



National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

The Faculty of Political Sciences

Doctoral School

***Frozen Conflicts in the Black Sea Region
as a Foreign Policy Instrument for Russia.
Ukraine's Case.***

- DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY -

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Summary

The topic of the research carried out within the doctoral program concerns the strategic interaction in the Black Sea Region between Ukraine and Russia, and particularly the escalation from the protracted conflict located in Donbass, to a conventional war (starting with February 24th, 2022) and the potential for settlement.

Moscow's decision to invade the sovereign and independent Ukrainian state marked not only the beginning of "the biggest war in Europe since World War II", according to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy or "the most dangerous situation since World War II", according to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, but also a radical change in Russia's approach to the so-called "near neighbourhood" – if previously it was based on laying the foundations for localized conflicts and freezing them, currently the range of foreign policy instruments "acceptable" to Moscow has been significantly expanded to include confrontations with regular troops. This aspect (only potential at the time I started the research in 2021) represents the most relevant argument to support the theoretical and, especially, practical relevance of the research topic.

The five main questions that guided the research process in this paper are:

- i. Why and how did the conflict in Donbass arise? The answer to this question was aimed at identifying the reasons why the negotiations between the two sides failed before the Russian side decided to act by other means to force Ukraine to accept the requested concessions (previously rejected by Kyiv in the negotiations).
- ii. Why was the conflict in Donbass not solved and what were the conditions that ensured the quasi-stability or the "freezing" for the *ex-ante status-quo* (pre-war)? By answering this question, I sought to identify the reasons why none of the parties involved had incentives, since the beginning of the conflict in Donbass, to deviate from the strategies that led them to engage in an unconventional confrontation. In other words, what are the conditions of existence for a "frozen" conflict to be a stable outcome of the strategic interaction (until the escalation in 2022)?
- iii. Why and how was the conflict "unfrozen"? How did it go from a localized conflict, of low intensity, with moments of intensification of confrontations in the vicinity of a Line of Contact agreed upon by the parties through negotiations, to an active phase, in which the two directly involved parties confront each other militarily with regular troops? In other words,

and very simply put, identifying the answer to this research question overlaps with finding an explanation for changing the Russian strategy for approaching the relationship with Ukraine.

iv. Under what conditions can the war expand/include actors other than those directly and immediately involved? In the context in which Russia continues nuclear threats against the West, as well as military actions near NATO territory (which may result in incidents leading to a so-called "spiral of escalation"), identifying the answer to this question has become extremely important to be able to see the conditions in which the current war is likely to escalate into a confrontation with conventional means between nuclear powers.

v. Under what conditions could the war end? By answering this question, I sought to indicate the ways in which players can reach other outcomes of the strategic interaction, apart from the one in which they currently find themselves in (bilateral war between Russia and Ukraine), but also outside other outcomes that involve military confrontations, i.e. the possibility of a hybrid war, respectively a bilateral war between Russia and the West. Therefore, given the construction of the strategic interaction model, there remain the possibilities of achieving the outcomes in which Ukraine ensures its independence, Kyiv is militarily defeated by Russia, or the Ukrainian side agrees to implement Moscow's requests.

To answer the research questions, I organized the thesis into five main chapters that I will briefly present.

The first chapter represents a critical review of the main **theoretical approaches** on the topic of strategic interactions between Russia and Ukraine, of course, published before the actual start of the war in 2022, as well as on topics that are extremely present in academic discussions, such as deterrence failure and negotiations failure prior to an escalation of tensions by military means. The focus in this chapter has been on the research questions that the authors aim to answer and on identifying the gaps in the literature. I have identified a series of assumptions, limits and aspects that I have subsequently approached and developed in a different light, starting from the refinements brought by Zagare and Kilgour (2000) to deterrence theory to analyze the interactions that led to the emergence of the conflict in Donbass, and which escalated into a full-blown war in 2022 from a game theory perspective.

