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# Dynamics and variability of the conflict in Ukraine. Condition and perspective analysis

Dynamika i zmienność konfliktu na Ukrainie. Analiza uwarunkowań i perspektywy

**Summary:** The purpose of this article is to analyse the dynamics and variability of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. As noted in the introduction, the term “conflict” refers to the state of bilateral relations between the two countries since 2014, nevertheless, for the analysis of the current state of the conflict, the key date is 24 February 2022. Since the start of the invasion, described by the Russians as a “special military operation”, we have seen an increase in the dynamics and intensity of the conflict at all levels. The intensification of military operations has also affected the political, economic, and social spheres. Just when it seemed that the so-called “annexation referenda” would mark a new phase in the course of the conflict, and the scenario of a “Ukrainian version” of a low-intensity conflict would become more feasible, it turned out that the counteroffensive of the Armed Forces of Ukraine changed not only the situation on the frontline but also dynamized the other levels on which the conflict is taking place. This forced the author to update the analysed phenomenon. The article concludes with the constata-tion that we are in a “period of transition”, and the coming winter may once again change the situation of both sides in the ongoing war.

**Keywords:** Ukraine, Russia, international conflicts, dynamics, variability

**Streszczenie:** Celem artykułu jest analiza zmienności i dynamiki konfliktu pomiędzy Federacją Rosyjską i Ukrainą. Jak zaznaczono we wstępie, termin „konflikt” odnosi się do stanu stosunków dwustronnych pomiędzy tymi państwami od 2014 roku, niemniej jednak, dla analizy obecnego stanu konfliktu, kluczową datą jest 24 luty 2022 roku. Od rozpoczęcia inwazji określonej przez Rosjan „specjalną operacją militarną” obserwujemy wzrost dynamiki i intensywności konfliktu na wszystkich poziomach. Intensyfikacja działań militarnych wpłynęła także na sferę polityczną, ekonomiczną i społeczną. W momencie kiedy wydawało się, że tzw. „referenda aneksyjne” wyznaczą nową fazę przebiegu konfliktu i bardziej realny stanie się scenariusz „ukraińskiej wersji” konfliktu niskiej intensywności, okazało się, że kontrofensywa Sił Zbrojnych Ukrainy zmie-

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niła nie tylko sytuację na froncie, ale też zdynamizowała pozostałe poziomy, na których ten konflikt się rozgrywa. Wymusiło to na autorze zaktualizowanie analizowanego zjawiska. Artykuł kończy się konstatacją stwierdzającą, iż znajdujemy się w „okresie przejściowym”, a nadchodząca zima może po raz kolejny zmienić sytuację obu stron w toczącej się wojnie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ukraina, Rosja, konflikty międzynarodowe, dynamika, zmienność

## Introduction

The subject of the paper is an analysis of the dynamics and changing nature of the conflict in Ukraine. At this point, it should be clarified that for the purposes of the presented argument, it was assumed that the word “conflict” refers to the state of relations between the Russian Federation and Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea and the federalisation of the Donbas. The extended timeframe makes it possible to grasp the dynamics and variability of the analysed issue more precisely and to notice the factors influencing these dynamics and variability. According to M. Pietraś, armed conflicts are inherently dynamic phenomena, subject to evolution along with changes in social conditions, i.e., the environment in which they arise. Their dynamics and variability reflect changes in behaviour and social processes at various levels – from local, to state, to international<sup>1</sup>. We can, therefore, speak of a synergistic effect of changes occurring at the level of the international environment and the state level<sup>2</sup>. These changes, as “driving forces”, determine the dynamics and variability of the ongoing conflict, which is often an element of the implementation of a specific political strategy being introduced at both the internal and international levels.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the key determinants influencing the dynamics and variability of the conflict taking place in Ukraine. The main research hypothesis refers to the statement that, for the neo-imperial plans of the Russian Federation, Ukraine is a key state, and the dynamics and variability of the conflict indicate the con-

1 M. Pietraś, *Uwarunkowania nowej jakości zbrojnych konfliktów wewnątrzpaństwowych/międzynarodowych*, “Roczniki Nauk Społecznych” 2013, vol. 5(41), issue 3, p. 33.

