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INTERNATIONAL

Ukraine-Russia crisis: What started the conflict and what will happen next?

The standoff has its roots in Russia's attempts to prevent the country from joining NATO on the grounds that it poses a threat to its national security

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Madrid - 27 JAN 2022 - 14:47 UTC



Russia and Ukraine were members of the Soviet Union until it dissolved in 1991 and Ukraine declared its independence. Ukraine occupies a strategic geographical position, sitting at the center of the fight for influence in Europe. Moscow wants to prevent Ukraine from turning towards the West: if Kyiv joins the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it will lose its ability to influence the country. NATO has not yet opened the door to Ukraine. What's more, the process of joining the organization is long and complex, and does not only depend on what Ukraine wants – the country has had its sights set on NATO since 2008. Moscow wants to veto Ukraine's membership in the alliance, arguing it would be a threat to Russian security.

The conflict between the two countries has been going on since March 2014, when pro-Europe protests against the corruption of Ukraine's pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich were violently suppressed. A series of violent clashes in Kyiv that occurred in this period pushed Yanukovich to flee.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin took advantage of the 2014 conflict to invade part of the Crimean Peninsula in the south of Ukraine, and organized a referendum to annex the area. The referendum, which took place in the presence of Russian troops, was declared illegal by the international community. The Crimean Peninsula is a strategic spot as it offers an important entrance to the Black Sea – an area Putin wanted to control. The annexation was celebrated at a large-scale event, in which Putin clearly explained the importance of the Crimean Peninsula: “Crimean Tatars have returned to their homeland.”

The invasion of the Crimean Peninsula triggered international protests, economic sanctions against Russia and ongoing calls for the territory to be returned. Putin has said that will never happen. Since 2014, he has been providing political and military support to pro-Russia separatists fighting the Ukrainian army in east Ukraine. Independent international reports have tracked the shipment of Russian weapons to the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine. According to the United Nations, around 14,000 people have died in the war in the disputed Donbas region.

Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have escalated further due to Russia’s decision to station tens of thousands of troops near the Ukrainian border and to carry out a steady flow of military maneuvers in a bid to showcase its military might. The United States believes that it wants to launch another invasion in Ukraine, and that this could be done imminently.

English version by [Melissa Kitson](#).

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