

Reassertion and Aggression: Exploring the Impact of Russian Federation's Actions on Ukraine and the Black Sea Region

Ghinea, Mihai-Codrut

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ghinea, M.-C. (2024). Reassertion and Aggression: Exploring the Impact of Russian Federation's Actions on Ukraine and the Black Sea Region. *Perspective Politice*, 17, 69-78. <https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.7>

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How to cite this paper:

<https://doi.org/10.25019/perspol/24.17.0.7>

Ghinea, M.C. (2024). Reassertion and Aggression: Exploring the Impact of Russian Federation's Actions on Ukraine and the Black Sea Region. *Perspective Politice*. Pages [69-77].

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Article

Reassertion and Aggression: Exploring the Impact of Russian Federation's Actions on Ukraine and the Black Sea Region

Abstract: *Since the fall of the communist bloc, the Russian Federation has constantly sought to reassert itself on the international political scene as a global actor, using a wide range of means and actions in this direction, some even exceeding the scope of legality and legitimacy of action.*

The Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, which broke out in February 2022, is one of the most heated contemporary issues in International Relations that generated regional repercussions in political, economic and social terms, echoing in the entire international political system. As a consequence, this armed aggression generated fundamental changes in the Black Sea Region, especially from a social perspective, as it created a migratory wave of Ukrainian citizens who wanted nothing more than to flee the path of war.

In this article, I want to investigate the immediate effects of the armed aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine from a social point of view – against the background of the huge migration wave in the European states – and politically – the coalition of the member countries of the European Union in providing support to the Ukrainian forces in order to survive in front of the Russian invading forces.

Moreover, using the scenario method on the present data available on open source, I would like to explore the possible outcomes of the war and their implications from the social, economic, and political standpoints. This will allow me to foresee how the “new normal” would look like for the nations

and which measures they need to adopt for a sustainable future.

Keywords: *Black Sea Region, economic implications, International Relations, Russian Federation, social perspective, Ukrainian armed conflict.*

Mihai-Codruț GHINEA

Doctoral School, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration,
PhD. Student, Bucharest, Romania,
ORCID: 0009-0000-1746-7350;
ghinea.codrut@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the strategic implications of the Russo-Ukrainian military conflict that began in 2022 and continues to the present day on regional and international security, with a focus on the social, economic, and political domains.

Starting from the contextualization of the current security environment in which this conflict has emerged, and analysing its immediate consequences and implications, I will gather essential indicators to outline the evolving scenarios of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Subsequently, based on the potential developments (built on 4 scenarios – best case, worst case, most probable scenario, and the “black swan”/ alternative scenario), one will consider highlighting specific actions for the sustainable and harmonious development of the states and the post-conflict reconstruction.

2. International Context

Currently, the international system is governed by tensions and uncertainties generated by some regional conflicts (such as the Russo-Ukrainian war or the one between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas), which directly influence political decisions and socio-economic conditions, still experiencing the reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the Black Sea Region, Russia, driven by its desire for reaffirmation and reclaiming the title of a global actor, acts aggressively to project power and impose influence. In this context, Russia’s interests in the Black Sea Region and the actions taken to achieve its strategic objectives have direct repercussions on the stability of the international system.

The dissolution of the USSR did not foreshadow the resilience of a state defeated by its own political system characterized by the inability to adapt in an indirect conflict with a democratic bloc led by the USA. However, the American analyst George Friedman was the one who pointed out the underestimation of Russia’s capabilities, as well as its intrinsic desire to return to the negotiating table on an equal footing with the USA. “The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to signal the demise of Russia as a significant player on the international political stage, but the news announcing this death arrived too soon. A nation as large, resource-rich, and strategically positioned cannot simply disintegrate. (...) The Russian Federation, though greatly weakened, has indeed survived and will play a significant role in the next decade” (Friedman, 2011: 151).

