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The Role of Lawfare in the Russian–Ukrainian War

Abstract

The war between Russia and Ukraine, which began in 2022, is being waged not only on the battlefield but also through legal means. This article explores how international and domestic law have become tools in the conflict: Russia uses legal language to justify its aggression, while Ukraine turns to international courts and sanction mechanisms to hold the aggressor accountable. Through concrete examples, the piece analyses the practice of lawfare – from courtroom litigation and reparations claims to propaganda-driven legal narratives – highlighting how law has become a critical front in modern warfare.

Keywords: lawfare, Russia–Ukraine war, international law, ICJ, ICC, sanctions, reparations, legal narratives, war crimes, legal warfare

Introduction

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, triggering an armed conflict of a magnitude unseen in Europe since the Second World War. The fighting has not been confined to the battlefields; it has also unfolded in negotiation rooms and across international forums. Both parties have deployed a wide array of legal instruments as strategic weapons. This phenomenon is increasingly referred to in the academic literature as *lawfare*, or legal warfare: the deliberate use of law by parties to achieve military or political objectives, effectively extending the battlefield by other means.²

The term was first coined by U.S. Air Force Major General Charles J. Dunlap, who defined lawfare as "a method of warfare where law is used as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve military objectives".³

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² VOYGER 2019.

³ DUNLAP 2009: 35.

The current Russian–Ukrainian war provides numerous examples of the various forms of lawfare. As a pretext for the invasion, Russia constructed a false legal narrative – claiming that Ukraine was committing genocide against the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas, and invoking this allegation to justify the launch of its “special military operation”.⁴ In response, Ukraine turned to international courts almost immediately, seeking to demonstrate the illegality of Russian aggression through the language and mechanisms of international law.

It should be noted however, that a state's reliance on international legal mechanisms in response to an armed attack does not in itself amount to lawfare, rather it constitutes the legitimate use of international law. This distinction is essential, as the purpose of the present study is to examine lawfare as a distinct strategic practice, not the routine exercise of lawful defence.

Interpreting the concept of lawfare

In this study, lawfare refers to the deliberate use of legal tools as instruments of power within armed or geopolitical confrontations. This may take the form of initiating legal proceedings for strategic advantage, interpreting legal rules or international agreements in an unusually expansive – or in some cases, abusive – manner to advance one's own interests, or employing regulatory and administrative measures such as sanctions and restrictions to undermine an opponent.

For Russia, one of the central purposes of *lawfare* is to construct a façade of legal legitimacy around its own use of force. From the outset, the Kremlin has framed its actions using the vocabulary of international law – often by distorting it. When announcing the attack, Vladimir Putin invoked Article 51 of the UN Charter, which deals with the right of self-defence, presenting the invasion as an act of “defending” Russia.⁵ International legal experts overwhelmingly rejected this argument, yet the episode clearly demonstrates Moscow's intention to instrumentalise legal language for political ends.

A recent study by dos Reis and Grzybowski offers an important analytical lens for understanding how international law functions within the Russian–Ukrainian war. Rather than assessing legal claims solely in terms of their validity or dismissing them as mere geopolitical rhetoric, the authors argue that both sides deliberately employ the language of international law as a communicative tool. In their view, legal categories – such as self-defence, territorial integrity, combatant status and co-belligerency – not only serve to justify actions or condemn violations, but also function as a shared vocabulary through which the parties articulate objectives, signal constraints and draw shifting “red lines”. Their analysis demonstrates that international law retains operational relevance even when its core norms are being violated: it provides a semantic framework that structures expectations and enables limited forms of dialogue between adversaries. This perspective underscores that the

⁴ ZVOBGO 2025.

⁵ WILMSHURST 2022.

legal dimension of the conflict is not merely a battleground of competing claims, but a pragmatic medium through which Russia, Ukraine and Western states communicate the boundaries of acceptable conduct.⁶

Research question and hypothesis

The analysis focuses on real examples that became visible during the conflict, such as cases brought before international courts, sanctions decisions, official legal arguments and disputes over treaties or obligations. By examining these cases, the study aims to highlight the political motivations, communication tactics, and potential long-term effects behind the legal steps taken by the actors involved. This study begins from the observation that contemporary conflicts in the 21st century are no longer determined solely by weapons, battlefield manoeuvres, or military doctrine. Increasingly, they are shaped by the strategic use of legal instruments. *Lawfare* – the deliberate employment of law to achieve political or military objectives – has evolved from a supporting element into an autonomous arena of interstate confrontation.

The research centres on the following question: In what ways do Russia and Ukraine employ law as a tool of warfare during the 2022 conflict, and how do these two approaches differ in their objectives, methods, impact and reception by the international community?

