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THE WAR IN UKRAINE AMONG CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICTS

■ INTRODUCTION²

Among about four dozen contemporary wars, the armed conflict in Ukraine since 2014 stands out as an exceptional event. It involves in its second stage four nuclear powers – one as a direct belligerent and three as providers of many-sided assistance to the second belligerent, with the presence of military personnel of all four nuclear powers on the territory of Ukraine. The war has been the biggest, bloodiest and longest war in Europe since 1945. It has also produced a strong impact on Europe and the broader international community.

According to two measures (at least), the war in Ukraine has been exceeded by a number of other wars since 1945, namely those occurring in Asia and Africa. In terms of mortality, it has been exceeded by the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Algeria, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Iraq. In terms of duration, it is unlikely to be longer than the wars in Vietnam, Algeria, Sudan and Afghanistan. Among all these armed conflicts, the war in Ukraine may be sharply distinguished by the reverse ratio between military and civilian mortality.

In the European framework, the central trigger of the first stage of the war in Ukraine was similar to what caused the armed conflicts and outright wars occurring between 1974 and 1999 on Cyprus, in Moldova, Georgia, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan as well as on the territory of the SFRY. Among the former, the first stage of the war in Ukraine most resembled the war in Croatia (1991–1995). The war in Croatia, which started prior to its international recognition, and the war in Ukraine 22 years after its recognition as an independent state, display a number of similarities that were not accidental. The interstate armed

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conflict in Ukraine has had several similarities with the war in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1999) which ended up with forceful separation of Kosovo from Serbia.

■ THE SIMILARITIES

The wars in Croatia and Ukraine involved two adversary pairs of neighboring and partly overlapping Slavic nations. These wars unfolded in the territories of two defunct „socialist federations” – the SFRY and the USSR. The causes of both wars were closely related to the almost simultaneous breakdowns of these two federations in 1991 and the demise of their communist regimes that had preceded and caused the breakdowns.

The institutional structure of the SFRY was modeled after and closely resembled the structure of the older „socialist federation”, the USSR. Shared features of the two included the division of each federation into full-fledged republics and autonomies. Most or all of these federal units were ethnically designated. At the foundation of the two federations the minorities of the biggest ethnic group (Serbs and Russians) were not accorded autonomy within other republics. In both cases, wars followed the declarations of „sovereignty” and „autonomy” and referenda organized by some members of the Serbian community in southwest Croatia and some members of the Russian and Russian-speaking community living in Eastern Ukraine. In each case, the central governments refused to negotiate with the insurgents and decided to suppress them militarily. The armed conflicts in Croatia and Ukraine developed into partly different combinations of civil and interstate wars. The civil war component referred to an armed conflict between the ultranationalist regime in the former second-most populous republic on one hand, and part of the biggest national minority closely related to the largest ethnic group in the former federation, on the other. Each war was fought exclusively or predominantly on the territory of the former second-most populous republic, which suffered the most. In both wars, there were gross violations of international humanitarian law and international sanctions were applied.

The causes of each war were tangibly related to profound geopolitical changes underway in Europe about 35 years ago. These changes entailed the slackening and termination of the Cold War between two military-political blocs and the wave of liberal-democratic transformation of political systems in Eastern Europe. Over the span of three years, about 30 different state entities declared their sovereignty in the area of three „socialist federations” (Yugoslavia, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia). Of these, 23 entities survived and soon gained universal recognition as sovereign states, including Croatia and Ukraine.