In **the second chapter**, I have presented for each of the **three research methods** that I have used (case study, game theory, Operational Code Analysis), the answers to three questions that I consider important, firstly for understanding each chosen tool and secondly, for arguing the reasons why I opted for certain methods of analyzing the war in Ukraine. The three

questions are: "What is it?" (that method) – I have presented some working definitions identified in the literature; "How is it applied?" (that method) – I have presented as concretely as possible the steps to be followed in order to carry out a research based on that particular method, which, of course, in some cases are stricter, more formal and can be better delimited – as is the case for game theory or Operational Code Analysis, and in other cases the steps depend to a greater extent on the subjectivity of the researcher – as can be found in the case study; "What are the advantages/disadvantages?" (in the use of that method) – I have exposed for each chosen method what are the advantages and disadvantages of using it.

The third chapter represents the most consistent contribution to the research and contains the modeling and analysis of the strategic interaction between players. To achieve this goal: I have presented the assumptions of the model (trying to respond to some of the limitations previously identified in the literature); I have modeled the structure of the game representing the actors, the strategies they have at their disposal, the order in which they make choices (taking into account first of all the knowledge I have on the development of the interaction between Russia and Ukraine over time) and the payment structure (resulting from the argumentation of the order of preferences, based on the input provided including by the Operational Code Analysis for each of the players); I have analyzed the interaction in complete information; I have analyzed the interaction in incomplete information (following both the model of Zagare and Kilgour, previously mentioned, and the steps theorized by Harsanyi for transforming the uncertainty about the players' actions and strategies into uncertainty about their utilities in each game profile - players have several types, depending on their preferences structure between the results of the interaction); I have identified the possible equilibria in each of the analyzed cases and I have drawn a series of **conclusions** from the previous analysis, that I have presented as **hypotheses**:

- Regardless of the real type of the player Russia, it must keep credible the threat of its willingness to risk/engage in a direct confrontation with the West, including even the nuclear component, in order to deter the West from intervening in support of Ukraine (**Hypothesis 1**);
- If Russia does not have a credible nuclear threat, then regardless of the type of the player West, it will support Ukraine through an intervention against the Russian side, thus ultimately ensuring the independence of the Ukrainian state (**Hypothesis 2**);
- Given Russia's incentives to signal that it is willing to escalate, the West, in order not to risk such an outcome, will choose to provide support and gradually increase the

level of engagement on Ukraine's side, so that the aid sent will not be (or cannot be) confused/interpreted as direct intervention. The West is therefore "testing" the reaction of the Russian side when it does not have reliable information on whether it is willing to take the risk of a nuclear escalation. The support it provides to Ukraine therefore has a dual role – the direct objective is to give Ukraine the opportunity to defend itself; the indirect aim is to obtain information on the type of the player Russia, in particular whether it is aggressive-hesitant or aggressive-determined (**Hypothesis 3**);

- Ukraine and the West are in a coordination interaction, neither side has incentives to bluff or send false signals to each other regarding their own types, although the goals and order of preferences of the two actors do not fully overlap (**Hypothesis 4**);
- Given the fact that in complete information the equilibrium of the game is a hybrid conflict, then a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the escalation to occur is that the players have incomplete information, especially Russia, which initiates a sequence of actions on a branch of the game other than the one on which the hybrid confrontation is located (**Hypothesis 5**);
- When bluffing, Russia makes the decision to attack Ukraine in the following situations: first – if it anticipates that Ukraine is determined and does not accept the demanded concessions, and the West is conciliatory; second – if it anticipates that Ukraine is hesitant, and the West is conciliatory. When Russia is one of the aggressive types, it makes the decision to attack Ukraine in any situation in which it anticipates that the West does not intervene directly in support of Kyiv (**Hypothesis 6**);
- To deter Russia from attacking Ukraine, then two conditions must be simultaneously met: firstly, the West must not appear to be conciliatory or cautious, and Ukraine must not appear to be hesitant. In other words, an intuitive idea, widely supported in the literature on deterrence, emerges, namely that both the West and Ukraine must increase the costs that Russia will have to bear if it nevertheless decides to initiate a conventional military confrontation. Both sides must be decisive, which increases Russia's costs, because the threat of Western intervention, when credible, is equivalent to the threat of a bilateral war between Russia and the West, costly for Moscow, which anticipating this development, chooses not to escalate militarily (**Hypothesis 7**);
- If deterrence posture of the West and Ukraine is not convincing for Russia (when it is the bluffing type), it is possible that the strategic interaction will end up in one of two

