

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

The Russian invasion of Ukraine: some readings from Italian newspapers (20 February–5 March 2022)

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Abstract

Over the last two years, the metaphor of war has often been used in Italy when discussing the fight against the pandemic, to describe the restrictions that have been introduced as a result, from lockdown to the Green Pass. Paradoxically, once the state of emergency ended, just as we were on the cusp of the long-awaited return to normality (to ‘peace’ in a sense), Russia’s sudden invasion of Ukraine meant that war truly became part of Italians’ lives through the media. In this context, I have analysed the positions taken by the major Italian periodicals (*Avvenire*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Foglio*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, *Il Mattino di Napoli*, *Il Messaggero* and *Il Tempo di Roma*) between 20 February and 5 March. What becomes clear through examination of the main articles is that the themes that would characterise the subsequent Italian debate – from a strategic, humanitarian, political, and economic point of view – were already present in the two weeks from the end of February to the beginning of March 2022.

Keywords: history; Ukraine; society; Italy; culture and media

From the pandemic to the invasion

Over the last two years, which have been characterised by the fight against the pandemic, the metaphor of war has often been used both by those introducing, and those agreeing to, measures that restrict freedom, such as isolation within the walls of the home; the requirement to wear a mask; and restricted access to non-domestic spaces including the workplace, which became conditional on the possession of a Green Pass certifying that the holder has been vaccinated.

In Italy, the vaccination campaign was coordinated by army general Francesco Paolo Figliuolo. This did not come without controversy, appearing to many a sign of political weakness and an abandonment of an opportunity for civil responsibility in favour of the military.

I distinctly remember when, after constantly hearing the phrase ‘we are at war’ being used to stigmatise the hardship of lockdown, I heard someone make the quip that there was war waged at home on the sofa, and there was war actually experienced by fathers or grandfathers in the trenches, on the battlefield, in shelters, and so on.

Well, as we were right on the cusp of a return to normality, the news of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine came crashing down on us on 24 February 2022, invading our homes

from the television screen with its immediate rawness. It was from the outset a war, to all intents and purposes, waged by grim tanks freshly marked with a Z. The mass of people the tanks were pointed towards set off in search of an immediate escape route, as though they knew that there could be no negotiation with a war machine. By the time of writing, on Easter Saturday, 12 million people have already fled within and beyond the borders of Ukraine, according to UNHCR data. This staggering figure bears witness to the violence with which the conflict has developed, and for which a solution is not yet discernible, whether it be military or diplomatic (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale 2022).

But, at its outset, how did the Italian press present this invasion? Given the unprecedented mass of Russian and Belarusian troops on Ukraine's borders, it could have been foreseen, even though actors long tried to prevent it.

A timely source for reconstructing the tension that marked the month from January to February is without doubt Euronews (<https://it.euronews.com>). Today, the determination with which Russia prepared for its attack on Ukraine is startling, and during this period, the opportunities for mediation sought by international diplomats proved inadequate, one after another (Iaccarino 2022).

We can track the days leading up to the invasion through the *Corriere della Sera*, which depicts the perplexity of political and diplomatic observers about Russia's waging of open war on Ukraine, despite the growing signs of confrontation between the two countries.

On 20 February, Sergio Romano (2022), former ambassador to Moscow (1985–9) and columnist for the *Corriere*, wrote an article entitled 'Why now Anything is Possible, Including a "Conflict of the Future"' for the column *L'ago della bilancia*, or 'The Tipping of the Scales'. There, he admitted that, in recent days, he had considered it unlikely that the Ukraine crisis would provoke a war, because he was convinced that 'the two opposing parties (Russia and the United States) would stop at the cliff edge and find a way to step back together'. He also still believed, despite indications to the contrary, 'that common sense would eventually prevail', as it did during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. This crisis, during which Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy were at loggerheads, cooled down through communication and talks, until it was resolved. Reference was often made to these events at the start of the last week of February.

One should note that during this first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, many commentators did not consider either Ukraine or the European Union as participants in possible negotiations with Moscow. In their assessment, a conflict was occurring between the US and Russia for the redefinition of spheres of influence, even if at times the awareness emerged that this was a crisis of a new kind: the first open confrontation of the post-Cold War era, in which the tried and tested rules of dialogue between the powers no longer applied (Žižek 2022).