2 M. Pietraś also writes about the peculiar process of double change of the international environment and its implications for qualitatively new armed conflicts occurring both inside the state and outside its borders – M. Pietraś, *Conflict Dynamics in International Relations*, [in:] *Border conflicts in contemporary world*, A. Moraczewska (ed.), Lublin 2014, pp. 15-41; idem, *Hybrydowość późnowestfalskiego ładu międzynarodowego*, [in:] *Późnowestfalski ład międzynarodowy*, M. Pietraś, K. Marzęda (eds.), Lublin 2008, pp. 57-74.

sequences of the Kremlin's actions not so much to the deconstruction, but even to the destruction, of Ukrainian statehood. The instruments for influencing the dynamics and variability of the conflict's course are used on three levels:

- political level – supporting pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine with the use of financial means and human resources (involvement of political technologists and other specialists in the field of political marketing and public relations), the so-called “Annexation referenda”, already carried out in Crimea and Donbas and planned for autumn 2022 in the Kherson region.
- military level – the annexation of Crimea and the federalisation of Donbas took place with the support of unmarked military formations, to which the Russian president did not admit in the initial phase of this stage of the conflict. From 24 February 2022, we are dealing with hostilities (hereinafter referred to as “special operation”). The number of casualties among the civilian population as a result of military actions of regular troops as well as air raids and artillery fire clearly demonstrate the intensification of the military factor and there is no indication that this state of affairs will change radically in the next few months.
- energy level – the strategy of so-called gas whip<sup>3</sup> used back in the 1990s and consistently implemented also in the later period, both for Ukraine and the countries of Central and Western Europe. The sanctions imposed on Russia after the aggression on 24 February 2022 were primarily aimed at reducing the revenues of the Russian Federation from the export of energy resources. These actions, however, require the application of comprehensive solutions that are not accepted by all EU Member States, which in turn allows Vladimir Putin to pursue further “energy blackmail” which, due to the prospect of the upcoming winter, may lead to a crisis on the scale of the entire continent.

It is clear that while in the 1990s and at the beginning of this century, the political strategy of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine

3 M. Orzechowski, *Bicz gazowy jako element rosyjskiej ruletki. Stosunki Federacji Rosyjskiej z państwami europejskimi na płaszczyźnie energetycznej*, [in:] *Quo Vadis Europa. Problemy polityczne i gospodarcze*, M. Janowski, J. Jonczek, L. Ślepowroński (eds.), vol. II, Szczecin 2008, pp. 153-165.

focused on the political level, we can observe, especially after the Orange Revolution, intensification of activities on the energy level, and since 2014, also militarily, which indicates the neo-imperial nature of Russia's policy throughout the post-Soviet area. The conflict has evolved into a military campaign, and we can now observe its most drastic form. The proposed structure of the paper aims to precisely explore the issues related to the dynamics and variability of the conflict in Ukraine.

## **1. “Special military operation” as an exemplification of the military dynamization of the conflict.**

### **From military escalation to the threat of nuclear disaster**

In Russia, regardless of whether the government was ruled by the tsar, the first secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) or, as is the case today, the president, the geopolitical factor was the key determinant of the country's domestic and foreign policy. This was due to the fact that in the 1990s, the Russian Federation, at both the declarative and real levels, assigned itself the role of an “arbiter” and “guarantor of stability” in the post-Soviet space<sup>4</sup>. It was invariably believed that geographical location was the starting point for the definition of strategic priorities to dominate the concepts and implementation of the state's foreign policy, and territorial size was invariably one of the basic measures of international position and the perception by other participants of international relations<sup>5</sup>.