situations that are outside the prescribed paths of balance. The first case (Russia-Ukraine bilateral war) can be encountered if: The West is cautious or determined, but Russia knows about it or assesses (erroneously) that it would, in fact, be hesitant; The West considers Russia's threat to escalate credible (which is why they choose to support Ukraine, but not to intervene directly). The second case (Ukraine's independence) can be reached in the conditions detailed in the previous case, with the only change that the West does not consider Russia's threat to escalate as credible (which is why it chooses to intervene militarily directly in support of Kyiv).

Similarly, if the deterrence posture of the West and Ukraine is not convincing for Russia (when it is the aggressive-hesitant type), there is a possibility that the players will follow paths outside those prescribed by the equilibria and end up either in a bilateral confrontation between Moscow and the West or when Ukraine secures its independence. These situations can only be encountered if there is an asymmetry of information, one of the parties underestimating the resolve of the other (**Hypothesis 8**);

- It is possible, even if unintentionally, to reach an escalation in the following situation: Russia is aggressive-determined type (but its threat of escalation is not credible to at least one type of player West, who assesses that Moscow is aggressive-hesitant type/ The West is misinformed about the type of player Russia) and at least one type of the West intervenes militarily in direct support of Ukraine after the attack by Russia. The West knows that Russia also has incentives to send signals that it is aggressive-determined type (regardless of the real type of player) and misinterprets that Moscow is aggressive-hesitant type (**Hypothesis 9**);
- Knowing that the West is deterred by the possibility of Moscow being aggressive-determined when assessing a response to the Russian invasion, Kyiv has incentives to minimize the likelihood that an eventual intervention by Western states will lead to a bilateral confrontation with the Russian side and thus, to minimize the likelihood that Russia will be perceived as aggressive-determined/maximize the likelihood that Moscow will be perceived as aggressive-hesitant. The situation allows Ukraine to increase the chances that the West will provide the highest level of support that it is willing to provide given its type and, therefore, that Kyiv will achieve the best possible result in the strategic interaction (**Hypothesis 10**).

In **the fourth chapter** I have tested the previously identified hypotheses. Their falsification allows, on the one hand, the evaluation of the constructed theoretical model, and on the other

hand, it provides answers to the research questions proposed in this thesis. For each of the five research questions, I have "deconstructed" what an answer would mean within the constructed theoretical model and then compared the identified conditions with what happened or can be observed in "reality".

- Why and how did the conflict in Donbas arise?

Russia's option for a low-intensity conflict represented, given the assumed order of preferences, a way for Moscow to reject the option of a Ukrainian state completely independent of Russian influence on the decision-making process in Kyiv and chose to escalate a step further (counted as such strictly within the framework of the constructed reductionist model). A disproportionately aggressive action by launching an invasion with regular troops would have brought very high costs to Russia, associated with a conventional war. The model built and the conclusions drawn from the analysis reveal that an escalation with hybrid means was the dominant option for the Russian side in 2014, when the Kremlin decided to invade Crimea and subsequently annex the Peninsula, as well as to invade Donbas with the so-called "little green men", without the insignia of the Russian state, which simultaneously offers military force and the possibility of plausibly denying direct involvement in confrontations (at least in the first phase), that is, in other words, minimal costs.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, given the fact that in 2013-2014 the pro-Russian power in Kyiv had just been replaced and President Yanukovych had left for Russia following the protests of Ukrainian citizens, which also led Ukrainians to unite around Western values, for Kyiv the response to resist the Russian side, including after the escalation of the security situation, has become dominant. The model shows why Ukraine chose not to accept the concessions demanded by Moscow: the alternative had just become, following Euromaidan, impossible to follow, or would have entailed far too high costs for the new interim leadership of the Ukrainian state (it would have been in total opposition to the population that expressed, at a very high price, the option of distancing itself from the "Russian world"). Any concessions to Moscow, in the context in which more than 100 people were killed at the orders of the pro-Russian authorities, would have been unacceptable. Therefore, the Ukrainian side's response not to give in was dominant (given the assumptions and the model built).