On 20 February, Fabrizio Dragosei (2022), writing for the *Corriere* newspaper, made the astute observation that Russia had to present the war as 'a necessity', because 'a cold attack against the near-blood relatives of the former Soviet Republic' would not have been 'acceptable to the majority of ordinary citizens'. He pointed to the Russian strategy of decrying the imminence of a 'Ukrainian attack' against the Donbas to justify its own intervention as 'preventing a humanitarian catastrophe'.

Dragosei was correct in identifying this element of Moscow's anti-Ukrainian narrative, which would later be proposed again in different forms, used to corroborate the image of the 'Nazi' Ukrainian who murders Russian-speakers, and therefore, in the significant developments that followed, deserving of merciless destruction.

During this first phase, however, there was a tendency to frame Moscow's actions in terms of its own security concerns, admonishing the West, to varying degrees, for having ignored the signs of Russian unease at the possibility of the further enlargement of Euro-Atlantic institutions on its borders. There was no shortage of points of contention

to this narrative, which seemed to allow Moscow to justify its increasingly intransigent attitude and its deafness to requests for clarification of its real intentions.

In the days leading up to the invasion, Russian president Vladimir Putin recognised the 2014 referendum in which Donetsk and Lugansk voted to become republics independent from Ukraine. His speech featured strong nationalist overtones that left little doubt about the Kremlin leader's neo-imperialist ambitions and his breaking with the international community (Micalessin 2022; Molinari 2022; Valle 2022; Flammini 2022; Valentino 2022b; Alfano 2022). And so, on 23 February, Ernesto Galli della Loggia (2022) painted a merciless picture in the *Corriere* of the 'abundant failures' that have marked the politics of the last 30 years. He discussed issues from the failure of Russia as a modern society, to that of the European Union, 'whose Christian Social Democratic political class, fixated on its own irenic-mercantile utopia, has considered concerns about the continent's economic and strategic autonomy to be the fruit of antiquated sovereignist and statist, if not warmongering, fantasies' (also see Polito 2022a, 2022b). This is one of the first allusions to the problem, which would later become all-consuming, of dependence on Russian energy and the failure to consider alternative sources of coal and gas. Depending on the commentators, these issues lend themselves to political and/or moral condemnation, whether generalised or targeted at certain parliamentary and business forces (Agnoli 2022).

The early days: from fear to reality

Many contributions were offered by various correspondents who relayed events in Ukraine from the early hours of the Russian invasion, in particular accounts of the immediate exodus of civilians. Driven by a sort of 'great fear', the result of a legacy of other similar invasions suffered over time, they became part of a wave that initially reached places not directly under Russian invasion and thus considered safer, but then decisively proceeded towards the country's borders. However, only women and children could leave the country. Men were not permitted to, as general conscription was announced immediately, as was the state of war. The image of Ukrainians that emerged from these accounts is one of 'people like us' who should be welcomed with generosity, and this encouraging message contrasted with the attitudes marked by intolerance and controversy that appear in various newspapers when discussing migrants who land on our shores (Valentino 2022a).

It is impossible to ignore that newspapers and other media sources have often gone no further than the winning formula of 'human interest'. They depict the types of situations that are most effective in encouraging others to identify with these new refugees. Many are travelling to Italy, where there is already a large Ukrainian community, particularly of women, and a vast network of intrafamilial contacts, many dating back to the days of hospitality programmes for the 'children of Chernobyl'.¹

The biggest surprise Ukraine had to offer was revealed almost immediately: the determination of soldiers and citizens alike to fight the invasion, to resist with arms in hand. Such a surge of rebellion is difficult for Western Europe, now accustomed to peace on the continent, to understand, and not to stigmatise as 'nationalist', where the term is given a pejorative meaning. Here, the paradox of the situation becomes clear: Ukraine should give up defending itself and recognise its inadequacy in the face of the Russian giant, yet it is precisely through resistance that it can counter Russia's plans for hegemony. From here, the figure of President Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky quickly emerged. Continually and too quickly prejudged as the ex-comedian catapulted to power as a ballot box joke, he loudly affirmed his own determination and that of the Ukrainian people – 'Ukrainian' in terms of a civic nationalism inclusive of ethno-religious-linguistic differences – to resist,

immediately asking for support and backing against Moscow, including sanctions, a no-fly zone, and the sending of arms.