The initial hypothesis may be formulated as follows: while Russia primarily employs legal instruments to circumvent existing norms and to create a formal veneer of justification for its aggression – including practices amounting to abuse of law and the use of disinformation – Ukraine relies on legal mechanisms for purposes of defence, legitimacy and accountability, chiefly through international institutions. This duality is reflected not only in the types of legal tools each side mobilises, but also in the moral and political reception of their respective strategies.

The aim of the research is to test this hypothesis through concrete examples and to demonstrate that the significance of legal warfare lies not only in how each party employs legal instruments, but also in the extent to which such practices can shape the future of the international order and the global sense of justice.

The analysis is primarily qualitative in nature and draws on three main groups of sources. The first consists of international legal documents and decisions issued by key institutions. The second source group includes English-language political and legal commentaries. Finally, the research is supplemented by credible international media reporting, and through translated materials, relevant official statements and press coverage from Ukrainian and Russian sources.

This analytical framework makes it possible to grasp not only “law in war” but also the “war waged through legal language”.

⁶ DOS REIS – GRZYBOWSKI 2024.

International legal proceedings

After the outbreak of the war, Ukraine immediately sought to shift part of the struggle into the legal domain by turning to international courts. At the end of February 2022, Kyiv filed a case against Russia before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), arguing that Moscow had violated the Genocide Convention and broader international law by invoking a fabricated allegation of "genocide" as a pretext for its invasion.⁷ The Court issued provisional measures ordering Russia to halt its military operations – an instruction the Kremlin simply ignored.

Later, on procedural grounds, the ICJ declined to rule directly on the legality of Russia's aggression. Even so, Ukraine succeeded in placing the issue of Russian aggression squarely on the agenda of major international bodies, and a clear majority of states publicly deemed the invasion unlawful, as reflected in multiple successive UN General Assembly resolutions⁸ condemning Moscow's actions.⁹

A key reason the ICJ did not rule directly on the legality of Russia's aggression was its lack of jurisdiction over that question. The Court clarified in its 2024 preliminary objections judgment that it can only exercise jurisdiction when both parties have consented through a treaty containing a compromissory clause. Because no treaty between Ukraine and Russia grants the ICJ jurisdiction to assess the lawfulness of the use of force or aggression as such, Ukraine was compelled to base its application exclusively on the Genocide Convention, the only instrument providing a jurisdictional gateway. The Court therefore examined only whether Russia's invocation of genocide fell within the scope of that Convention, rather than addressing the broader legality of the invasion. This procedural limitation underscores how legal claims – such as fabricating a genocide allegation – may fall outside the ICJ's reach when its jurisdiction is narrowly defined.¹⁰

Similarly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has become a key arena in this legal struggle. With Ukraine's cooperation, the ICC Prosecutor opened an investigation into alleged war crimes, and in 2023 the Court took the unprecedented step of issuing an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin over the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children.¹¹ Russia reacted by its authorities launching criminal cases against the ICC judges and prosecutors involved and issued domestic arrest warrants for them. Through this response, Moscow reinforced its rejection of the Court's jurisdiction and attempted to use its own legal system as a protective shield against international accountability.¹²

International legal narratives, rhetoric and vocabulary

In the information battle surrounding the war, both sides employ legal terminology as part of their propaganda efforts, using it to legitimise their own actions while

⁷ ZVOBGO 2024.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly 2022a.

⁹ MORAN 2024; European External Action Service 2022.

¹⁰ International Court of Justice 2024.

¹¹ International Criminal Court 2023.

¹² ROTH 2023.

delegitimising the opponent. From the very outset, Russia claimed that Ukraine was committing genocide against Russian-speaking populations in the Donbas – an allegation that served as principal justification for launching the so-called “special military operation”.¹³ Although this accusation lacked any factual basis, Moscow repeatedly invoked the legal language of “genocide” and “self-defence” to cloak its aggression in a veneer of international legality. The Kremlin’s messaging goes further by portraying Ukraine as a “Nazi regime” or a “terrorist state”; for instance, a Russian court formally designated the Ukrainian Azov Regiment as a terrorist organisation, a classification used to rationalise the harsh treatment of captured Ukrainian fighters.¹⁴ These legal labels function primarily as tools to validate the war to domestic audiences and sympathetic foreign actors, despite widespread rejection of such claims by the international community.

