

## THE SEPARATIST ACTIONS FROM UKRAINE – TOWARDS A NEW FROZEN CONFLICT

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*Abstract: The conflict in Ukraine began in April 2014 and lasted months before Ukraine and the separatists reached an agreement to stop the violence and release prisoners. But the ceasefire has not been complete. Both sides used the lull to build forces and the rebels tried for months to take advantage of the Donetsk, a symbolic strategic advantage. The Russian Federation involvement in such insurgent actions qualifies it as, instigator, intervener, supporter and as mediator. In Ukraine's case we must identify and take into consideration a number of explanatory operational variables.*

*Keywords: hybrid warfare, geopolitics, frozen conflict, separatists*

The analysis of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine highlights a major feature with older roots related to its history and simultaneously to the status as a former Soviet country. It envisages the insurgency as in most post-Soviet conflicts. But this insurgency is linked to the Russian Federation's vulnerability, which in order to protect their borders it must exercise more control, beyond them. The Russian Federation's involvement in triggering such insurgent actions qualifies it as an actor, instigator, intervener, supporter and mediator. The potential for conflict was predictable since 2004 according to some analyses on the Ukrainian space. According to the documentary, "more than \$12 billion a year disappear from the Ukrainian budget. In its most recent analysis of global grafting off, anti-corruption monitoring, the Transparency International has ranked Ukraine on the 142 place out of 174 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index, lower than countries such as: Uganda, Nicaragua and Nigeria"<sup>1</sup>. Another highly relevant aspect it was the decision of Viktor Iusenko, the Ukrainian President, to abolish the traffic police because of "widespread corruption in the circulation service, the symbol of corruption in the former Soviet Republic"<sup>2</sup>. This decision demonstrated that in the Ukrainian society it has developed a weak culture of the public service, and today it was maintained or transformed and adapted to the new realities imposed by the oligarchic interests in the context of conflict. The potential for conflict in Eastern Ukraine can be explained by the infiltration of the Russian agents in the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/jul/10/corruption-may-send-ukraine-back-to-russia/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1219160-ucraina-prima-tara-fara-politie-rutiera.htm>.

security and military structures, the existence of a subversive network, a corrupt political system, the dependence on trade with Russia.

The social, economic and political developments in the former Soviet Union have facilitated the Russian subversion, which in situations of insurgency their military escalating is controlled in order to deter the foreign intervention and by extension the transformation into a viable hybrid warfare. In the regional context there are highlighted at least four attributes of the region “ethnic heterogeneity; the presence of latent historical discontents; the weakness of civil society; the Regional complexity that the Russian Federation understands by its positioning in relation to external actors”<sup>3</sup>. In the political vision of the Russian Federation, all former Soviet republics should be part of its sphere of influence, which from geographical perspective, it gives a dominant position to control the escalation of conflict up to certain limits by the military power used rather to threaten and discourage a military reaction. At the same time it wants to “maintain the conflict at local level and to deter the foreign intervention, to expand its sphere of influence and to revise the status quo by changing borders and influencing the political regimes of neighboring states.”<sup>4</sup> Amid the existence of a weak civil society, ethnic and linguistic slippages, the Russian propaganda exploits easily the local discontents that weaken from within the Ukrainian society. By well-orchestrated actions of the Russian Federation “frozen conflicts have increased and it has supported separatist regions in countries in its sphere of interest, including Transnistria in Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia”<sup>5</sup>, conflicts that are exploited as a tool to curb the integration of former Soviet states in the “near neighboring states” of the European Union. The Russian Federation by its external actions presents itself as an actor with negotiation and mediation power.

Another operational variable in the former soviet space is represented by the “use of the political power to obtain economic benefits for certain interest groups. This in turn has further increased the concentration of power of the oligarchic clans that have deepened the Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia.”<sup>6</sup> Also, amid the economic difficulties and the economic crisis it could not allocate funds for real reforms in the military domain. In such defined context, it was created the ease with which the Russian intelligence services infiltrated, recruited collaborators, etc. As the crisis in Ukraine maintains and there are not identified solutions, the Russian Federation is emerging globally as a winner.

From an economic perspective, differences in business models between the European and former Soviet space shows that the “open markets and relationships based on rules are contrary to the Russian way to do business in the near vicinity, reinforcing the growing

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, *Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe*, International Affairs, 2016, p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Lanoszka, *Russian hybrid warfare and extended deterrence in eastern Europe*, International Affairs, 2016, p. 189.