The careful analysis of George Friedman’s assessment, compared with Russia’s offensive actions in the Black Sea Region, such as amassing an impressive number of troops on the border with Ukraine (January 2022) and the subsequent military invasion (February 24th, 2022) with the declared purpose by the Kremlin of “denazification and demilitarization” of this state, leads to the conclusion that the American analyst’s prophecy has been entirely fulfilled. In fact, Russia aims to limit NATO and European Union expansion near its own borders, as well as to maintain the Ukrainian state under its influence, in one form or another (minimal option – keeping the regions of Lugansk, Donetsk, and the Crimean Peninsula within the Russian Federation and changing power in Kiev, respectively the maximal option – dismantling Ukraine and annexing territories by neighbouring states).

A starting point of the war between Russia and Ukraine for all political analysts and decision makers should have been the year 2008, because that was the moment when “Georgia and Ukraine pursued attempts to join NATO, which Moscow found too provocative and unacceptable” (Oxenstierna and Olsson, 2015: 13). Moreover, in 2008, at the NATO Summit held in Bucharest, Romania, Vladimir Putin stated Russia’s view regarding “the continued expansion of NATO, the creation of a military infrastructure on the territory of new members (...) and

plans to deploy in Europe elements of the United States of America's strategic missile defence system – (...) a direct threat to the security of our country” (President of Russia, 2008).

Careful analysis of the timeline events from the Black Sea Region, in which the Russian Federation has been directly or indirectly involved, underlines the tendency of the Russian state to maintain an area of influence, corresponding to the former socialist republics. The need of Russia for controlling a vast territory has historical and geopolitical ties. It is considered that at the time of his death, Peter the Great left behind a testament in which he recorded an unfulfilled wish from his reign – the expansion of the borders of the Russian state: “We must keep steadily extending our frontiers northward along the Baltic and southwards along the shores of the Black Sea” (Lehovich, 1948: 112). This desire will become a true leitmotif of Russian foreign policy over time, strongly motivated by Halford Mackinder's geopolitical theory of the Heartland. Nowadays, Halford Mackinder's theory can be easily explained by Russia's actions to maintain a buffer zone between its borders and NATO (Mackinder, 1919; 2004).

3. Immediate consequences of the conflict

Since the beginning of 2022, Russia and Ukraine have been in full-scale war, which has generated a series of social, economic, and political effects and has raised uncertainties regarding possible developments and the establishment of peace.

The most visible consequence of the outbreak of the armed conflict has been the large wave of migrants into European countries. “Immediately after the onset of the conflict, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, and its partners intervened to fill the gap, ensuring that refugees from Ukraine received the support they needed at the beginning of the crisis, including money, shelter, and information” (UNHCR Romania, 2023). The humanitarian aid provided by host countries to Ukrainian refugees represents an additional element that puts pressure on the budgets of these states, which are in a complicated post-pandemic context, where social and economic activities are recovering after having been reduced to the minimum necessary to prevent the negative effects of COVID-19.

“On 4 March 2022, the EU activated the temporary protection directive. (...) Temporary protection is an EU emergency mechanism which is activated in exceptional circumstances of mass influx to provide collective protection to displaced persons and to reduce pressure on the national asylum systems of EU countries” (Council of European Union, 2024).

In addition, the wave of migration and the armed conflict generated direct repercussions in the global economy, marked by price drops on stock exchanges in the early days of the military aggression, and by the impairment of the ability to distribute grain from the two countries involved in the war. In this regard, some experts claim that “the conflict has hit food security around the world. Before the war, Ukraine and Russia were together the world's largest exporter of wheat – responsible for over a third (36%) of wheat exports. They also exported more than half of the world's sunflower oil” (Economics Observatory, 2023).

To compel Russia to abandon the war and to limit its economic capacity, European Union (EU) member states and the USA have updated and expanded the international sanctions in place since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. “Since March 2014, the EU has progressively imposed restrictive measures (sanctions) against Russia targeting specific economic sectors in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol and the deliberate destabilisation of Ukraine. The restrictive measures were expanded following Russia's mili-

tary aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 with the aim of weakening Russia's economic base, depriving it of critical technologies and markets and significantly curtailing its ability to wage war" (EU Sanctions Map, 2024).

Moreover, the coordination among Western states in implementing international sanctions against the Russian Federation aims to strengthen the political-diplomatic relations among them and to send Russia a firm message regarding its actions, which are considered unacceptable and in violation of international regulations.