President Vladimir Putin once described the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”<sup>6</sup>. According to some analysts who criticise the statements of Putin and his supporters, work has been underway in Russia on a project known as the “Soviet Union light”<sup>7</sup>.

4 M. Orzechowski, *Strategie polityczne Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec państw obszaru Europy Wschodniej w latach 1990-2005*, Toruń 2013, pp. 89, 126.

5 Z. Brzeziński, *Wielka Szachownica. Główne cele polityki amerykańskiej*, Warsaw 1997, pp. 36-56.

6 G. Morawski, *Władimir Putin: Upadek ZSRR katastrofą*, Psz.pl, <https://psz.pl/162-wschod/ros-ja-wladimir-putin-upadek-zsrr-katastrofa> [2.04.2022].

7 J. Brooke, *Is 'Soviet Union light' the Future of Putin's Russia?*, VOA News, <http://www.voanews.com/content/soviet-union-light-future-putin-russia/1521341.html> [22.03.2022].

The starting point for the conceptual assumptions of the so-called “Putin’s doctrine” has become a vision of the world in which Russia plays the role of the centre of the “Russian-speaking civilisation community: – linking Russia with Ukraine, and then with Belarus and other states created after the collapse of the USSR. It was to become the basis of a spiritual and civilisation community, referred to as “Russkij mir”. The “Russian world”, in the maximalist approach, is in fact the process of rebuilding the empire within the borders of the former USSR or encompassing only Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine<sup>8</sup>. In the most minimalist version, it can be seen as a plan to transform the Eurasian Economic Union into a strict integration bloc, partly imitating the European Union in its form, but implementing a development model different from the Western one. Either way, the acquisition of strategic control over Ukraine remains key to the success of Russia’s plans<sup>9</sup>.

The intensification of military operations since 24 February 2022 has further destabilised the situation not only in Ukraine but also throughout Europe. Additionally, the increasingly realistic vision of Russia’s use of its nuclear arsenal means that we are dealing with a real existential threat to hundreds of millions of people. The difficult situation is additionally complicated by the energy crisis related to sanctions restrictions on the export of Russian raw materials, and it has been known for a long time that Russia will not give up its main instruments of influence towards Western countries.

The strategy of neo-imperial expansionism of the Russian Federation has long since exceeded the borders of the former USSR. At present, we are reaching the point where Vladimir Putin is checking the durability of the alliance of Western countries, especially the European Union, where oil and gas have always been a bargaining chip in Russia’s policy. The upcoming winter will be another “test of unity” for Western countries, and a test of consolidation and the consequences of the actions taken against the Russian aggressor. Ukraine is

8 *Torzhestvennyy priyom po sluchayu Dnya narodnogo yedinstva* [Торжественный приём по случаю Дня народного единства], Kremlin.ru, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19562> [8.04.2022].

9 M. Menkiszak, *Doktryna Putina: tworzenie koncepcyjnych podstaw rosyjskiej dominacji na obszarze postradzieckim*, “Kommentarze OSW”, 27 March 2014, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2014-03-27/doktryna-putina-tworzenie-koncepcyjnych-podstaw-rosyjskiej> [16.04.2022].

thus becoming a “battlefield” on which something much bigger than a military conflict is being played out.

The current situation in the east and south of Ukraine clearly shows a dynamic trend of qualitative changes in the conflict. Ukraine started its counteroffensive using weapons received from Western countries as well as theoretical and practical knowledge acquired during training. The effects are already visible.

Ukrainian forces successfully exploited the enemy with tactical surprise and advanced at least 20 kilometres deep into Russian-controlled territory in Kharkiv Oblast, reclaiming some 400 square kilometres of land. Russian troops in the area have been weakened by previous movements to try to seize the Donetsk Oblast and to support the defence against Ukrainian attacks in the Kherson Oblast in the south of the country. Ukrainian forces have probably wisely used the relocation of Russian troops, equipment, and general operational concentration to launch local counteroffensives towards key points in the Kharkiv Oblast.