■ THE SPECIFICITY OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Ancestors of today's Russians and Ukrainians shared in the distant past close to 400 years of common history in Kievan Rus. In the XIII century this large state formation was destroyed by the invasion of the Tatars-Mongols. The subsequent centuries-long domination by Lithuanian and Polish feudal rulers over the ancestors of today's Ukrainians contributed greatly to their cultural and language distancing from the Russians. In 1648, the Cossack ancestors of some of today's Ukrainians rebelled against Polish feudal rule, in 1654 begged for protection and voluntarily submitted themselves to the Moscow Tsardom. For two and a half centuries, until 1917 they remained as part of the Russian empire, named Ruthenia and later Malorossiya. In 1918, an independent state was proclaimed as the Ukrainian People's Republic. The new political term Ukraine remained under the Bolsheviks and in 1922 Soviet Ukraine became a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. In several decades, the territory of Soviet Ukraine was more than doubled by Moscow from the size of the Cossack Hetmanate when it joined the Moscow Tsardom. This was accomplished in several successive stages in 1920–1922, 1939–1940, 1945–1947 and 1954 by including into it arbitrarily the lands of Novorossiya, with millions of Russian and Russian-speaking people in the East and South, as well as annexed parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and part of Moldova in the West. In all of these cases, this was done without their population's consent. Thus a territorially large multiethnic and multicultural Soviet republic was created by Moscow, in some cases in violation of international law (notably the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact) or Soviet laws. In 1991, all these territorial gains became parts of independent Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders although Kyiv prior to it violated the federal law on dissolution of the Soviet Union when it did not allow holding a referendum on the status of Crimea separate from the all-Ukrainian referendum. From 1945 for more than four and a half decades Ukraine enjoyed Moscow's symbolic gift – the status of a UN founding member although it had been a constituting part of another UN founding member (USSR). When at Moscow's initiative the Soviet Union was unconstitutionally dissolved and Ukraine attained independence it did not have to apply for UN membership which from then on it deserved.

Divergent political and economic developments in the two independent states exposed a number of different interests and of problems unresolved at the time of separation. These issues, in somewhat different combinations during the two stages of the war contributed to three groups of conflictual relations: (1) between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, (2) inside Ukraine and (3) between the Russian Federation and the West, primarily USA.

The position of the large Russian minority became a growing political problem with the rise of Ukrainian ultranationalism and of the officially promoted cult of Stepan Bandera. Combined with divergent attitudes in Western and Eastern

parts of the country concerning Ukraine's relations with Russia, EU and NATO, language-related issues contributed tangibly to political explosions in Ukraine in February/March 2014. These explosions however were provoked by external factors, primarily by the West.

Since 1991, two processes have altered the geopolitical map of Europe. These were the Eastward expansion of the USA – dominated NATO along with the closely intertwined enlargement of the European Union. The first stage of these two processes in 1990–1991 – the absorption of Eastern Germany into both organizations – had no impact on the internal crisis in Yugoslavia, including the conflict in Croatia. By 2004, however, the process of NATO expansion had already reached the borders of both Ukraine and Russia, thereby adding a very real extra-regional component to the conflict in and about Ukraine.

For over two decades, one of the USA's geostrategic goals has been by fostering „color revolutions” to bring about regime changes in the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine and also Russia. By using Ukraine as a tool, the USA has endeavored to harm and weaken Russia. Under USA pressure and notwithstanding German and French objections, at the NATO summit held in Bucharest in April 2008 Ukraine was promised membership in the alliance, yet without stating a date. Openly and strongly opposed by Russia, this decision unleashed a chain of events, 6 years later leading to a war in Ukraine. The European Union and its policy of Eastern neighborhood notably contributed to these developments. The prospect of concluding a controversial association agreement with the EU deepened the internal political conflict in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government's decision to postpone its conclusion motivated mass protests in Kyiv. These organized protests deteriorated into violence, and occupation of some governmental buildings by armed mobs. On 21 February 2014 this turmoil was skillfully exploited to stage a US-guided coup d'état in Kyiv. The new regime came to power in violation of the Ukrainian constitution and of an agreement cosigned by three foreign ministers of EU member states including that of Poland.

The combination of membership in NATO promised to Ukraine and of the new regime in Kyiv fully dependent on the USA foretold that Russia would certainly lose its old naval base in Sevastopol, for which it had paid a high rent since 1992. Moreover, as a NATO naval and air base, Sevastopol would pose a direct threat to Russia and to its geopolitical position in the Black Sea and Mediterranean area. To thwart this prospect, lightly armed detachments of Russian marines, already legally stationed on Crimea, were ordered to move in unmarked uniforms to take control of the entire peninsula. This clear act of aggression was similar in its objective to the USA and NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 – the forceful separation of a part of territory of a sovereign European state. Serbia however offered stiff resistance and the NATO three-months-plus long bombing campaign caused about two thousand mortal casualties and a huge economic damage. On the other hand the Russian marines in Crimea did not face any resistance, on Kyiv's strict orders, from the about 22,000

Ukrainian troops or inflict any casualties or damage. The Ukrainian officialdom simply vacated Crimea. This expeditious takeover was soon followed by a successful referendum accompanied by international observers on approving Crimea's legal separation from Ukraine and it rejoining Russia. Moscow thus took back Nikita Khrushchev's present of Crimean Province to Ukraine on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of its unification with Russia and Sevastopol, which Kyiv subsequently unilaterally annexed.

