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THE WAR IN UKRAINE - A LONG TERM CONFLICT

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Abstract

European security has been severely shaken by the Russian Federation's surprise invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The causes and determinants, as well as the implications of this conflict, require a broader, more comprehensive approach, starting from the events of 2014. The conflict in Ukraine is and will remain a hot topic of utmost interest due to its political-military and economic-social implications, at a global level. The outlook for the conflict in Ukraine remains uncertain and dependent on a whole range of factors and circumstances.

Key words: NATO, security, geopolitics, military conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The current War in Ukraine is a complex conflict with deep historical roots and significant geopolitical implications. While the invasion effectively took place in February 2022, the spark of the conflict has to be traced back at least a decade, with 2014 being a landmark year in this regard. Beginning as a protest movement against the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich, the conflict rapidly escalated into violences, culminating in the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and the explosion of inter-ethnic unrest in Ukraine's eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

I. CAUSES AND STAGES OF CONFLICT

1.1 The root causes of the conflict in Ukraine are multiple and complex, with historical, political, economic and cultural roots. From a geopolitical perspective, Ukraine is at the border between East and West, and its aspirations

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for European and Euro-Atlantic integration have been perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its sphere of influence. The complex history between the two countries, including close cultural ties and historical resentments, have fueled the already rising tensions.

The historical connections between Ukraine and Russia date back to the 9th century, when Kiev was the center of the first Slavic states, and the region played a prominent role in later Russian history. During the Soviet period, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, during which it suffered greatly, including from the artificial famine of 1932-1933 known as the Holodomor¹. The memory of these events deeply influenced pro-Ukrainian national sentiments.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine gained its independence, but subsequent economic and political challenges have created instability that has contributed to growing internal tensions.



Figure 1: Ukraine before 2014 & Ukraine in 2024

Thus, these internal tensions have polarized the entire Ukrainian society between pro-Europeans and pro-Russians, with wide and deep disputes between supporters of the Western orientation (European and Euro-Atlantic integration) and supporters of Russian influence. This polarization was evidenced, for example, in the 2010 presidential elections, when pro-Russian Viktor

¹ The Ukrainian famine (1932-1933), also known as Holodomor (Ukrainian: Голодомор), was one of the worst national catastrophes of Ukrainians in modern history, with an estimated 10 million dead. While the famine in Ukraine was part of a famine that also affected other regions of the Soviet Union, the Holodomor is strictly understood as the events that affected the territories inhabited by ethnic Ukrainians. Researchers agree that the famine was caused by the agricultural policy of the Soviet government and Stalin rather than by natural causes, and the Holodomor is also referred to as the 'Ukrainian genocide', which would imply that the Holodomor was engineered by the government with the aim of destroying the Ukrainian nation as a political factor and social entity. Historians are still debating whether or not the policies that led to the Holodomor fall under the provisions of the Genocide Convention, and several countries have since recognized the Holodomor as genocide. On November 28, 2006, Ukraine's parliament passed a resolution stating that the Soviet-era forced famine was an act of genocide against the Ukrainian people.

Yanukovych won the election, leading to massive protests by pro-European supporters.

On the other hand, endemic corruption and economic decline have led to widespread distrust among Ukrainian citizens of the political elite. Dissatisfaction with Yanukovych's government culminated in the Euromaidan demonstrations, which called for wide-ranging reforms and a pro-European orientation.

Another significant cause is the sphere of geopolitical interests in the wider Black Sea area, a point reached by the Yanukovych government's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2013, thus attracting widespread discontent among Ukrainians. This was perceived as a caving in to Russian influence, further inflaming internal tensions. Russia perceived this possible eastward expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures as a direct threat to its security. The Russian Federation's support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine can be seen as a permanent attempt to keep Ukraine within its sphere of influence.

Economic factors cannot be ruled out either, as close trade ties with Russia are recognized, Ukraine was heavily dependent on Russian natural gas and trade with Russia, making integration into the European space a challenge. This economic dependence was exploited by Russia to maintain control and influence over Ukraine. Domestic economic crises and falling living standards have fueled social tensions, and the lack of economic prospects has amplified the desire for change.