This situation clearly shows that the dynamics of the changeability of the course of the fighting will be maintained, which, combined with the determination of Ukrainian society and further “rearmament” of the Ukrainian army, may result in a shift of the front line and a gradual regaining of control by Ukraine over the occupied territories.

It should be expected that the war in Ukraine will last at least a few more months. The Ukrainian state and society will adapt to life in new conditions. The continuation of military activities will further hinder the economic life in the areas covered by them, but outside them, businesses and services are already recovering, and new supply chains and logistic routes are being created<sup>10</sup>.

Therefore, Ukraine’s success will depend on increasing the scope and pace of supplies, which will enable the further liberation of Ukrainian lands from Russian occupation. There are also promising initiatives to increase the liquidity of the Ukrainian budget and to facilitate

10 *Relokatsiya biznesu tryvaye i Komitet z pytan' ekonomichnoho rozvytku dokladaye usikh zusyil' zadlya pokrashchennya umov yiyi zdийsnennya*, Verkhovna Rada Ukrainy [Релокація бізнесу триває і Комітет з питань економічного розвитку докладає усіх зусиль задля покращення умов її здійснення, Верховна Рада України], 8 August 2022, <https://www.rada.gov.ua/news/razom/226586.html> [17.08.2022].

the sale of production on foreign markets – this is important because the social security of citizens will help increase their determination to continue resistance.

It seems that President Volodymyr Zelensky's earlier declarations, announcing attempts to recapture not only the areas occupied after 24 February 2022 but also those taken in 2014 – Crimea and Donbas, are now reflected in the activities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. These bold declarations raised concerns among some of the Western allies that too much military progress by Ukraine could provoke Putin to escalate his actions, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The change in the dynamics of operations and the progress of the Ukrainian army may be an impulse to put more pressure on the Russian side to try to negotiate, although the chance of this is slim; as indicated, for example, by the rhetoric of the deputy chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, the basic condition for starting the talks is Ukraine's unconditional capitulation, which is unacceptable to Kyiv given the current "counteroffensive tendency".

As a result, in the weeks and even months to come, President Zelensky will be challenged to skilfully "navigate" between the expectations of Ukrainian society and the concerns of Western partners in such a way as to maintain the support of both.

The war in Ukraine is a specific fulfilment of Putin's nostalgic longing for the Cold War and the bipolar system of international relations. Now, while the United States has been partially replaced by the North Atlantic Alliance as the main adversary in the global confrontation, the return to "hard power" has become for the Russian president more than just an instrument of implementation. Putin cannot afford to change policy towards Ukraine, although the lack of visible progress on the eastern and southern fronts should induce the Russian leader to "remodel" the strategy of actions towards a low-intensity conflict. The prospect of holding "annexation referenda" could also lead to a reduction in the intensity of military activities in favour of "political" appropriation of the occupied territories. The situation is complicated, however, by the unwavering resistance of Ukrainian society and the activity of militant and sabotage groups, directed not only against the occupiers but above all against collaborators and self-proclaimed local leaders in territories controlled by the Russian army.

## 2. “General Frost” and the Russian gas whip – Russia’s energy blackmail and the threat of a nuclear disaster

The increasing frequency of Russian shelling on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in recent weeks has damaged some of the infrastructure on the site. The power plant has been occupied by Russian troops since 4 March 2022, and in recent weeks it has been under constant fire by the Russians, which has raised concerns about the risk of a serious accident<sup>11</sup>. On 25 August 2022, the power plant, for the first time in its history, stopped producing electricity completely, albeit periodically, and was disconnected from the grid.