■ THE FIRST STAGE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Closely related to the dramatic developments in Kyiv, there were uprisings in several Ukrainian cities and proclamations of „sovereignty” and „autonomy” in Lugansk and Donetsk. These uprisings largely featured protests against new regime and the discriminatory law adopted depriving Russian the status of the second official language in provinces with strong majorities of Russian and Russian-speaking population. The regime in Kyiv responded on 13 April 2014 by branding the protesters „terrorists”, declaring a „wide anti-terrorist operation” and entrusting the Ukrainian Army to carry it out. This military operation launched the first stage of the war in Ukraine. In its attacks on the Donbas autonomists, the Ukrainian Army employed bombers, tanks, armored vehicles and artillery while battalions of Ukrainian ultranationalist volunteers with neo-Nazi leanings and financed by Ukrainian oligarchs used artillery and light weapons. On the defending side, there were about 35,000 members of the territorial people's militias of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics as well as Russian and other (including Serbian) volunteers. Like Serbia did to help the Republic of Serbian Kraina in Croatia, but much more extensively the Russian Federation offered many-sided support to the two besieged republics, encompassing financial, material, humanitarian and military assistance. Russian professional military personnel were integrated into the local militias and did not operate as separate and regular units of the Russian Army. At the same time, the US and British armed forces offered very sizable material and other military assistance to the Ukrainian Army, involving thousands of advisors and instructors. In numbers, they were comparable to the Russian military personnel on the other side of the frontline.

By February 2022, this armed conflict in Donbas caused 14,000 to 20,000 deaths. Two armistice agreements did not halt the Ukrainian shelling of Ukrainian territory, which was responsible for thousands casualties among the civilian population of the two self-proclaimed republics. These attacks continued for more than 9 years, accompanied by gross violations of international humanitarian law.

On 15 February 2015, Petro Poroshenko, President of Ukraine signed the Minsk 2 agreement. It was co-signed by the leaders of Germany, France and Russia and unanimously adopted as a resolution by the UN Security Council, thereby becoming part of international law. The Minsk 2 agreement provided the basis for peaceful

resolution of the conflict in Donbas³. Nonetheless, Petro Poroshenko and his successor Volodymyr Zelensky refused to implement most of Ukraine's 12 obligations, including the key provisions under which Ukraine was to grant constitutionally guaranteed autonomy to the Russian and Russian-speaking population in Donbas. In addition, Zelenski reneged on his pre-election promise that saw him win the election in 2019 and did not stop the war (see also: Minakov 2024). Having already lost Crimea the Kyiv regime rejected the prospect of having autonomous predominantly Russian-speaking units within federalized Ukraine. This arrangement as a price for peace would have been similar to the Dayton solution for Bosnia and Herzegovina with the Republic of Srpska as its part. This rejection was a fatal blunder with disastrous consequences for Ukraine.

■ THE SECOND STAGE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

On 24 March 2021, Zelensky blatantly violated the Minsk 2 agreement and international law by ordering the Ukrainian Army to liberate the territories of the two republics and Crimea⁴. The bulk of the Ukrainian Army was then relocated to their vicinity, clearly visible by Russian satellites. Instead of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, Zelensky, thus decided on full-scale military suppression of the Donbas autonomists and on reconquering Crimea⁵. He and his American patrons were surely well aware that it would provoke a strong reaction from Russia. On 16 February 2022, upon his order the Ukrainian Army initiated the second and much more violent stage of the war. From that date on, the intensity of Ukrainian shelling of Donetsk started to grow from several tens to 1,500 explosions daily.

