

Argentina: The Conflict Inside the Conflict

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Reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Argentina

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, started by the Kremlin almost a year ago, did not go unnoticed in Argentina. On the contrary, the topic was everywhere in the media, in political debates and in everyday conversations for almost a month. As the conflict went on, the issue lost its centrality, but still featured every day on the news. That should not come as a surprise: despite the geographical distance and the remote chance that the war would have a direct impact on the country, there is in Argentina both a noticeable interest about Russia and an unusual reaction to a politician like Vladimir Putin.

What is Russia? Who is Putin?

These two factors played a fundamental role in the Argentinean reaction to the invasion of Ukraine, although in opposing ways. On the one hand, the war resuscitated in a segment of society a feeling of Russophobia, inherited from the period of the Cold War. At that time, Argentina was part of the Western Bloc and Russia was seen as the land of communism and barbarism. Even today *communism* is a term used here to disqualify any political argument.

Anti-Russian sentiment revived with some force in 2020 when the Kremlin announced the registration of Sputnik-V vaccine and the Argentine government, headed by Kirchnerist Alberto Fernández, decided to acquire doses to administer to the population. The epic flights of Aerolíneas Argentinas to Moscow to bring back the cargos of vaccine were met with suspicion and dismissal, especially from sectors opposed to the government. “It is water from the Volga river,” “It is not a safe vaccine,” or “They are going to inject us with communism” were some of the many opinions on social networks or heard from the mouths of social communicators and political leaders. Most of these critics had no technical knowledge about the vaccine and simply mistrusted it because of its [geographical origin](#).

The invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 was a new excuse for that part of society to bring out its stereotypes and prejudices regarding Russia, without being able to distinguish its population and its culture from its government’s decisions. As a consequence, it was very difficult to provide any rational analysis of the situation. This meant, among other things, joining the wave of cancellations that affected Russian artists, academics, and athletes all over the world. The situation here escalated to the curious extent of a [restaurant removing Russian salad](#) from its menu (Olivier salad is called “Russian salad” here, and is widely consumed by Argentinians).

On the other hand, the war was used by some people considering themselves liberals to vindicate Russia in general and Vladimir Putin in particular. The reasoning of these groups can be summarized as follows: since Putin holds a position against the United States and the United States has historically applied imperialist policies in Latin America, Russia should be a natural ally of Argentina. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” to put it in a reductionist but effective formula. Dmitry Medvedev’s recent [assertions](#) on a very delicate topic in Argentina helped to reinforce that

idea. As a consequence of this reasoning, NATO was defined as holding the main responsibility for the invasion and the actions of the Kremlin were consequently justified, since it was acting defensively. For these liberals, Putin could be seen as an anti-imperialist leader of whom everything should be forgiven, based on the excuse that any criticism would play along with Western imperialism. It is common to see in social media Putin's famous photographs and memes with naked torso or dressed as a judo fighter, and people praising his qualities as a leader capable of acting decisively. This image of Putin was an ideal and not a real one, creating the paradox of liberal sectors defending an authoritarian and conservative leader. As [Pablo Stefanoni](#) has pointed out, this "campism that values any global conflict in geopolitical terms", left out in its analysis of the war the voice of the Ukrainian population affected by the invasion, and prevented the possibility of discussing any imperialism beyond that of the United States.

The invasion meets *la grieta*

What has been said above shows how the reaction to the invasion here became part of another conflict known as *la grieta*, "the crack" or "the fracture." This expression was promoted to a large extent by the media in order to label the antagonism that has developed in the last fifteen years between Kirchnerism and anti-Kirchnerism. It can be seen as an update of the historic confrontation between Peronism and anti-Peronism. The external conflict is used to develop internal messages through dichotomous formulas: whoever supports the government should defend Russia and whoever is against the president should oppose the invasion. In fact, the support shown towards Ukraine during the first days of the invasion — expressed in [flags placed on balconies](#) or posts on social networks — had more to do with taking a critical position towards the Argentine government than with genuine solidarity.

This situation is better understood if we follow the trajectory of the Argentinean government in terms of international policy, which somehow tried to continue with the steps initiated by the two-time president and current vice-president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who visited the Kremlin twice (in 2008 and 2015, while she was president). Alberto Fernández reinforced this closeness to Russia when in 2020, as already mentioned, his government was one of the first to request the Sputnik-V vaccine. But at the beginning of 2022, Fernández fell into an ambiguous situation, which at this point is a trademark of his administration. With bad calculation, he met his Russian counterpart in Moscow on February 2, that is, a couple of weeks before the invasion began, but when both military mobilization and diplomatic meetings to avoid it were obvious. When most of the countries were keeping their distance from the Kremlin, the Argentinean president was arguing that the link between the two nations should grow and that Argentina should be "[Russia's gateway to Latin America](#)." For the hard-core supporters of Kirchnerism, this closeness to Russia was seen as necessary in order to break away from the tutelage exercised by the United States, and to stimulate a multipolar world. For the opposition, it was yet another example of the populist nature of the government and of its alignment with the "axis of evil." Weeks later, just after the attack, the government preferred not to use the term invasion and abstained from voting on a motion against Russia at the Organization of American States. That lack of definition was used by the main anti-Kirchnerist force, Juntos por el Cambio (Together for Change), to question and discredit the ruling party. The government wanted to detach itself from an issue that was, ultimately, distant to it, and a few days later it condemned the invasion, [a position that it ratified six months later](#). But the damage in terms of credibility had already been done.