Ukraine, by contrast, frames Russia as a grave violator of international law – accusing it of war crimes and, in some cases, acts approaching genocide. President Zelensky has on multiple occasions described Russian attacks on civilians as genocidal and has urged the international community to recognise Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.¹⁵ Numerous states and international organisations have indeed adopted resolutions stating that Russia employs terrorist-like methods and bears responsibility for war crimes. For Ukraine, this rhetoric is designed to sustain global support and maintain moral pressure on Moscow. In this sense, legal terminologies – “aggressor”, “war criminal”, “terrorism” – have become a strategic tool for shaping international public opinion.¹⁶

In sum, a parallel battle over legal narratives is unfolding. Russia seeks to justify its actions through fabricated legal pretexts, while Ukraine presents itself as the defender of international norms and lawful conduct. In this domain, *lawfare* involves deploying the language of law as an instrument of persuasion, turning legal concepts into tools of strategic communication aimed at shaping perceptions of legitimacy and victory.

Sanctions and other legal tools

Following the outbreak of the war, Western states launched an unprecedented wave of economic sanctions against Russia – one of the clearest expressions of *lawfare* in the conflict. The United States, the European Union, and their partners rapidly adopted punitive measures of a scope never previously applied to a major power: Russian banks and key companies were cut off from international finance; exports of advanced technologies were halted; a significant amount of funds in Russian central bank reserves were frozen; and the assets of hundreds of oligarchs were blocked. Although these sanctions take the form of legal acts – regulations, executive orders and binding resolutions – their strategic purpose is unmistakably military: to weaken and constrict the Russian war economy. Analysts have repeatedly noted that no sanctions

¹³ ZVOBGO 2025.

¹⁴ Reuters 2022c.

¹⁵ United Nations General Assembly 2016.

¹⁶ Ukrainian Institute for International Politics 2022.

package of comparable breadth had ever been deployed against a major state before the 2022 measures targeting Russia.¹⁷

A parallel category of measures consists of visa bans and travel restrictions. The European Union, the United States,¹⁸ and other allied states placed numerous senior Russian officials, oligarchs and state-enterprise executives on sanctions lists, resulting in asset freezes and prohibitions on entry.¹⁹ These steps carry both economic consequences and strong political or moral symbolism: they signal that the international community views members of Russia's leadership circle as responsible for the aggression against Ukraine and thus not legitimate actors in diplomatic fora.²⁰

Russia had only limited room to respond with meaningful economic countermeasures, so its reactions took the form of politically symbolic steps rather than actions with substantial economic impact. The Kremlin introduced import bans on selected Western goods, imposed entry prohibitions on certain foreign politicians, and attempted to use its energy resources – particularly natural gas – as leverage. The reduction or complete halt of gas deliveries affected several European states severely, yet it did not fracture the EU's unity on sanctions, contrary to earlier expectations.²¹ Current analyses suggest that Russia's countermeasures achieved only partial strategic effect, while Western sanctions have inflicted significant medium-term structural damage on key sectors of the Russian economy, especially in technology, finance and energy.²²

In broader terms, the sanctions regime represents a form of *lawfare* in which legal regulation functions as a kind of “long-range strike capability”. Although sanctions do not inflict physical harm, their power lies in their ability to weaken an adversary's war machine and exert pressure for political concessions. The experience of the conflict so far indicates that legal-economic warfare has become an essential complement to traditional military operations – and is likely to remain so in future conflicts.

Compensation claims and reparations: The legal settlement of war damage

In the wake of the devastation caused by the war, Ukraine is demanding that Russia provide reparations for the harm it has inflicted. International law is clear on this point: an aggressor state bears responsibility for the damage it causes and is obliged to make full reparation. The UN General Assembly reaffirmed this principle in a resolution adopted in November 2022, stating that Russia must be held accountable for war-related losses and recommending the establishment of an international compensation mechanism.²³

A key legal question in the debate over Russia's frozen state assets concerns whether the strict rules of sovereign immunity can be limited through the doctrine of

¹⁷ ANDERSON et al. 2022.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State [s. a.].

¹⁹ European Commission 2022.

²⁰ COOK 2025.

²¹ ASTROV – HANZL-WEISS 2025.

²² SARIC et al. 2025.

²³ United Nations General Assembly 2022c.

countermeasures. Traditionally, state property – particularly central bank reserves – is protected from seizure or enforcement, even in cases of grave internationally wrongful acts. This is why current initiatives prioritise using the interest generated by the assets rather than confiscating the principal. However, there are arguments that countermeasures, if reversible, proportionate and aimed at inducing compliance, may provide a lawful basis for temporarily suspending immunity in exceptional circumstances. Russia's ongoing refusal to provide reparations and the magnitude of its aggression are cited as potential grounds for such an approach.

