

# Tech firms flock to Spain trade show in shadow of Russia war

February 28 2022, by Joseph Boyle, Valentin Bontemps and Yassine Khiri



At the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, smartphone and telecoms companies show off their latest products and reveal their strategic visions.

One of the technology industry's biggest annual get-togethers kicked off

in the Spanish city of Barcelona on Monday, under the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The Mobile World Congress, where smartphone and telecoms companies show off their latest products and reveal their strategic visions, is expected to welcome more than 40,000 guests over its four-day run.

Organisers were hoping to return to a full-scale event after two years of disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, but they were forced to remove Russia's dedicated pavilion following the invasion.

Opening the event, Mats Granryd of industry body GSMA said his organisation "strongly condemns the Russian invasion of Ukraine", drawing applause from the packed auditorium.

Some Russian companies, however, were still participating in the event.

"We're here as an independent company," said Elizaveta Shulyndina at the stall of Kaspersky, a cybersecurity firm founded in Moscow but with its holding company in the UK.

One of the few Ukrainian companies slated to display at the event told AFP they would not be attending.

"We are staying in Ukraine and fighting for our country," said Daria Fedko of WeAR Studio.

The invasion has sparked wider jitters, with the industry assessing likely shortages of key raw materials caused by the conflict, as well as sanctions slapped on Russia by the United States, Europe and individual countries.

## **Pandemic woes**

The MWC was cancelled at the last minute in 2020 as the pandemic spread from China to Europe, and last year's edition was drastically scaled down.

The pandemic continues to cast its shadow with big names like Sony, Asus and Lenovo pulling out or participating "virtually".

But organisers are bullish, promising 95 percent of speakers would be in Barcelona.

Smartphone behemoth Samsung, as well as Nokia, Ericsson, Google, Huawei and Verizon were all hosting major stalls.

Focuses of this year's event include the rise of 5G, the opportunities offered by the Internet of Things (IoT), the metaverse and the impact of tech on the environment.

Thousands joined queues early in the morning to get into the event, but attendances are still much smaller than pre-pandemic, when the gathering welcomed more than 100,000 people.

## **Global 'turmoil'**

The show will, however, provide Chinese phone makers such as Oppo, Xiaomi and Vivo with a "coming out party", according to Ben Wood of CCS Insight.

"It's the first time they will be able to flex their muscles at a big Western trade show," he told AFP, pointing out that they have all become much bigger during the pandemic.

They are filling a void left by Huawei, which has been hobbled by

sanctions imposed by the US in 2019 over accusations its wireless systems could allow spying by Chinese state entities.

The entire industry will now need to reckon with sanctions over the Ukraine invasion, with the US already announcing restrictions on technology exports to Russia.

And both Ukraine and Russia supply raw materials such as neon and palladium used to manufacture smartphone components.

Analysts point out that the conflict could lead to shortages of many other products and rising prices, which could in turn hit demand for phones.

Vodafone boss Nick Read told the audience the Ukraine war added to "the world's political, economic, social and environmental turmoil".

"We are all going to have to dig very deep to help overcome these challenges. As an industry it is our obligation to do our part," he said.

The smartphone market grew by 5.7 percent last year, with 1.35 billion devices sold worldwide, according to analyst firm IDC.

Samsung sold the most phones followed by Apple and Oppo.

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Citation: Tech firms flock to Spain trade show in shadow of Russia war (2022, February 28) retrieved 2 March 2024 from

<https://techxplore.com/news/2022-02-tech-firms-flock-spain-shadow.html>

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