The main aim of the shelling is to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the West as an irresponsible state ready to cause a nuclear disaster. At the same time, the power plant is a kind of shield for the Russian forces – its territory is regularly used by them for shelling Nikopol on the other side of the Dnieper River and its vicinity. On 29 August 2022, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Rafael Grossi, announced that the Agency’s mission was on its way to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Enerhodar. Representatives of 13 countries took part in the mission, including Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Serbia, China, Albania, France, Italy, Jordan, Mexico, and North Macedonia. On the eve of the departure of the IAEA mission, on the night of 28-29 August 2022, Russian troops again fired on the city of Enerhodar<sup>12</sup>. The head of Enerhoatom, Petro Kotin, warned of the plans to shut down all power plants in the occupied territories of southern Ukraine in order to gradually connect them to the grid of the Russian Federation. Although, after the aforementioned failure on 25 August 2022, the Zaporizhzhia power plant is still operating in the CESA system, it cannot be ruled out that such a scenario will be implemented in the future. Permanent shutdown of the facility that supplies, among others, large cities, may lead to an energy deficit during the heating season – especially when there are problems with heat

11 H. Bazhenova, *Wojna na Ukrainie: przestępstwa przeciwko środowisku (część 1)*, “Komentarze IEŚ” 2022, no. 117, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/wojna-na-ukrainie-przestepstwa-przeciwko-srodowisku-czesc-1/> [26.05.2022].

12 S. Matuszak, *Niebezpieczna gra wokół Zaporoskiej Elektrowni Atomowej*, “Analizy OSW”, 1 September 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-09-01/niebezpieczna-gra-wokol-zaporoskiej-elektrowni-atomowej> [5.09.2022].

production for residential buildings due to infrastructure damage or insufficient gas and coal supplies.

The heating season of the coming winter will prove to be the most difficult in history, not only for Ukraine but also for Europe as a whole. Although Ukraine has over 12 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas in underground reservoirs<sup>13</sup>, to reach the level of 19 billion m<sup>3</sup> assumed by the government, Kyiv would have to find gas and allocate even several billion dollars for this purpose, which it is trying to obtain. The authorities inform that by mid-August they had accumulated 1.9 million tons of coal, but there is a risk that in the event of shelling of power and heat plants, along with the buildings, nearby raw material depots may also be destroyed<sup>14</sup>.

From 27 July 2022, the strategy of the “gas whip for Europe”<sup>15</sup> entered the next edition. Gazprom has limited gas supplies to European customers via the Nord Stream 1 (NS1) gas pipeline. The daily gas transmission has decreased from approximately 65 million m<sup>3</sup>, which constitutes 39% of the standard values, to approximately 32 million m<sup>3</sup> (19%)<sup>16</sup>. A significant reduction in Russian gas supplies to Germany via Nord Stream 1 also means the implementation of Vladimir Putin’s earlier threats. The immediate goal of the Kremlin is to make it difficult to fill European gas storage facilities before the winter heating season and to trigger an energy crisis in key European Union countries. It is, therefore, very likely that Russia will continue to reduce gas supplies to the EU in the near future. To this end, it may reduce the transmission of raw material via NS1 on the pretext of technical problems with turbines or blockage, e.g., under the guise of a failure, supplies via the Friendship (Druzhba) Pipeline through Ukraine. This is evidenced by the manipulation by Gazprom of the pressure of the gas flowing through this route, which was noted by the operator of the Ukrainian gas pipeline system two days before the aforementioned transmis-

13 T. Iwański, *War as the new normal: Ukraine six months since the Russian invasion*, “OSW Commentary”, 23 August 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2022-08-23/war-new-normal-ukraine-six-months-russian-invasion> [29.08.2022].

14 *Ibidem*.

15 More on gas whip strategy until 2015: M. Orzechowski, *Od realnego pragmatyzmu do neoimperialnego ekspansjonizmu. Ewolucja strategii politycznej Federacji Rosyjskiej wobec Ukrainy*, Szczecin 2015, p. 206.