Not least, propaganda and media factors have fueled internal disputes over identity. Some regions, particularly eastern Ukraine, have a predominantly Russian-speaking population and a cultural identity more closely tied to Russia, while the west tends to identify more with Ukrainian national ideals and Europe. Propaganda on both sides (Russian and Ukrainian) has amplified the divisions, presenting diverging narratives of conflict, identity and sovereignty.

In essence, we can see that the war in Ukraine has not a single cause, but is the result of complex interactions between several inputs. Historical, political and economic tensions, combined with external influences and national identity, have created an environment conducive to conflict escalation. The situation remains of ongoing concern, with implications extending beyond Ukraine's borders, affecting regional stability and international relations.

1.2 Stages of the conflict. Although Ukraine was invaded, effectively by Russian troops, in February 2022, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict² has older roots and can be analyzed in several stages:

² The Russo-Ukrainian War is an ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, which began in February 2014. Following the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea from Ukraine and has supported pro-Russian separatists fighting against the Ukrainian army in the war in Donbas.

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- *The historical and political context before 2014*, when Ukraine had a complex history, marked by historical ties with both Russia and the Soviet Union. After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine oscillated between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations, leading to internal tensions.

- *The crisis in Crimea in 2014, preceded by the Euromaidan³ protests in November 2013-February 2014*, with Russia's annexation of Crimea a key moment in the conflict. In March 2014, Russia intervened militarily in Crimea and a controversial referendum was held, with the result in favor of Crimea's annexation to Russia. This action was widely condemned by the international community and led to the imposition of economic sanctions against Russia. On February 22, 2014, President Viktor Yanukovich fled Kiev and the Ukrainian Parliament adopted a series of measures to replace the government.

- *The war in the Donbas from 2014-2022*, when pro-Russian separatists unleashed large-scale fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, declaring independence. The fighting led to a severe humanitarian crisis. Ukraine has launched anti-terrorist operations to re-establish control over the regions and Russia has been accused of supporting the separatists. In an attempt to impose a diplomatic solution, the Minsk Peace Accords (Minsk I/September 2014 and Minsk II/February 2015) were signed in 2014/2015 in the presence of OSCE officials and representatives of Western states (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The Minsk Agreement (Minsk II) was signed by Russia, Germany, France and Ukraine in 2015, (Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, Francois Holland and Petro Poroshenko).

Source: <https://www.dw.com/ro/ce-con%C8%9Bine-acordul-de-la-minsk/a-62145009>

These agreements included a ceasefire and other measures to de-escalate tensions, but violence has continued and the process of implementing the agreements has been flawed, with all parties involved constantly violating them.

³ In November 2013, the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend preparations to sign an association agreement with the European Union sparked massive protests in Kiev, known as Euromaidan. The protests escalated into violence in January and February 2014, leading to clashes between demonstrators and police.

- *Escalating tensions and the February 2022 invasion*, were preceded by a massive mobilization of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine at the end of 2021. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking the beginning of a new stage in the conflict. Ukraine responded with significant resistance and the international community condemned the invasion, offering military and humanitarian support to Ukraine.

On the other hand, the international community, including Western countries, has supported Ukraine with military and economic assistance, as well as sanctions against Russia. These sanctions have targeted key economic sectors including energy, finance and technology. NATO increased its presence in the region and the EU continued to support reforms in Ukraine.

The conflict continues with intense fighting in different regions of Ukraine and its fate remains uncertain. There are continuing international efforts for diplomatic solutions, but tensions remain high and the prospect of peace is difficult to assess.

II. IMPACT ON POPULATION

The war in Ukraine, which began in 2014 and has intensified drastically since February 2022, has had, and continues to have, a profound and devastating impact on the Ukrainian population, both in humanitarian and socio-economic terms. It is estimated that millions of people have been forced to flee their homes and the conflict has generated severe humanitarian crises. The Ukrainian economy has been severely affected and the country's infrastructure has been largely destroyed, especially in the eastern half of the country. Personal tragedies and broken communities have left a lasting imprint on Ukrainian society.