A debate began immediately and would become increasingly heated throughout March and April. While Italy converged with European partners to send arms and impose sanctions on Russia (Marra 2022), political differences linked to economic concerns also began to emerge, from evaluations of the risks posed by the possible escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, to the use of nuclear weapons (Giarelli 2022; Valentini 2022; Montanari 2022), and considerations of the value of 'peace', 'dialogue' and 'negotiation' that drew on both pacifist and religious approaches (Liverani 2022; Muolo 2022).

These themes would be developed later but, in essence, the terms of the debate were already set during these early weeks.

The problem that soon became apparent was the violence with which the invasion was carried out, which Russia presented as a 'special operation' against the Ukrainian president and his government. It was argued that the failure of this *blitzkrieg*, the result of the prompt Ukrainian response, forced the Russians to review their strategy, despite not having adequate resources or sufficient preparation. At the same time, reports began to emerge of unjustified violence against civilians, and the fear of genuine war crimes started to grow.

The denialist attitude of the Russian authorities, combined with the repression of demonstrations of dissent across the country through intimidation, custodies, and arrests, has united the Italian press in their acknowledgement that this is a war and it should be denounced. To some, it is senseless, to others it is fratricidal, but fundamentally, its methods, timing, and acts are unjustified. Moreover, almost all newspapers have correspondents on the ground offering first-hand accounts of the Ukrainians' shock and their desperate search for safety in the face of the perhaps inefficient but nonetheless deadly efforts of the Russian troops. Even a newspaper like the Catholic *Avvenire*, which always places importance on working towards negotiation and peace, does not hide the reality of the situation from its readers. In fact, the opposite is true. From Chişinău in Moldova, Nello Scavo (2022) wrote:

Missiles are being used to do the dirty work: 478 have been dropped in recent weeks. Add to that the unending bombardment of cannons that are aimed at the population being massacred by Moscow. The dissociation between incoherent narratives and reality continues to cause death. More than 500 civilians have been killed, plus at least ten times as many soldiers.

There is no justification that holds up in the face of a people who fight rather than surrender, argues Adriano Sofri (2022) in *Il Foglio*. This newspaper devotes many in-depth analyses to the various 'faces' of war, featuring several commentators writing numerous columns. The same is true for *La Repubblica*, which emphasises the obstacles Russia is encountering, the European measures to respond to the invasion, and Italy's reaction, all framed within their approval of how democracies have responded to Russia's attack on the European, and perhaps world, order.

As Nathalie Tocci (2022), director of the Institute for International Affairs in Rome, wrote in *La Stampa*:

There was one world before and another after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The unthinkable became reality in little more than a week. Many knew or imagined, while others downplayed or failed to recognise, that an invasion was at least possible, if not probable. There were those, including this writer, who thought that Putin would stop after recognising the provinces of Donetsk and Lugansk, and that he

would quietly maintain military control of Belarus, while others feared a full-scale invasion for months. But even among the latter, few could have imagined what has occurred in the last week.

However, there no newspaper has been silent on the risks to Europe if Russia does indeed follow through on its threat of using nuclear weapons, and if Europe's resolve stretches to extending sanctions to cut its own energy supplies.

How to help the Ukrainians? Early differences

These are discussions that break up the apparent unanimity, and reveal its fragility. They also expose an underlying intolerance for what has been described as the 'decisionism' of prime minister Mario Draghi, which, as we know, was to lead parliament to vote on sending arms to Ukraine.

In *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, Marco Travaglio (2022) opens the door to doubt, cultivating a kind of reflection that will become more prevalent from March to April. Then, we will clearly see the extent to which Italy is now singularly pro-government and therefore pro-Ukrainian and anti-Russian in its outlook. This leaves no room for dissent and 'heterodox' views, even when they are legitimate expressions of a difference of opinion. Travaglio writes:

Who would dispute that the Ukrainian people should not be abandoned in their heroic resistance against the Russian invader? And that they do not need flowers, but weapons? This is all obvious, in principle. But before even a single firecracker can be sent beyond Ukraine's borders, other, much less obvious questions must be answered. Unfortunately, while the government was making this decision before a parliament of liars, no one thought to even ask, let alone answer them. ... If one believes that Ukraine, aided by the sanctions against Russia, has a good chance of success in both the short and long term, sending weapons makes sense. If, on the other hand, one believes that the outcome of the invasion is immutable, arming untrained (or poorly trained) civilians only serves to prolong the country's agony and increase the carnage, while the tormented population continues to be used as cannon fodder in the war games of the 'big boys'.