Combined with movements of Ukrainian troops this wave of fire strongly indicated that a massive land attack was coming soon as part of implementation of the March 2021 order. It was very similar to the beginning of the Georgian offensive against the self-proclaimed Republic of Southern Ossetia on 7 August 2008. This strong Ukrainian escalation was no doubt coordinated with the US President Joe Biden, who publicly predicted that Russia would invade Ukraine on 16 February 2022 (Ward, Forgey 2022).

The stepping up of the level of violence ordered by Zelensky successfully provoked in several days a predictable Russian response. On the political and legal levels, this entailed the Russian Federation's recognition of the two republics as independent states, signing with them two agreements on friendship, cooperation

³ The full text of this agreement is available at OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) ,<https://www.osce.org/cio/140156> (access 1.09.2024).

⁴ The Decree No. 117/2021 of 24 March 2021, available here: <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/1172021-37533> (access 1.09.2024).

⁵ <https://ppu.gov.ua/en/press-center/today-president-of-ukraine-volodymyr-zelenskyy-signed-decree-117-2021-of-march-24-2021-on-the-strategy-of-de-occupation-and-reintegration-of-the-temporarily-occupied-territory-of-the-autonomous-republ/>.

and mutual assistance, accepting their pleas for assistance and protection in line with Art. 51 of the UN Charter and invoking the Responsibility to Protect. In the latter the Russian Federation used a very similar justification as did NATO in 1999 for its aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. On the military level, Putin was faced with the real prospect of Ukraine quashing the two client, Russian-speaking parastates. This would have submitted their Russian and Russian-speaking majority population to retribution by the Ukrainian ultranationalist regime, causing it, like it happened in Croatia to flee en masse across the border. Putin later explained that moral duty is higher than legality. He could not, also for domestic reasons, afford a humiliating political defeat similar to that suffered by Slobodan Milosevic in Croatia in August 1995. Unlike in August 2008 in Georgia, he did not wait for an all-out Ukrainian ground attack. Putin could fully expect that stronger Western sanctions than were currently in place would follow, even if Russia's response to the Ukrainian offensive were only moderate.

Probably on the basis of a faulty assessment of both Ukraine's capacity and determination to resist and of the West's probable response, he precipitously and knowingly in violation of international law ordered a „special military operation”. It involved an invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, by a limited contingent of Russian land forces. This move was combined with extensive destruction of the Ukrainian air force, the air defense system, and other military infrastructure. Ignoring an axiom of military science, an invading force of some 90,000 Russian land troops was sent against the Ukrainian Army thrice superior in numbers. This Russian force was also grossly insufficient and logistically and otherwise unprepared to accomplish the officially declared task of „demilitarizing” and „denazifying” entire Ukraine. In spite of its shortcomings, this force managed to swiftly occupy additional 15% or so of the Ukrainian territory (some as an operational diversion and only temporarily) and effectively protected the two attacked republics. It additionally established and secured a land bridge between Crimea and Donbas, made the Sea of Azov part of Russia's internal waters, took control of the largest European nuclear power station at Zaporizhzhia and deprived Ukraine of its stocks of plutonium and uranium. These stocks would have been sufficient to make Ukraine the world's fourth-strongest nuclear power. The latter was an effective response to Zelensky earlier declaration that Ukraine was intending to again acquire nuclear weapons („Al Jazeera” 2021). Preventing this dangerous prospect certainly served as an additional and important incentive for Putin's decision.

For the US, by far the most frequent violator of international law, provoking Russia into an act of aggression fitted nicely with its strategic goal. Russia's invasion of Ukraine provided a perfect occasion for demonizing and isolating it internationally and for uniting the West under USA's guidance on imposing on Russia an unprecedented array of drastic economic and other sanctions. These punitive measures were expected to quickly ruin the Russian economy, hopefully bring down Vladimir Putin's regime,

defeat Russia militarily without losing American lives, and cause the fragmentation of Russia into several states (as elaborated earlier publicly by Zbigniew Brzezinski and the RAND Corporation). However, these hopes have not materialized. Moreover, the effects of the Western sanctions proved to be much more harmful to the EU economies than to the Russian economy while in no way helping Ukraine.