The humanitarian impact. Millions of Ukrainians have been affected, directly or indirectly, by the tragedies of this conflict (Figure 3). It is estimated that tens of thousands of civilians and soldiers have been killed or wounded and millions of Ukrainians have been forced to leave the country.



Figure 3: The humanitarian impact of the conflict in Ukraine, (source: UNICEF/Filippov and Euronews)

By the beginning of 2024, it is estimated that more than 8 million people had fled to other European countries, making it one of the biggest refugee crises in Europe in decades. Millions have also been internally displaced within Ukraine, from the war-torn east to the west-central areas less exposed to Russian attacks.

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The psychological impact. Many Ukrainians, including children, have been exposed to violence, destruction and death, resulting in psychological trauma. The increase in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms is a major concern, with a lasting effect on mental health. At the same time, censorship and fear of repression have increased, affecting people's mental health.

Economic impact. Attacks on cities and critical infrastructure (roads, hospitals, schools) led to the destruction of the local economy. Many businesses closed or suffered significant losses. The majority of the population faced a drastic reduction in income, increasing the number of people in extreme poverty. In many cases, those who remained in the country experienced shortages of food, water and other essential resources. Many people lost their jobs, and those who remained had limited access to job opportunities, increasing unemployment.



Figure 4: The economic impact of the conflict in Ukraine, screenshot (<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/cele-mai-grave-efecte-ale-razboiului-din-ucraina-asupra-economiilor-din-europa-vor-aparea-in-urmatorii-ani-2515213>)

The impact on education. Many schools have been destroyed or closed, affecting access to education for millions of children. Even in areas not directly affected by the fighting, many children were unable to attend school due to migration or trauma. Despite attempts to implement online learning, the quality of education has been seriously affected and students have had difficulty accessing necessary resources.

Impact on the health system. The healthcare system was overburdened, with large numbers of injured and patients in need of medical attention. Hospitals were attacked, and many medical facilities were destroyed or operating in poor conditions. Millions of people had difficulty accessing health services, especially for non-urgent treatment.

The impact of the war on the Ukrainian population is profound and varied, affecting every aspect of life. The consequences are felt not only in the short term,

but it will take many years for Ukrainian society to fully recover from these devastating events. Once the conflict is over, the challenges of reconstruction, reconciliation and recovery will require a sustained commitment from Ukrainians and the international community.

III. REPLACING RECOURSE WITH APPEAL OR CHANGING THE LEGAL REGIME OF RECOURSE?

THE FUTURE OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

In the first part of this year, the war in Ukraine entered a phase of relative stagnation, with a well-defined front line and constant attacks on both sides. But this summer's tactical move by the Ukrainians to attack the Russian Federation in their offensive on the Kursk region surprised everyone, not just the Russians, including their own soldiers. (Figure 3)

Ofensiva din Kursk i-a luat prin surprindere chiar și pe soldații ucraineni. Au crezut că ordinul să invadeze Rusia este o glumă

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Figure 5: Press article on the "Kursk Offensive", screenshot (<https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/ofensiva-din-kursk-i-a-luat-prin-surprindere-chiar-si-pe-soldatii-ucraineni-au-crezut-ca-ordinul-sa-invadeze-rusia-este-o-gluma-2900475>)

The prospects for a lasting solution remain unclear, and the escalation or de-escalation of the conflict depends on many factors, including domestic politics in Russia and Ukraine, but also on the reaction of the international community. The future of the conflict in Ukraine is highly uncertain and depends on a complex set of internal and external factors.

The future of this war depends on a number of factors: continued US assistance, continued European assistance, continued generation of Ukrainian forces, but there is a reality here, Ukraine has a population less than one third of Russia's. Russia is apparently not concerned about casualties. And Russia has an

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*economy ten times the size of Ukraine's - said General David Petraeus, former CIA director, in an interview published this summer*⁴.

Several aspects are extremely essential in the evolutionary analysis of the whole conflict situation.