<sup>5</sup> International Security and Estonia, 2016, p.19, <https://www.teabeamet.ee/pdf/2016-en.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.

perception in the Russian Federation that the EU is a problem, rather than an opportunity.”<sup>7</sup> Another particular element is represented by the “centrality of the mass-media” that facilitated the information warfare outlining more and more the characteristics of a hybrid warfare as “one of the most innovative and popular tools in the contemporary international politics and not confined to post-Soviet spaces, it is now used in a systematic way, subtle and refined, supported by a state official discourse that denies it and supports it at the same time, and to which the international community seems unable to respond.”<sup>8</sup> The formations of private military battalions that do not always act under the direction of the government of Kiev, financed by rich people defend also their local business interests. They are pro-Ukrainian rather than pro-government. The insurgency in eastern Ukraine is also based on “groups of separatist paramilitaries. The local population, rapidly captured by the Russian mass media, was actively mobilized in order to achieve secession and the creation of the so-called Novorossia, which included the Ukrainian regions on the Black Sea’s coastline.”<sup>9</sup> The existence of paramilitary groups in the separatist regions makes for the “military power to generate the political power and the strongest group, obviously, will form the new local power elite. At the same time the military power generates also the financial power”<sup>10</sup>, which as such it offers the mechanisms for controlling trade, the organized crime and other activities that thrive in the chaos and confusion of conflict.

The component for Russian manipulation and propaganda of the hybrid warfare in Ukraine led to the position taken by the European Parliament to prepare “a communications strategy to counter the Russian campaign propaganda directed against the EU, against its neighbors in the East, including Russia and to develop tools to allow the EU and its Member States to tackle the propaganda by campaigns at European and national level”<sup>11</sup>. From a sociological perspective, the insurgency in eastern Ukraine is rather a rebellion “homo sovieticus” in an area which over time became the industrial center of the former Soviet Union.

In the current situation it may be debated also the legal uncertainty developed on “the weak position on which the Ukrainian state is acting, the high dependency to the Russian markets and energy supply, this hybrid warfare requires legal, innovative changes and not least the Ukrainian elites are viewed as being undemocratic and corrupt”.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian Federation conducted an extremely aggressive propaganda in the mass-media, social media, cultural institutions, non-governmental organizations etc. which are

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Geers (Ed.), *Cyber War in Perspective: Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, NATO CCD COE Publications, Tallinn 2015, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Licinia Simao, *The Ukrainian conflict in Russian foreign policy: Rethinking the interconnections between domestic and foreign policy strategies*, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2016.1175141?journalCode=fswi20>.

<sup>9</sup> *The journal Romanian Foreign Policy*, no. August-September, 2015, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament, *Russia's disinformation on Ukraine and the EU's response*, Briefing November 2015, p. 7, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571339/EPRS\\_BRI\(2015\)571339\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/571339/EPRS_BRI(2015)571339_EN.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Tetyana Malyarenko, David J. Galbreath, *Paramilitary motivation in Ukraine: beyond integration and abolition*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2016, p. 122.

components of this type of hybrid warfare, which among others aims also at decentralization among others. A divided and dysfunctional Ukraine is, ultimately, a major advantage of Russia to exert influence, thus expressing “great power status in the world in a fairly traditional way.”<sup>13</sup> With reference to the vision of Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation “must continue through international dialogue searching for a reasonable balance between the interests of all participants.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Russia implements its “own independent foreign policy in the pursuit of its geopolitical interests”<sup>15</sup> especially since the international landscape is so varied and it changes so quickly in the light of dynamic development in a lot of countries and regions.

In fact Ukraine by its geo-economic orientation has become the stakes for the competition between the EU and Russia. Thus, Russia was involved to prevent Ukraine's accession to NATO and to “draw it in the Eurasian integration project, whose basic element regarded the reunification in the Russian world and also for achieving a new federal readjustment of Ukraine in order to hold total domination of Kiev and thus making impossible any structural point of view of NATO”<sup>16</sup>. It is noteworthy that after 1991, when Ukraine declared its independence during this period until the Euromaidan events it has manifested as a rather weak, fragile and insecure state.

It can be concluded that the separatist actions in Eastern Ukraine are presented as extremely problematic and complex. It seems to us that the Russian Federation wishes rather maintaining the conflict on moderate coordinates with insurgent or guerrilla tactics, so as not to be forced to intervene militarily and thus the intervention of other bodies. We also appreciate that from the Russian side there is an approach to control the strategic risks so as to have solutions to “as many instabilities it can manage.”<sup>17</sup> The worsening of the continuation of insurgent actions depends also on the ability of Ukraine to implement the economic, political and military reforms, of the role of state institutions and their ability to strengthen the sovereignty.