■ THE TWO WARS COMPARED

Still officially undeclared by Russia, the war in Ukraine has already lasted twice longer than the war in Croatia, and is still ongoing. There are also other important differences caused by the mismatch between Croatia and Ukraine in the size of their population and territory (approximately 1:10), and by the different configuration and extent of the theaters of war. Furthermore, there are large differences in the size and structure of the armed forces involved, in the disparities between Serbia's and Russia's military capabilities compared to the respective capabilities of Croatia and Ukraine. The war in Ukraine in its second stage has been different from the war in Croatia due i.a. to a massive use of several weapons systems (notably drones and missiles).

There are also huge differences in the direct involvement of international organizations and other external actors in the two wars. In the fall of 1991, the European Economic Community (EEC) sent the first mission to Croatia of white-clad and unarmed observers who, as impartial intermediaries, tried unsuccessfully to stop the armed clashes between the Croatian police and Serbian insurgents. The United Nations established UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force) in February 1992, operating from Zagreb. It was followed by UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia) in 1995–1998, UNTAES (UN Transitional Administration in Eastern Croatia) in 1996–1998, and UNMOP (UN Mission of Observers in Prevlaka) in 1996–1997. For several years, the UN-supported International Conference on Former Yugoslavia was active operating from Geneva. In comparison, there have been no UN or EU peacekeeping or observer missions in Ukraine. The UN General assembly has adopted a number of resolutions related to the war in Ukraine. In several resolutions it deplored and condemned Russia's invasion with huge majorities for and only five votes against. The UN Secretary General António Guterres facilitated the conclusion of an agreement on grain exports from the two warring states. The OSCE had no observer missions in Croatia, but deployed two such missions in Ukraine, notably the sizable OSCE Special Monitoring Mission from 2015 until March 2022. In addition, the OSCE played an active role in facilitating the Minsk 1⁶ and Minsk 2 ceasefire agreements.

⁶ The Minsk 1 Agreement consisted of two documents, both available at the OSCE website: the Minsk Protocol from 5 September 2014 (<https://www.osce.org/home/123257>) and the Minsk Memorandum from 19 September 2014 (<https://www.osce.org/home/123806>) (access 1.09.2024).

Extra-regional states were not openly involved in the war in Croatia. In 1991–1992, the Croatian forces included 456 foreign fighters (British, French, German, et al.), accompanied by about 2,000 private American military instructors. On the other hand, Ukraine has received huge support from several dozen foreign states, in particular the US, as well as other NATO and EU members in the form of heavy arms, ammunition, training, intelligence, economic and humanitarian assistance. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, since 2022, 13,387 foreign fighters, mercenaries and volunteers, joined the Ukrainian Army of whom 5,962 lost their lives. Polish citizens have been most numerous in both categories – 2,960 enlisted and 1,497 dead. They were followed by Americans and others. This strong external involvement transformed the local war into an extra-regional armed conflict between Russia and the US-led collective West, with Ukraine sacrificing its soldiers and itself as the West's expendable proxy.

The war in Croatia and its outcome were closely linked with the war in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, while there has been no similar regional linkage of the war in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has also produced by far a bigger international political and economic impact on other countries, not only in Europe, than the war in Croatia.

Most importantly, there have been enormous differences between the two wars in the number of dead (at least 1:25), number of refugees and displaced persons (approximately 1:25), and extent of destruction and amount of economic damage (at least 1:20). The war has inflicted a considerably greater damage on Ukraine as a state and on the Ukrainian society than the war did on Croatia. Since 2014, the population under Kyiv's control has so far been reduced by at least one-third and the territory by close to one-fifth. It has been estimated by some Western experts that the Ukrainian Army, National Guard and volunteers have suffered well over 400,000 deaths. Ukraine has also lost a good deal of its industrial capacity, agriculture, energy generation and critical infrastructure. Continuing the war suits the USA's geostrategic, chiefly anti-Russian goals, whereas Ukraine is paying a horrible price for it. The dragging on war of attrition is sapping Ukraine's ability to sustain itself, at least in its already rump shape.

The first phases of the war in Ukraine and the war in Croatia revealed substantial similarities in terms of causes and devastating consequences. On the other hand the second phase of the war in Ukraine strongly differs by being predominantly an interstate war and the first interstate armed conflict in Europe caused by NATO enlargement. As a result, the war in Ukraine stands out for its scale of devastating consequences, violations of international humanitarian law, international impact, and by the degree of great powers involvement.