A 2024 study of the European Parliamentary Research Service offers a detailed analysis of this dilemma. It reaffirms that sovereign immunity constitutes the primary legal barrier to any transfer of Russian assets, yet it also recognises that third-party countermeasures – already visible in the broad freezing of Russian reserves since 2022 – could justify conditional uses of these funds. Such measures may include placing assets in an escrow mechanism or using them as collateral for reconstruction loans, provided that Russia retains a theoretical right to restitution if it fulfils its obligations. The study further notes that the International Law Commission has not excluded state immunity from the scope of countermeasures, leaving room for a narrowly tailored, reversible model. In conclusion, while outright confiscation remains legally uncertain, the structured use of frozen assets as reversible countermeasures appears to be one of the most defensible pathways under international law.²⁴

A central initiative concerns the use of Russian state assets frozen abroad. Approximately 300 billion USD in Russian central bank reserves, along with additional oligarch-owned assets, remain immobilised in Western jurisdictions. The EU and the G7 are exploring ways to channel either the interest generated by these assets – or potentially the assets themselves – toward Ukraine's reconstruction, within a lawful framework. One proposed model would involve issuing large-scale loans to Ukraine backed by the frozen Russian funds, with repayment later drawn from compensation obligations imposed on Russia. This structure would circumvent the current legal barriers to outright confiscation. However, these ideas are still under development and raise numerous legal and political challenges.²⁵

Ukraine is also pursuing Russia before various courts and arbitral tribunals in an effort to establish financial responsibility. A series of international arbitration cases have been launched in which Ukrainian state-owned and private companies seek compensation for assets lost in Crimea. These proceedings have repeatedly resulted in multi-billion-dollar awards in Ukraine's favour; for instance, in 2023 an arbitral tribunal ordered Russia to pay 5 billion USD for the unlawful seizure of Naftogaz's assets on the peninsula. Moscow refuses to recognise these rulings, yet each decision adds to its growing legal "bill", and the successful claimants may attempt to enforce the awards by targeting Russian assets abroad. Over time, these cases could function as a form of "back door" reparations and exert additional pressure on the aggressor state.²⁶

²⁴ WEBB 2024: 48.

²⁵ RANKIN–HENLEY 2025.

²⁶ CHANG 2022.

Confiscation of Russian assets in Ukraine

Early in the war, Ukraine adopted a law entitled *On the Basic Principles of the Forcible Seizure of Objects of Property Rights of the Russian Federation and its Residents in Ukraine* (7 March 2022),²⁷ which authorises the compulsory nationalisation of real estate, bank accounts, securities and other assets owned by the Russian state or by Russian citizens located on Ukrainian territory.²⁸ Under the law, the government proposes a list of assets to be confiscated, the National Security and Defence Council (NSDC) reviews and approves this list, and the final decision is enacted through a presidential decree followed by parliamentary endorsement – no later than six months after the state of war is lifted.

UN, EU and G7: Emerging reparation mechanisms

The initiative establishing the legal grounds for reparations has been complemented by the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, which created an international claims register to support future compensation processes for Ukraine. Comparative analyses emphasise that many of these steps have a distinctly strategic *lawfare* dimension: they do not merely prepare for post-war enforcement, but also function as instruments of political and financial pressure, signalling the international community's expectation that Russia will ultimately be held legally accountable and will be required to pay reparations.²⁹

The European Union and the G7 countries have developed several concrete proposals for using Russia's frozen state reserves. In 2024, based on joint EU–G7 decisions, the so-called *Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration (ERA)* loan programme was launched.³⁰ Under this scheme, Ukraine received 50 billion USD in financing for 2024, with repayment covered by the interest generated on immobilised Russian assets.³¹

An even more far-reaching idea is the *Reparations Loan* concept, introduced by the EU at the end of 2025. The proposal envisions issuing EU bonds backed by the approximately 140 billion euros in Russian central bank reserves frozen in Belgium. The liquidity raised through these bonds would be transferred to Ukraine. Crucially, Ukraine would only be required to start repaying the loan once Russia provides compensation as part of a future peace settlement.³² As Reuters explains, "the proposal would allow EU countries to lend money to Ukraine, which it would only have to repay if a peace deal obliges Russia to provide war reparations".³³

This concept was also discussed during the 2025 G7 summit in Washington, where several EU Member States and the United Kingdom indicated willingness to guarantee the loan. According to *The Guardian*, the arrangement would mean that

²⁷ Reuters 2022a.

²⁸ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2025.

²⁹ RAFF–LATTIMER 2025.

³⁰ The White House 2024.

³¹ The Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies 2025.