The dynamics of military actions. Changes on the battlefield, including the success or failure of Ukrainian or Russian offensives, will directly influence the course of the conflict. If Ukraine continues to achieve some strategic victories, it could shift the balance of power in its favor. On the other hand, a strengthening of Russian positions could lead to further escalation.

Moreover, continued support from Western countries is essential for Ukraine. Increasing or decreasing this support, both in terms of military equipment and actual funding, could influence Ukraine's ability to sustain the war effort.

Diplomacy and peace negotiations. International organizations and third countries can play a crucial role in mediating peace talks. These initiatives may lead to a ceasefire or peace negotiations, but the terms of the negotiations will profoundly influence the future of each party involved.

In another vein, the willingness of the parties to compromise will be crucial. Ukraine wants recognition of its sovereignty and the liberation of occupied territories, while Russia may have different demands. A mutually acceptable deal may be hard to achieve. Also to be taken into account will be Ukraine's position on the recent incursion into the Kursk region, and how it intends to deal with the occupied Russian territories.

Geopolitical factors. Tensions between Russia and the West (in particular with the United States and the European Union) will influence the course of the conflict. Economic sanctions and political measures imposed on Russia are geopolitical factors with a long-term impact.

However, the interests of powers such as China, Turkey, India and other relevant global actors in the conflict could influence the decisions of those directly involved. These states could either provide support or mediation, or simply extrapolate conflicts to other regional contexts.

The economic impact of war. With the possible end of the conflict, Ukraine will face huge challenges in rebuilding its infrastructure and economy. Economic stability will influence Ukraine's ability to maintain effective governance and avoid possible internal conflicts.

On the other hand, the economic consequences for Russia, including sanctions imposed by the international community and political isolationism, will

⁴ The three factors determining the fate of the war in Ukraine. A former CIA chief explains, 23.08.2024, source: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/cei-trei-factori-de-care-depinde-soarta-razboiului-din-ucraina-explicatiile-unui-fost-sef-al-cia-2904595>

also influence Moscow's attitude towards the continuation or termination of the conflict.

Managing inter-ethnic relations in Ukraine. Ukraine's ability to maintain national unity in the face of economic and social challenges will be crucial. Regions that have been most affected by the conflict could face resentment or tensions, and government authorities need to respond effectively. Tensions between different ethnic groups in Ukraine could pose a long-term risk, especially if the integration of those affected by the conflict is not properly managed.

Regional security. Eastern European states will continue to strengthen their defenses against perceived threats from Russia. This may lead to a further escalation of tensions in the region. The future of the European and global security system will be influenced by this conflict, and some states in the region may change their defense policies, including through increased military spending.

Humanitarian challenges. The conflict will continue to generate huge humanitarian needs and managing those affected will be an enormous challenge for governmental and non-governmental organizations. Rebuilding trust and social cohesion will require considerable resources, time and international commitment.

In such circumstances, the priority of the North Atlantic Alliance is to strengthen defense and deterrence in order to avoid a possible conflict with Russia. According to NATO doctrine, "*the best way to avoid war is to be prepared for it and to make that clear to a potential aggressor, in this case Russia,*" said Sean Monaghan, an expert with CSIS Europe, Russia and Eurasia program⁵. As a result, the Washington summit this summer focused on defense and deterrence at all levels..

CONCLUSION

The future of the conflict in Ukraine is determined by a whole range of factors such as the interactions between the parties directly involved in the conflict and major international actors, political decisions, military realities and economic and humanitarian challenges. A deep understanding of regional dynamics is also essential to anticipate future moves. While hopes for a peaceful solution remain, the complexity and depth of the conflict suggest that the challenges will continue long into the future.

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine is a long-lasting conflict because its roots are deep and its complexity is amplified by the geopolitical interests at stake. Resolving this conflict will require not only political will, but also a sincere commitment from all actors involved to find a solution that meets the needs and aspirations of the Ukrainian people.

⁵ https://www.defenseromania.ro/experienta-ucrainei-arata-ca-un-razboi-cu-rusia-poate-fi-prelungit-potrivit-expertilor-csis-nato-nu-este-pregatita-pentru-asa-ceva_628946.html, accessed 20.08.2024.

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