At the beginning of the second phase of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Army preempted the anticipated Ukrainian version of an offensive akin to the Croatian operations „Flash” and „Storm”. It not only prevented the possibility of Volodymyr Zelensky

triumphant entrance in Donetsk like Franjo Tujman's entrance in Knin. The Russian Federation also officially annexed four Ukrainian provinces with Russian and Russian-speaking majorities in their populations and the Russian Army occupied a good share of them. In 2014 and 2022 Moscow thus took back by force a considerable part of former Novorossiia given to the Soviet Ukraine in 1920 and 1954. Unlike in Croatia, but like in Kosovo (1999, 2008) the war in Ukraine has extended the list of the more than three dozen new or de facto changed borders between European states since 1945.

■ RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WAR IN UKRAINE

In a speech delivered at the UN General Assembly, US President Joe Biden attributed full responsibility for the war in Ukraine to Russia. Yet, in fact, many countries are directly responsible or co-responsible for its outbreak and continuation, including notably the USA led by Joe Biden.

Firstly, the war was initiated by the Ukrainian Army in April 2014 according to orders by the Ukrainian interim Presidency, when in February Russia against international law forcefully occupied Crimea. Under two subsequent Presidents Poroshenko and Zelensky, Ukraine violated two armistice agreements and sabotaged realization of the Minsk 2 agreement on peaceful resolution of the Donbas conflict. President Zelenski failed to fulfill his pre-election pledge to end the war, a pledge that had seen him win the election in 2019. On 24 March 2021, he ordered the Ukrainian Army to attack Donbas and Crimea in direct violation of both the Minsk 2 agreement and of international law. The Ukrainian leadership's orders to steeply increase the artillery shelling of Donetsk from 16 February 2022 on, together with the movement of Ukrainian troops provoked an invasion by the Russian army. This led to the armed conflict transforming from an internal to largely an interstate war. In April 2022, President Zelensky reneged on an initialed agreement with the Russian Federation on peacefully resolving the conflict forged with assistance from the leaders of Israel and Turkey as intermediaries. Though Zelensky can not be blamed for failure, it is more complex⁷. Ukraine is responsible for the casualties and damage caused by its forces in Ukraine and in the Russian Federation.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation has grossly violated the UN Charter, the Helsinki principles and a dozen international treaties and agreements by which it

⁷ „Even if Russia and Ukraine had overcome their disagreements, the framework they negotiated in Istanbul would have required buy-in from the United States and its allies. And those Western powers would have needed to take a political risk by engaging in negotiations with Russia and Ukraine and to put their credibility on the line by guaranteeing Ukraine's security. At the time, and in the intervening two years, the willingness either to undertake high-stakes diplomacy or to truly commit to come to Ukraine's defence in the future has been notably absent in Washington and European capitals” – <https://www.intellinews.com/fresh-evidence-suggests-that-the-april-2022-istanbul-peace-deal-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine-was-stillborn-321468/>.

guaranteed Ukraine's security and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. In February 2014, it committed an act of aggression by occupying and annexing Crimea. On 24 February 2022, it committed a second act of aggression by invading, partly occupying and officially annexing four Ukrainian provinces. The Russian Federation is responsible for the casualties and huge damage the Russian armed forces have caused on Ukrainian territory.

The leading NATO members are co-responsible for the outbreak and continuation of the interstate conflict and war in and over Ukraine. This primarily applies to the USA, which knowingly unleashed a chain reaction in the conflictual relations between NATO and Russia. The USA used NATO to embroil EU in this conflict, even though that contradicts objective economic and other interests of many EU members, notably of Germany. This chain reaction led to the political conflict deteriorating into a war in which the USA is using Ukraine primarily as a tool to harm and weaken Russia. Germany and France under the Minsk 2 agreement and with subsequent policies for seven years supported Ukraine's policy opposing Russia's aims in the Donbas conflict. As leaders in the European Union's common foreign policy, they encouraged and supported Ukraine's active preparations for a war with Russia. The Western powers became co-responsible for the transformation of a relatively limited internal war in Ukraine into a wider, much more lethal, bloody and destructive, predominantly interstate war. In April 2022, the USA and Great Britain prevented the conclusion of an initialed Russian-Ukrainian agreement on resolving the conflict⁸. The members of NATO and EU by politically encouraging and by providing arms and funds to Ukraine have been enabling the continuation of this war. Without this interference, the war in Ukraine would have been already over and very probably on better terms for Ukraine than there will actually be.