The mainstream media were not immune to this logic. The two main newspapers, [Clarín](#) and [La Nación](#), with a clear anti-Kirchnerist position, condemned the invasion but in order to highlight the closeness of Fernández's government with the Kremlin. For these newspapers, both governments were a clear example of *populism* and, therefore, deserving of condemnation, despite the enormous distance between them, especially in terms of civil and political liberties. In turn, the newspaper

[Página/12](#), with positions close to Kirchnerism, went a long time without mentioning the word invasion: on the contrary, it spoke in its articles about a *military operation*, a term very close to the one used officially by Putin's government. Thus, both positions prevented an honest and conscientious debate about what was happening in Ukraine. The television and radio media could not escape this dichotomous gaze either. Whenever they could, they tried to highlight, on the one hand, the links between Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Alberto Fernández with Putin's government, even when Fernández had already stated his opposition to the invasion, or, on the other hand, the alleged responsibility of NATO in triggering the invasion. There were very [few cases](#), linked to alternative media, that tried to get out of this reductionist vision of the conflict, but they were the [exceptions](#) to the rule. In this context, it was difficult to give a voice to the Ukrainian people, to identify the true motives for the invasion, and to understand the real consequences both inside and outside Russia. The external political conflict was inserted into the internal one.

The Argentinean left in debate

Within the Argentinean left, the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not go unnoticed and, in keeping with the left's historical interest in the international context, the news generated significant reactions. Here we leave aside the position of the Argentine Communist Party, which closed any type of debate and in-depth knowledge of the situation by invoking NATO and US imperialism and NATO as the main cause of the invasion.

Perhaps the most significant [debate](#) was the one that took place on May 31 within the Frente de Izquierda y Trabajadores-Unidad (Worker's Left Front-Unity), the most important left-wing electoral coalition in Argentina. It was originally formed in 2011 by three Trotskyist parties: the Partido Obrero (PO, Workers' Party), the Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas (PTS, Socialist Workers' Party) and Izquierda Socialista (IS, Socialist Left). In 2019, the Movimiento Socialista de los Trabajadores (MST, Workers' Socialist Movement) also joined. Currently, this coalition has four seats in the National Congress. Although all the participants in the debate condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, their positions were nuanced and not unanimous regarding the characterization of the conflict and what should be done. The representative of the PTS, for example, pointed out that Ukraine was nothing more than a "pawn" in a larger conflict that was taking place worldwide, such as the one between Russia and NATO. In this sense, the task of the Argentinean left should be to prevent Ukraine from arming itself, to maintain an independent position and to wait for the war to enable a revolutionary scenario. A similar position was held by the PO delegate, for whom Ukraine is a "semi-colony of the European Union and US imperialism." Therefore, the left had to be cautious in terms of unconditional support, since if the Ukrainian resistance succeeded, NATO and North American imperialism would be reinforced. The MST representative seemed to avoid these positions by highlighting the imperialist nature of the Russian invasion. However, by posing the conflict within the framework of "inter-imperialist" struggles, he also included NATO among those who were responsible. If the task to be carried out should be to support the working class and the Ukrainian resistance, this had to be achieved within a larger task that involved not only the confrontation of Russian imperialism but also that of NATO. Finally, the IS delegate seemed to take the most dissimilar position by stating that it was not a conflict between Russia and NATO. In fact, he stressed the point that there were no NATO troops in Ukraine. On the contrary, it was "a war between an imperialist country like Russia against a semi-colony like Ukraine" and, therefore, he called for support for the Ukrainian resistance.

Without being in the coalition, but also from Trotskyist position, Nuevo Movimiento al Socialismo (New Movement for Socialism) also expressed its rejection of the invasion and its solidarity with the Ukrainian people, although it also included in its appeal the rejection of "[neoliberal imperialism](#)," embodied by NATO. Thus, the positions of Argentine Trotskyism about the war could not escape from a position that in general preferred to underline the influence of NATO than the internal logic

of Putinism itself. As a consequence, their positions had enormous difficulty in hearing the voice of the Ukrainian people and in separating specific claims from general ones, which helped to dilute the impact of any critical appeal to the Russian government as well as any unconditional solidarity for the Ukrainian people.

In the past year there have been other publications and activities developed from a left-wing sensibility that helped to try to understand the conflict in a more complex way, of which we have selected the most relevant. A few months after the invasion, a [statement](#) released by the European Solidarity Network with Ukraine entitled “With the resistance of the Ukrainian people” was circulated by email, denouncing Russian imperialism and unconditionally expressing its solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The document generated an intense [debate](#) among left-wing intellectuals, some of whom expressed the impossibility for them of signing a document that did not sufficiently condemn NATO, showing again the lack of willingness to overcome dichotomous and campist positions. However, the declaration was widely accepted and won prominent signatories. Journals such as [Herramienta](#), [Nueva Sociedad](#) and [Le Monde Diplomatique](#), for instance, immediately published dossiers about the war that aimed to broaden both the knowledge of what was happening and the interpretative debates. In June [El dominio del amo](#) (*The Master's Domain*) was published, a book in which the links between the invasion and Russian political history were analyzed critically, making use of original sources in Russian. All this was accompanied by [conferences](#) and [public debates](#) organized by specialists, who tried to provide a perspective that went beyond reductionist visions.

The reaction in Argentina to the Russian invasion of Ukraine showed the need for an honest and critical approach to the conflict that could help to dispel both stereotypes and partial views. Also, it highlighted the need for the left to rethink and update interpretations and slogans. The rejection of the Russian invasion must be unconditional and the denunciation of imperialisms must be total. Support must be addressed to the resisting Ukrainian population as well as to the Russian militants who every day risk their lives and freedoms to oppose the war and Putin's dictatorial regime. This should be the minimum consensus that allows us to keep thinking not only about the situation in Ukraine but also about a project for a non-tragic future world.

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