Although the economic sanctions were imposed in order to make Russia give up its military aggression, they have also had negative effects in terms of price increases of sanctioned products. An example of this is the energy sector (for instance gas and oil), which has experienced substantial price increases since the war. "Even if the Russia-Ukraine war were to end today, its impact will be felt across the world for years" (KPMG, 2022).

4. Scenario method on Russo-Ukrainian war

In applying the scenario method to identify possible developments in the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, after defining and contextualizing the issue in previous chapters, we proceeded to collect and organize data from open sources. This step led to the identification of a set of indicators that influence the course of the war (Fig. 1). Subsequently, by assessing the impact of each indicator, we proceeded to describe the scenarios. Furthermore, in developing each scenario, we outlined the actions that states can undertake for post-conflict reconstruction and a sustainable future.

4.1. Best case scenario

The best-case scenario refers to Ukraine's victory over Russian aggression and would be based on a combination of favourable factors. In addition to the determination of the Ukrainian soldier who has managed to defend his homeland for over two years with enormous sacrifices, Ukrainian efforts should be doubled by:

- the installation of a sense of attrition and discouragement in the morale of Russian soldiers, as well as the disorganization, against the backdrop that a state the size of Ukraine compared to the Russian Federation has managed to generate considerable losses;
- street movements and violent protests against Putin, encompassing the whole of Russia (given the overwhelming victory in the presidential elections of March 2024), which could eventually materialize in a coup d'état to remove Vladimir Putin;
- the death of the Kremlin leader (unlikely, but worth considering, given the rumours in the press indicating his precarious health condition);
- continued provision of high-tech weaponry and financial and logistical flows from the West;
- the international sanctions imposed by the EU and the US prove their effectiveness by exerting significant pressure on Russia's economic capacity to withstand isolation;
- the results of the presidential elections in the United States, which will determine whether they will or will not continue the flow of material support to Ukraine.

If Putin were to be removed from leadership in the Russian Federation, either due to old age or health condition, or through a coup d'état, Russia would be caught off guard and characterized by internal instability, which would hinder its ability to maintain a military presence

in Ukraine. From this perspective, the interdependence between Putin and Russia is visible, a point also emphasized by Russian political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky, who worked for Russian presidents Boris Yeltsin, Dmitry Medvedev, and Vladimir Putin between 1996 and 2011: “While Putin is there, so is Russia; once Putin is gone, so is Russia” (Pavlovsky, 2016: 10).

At the same time, a new leadership would have a much more pragmatic vision, aiming to reduce human casualties and the economic repercussions of the conflict, including those of international sanctions. “Furthermore, the new leadership that succeeded Mr. Putin, while still overtly nationalistic and anti-Western, could be more pragmatic about the prospects of Russia maintaining an occupying force in Ukraine over the long term, and the effects of that on the Russian economy. This scenario could therefore result in a controlled and gradual pull-back of troops and/or a negotiated end to the conflict” (Economist Intelligence, 2023).

In both cases, whether Putin remains in power or departs from the helm of Russia through any means, a peace treaty will need to be signed between the two states, serving as a guarantee of their territorial integrity and sovereignty. Furthermore, in the event of a victory for Ukraine, there is a possibility that the country could regain the Crimean Peninsula (illegally annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014) and the Luhansk and Donetsk regions (which declared their independence in 2022, officially recognized by Russia).

“Ukraine’s victory (...) means a restoration of Ukraine’s territorial integrity within the pre-2014 borders, future security guarantees, criminal consequences for Russian war crimes and reparations for the material damage caused. Ukrainian membership in NATO and the European Union should also be part of (and a guarantor of) its victory” (GIS, 2023).

In addition to this territorial reorganization, Ukraine will require economic support for reconstruction, considering the material damages caused by the war to its infrastructure. This process will be accompanied by another wave of migration of Ukrainian citizens who will want to return home to resume their daily lives and activities.

From an economic standpoint, Western countries will need to carefully consider the need to maintain international sanctions, which have proven effective in containing Russia. Consequently, the trades of products subject to the embargo will be resumed with Russia.