Finally, the model also explains the collective West's decision after Ukraine's decision not to accept concessions. At this point in the interaction, the third player we introduced into the model was "called" to make a choice, in which context he opted to support Kyiv. The

alternative, too, would have been much more costly for Western states.

Therefore, what led to the emergence of the conflict in Donbas was this sequence of choices that I have described above, representing dominant strategies for each of the three actors in the context of the previous choices made by the other players, the types of players and assumptions about the order of their preferences, as well as the way we constructed the sequence of interactions and the degree of "freedom" that we introduced into the options that the players had at the disposition. This sequence of actions led to a (predominantly) low-intensity, or hybrid, conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the latter benefiting from a certain level of support from Western states.

- **Why has the conflict in Donbas not been resolved?**

The conflict of a (predominantly) hybrid nature that Russia and Ukraine reached after overcoming the active stage of confrontations in 2014-2015, officially marked by the signing of the Minsk II Agreement, represented an equilibrium of the strategic interaction, proved to be stable until the start of the Russian invasion in February 2022. Once at the point described above, neither side had any incentive to unilaterally deviate from the hybrid conflict. The reason for this situation, which emerges from the theoretical model constructed, is that any other choice made by one of the parties would have led to more serious consequences than maintaining the new status quo on the ground, which allows relatively low costs to be incurred compared to the alternatives. Ukraine would not have had the necessary means to liberate the temporarily occupied territories, and if the situation had escalated, Russia would have intervened even more strongly, with even more military resources, which would have generated even greater costs for Kyiv. In the case of Russia, even if it had the means to achieve its goal of occupying Ukraine, it would have had to commit numerous resources and spend significant amounts of money over a very long period.

According to the analysis, the profile of the game in which a confrontation of a hybrid nature is reached can be a balance in any possible distribution of the three types of players. Therefore, it is difficult to identify definitive conclusions regarding the real types of actors (and it is not necessarily one of my research objectives), given strictly the low input provided to the theoretical model. However, regardless of the distribution "chosen" by Nature regarding the types of actors, there are certain conclusions that can be drawn regarding the conditions of existence for this result to be a stable one: Russia's threats (of escalation) are not credible (or Moscow perceives that at the level of Western states its own threats are not considered credible, which is equivalent to not having credible threats

– or in other words the risk threshold acceptable to Russia is not exceeded), and Kyiv's Western partners pledge to support Ukraine, even if not through direct intervention (which would lead to a bilateral Russia-Ukraine war, in which the latter benefits from support for the war effort).

- Why and how has been the conflict "defrozen"?

The conclusion of the research leads us to the idea that it has become rational for Russia to choose a conventional escalation, that would lead to a bilateral war with Ukraine, or even to Kyiv's defeat – if, in the first place, it assessed that the current (at the time) strategy of maintaining a low-intensity confrontation does not produce the desired results - bringing Kyiv closer to Moscow and getting closer to reaching the objective of controlling the decision-making process in Bankova; and, secondly, if the West had decided not to support the Ukrainians, and Moscow would have been aware that this would be the decision of the Western states. As for Ukraine's choice, the option not to give in continued to be part of the dominant strategy, due to the assumed order of Kyiv's preferences.

A bilateral war between Russia and Ukraine is likely to occur if the West (of the cautious or determined type) perceives Russia to be of the aggressive-determined type (although it is likely to be of another type) and therefore anticipates that it would attack if Western states would commit to Ukraine's side after conventional aggression. Instead, the West chooses to provide support to the Ukrainian side so that it can resist Russian aggression. For Ukraine, regardless of the type of player, this situation means that the option of not accepting concessions after a military attack by the Russian side is better than the alternative.

- Under what conditions can war expand?