³² MEIJER–BAYER 2025.

³³ MEIJER–BAYER 2025.

"loan repayment would depend on Russia using its frozen reserves as part of a final peace agreement to fund Ukraine's reconstruction".³⁴

Taken together, the initiatives of the international community – from UN resolutions to EU proposals and G7 financial instruments – reflect an effort to construct legal mechanisms that would ultimately compel Russia to compensate Ukraine for the destruction caused by the war. Each of these measures represents a form of strategic legal action, lawfare using international law and the legal status of frozen assets to generate leverage, enforce potential reparations, and secure resources for Ukraine's future reconstruction.

International agreements: Upheld and circumvented

During the conflict, Russia has consistently framed its position by referring to international legal and treaty-based arguments. Russian officials repeatedly claim that Western states broke their assurances and that Ukraine failed to fully implement the Minsk agreements. These legal and political arguments serve as key reference points in Moscow's interpretation of the conflict, even though other states and institutions dispute their validity or relevance.³⁵

After the invasion began, Russia also made extensive use of its veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council – a prerogative that plays a decisive role in the Council's ability to act. While the veto is an established feature of the UN Charter system, its use has sharply constrained the Council's room for manoeuvre, a reality assessed quite differently by various members of the international community.³⁶

In parallel, Russia withdrew from several European institutions, notably the Council of Europe – thereby removing itself from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. Moscow presented this step as a reaffirmation of its political and legal position, whereas observers³⁷ saw it as a retreat from international oversight.³⁸

The internationally disputed referendums held in occupied Ukrainian territories in 2022, and the subsequent "accession documents", also form part of the legal architecture Russia cites to justify its territorial claims. The overwhelming majority of the international community refuses to recognise these processes as lawful, underscoring the profound divergence in legal interpretations surrounding the conflict.³⁹

In contrast, Ukraine seeks to reinforce and make use of international legal frameworks as instruments of its own defence. After the invasion began, Kyiv formally submitted applications for membership in both the European Union⁴⁰ and NATO,⁴¹ signalling that it views Western alliances as essential guarantees for its future security. Although these are political moves, their legal dimension is equally significant:

³⁴ SABBAGH et al. 2025.

³⁵ DUMOULIN 2024.

³⁶ UN News 2022.

³⁷ Reuters 2022b.

³⁸ Council of Europe 2022.

³⁹ United Nations General Assembly 2022b.

⁴⁰ European Commission 2023.

⁴¹ MAYNES 2022.

Ukraine is seeking the strongest possible treaty-based protection against any renewed Russian aggression (most notably through NATO's collective defence clause), while EU membership would anchor the country within a community built on the rule of law.

At the same time, Kyiv repeatedly invokes its adherence to existing international treaties – such as the Geneva Conventions – emphasising that Russia is a “treaty-breaking” state that cannot be regarded as a reliable partner.⁴²

Taken as a whole, this sphere of international agreements has become another arena of conflict: Russia undermines legal frameworks and evades its obligations, whereas Ukraine works to secure new defence commitments and to isolate the occupying power through legal means. This dimension of *lawfare* highlights the need for the international institutional system to adapt – rules must be enforceable, otherwise an aggressor can exploit legal loopholes with impunity. The eventual settlement of the war will inevitably involve a legal reckoning, and today's treaty-based struggles are already laying the foundations for that process.

Conclusions

The Russian–Ukrainian war has made one thing unmistakably clear: in 21st-century conflicts, law is as much a part of warfare as weaponry. The struggle is fought not only with traditional weaponry, but also through legal instruments deployed as strategic tools.

Russia employs *lawfare* for coercive and aggressive purposes: it dresses its actions in legal terminology, manipulates international rules and seeks to shield itself from responsibility. Ukraine, by contrast, uses legal warfare defensively and as a means of accountability – arguing its case before courts, building international support through the language of law, and laying the groundwork for future justice.

For the international community, the war offers significant lessons. It has exposed the shortcomings of existing legal institutions – for example, the paralysis of the UN Security Council or the absence of an international court specifically empowered to prosecute the crime of aggression. It also demonstrates that international law must be actively upheld and enforced; without this, the rules-based order becomes fragile, and aggressors exploit its loopholes whenever they can.

Ultimately, the outcome of legal warfare will shape the post-war landscape. Once the fighting ends, judicial rulings, reparation mechanisms and war crime proceedings will take centre stage. Today's *lawfare* therefore concerns not only the present conflict but also the future architecture of justice. Those who effectively mobilise legal instruments now will determine which narrative, and which claim to legitimacy, endures in international memory.

⁴² LAWLESS 2025.

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