However, KPMG experts believe that “Russia likely remains under sanctions and loses access to foreign investment for several years” (KPMG, 2022).

4.2. Worst case scenario

“Russia will never relinquish the idea of conquering Ukraine and destroying its statehood, regardless of changes in the political regime there (seeing Russia turning democratic in the immediate future is close to impossible). Therefore, many experts consider the factor of the “withdrawal of Putin from power” as less relevant to the analysis” (GLOBSEC, 2023).

Russia’s victory, in both forms – total, through the annexation and dismantling of Ukraine as a state, or partial, by retaining previously annexed territories, combined with the change of leadership in Kiev to one completely subservient to Moscow – essentially means nothing but keeping Ukraine under Russia’s influence. This would be possible under certain circumstances:

- weakening the resilience of Ukrainian soldiers, including by lowering morale;
- the cessation of arms deliveries and financial support by Western states, because of the internal economic issues they are facing and the priority of preserving national interest in relation to regional stability in the Black Sea;

- “Ukraine’s economy contracts, exports decrease, and attacks on critical infrastructure drive inflation and limit the financial capacity for reconstruction” (Reliefweb, 2023);
- US presidential election results, given that Donald Trump has a policy with minimal emphasis on direct or indirect involvement of the USA in proxy support for conflicts;
- the international sanctions do not have the desired effect, given the dependencies of the Western states on Russian gas and oil, as well as on cereals originating from this region;
- Putin’s winning another presidential term gives him domestic legitimacy to fully mobilize Russia in the war against Ukraine. “This scenario could materialise if Russia ramps up domestic arms production, through successful evasion of sanctions, and mobilises even more personnel to the front” (Economist Intelligence, 2023);
- “fully occupying eastern and southern Ukraine, namely the regions it claimed to have annexed in September 2022 – Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhya (...) occupy Ukraine’s Odesa and Mykolaiv regions, fully closing off Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea” (Economist Intelligence, 2023);
- “more aggressive Russian military strategy. (...) Russia indiscriminately targets civilian infrastructure. Air strikes increase throughout the country. Biological and chemical agents cause significant casualties, while nuclear coercion escalates, with Russia moving its nuclear attack capacities closer to the Ukrainian borders or destabilising nuclear power plants” (Reliefweb, 2023);
- the possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons, employing a pre-emptive strike and justifying its necessity to protect its security and territorial integrity, without Western democratic states led by the USA responding to avoid a global nuclear conflagration.

Russia’s victory will undoubtedly impact the international political scene, causing a shift in the balance of power in its favour. Firstly, from an economic standpoint, Russia will have an argument for increasing the price of energy products – oil and natural gas – delivered to European states, banking on the fact that they supported Russia’s enemy during the special operation of “denazification and demilitarization”. Moreover, with Ukraine either under control or fully annexed, Russia will also gain a dominant position in grain exports, which will further allow it to increase prices, putting pressure on Western states. In this situation, the EU will find itself in a complicated position where it will need to consider abandoning the international economic sanctions on Russia.

Also, if Russia opts to keep Ukraine as a state, it will impose a regime that is loyal to it and will never consider joining NATO or the EU, nor seek economic advantages and market access in the EU.

Regarding Ukrainian refugees, most of them will not want to return to their homeland, fearing the oppression that the Kremlin regime will initiate against them. For this reason, host countries will need to devise solid and tangible plans for their social integration and participation in the labour market, as well as dedicated education programs for young people to continue their studies.

4.3. The most probable scenario

In this scenario, the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine will continue in the short and medium term, leading to a war of attrition that will compel the two states to reach a consensus and sign a peace treaty.

Ukraine will most likely be forced to accept that its previously annexed territories by Russia will remain an integral part of this country, thus acknowledging their belonging to the Russian Federation. In this form, Ukraine's situation resembles that of a frozen conflict, "in which the fighting ends or diminishes, but there is no final resolution of the conflict, has precedent in the frozen conflicts in Moldova and Georgia" (RAND, 2023).

