*

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It might seem improbable to relate the current Ukrainian-Russian conflict to a possible conflict within Rwanda. However, economic crises caused by global events have led to civil unrest, as seen during the late 1980s and early 1990s after the collapse of tea and coffee prices. Jared Diamond suggests that the global price decline for these commodities led to economic instability within Rwanda, eventually resulting in the 1994 genocide.<sup>20</sup> However, his argument minimizes the multiple reasons that led to the genocide. Other factors include ethnic divisions, vast corruption of the Habyarimana regime, and a rise of a small Hutu extremist elite, the *akazu* or ‘small house’, trying to resurrect its political and economic power by securitizing Rwanda’s Tutsi population.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, as seen during the foreign aid withdrawal in 2012–2013 after international accusations of Rwandan support of the Congolese rebel group, the Movement 23 March (M23),<sup>22</sup> economic hardships produced by outside forces led to nervousness by Rwandan government officials of possible future economic and social problems.

### ***Rwandan Foreign Policy***

Under President Paul Kagame, the Rwandan government has spoken little about the Ukrainian-Russian conflict as they are inflamed in their international crisis with renewed allegations of involvement with the M23.<sup>23</sup> As with many other African

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<sup>19</sup> Unnamed Rwandan civil society leader, interviewed by the Author, January 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Wallis, “Rwanda’s Forgotten Years: Reconsidering the Role and Crimes of Akazu 1973–1993,” *Journal of International Peacekeeping* Vol. 22, No. 1–4 (2020): p. 40–59.

<sup>22</sup> Dominique E. Uwizeyimana, “International Donors’ obliviousness to human rights violations and lack of democracy in their disbursement of aid: a case of post-genocide Rwanda,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014): p. 1–17.

<sup>23</sup> News Wire, “European Union urges Rwanda to stop supporting M23 rebels in DR Congo,” *France24*, 31 December 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221231-european-union-urges-rwanda-to-stop-supporting-m23-rebels-in-dr-congo>

nations, Rwanda called for the conflict to be resolved. During the 2 March 2022 United Nations vote to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Minister Counsellor in Permanent Mission of Rwanda to the UN, Robert Kayinamura commented:

Rwanda voted in favor of this resolution to firmly support that the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of any country must be respected.<sup>24</sup>

While it is not unusual for this type of response by the Rwandan government, there have been times when the nation has had a more vocal or critical role in global events. An example is during the 2014 Israeli-Hamas war, Operation Protective Edge. During this little more than one month length conflict, Rwanda spoke in defense of Israel. Importantly, Rwanda held a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Former Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo traveled to Israel to witness Hamas' missiles launched from the Gaza Strip. While not everyone within the Rwandan government supported Israel's right to defend itself, most came out in support. This primarily resulted from the Rwandan shared identity of both nations experiencing a security threat from actors wishing the destruction of their nations as well as the hope for increased economic, military, and political collaboration between the two states.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Rwanda buckled international norms against Israel to promote its state interests.<sup>26</sup> The current conflict in Ukraine does not pose the same opportunity for Rwanda.

Rwandan foreign policy promotes state interests with the intersubjective themes of abandonment, *agaciro* and promoting Rwandan human security. Abandonment of Rwanda is not confined to just the early days of the genocide when the international community withdrew their citizens and attention from the massacres. Instead, it consists of multiple periods of abandonment, such as during its refugee crisis, which many of the government's inner circle, including President Kagame himself, experienced; the crises in neighbor Zaire before the First Congo War and the 2012-2013 foreign aid withdraws to name a few.<sup>27</sup> *Agaciro*, a Kinyarwanda word meaning 'dignity' and 'self-sufficient,' is often used within economic terms.<sup>28</sup> However, it can be found within how Rwandan government officials wish for the nation to become independent from foreign aid reliance and be forced into foreign policy decisions that do not benefit the nation.<sup>29</sup> Lastly, Rwandan human security follows a Constructivist

<sup>24</sup> Alice Kagina, "Rwanda speaks out on Ukraine conflict," *New Times Rwanda*, 3 March 2022. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/194012/News/rwanda-speaks-out-on-ukraine-conflict>

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan R. Beloff, "Rwanda, Israel, and operation protective edge," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016): p. 103-113.

<sup>26</sup> Beloff, "Foreign Policy," p. 255.

<sup>27</sup> Beloff, "Foreign Policy," p. 21-23.

<sup>28</sup> Beloff, "Foreign Policy," p. 23-26

<sup>29</sup> Beloff, "Foreign Policy," p. 26-30.

description<sup>30</sup> to include the protection of all who identify as Rwandan rather than Hutu, Tutsi or Twa. The Rwandan government and its military, the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF), will actively promote security for the nation and those who identify as Rwandan. An example is how Rwandans studying and residing in Egypt were airlifted back to Rwanda during the 2011 Arab Spring.<sup>31</sup> For Rwandan foreign policy, these intersubjective themes influence how the nation perceives and engages with the international community. However, there is little opportunity for Rwanda, let alone most African nations, to express its agency and promote its interests in combating the negative impacts of the Ukraine-Russian war.