Furthermore we take also into account the developments of the Russian relations with the European Union, the US and NATO. This leads to a “sustainable confrontation between the Russian Federation and the West. Wishing to demolish the hegemonic position of the US in a world that has never ceased to denounce it as being monopolar, Russia craves to being a parity.”<sup>18</sup> Expanding the analysis of the conflict at global level, then we can advance the idea that we need to understand the context, rather at the global level than the local one, the global

<sup>13</sup> Hrant Kostanyan, Stefan Meister, Ukraine, Russia and the EU Breaking the deadlock in the Minsk process, No. 423 / June 2016, p. 5. [https://www.ceps.eu/system/files/WD423KostanyanMeisterMinskII\\_0.pdf](https://www.ceps.eu/system/files/WD423KostanyanMeisterMinskII_0.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Vladimir Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 februarie 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Snegovaya, Russia Report 1. Putin's information warfare in Ukraine. Soviet origins of Russia's hybrid warfare, 2015, p. 9, [nderstandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20](http://nderstandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20).

<sup>16</sup> Dmitri Trenin, The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great – Power Rivalry, Carnegie Moscow Center, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Van Metre, Viola G. Gienger, Kathleen Kuehnast, The Ukraine-Russia Conflict Signals and Scenarios for the Broader Region, Special Report, United States Institute of Peace, 2015, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> The European Foundation Titulescu – Center for Strategic Studies, The debate on the battle for Ukraine, 2015, <https://nastase.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/batalia-pentru-ucraina.pdf>.

geostrategic context in fact. Given the overall interests of the USA expressed by the strategic vision of being able “to win the full range of military operations in any part of the world, to operate with multinational forces, and to coordinate military operations with other governments and international organizations”<sup>19</sup> Russia will continue to claim its status of great power.

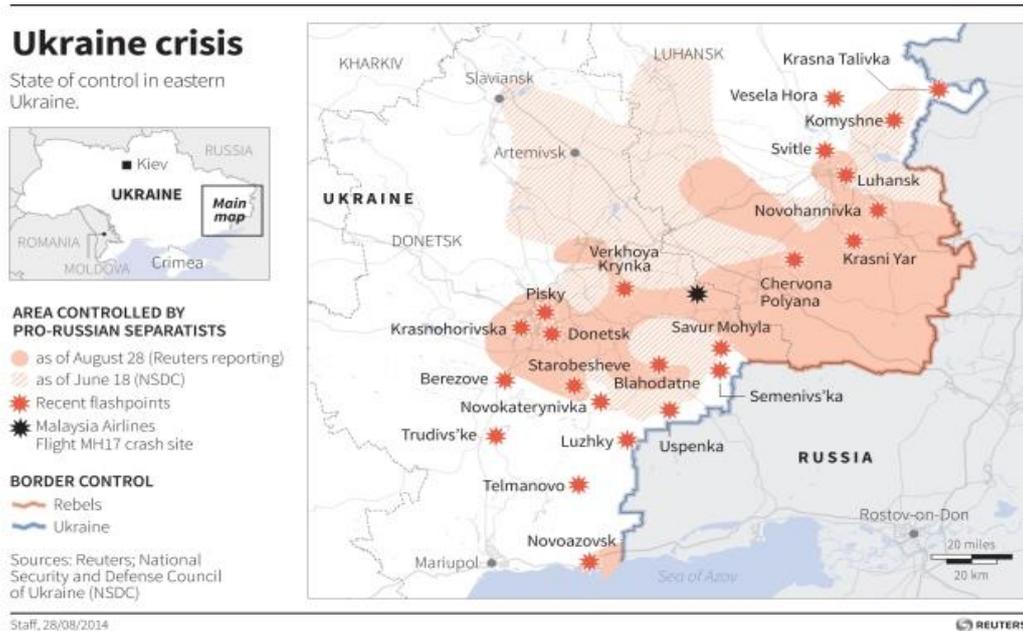


Figure 1. Crisis in Ukraine<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Joint Vision 2020, America’s Military- Preparing for Tomorrow, 2000, <http://www.offiziere.ch/wp-content/uploads/1225.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.google.ro/search?q=war+in+ukraine+2016+pdf&biw=1366&bih=659&source>.



Figure 2. The percentage of the population identified as being Russian<sup>21</sup>



Source: Heritage Foundation research based on information from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Leaders Discuss Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict; Kerry Expresses 'Strong Concern,'" September 5, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/nagorno-karabakh-/26567727.html> (accessed January 5, 2015).

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Figure 3. Frozen conflicts in the South Caucasus<sup>22</sup>

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