The factors underlying the construction of this scenario have consisted of:

- the Ukrainians' ability to resist Russian aggression relies on external military, logistical, and financial support;
- the outcome of the Russian presidential elections with Putin securing another term;
- US election result – "the potential election of Mr Trump (or another Republican candidate) as US president in 2024 could lead to a sharp change in policy towards Ukraine, with greater prioritisation of protectionist measures and a shift in the focus of national security policy to the Indo-Pacific" (Economist Intelligence, 2023);
- international economic sanctions do not imply the total isolation of Russia, given the energy dependencies (even the removal of Russia from the SWIFT system has not been complete);
- NATO does not want to militarily intervene to defend Ukraine in order to avoid triggering a world war, as its interest is limited to preventing Russia from achieving victory;
- the war of attrition can erode the morale and resilience of soldiers from both sides, ultimately leading to the signing of a ceasefire.

Vladimir Putin will have some political demands for an end to the conflict that the Ukrainians will have to accept. "Ukraine would have to be a neutral country and not join NATO; Crimea would have to be recognized as Russian territory; the Russian-backed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk would be granted independence; Ukraine would have to demilitarize and surrender any weapons that constituted a threat to Russia; Ukraine would have to be «de-Nazified», meaning a change of regime to one acceptable to Russia; and Russian would have to become an official second language in Ukraine" (RAND, 2023).

The involvement of Western states and the USA will be minimal in Ukraine's reconstruction process, and the majority of Ukrainian refugees will not wish to return home and contribute to this reconstruction, but instead they will opt for inclusion in the host countries.

"The overall situation remains tense, and challenges persist in achieving long-term stability and reconstruction" (Reliefweb, 2023).

4.4. The alternative scenario/ "Black swan"

This scenario underlines the risk of contagion from Ukraine, leading in a first stage to the outbreak of similar violent and armed clashes in frozen conflict zones such as "Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijan" (Dungaciu and Godzimirski, 2020: 3). Subsequently, these conflicts have the potential to escalate into a global conflagration, based on the following arguments:

- to distract public attention, Russia initiates internal movements and protests in frozen conflict zones;
- Putin winning another presidential term allows him to act subversively and aggressively;
- the use of nuclear weapons by the Russians, prompting a strong response from the US and European states (mainly the United Kingdom and France, which possess such arsenal);
- Increased energy dependency and economic pressures lead to a heightened interest from Western states to get involved in solving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

If the contagion stage has some degree of materialisation, the risk of a world war in which combatants use nuclear weapons has consequences that are hard to imagine, and recovery and reconstruction after such a massacre require a long period of time and sacrifices on all levels.

5. Instead of conclusions

To some extent, each scenario came up with a set of conclusions and steps for sustainable development. We find ourselves in a complex economic, political, and social context and it is everyone's duty to contribute individually to a common development and for the greater good.

The likelihood of a prolonged war in the Black Sea Region is high, meaning that EU member states and USA will play a significant role in ensuring Ukraine's survival through continuous logistical and financial support, as well as pursuing economic and political-diplomatic efforts to persuade Russia to abandon its aggression.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Annex

Key factors	<i>Best case</i>	<i>Worst case</i>	<i>The most probable</i>	<i>Black swan</i>
	Ukraine wins	Russia wins	Frozen conflict	World War III
Ukrainian soldiers' morale	+	-	-	-
Russian soldiers' morale	-	+	+	-
Financial and logistical support from the EU and the US	+	-	+	0
International sanctions	+	-	+	0
Dependence on Russian fossil fuels (oil and natural gas)	-	+	+	+
Price increases in the energy sector	-	+	+	+
Export of cereals and the European states dependence on them	+	+	+	+
American presidential elections Democrats win	+	-	+	0
American presidential elections Republican win	-	+	-	0
Russian presidential elections	-	+	+	+

Fig. 1

About the author

Ghinea, Mihai-Codruț. He was born in 1994, in Pitesti, Romania. His studies and professional training are in the field of military science, national security, and international relations. Currently, he is actively engaged in military service, where he applies his expertise to address contemporary security challenges. With a profound understanding of the complexities of global security, GHINEA Mihai-Codruț, Ph.D. candidate at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, is dedicated to unravelling the intricacies of security dynamics, particularly concerning Russia in the Black Sea Region.

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