

Humanitarian implications of sanctions to end the war in Ukraine

🌐 By Dorothea Hilhorst and Rodrigo Mena ()

March 7, 2022 (<https://issblog.nl/2022/03/07/what-we-dont-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-using-sanctions-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine/>)

The sanctions package against Russia is expanding every day as the main strategy to end the invasion of Ukraine. While it is inevitable that ordinary Russians will suffer from these sanctions (as will people in the countries applying these sanctions), we must do everything in our ability to protect all civilians affected by this war, including people in Russia, from the impact of sanctions. This is not an easy task at all. On one hand, the sanctions might bring suffering to people in Russia (primarily for the most vulnerable ones), but on the other hand, they might lead to the end of the war, and, thereby, save many lives and reduce the extreme suffering of millions in Ukraine.



The great dilemma: using sanctions as a tool to end war

This great dilemma of how to stop the war while avoiding more suffering should not be taken lightly, and its impacts carefully assessed. On Tuesday evening, we listened to a conversation with two well-known military experts on the Dutch radio: Rob de Wijk and Arend Jan Boekestijn. After a while the conversation turned to the effects of the sanctions. Rob de Wijk stated, “We will smoke out the ‘regime’.” He found it likely that the ruble would completely collapse, and hence destroy the Russian economy. Boekestijn went one step further. He praised that the Russians, as a result of the imposed sanctions, can no longer withdraw money from ATM machines. He continued, “when people get hungry, they will go out on the ‘street’.” While the sanction seek to affect those in power, oligarchs, and the government itself, either of these two men did not seemed concerned about what their predictions would mean for the majority of people in Russia. On the contrary, they were impressed and fascinated by the sanctions, and almost jubilant about their possible effects.

The assumption, however, that hungry people will take to the streets to overthrow Putin is debatable. It ignores the fact that many Russians have already taken to the streets. In the early days of the war, an estimated 5,000 Russian civilians were

arrested during widespread protests against the war. The effects of large-scale protests are also uncertain. Until now, we have never seen Putin care much about protests or act based on what people think. [\(https://issblog.nl/\)](https://issblog.nl/)

The unsettling costs of sanctions: hurting the innocent and the most vulnerable

Provoking hunger is, unfortunately, a common weapon of war. Forcing the enemy to surrender through a siege that cuts off an area from food is a recurring theme in history. The creation myth of Carcassonne in France, in which Mrs. Carcass managed to deceive besiegers by throwing a well-fed pig over the city wall is just one of many examples. Emperor Charles V who besieged the castle did not realise it was the only pig left over in the desperately hungry city, and withdrew his troops when he concluded their siege was not successful. In the previous century, hunger has been used as a weapon of war in many conflicts — in China, Ethiopia, Biafra, Sudan, and so on. The Dutch hunger winter in the Second World War should not be missing from the long list as well, and nor should the so-called holodomor, in which Russia caused a dramatic famine in Ukraine in the 1930s, resulting in the death of more than 3 million people because of starvation.

Hunger often kills more civilians during wars than armed violence, and the long term effects of malnutrition are incalculable. The World Peace Foundation has listed 61 famines as part of conflicts that took place between 1870 and 2015. A conservative estimate of the number of victims came to 105 million deaths. To end hunger as a weapon of war, an international resolution was passed in 2018 condemning this. The resolution 2417 was an initiative of the Netherlands, and thanks to a great deal of diplomatic effort, it was adopted with unanimous support by the Security Council of the United Nations.

Making sanctions work without impacting civilians — is it possible? Sanctions are meant to end the invasion. Russia is targeting civilians with the bombing and seems to be rapidly accumulating war crimes. In the last 8 years, while war was ongoing in the separatist regions of Ukraine, humanitarian needs were immense. There were at least 850.000 people internally displaced, along with an acute need for socio-economic and

psycho-social care. Aid providers shared with us about the difficulties they face in the areas controlled by the Russian-backed separatists, ranging from concerns for the safety of aid providers to administrative hindrances (withholding permissions) in providing access. It will, therefore, be important to continue negotiating access to Ukraine, and enabling people to move freely in search for refuge, and most importantly seek an end to the invasion.

There is great optimism that the international solidarity and widely shared support for sanctions may facilitate the end of the war. It is inevitable that ordinary Russian civilians will bear some of the burden of the imposed sanctions. But we cannot let this become the goal. Instead, let us think about how to organise sanctions so that citizens are spared as much as possible, because the most vulnerable are, in every side of the conflict, the ones that usually pay the greatest costs.

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