■ CONCLUSIONS

The NATO and EU members will certainly fail to achieve their main declared goal – Ukraine's victory and hence Russia's military and political defeat. This applies chiefly to the leader of the West. After that in Afghanistan, the USA will suffer one more political defeat. On the other hand, the USA has this time been rather successful in realizing several related goals. The USA has solidified its hegemony in the Western camp and in most of Europe, reactivated NATO, attracted to it two new members Finland and Sweden, bolstered their dominant role in the alliance, subordinated even further and simultaneously economically and politically weakened the European Union, for quite some time poisoned Germany's and the

⁸ See more on broken down negotiations: <https://www.intellinews.com/fresh-evidence-suggests-that-the-april-2022-istanbul-peace-deal-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine-was-stillborn-321468/>.

EU's relations with Russia and inflicted a very considerable economic and political damage on Russia.

A decade since the Donbas conflict began and the annexation of Crimea followed, Ukraine is today much farther away from accomplishing its cardinal strategic goals – to reestablish its government's control and the country's sovereignty on the entire internationally recognized territory – than it was in February 2022, let alone in February 2014. Moreover, another desired goal remains unattained. It was stated in Zelensky decree as a condition for lifting the prohibition on any negotiations with the Russian Federation – to remove Putin from the position of President. However, with his mandate already expired in May 2024 Zelensky himself will certainly be out of his presidential office much sooner than Putin will be from his. On the other hand, the Russian Federation has achieved some of its strategic goals, albeit not the two declared principal ones – Ukraine's permanent „neutralization” and „demilitarization”. Due to the two sides' mutually excluding objectives, the final outcome of the war in Ukraine will not be decided around a diplomatic table as a compromise. Like what happened in Croatia in 1995, in Serbia in 1999, in Georgia in 2008 and in Azerbaijan in 2023 it will be decided on the battlefield. However these outcomes will be very different. The war of attrition in Ukraine imposed by Russia, will probably result in a collapse of the Ukrainian army. Possibly like at the end of the war over Kosovo an agreement would be signed by military representatives of the two warring sides perhaps somewhere in Belarus in 2025. A ceasefire would be implemented with the withdrawal of Ukrainian forces behind the lines stipulated in the agreement. Probable outcome of the war in Ukraine would be similar to those in Serbia and Georgia – a loss of a considerable part of state territory and de facto the establishment of a new internationally universally unrecognized interstate borders. It is conceivable that after the war Ukraine will be again an ethnically and culturally more homogeneous landlocked country on about a half of its pre-2014 territory. As a permanently neutral state enjoying good relations with all its neighbors and wider, Ukraine could play a positive role as a buffer between the Russian Federation and NATO member states thus contributing to European security.

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THE WAR IN UKRAINE AMONG CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICTS

The war in Ukraine is the biggest, bloodiest and longest war in Europe since 1945. Its initial stage holds similarities with several other armed conflicts and wars in the last 50 years on Cyprus and in the territories of the former Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Among the cases in ex-Yugoslavia the greatest similarity is seen with the war in Croatia (1991–1995). These conflicts stemmed from almost simultaneous breakdowns of two multinational „socialist federations” and their communist regimes. The dissimilarity of the second stage of the war in Ukraine and the war in Croatia is primarily due to the processes of NATO and EU enlargement coupled with the USA's policy of using NATO enlargement and Ukraine as tools to harm and weaken Russia. The conflict about Ukraine developed into an indirect war between Russia and the US-led West, where Ukraine is the West's proxy and the main victim. The final outcome of the war in Ukraine will be decided on the battlefield and not around a diplomatic table. Still, it will be very different from that in Croatia. Responsibility for the war in Ukraine and its consequences must be shared between the two direct belligerents, the co-responsible USA and other NATO members.

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