Or, as described in the less polemical and apolitical tone of *Il Foglio* (2022), 'the pride of the West that fights united for freedom shrinks in the face of a single question: where is the line between deterrence and powerlessness?'

It is also impossible to ignore the economic warnings delivered by other newspapers that wish to express the unease of entrepreneurs, particularly small ones. Already struggling as a result of Covid, they are now being threatened with new costs due to higher prices for gas, oil, and essential materials, with stock markets suffering from the climate of uncertainty linked to the conflict (*Il Tempo* 2022; *Il Messaggero* 2022).

Reflections of a high standard, by well-known commentators or experts on diplomatic, political and military issues are platformed by all the newspapers – *Avvenire*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Foglio*, *La Repubblica*, *La Stampa*, *Il Mattino di Napoli*, *Il Messaggero* and *Il Tempo di Roma*. However, what is really missing upon closer inspection is a reflection on Ukraine. It is almost as though there has been nothing to counter the Russian stereotype of Ukraine as a barely sovereign nation, artificially constructed by the Bolsheviks between the Revolution and the Second World War, 'unjustly' enlarged by Khrushchev with the 'gift' of Crimea and governed by a corrupt and inadequate political class.

Does Ukraine have a history? An ever-current question

A reflection that I have continually included in my study of Ukraine since the early 2000s is that the country has never been present on the European cultural map, and therefore in the European mentality. Ukraine has been considered a nation ‘without a history’, like other fundamentally peasant nations, lacking a conscious elite, a language recognised as distinct, and a clear state narrative of its existence (Lami 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2017).

The destiny of Ukraine, a ‘country of variable geography’ as it is often called, has a troubled past. Following the Kievan Rus’, a medieval political federation encompassing present-day Belarus, Ukraine, and part of Russia, the lands that today make up Ukraine were divided over the centuries between powerful states, such as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Tsarist Russia, the Habsburg Empire, and their successor states (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, the USSR). After 1991 and before the current serious situation, independent Ukraine was discussed little and infrequently on occasions when its path crossed that of Russia (Fiori 2022).

Certainly, all scholars have done their best to explain Ukraine, going beyond the university and dedicated conferences and conventions to meetings with schools, institutions, and associations, as well as giving interviews to various media outlets (see the website of the Italian Association of Ukrainian Studies: <https://aisu.it/>). However, much remains to be done to make this great country better known to and ‘recognised’ by all.

Perhaps now it is too late. Historians are not fortune-tellers, so we do not really know what will remain of the expanse of Ukraine from the Black Sea to the Carpathians, from the Dnipro to the Buh. What’s more, it is not a question of expansion, of ‘nationalism’, but of a state, of its existence as a space defined by borders protected by international law. We must also consider this too in years to come, because every precedent set makes history and justifies the next violation.

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Competing interests. The author declares none.

Note

1. Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Ivanovyč Kuleba, recalled his stay in Irpinia, Atripalda, when he was welcomed as a 13-year-old boy by an Italian family with whom he has always remained in contact.

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Italian summary

Negli ultimi due anni in Italia si è spesso utilizzata la metafora della guerra in relazione alla lotta alla pandemia, per le misure restrittive che ha comportato, dal lockdown al greenpass. Paradossalmente, finita l'emergenza, alle soglie del tanto atteso ritorno alla normalità (alla 'pace' in un certo senso) all'improvviso, con l'invasione dell'Ucraina da parte della Russia, la guerra è davvero entrata nella vita degli italiani, attraverso i *media*. In questo contesto, si sono analizzate le posizioni assunte dai maggiori periodici italiani (*Avvenire*, *Corriere della Sera*, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, *Il Foglio*, *la Repubblica*, *La*

Stampa, Il Mattino di Napoli, Il Messaggero e Il Tempo di Roma) fra il 20 febbraio e il 5 marzo. Dall'esame dei principali articoli, emerge che i temi che caratterizzeranno il successivo dibattito italiano – dal punto di vista strategico, umanitario, politico, economico – sono già presenti nelle due settimane a cavallo fra il febbraio e il marzo 2022.

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