16 M. Menkiszak, I. Wiśniewska, *Kreml na wojnie gazowej z Europą*, “Analizy OSW”, 4 August 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-08-04/kreml-na-wojnie-gazowej-z-europa> [14.08.2022].

sion restrictions by Nord Stream. Only thanks to the quick reaction of the operator was it possible to prevent the failure of the transmission system. Therefore, the unexpected increase in pressure in the Urenгой-Pomary-Uzhgorod pipeline leading to the EU via Ukrainian territory can be treated as sabotage by Russia. Its exclusion could be used by Gazprom as an argument proving that the actual possibilities of gas transmission to the Old Continent are very limited.

The least likely, though not excluded, variant of the “gas whip” scenario involves a serious limitation or suspension of supplies by one of TurkStream’s lines (towards European customers), which is currently operating at almost full capacity (44 million m<sup>3</sup>/day). However, this would close the last route to the existing or potential supply of Russian gas to European countries considered by the Kremlin to be “friendly” – Serbia, Hungary, and Austria<sup>17</sup>.

The Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, who was present at one of the panels devoted to the situation in Ukraine which took place during the Campus Poland of the Future, spoke very suggestively about the European energy crisis. Krastev stated, among other things, that this is another, perhaps the most important, “test of unity” for Western countries, which must decide whether they will put their own comfort or their system of value first. Therefore, he puts forward the thesis that while in the first 6 months of the conflict, the basic question was: “how will Ukraine handle it?”, the most important issue that will have to be answered in the next six months is: “how will Europe handle it?”<sup>18</sup>. The Bulgarian analyst also reminds us that Russia will soon “gain additional support, which will be winter”. As history shows, “General Frost” helped defeat Napoleon and Hitler. This time, it may once again prove to be a support for Russia in the winter “energy game”.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Krastev: *Łatwo jest mówić, że wspieramy Ukraińców, ale jeśli uderza to w nas osobiście, to perspektywa robi się inna*, TVN24, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/campus-polska-przyszlosci-poli-tolog-ivan-krastev-latwo-mowic-ze-wspieramy-ukraincow-ale-jesli-uderza-to-w-nas-osobis-cie-perspektywa-robi-sie-inna-6086743> [9.09.2022].

## Conclusions

The visible dynamics of the conflict in Ukraine, however, do not allow an answer to the key question: how long will it last and how will it continue to evolve? It should be remembered that the departure from the formula of conflicts characteristic of the Westphalian system meant that, especially in Europe and Africa, at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, a new type of organised violence occurred within states. It is referred to as a new war, a postmodern conflict, or a low-intensity conflict<sup>19</sup>. There is a form, proven in practice in the post-Soviet area, including in Transnistria, nevertheless, despite some similarities (functioning on the territory of a sovereign state, separatist entities, politically and militarily supported by Russia), at the present stage of the conflict, this formula is not applicable in the next few months. One can agree with Ivan Krastev's opinion that the coming winter months will play a key role in the further course of operations on the front, and that if it will be possible for Ukraine to settle the war in its favour, it will depend not only on the attitude of the army, society, and politicians. High prices of energy carriers and their deficit create additional opportunities for Russia to put pressure on Western European consumers. In exchange for gas, Moscow will demand concessions in behind-the-scenes negotiations in the form of stopping aid for Ukraine and lifting, or at least loosening, sanctions. The internal political dynamics in the US after the "half" elections to the Congress to be held in November 2022 will also be a challenge – the possible victory of the Republicans may have a demotivating effect on the continuation of support for Kyiv.

In summing up, it should be stated that we are at a critical point in the course of the conflict, with the possible prospect of both further military escalation and a gradual transition to the "low intensity" phase.

19 M. Pietraś, *Istota i specyfika konfliktów niskiej intensywności*, [in:] *Konflikt niskiej intensywności w Naddniestrzu*, M. Celewicz, J. Kłoczowski, M. Pietraś (eds.), Lublin 2006, p. 30.

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