The war initiated by Russia against Ukraine can lead to its transformation into a bilateral one between two nuclear powers, fortunately only hypothetically at the time of analysis. Two conditions must be met simultaneously to witness such a development. The first condition is that Russia is aggressive-determined by Nature, so it prefers to enter into a bilateral confrontation with the West, rather than allow Ukraine to be independent. The second condition is that the parties have distorted information about the types of the other players, i.e. the West mistakenly considers that the Russian side is bluff or aggressive-hesitant type, while Russia appreciates, just as wrongly, that Western states consider it to be really aggressive-determined, therefore according to the "assigned" typology of nature (so each of the two parties anticipates a different response from the adversary). The

conclusion regarding the second condition, namely that the parties must have distorted information, can also be derived from the fact that this game profile does not appear in equilibrium in any possible distribution of player types, as "decided" by Nature, a situation in which the parties have incentives to unilaterally change their strategy if they end up in such a situation. Consequently, in order for the West to avoid this outcome of the game (given that we are already at a later point in time than Moscow has already invaded Ukraine), then it must seek to obtain information as accurate and precise as possible on the real type of the opponent – that is, on the real structure of Russia's preferences and the level of risk acceptable to the Kremlin, beyond public statements on nuclear escalation.

- **Under what conditions could the war end?**

There is a possibility of achieving the outcomes in which Ukraine secures its independence, Kyiv is militarily defeated by Russia or the Ukrainian side agrees to implement the demands made by Moscow, in addition to the profile of the game we are currently in, i.e. the one in which Russia and Ukraine face each other militarily and in which the latter benefits to a certain extent from support from Western states.

The result in which Ukraine is defeated can only be achieved if the West is conciliatory and, moreover, considers Russia's threat of escalation to be credible (whether it is real or not, i.e. whether Russia really is aggressive-determined, or whether Moscow is only successfully projecting aggression not covered by the risks it would be willing to take).

Similarly, the end of the war by Ukraine accepting the concessions requested by Moscow can only be achieved under the conditions presented above regarding the modification of the preferences of Western partners, to which is added the condition that Ukraine is hesitant type.

Finally, the result in which Ukraine obtains its independence can only be obtained if there is a qualitative change in the level of the player Russia, which is bluffing or aggressive-hesitant but continues to consider that its threat is perceived as credible by the West. At the same time, in order to reach this result, another condition is that the West must be sure that Russia is not aggressive-determined, so that it can intervene in support of Kyiv.

The final chapter contains **the conclusions** of the analysis or the answers to the research questions and is structured in several sections. The first section includes the observations I have made following the literature on the subject (with the specification that most of them are dated before the start of the war in 2022); the second section contains the results I have obtained after analyzing the strategic interaction between the three players in complete information (as a necessary first step of the research); the third section of conclusions

includes answers to the research questions that I have formulated to address the subject, resulting from the analysis of the interaction between the three players in incomplete information. In this section – which is also the most complex – of the work, I review the main aspects arising from the application of game theory tools to the current situation represented by the war in Ukraine, highlighting the conditions of existence for the emergence of the conflict in Donbass, for the relative stability between 2014 and 2022, for the escalation of confrontations to a war with conventional means, for the possible extension of military confrontations and, last but not least, to end the war. If the first three sets of conditions can be clearly indicated (since they refer to developments already recorded), the last two represent more of a theoretical analysis, meant to indicate the ways by which from the point where we are currently, we can arrive at another result of the strategic interaction between players.

Also, the conclusions chapter includes a separate section on the problems I have encountered, respectively what risks I had to be aware of during the research and how I overcame them, and finally, it contains a section in which I specified the limits of the present doctoral research and possible suggestions for future analyses to develop the knowledge produced by this work.

From a **theoretical point of view** the results of the research contribute to a better understanding of the strategic interaction between Russia and Ukraine, which evolved towards the outbreak of a war, within a logically consistent approach. Also, the identified limits will allow for further development of the subject and refinement of the tools used.

From a practical **point of view**, the relevance of the results lies in the conditions and predictions regarding the developments in the dossier on security in the Black Sea Region and their contextualization to identify the impact on Romania's security interests (it is not an objective of the present research).