### ***What can Rwanda Do?***

Beyond speaking their frustrations about the negative impacts of the distant war on their everyday lives, most Rwandans acknowledge the lack of options that they are their country can do. Nothing within Rwandan foreign or economic policy can adequately curb the adverse effects on them and much of the world. The National Bank of Rwanda and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Cooperation (MINECOFIN) have attempted policies to control prices, fight inflation and continue supporting economic growth. Few effective policies can combat the rising energy prices that will help most Rwandans.<sup>32</sup> As Milton Friedman warned, price controls typically do not intend to support those most affected by inflation.<sup>33</sup> Over the past decade, Rwandan foreign policy has focused mainly on economic and commercial diplomacy to increase foreign investment for development.<sup>34</sup> However, global economic slowdowns significantly impact the rate of investment and number of tourists, which the Rwandan government had hoped would rebound after Covid-19.

Beyond the economic consequences, Rwanda, like much of Africa, cannot influence Russia, Ukraine, or their allies. Nevertheless, some Rwandans wish for their government to play some type of role in ending the conflict. One Rwandan commented on how Rwanda should offer its soldiers as peacekeepers to end the conflict by instituting some buffer between Ukraine and Russia.<sup>35</sup> While this is a noble concept, it has little practicality. Rwanda is a prominent global actor in peacekeeping, receiving international praise for its military and police effectiveness

<sup>30</sup> Edward Newman, "Human security and constructivism." *International studies perspectives* Vol. 2, No. 3 (2001): p. 239-251.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Kayiramura, "Return of Rwandan students to Egypt is good news," *New Times Rwanda*, 21 March 2011. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/52504/Opinions/return-of-rwandan-students-to-egypt-is-good-news>

<sup>32</sup> Kamlesh Bhuckory, "Rwanda Central Bank Expects Interest Rate Increases to Help Control Inflation," Bloomberg, 12 September 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-12/rwanda-sees-rate-increases-helping-tame-runaway-inflation>

<sup>33</sup> Milton Friedman, "Nobel lecture: inflation and unemployment," *Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 85, No. 3 (1977): p. 451-472.

<sup>34</sup> Beloff, "Foreign Policy," p. 181-203.

<sup>35</sup> Unnamed Rwandan, interviewed by the Author, January 2022.

in conflict zones.<sup>36</sup> However, the numbers would be too insignificant to provide a buffer for the conflict seriously. Additionally, the conflict has grown beyond a dispute between Russia and Ukraine. The conflict has become an international incident, with Ukraine receiving support from those Russia perceives as threats to the nation's survival, which is closely aligned with Neoclassical Realists' description of state security. Despite these pleas, most Rwandans acknowledge the situation they, Africa, and much of the world are in with a simple shrug of the shoulders and a hope that the conflict ends soon for things to begin returning to a sense of 'normal.' Few realize that the destruction in Ukraine, particularly the agricultural production of grain exported to Africa, as well as Russia's military and economic deterioration, likely means Africa will continue to experience the consequences of the conflict.

### ***Conclusion***

During my nearly three-month stay in Rwanda, I was continually asked about the future of the Ukraine-Russian war. While some were genuinely interested in the future of the conflict, most were more concerned about its impacts on their everyday lives. The conflict thousands of kilometers away caused and continues to impact Rwanda's economic development. Higher petrol and food prices fuel a domino effect that has hit all aspects of Rwandan life. The most frustrating part for Rwandans is how little they and their country can do. Rwanda's history illustrates how foreign events can significantly impact their everyday lives. When the prices of coffee and tea dropped in the late 1980s, the Rwandan economy went into a spiral which, as Diamond suggests, was a cause of the 1994 genocide. Additionally, the *agaciro* belief urges Rwandans to tackle pressing societal issues. However, the current crisis is not so easily navigable, with most realizing the limitations placed on them and their government.

This is not a unique feeling for Rwanda, as much of the Global South is hampered by the current conflict in Ukraine. Unfortunately, even if peace reigned tomorrow, the economic implications would continue for the short term. This impact is not alone, as Covid also harmed many African countries. For Rwanda, the tourist and service industry has been significantly affected by the global pandemic. While tourism is beginning to increase again, the increased prices of transport have hindered its possible return. Beyond the economic consequences of the current tourist sector, the continuation of the war means the continued impacts on petrol prices resulted in financial repercussions felt by most Rwandans, Africans, and much of the world. The international community needs to address these concerns even if Africa does not play a significant part in the seemingly renewed Cold War between Russia and the West.

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<sup>36</sup> Danielle Beswick, "Peacekeeping, regime security and 'African Solutions to African Problems': Exploring Motivations for Rwanda's Involvement in Darfur," *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 31, No. 5 (2010): p. 739-754.