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**PROTRACTED CONFLICTS IN REGIONAL  
AND WORLD POLITICS: THE INTERSECTION  
OF FOREIGN INTERESTS AND THE CONFLICT DYNAMICS  
(ON THE EXAMPLES OF SYRIA AND UKRAINE)**

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*The paper examines the role of external factors in the intensity and duration of armed conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. The authors propose that higher levels of intervention lead to a higher intensity of fighting and longer duration of conflicts. Also, the issue of transformation of state institutions and the probability of their survival during the conflicts is addressed.*

**KEY WORDS:** *hybrid warfare, proxy warfare, state, armed conflicts, Syria, Ukraine*

Armed conflicts are one of the most commonly discussed topics in political science, perhaps due to their prevalence in key regions of the world and unique characteristics differentiating them from older conflicts. One frequently addressed problem is the interventionist role of external powers in these conflicts. However, elaboration on the topic of turning these interventions into a political strategy of domestic elites has been inadequate. Therefore, this is the main problem we would like to address as it directly influences the state of political institutions and the probability of state survival.

To shed light on the stated problem, we are interested in answering the following research questions:

1. How does foreign involvement influence the dynamics of conflicts in Syria and Ukraine?
2. How can these two conflicts be connected under one geopolitical strategy of “superpowers”?
3. How do local elites’ strategies in Syria and Ukraine vary, and what implications do they have for political institutions and the probability of state survival?

Finding answers to these questions will lead us to a deeper understanding of the intersection of domestic and foreign interests in the conflicts and will highlight its consequences for state institutions. The interplay between domestic and international in contemporary armed conflicts is an extremely topical field of analysis, primarily due to the nature of modern conflicts. They are greatly influenced by external players, and these conflicts usually have a regional impact regarding the spill over of violence and require a regional approach to resolve disputes. Secondly, most contemporary conflicts can be perceived as elements of a geopolitical struggle for domination between key players. Consequently, we propose that they can be put into one framework and analyze them together using similar theoretical approaches. Just as importantly, comparing seemingly different cases can bring additional insight into a greater understanding of the dynamics of these conflicts as we can search for fundamental structural similarities between them. We also believe that the knowledge we can gain from changing the perspective can be crucial for placing the Ukrainian case into a broader analytical framework, which will help to better understand and predict the dynamics of the conflict.

One of the most comprehensive works concerning the influence of war on social and political institutions in the Middle East is *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* by Steven Heydemann and his collaborators. This book is intended to fill the gap in Middle East studies concerning the implications of war and state transformation. The author systemizes the differences between early Modern Europe and contemporary Middle East, noting that the consequences of war-making are very different for social institutions, including the state (Heydemann 2000, 2-22). Specific attention is paid to the transnationalisation of war preparation and war-making.

Jennifer De Maio regards the transnationalisation of conflicts as resulting from machinations among elites (De Maio 2010, 25), meaning spillover does not happen only as a result of the domino effect of violence. It may occur due to the benefits it provides for internal players. De Maio suggests that the transnationalisation of war is used for consolidating domestic power as well as destabilising the region, which helps spread a specific state's influence. Focusing on the spillover of violence as a governmental strategy, she writes: "A civil war thereby becomes a proxy war between states with the advantage that governments can distance themselves from atrocities committed by their proxies by attributing blame to rebel factions" (De Maio 2010, 26). Spillover and destabilisation can appear not only in violent actions but also in the flow of refugees, recruitment of fighters, or use of another country as a transit point for arms, supplies, or people. De Maio argues that this is a controlled and intentional process aimed at engaging other countries to fight in a proxy war (2010, 28). Furthermore, spillovers can be useful for suppressing rebel groups and cutting their external support.

Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen pointed out that in Syria's case, external players perceive the conflict as a zero-sum game, meaning that achieving one's goals inevitably leads to other players not achieving theirs (Asseburg/Wimmen 2012, 3). This insight leads to an assumption that foreign involvement in the form of financial and material support of different adversaries may well result in a higher intensity of fighting or in the structural changes in the dynamics of the conflict. For example, uneven material support of rebel groups in Syria at some point led to the radicalization and Islamization of opposition.

Jeffrey T. Checkel raised a question of methodology in studying mechanisms involved in the transnationalisation of civil wars (Checkel 2010, 9). He notes that most specialists who study this process do not have a clear methodology for tracing causal connections so they primarily use separate cases to prove their point of view (2010, 10). To overcome this lack of methods and proper understanding of transnationalism, he suggests readdressing "the language and practice of causal mechanisms and to theories of transnationalism" (2010, 11). Casual mechanisms in a transnational environment can operate in different dimensions: agent-to-agent, structure to an agent, agent to structure, or structure-to-structure (2010, 14). This division is an important starting point for the subsequent conceptualisation of the processes underlying the conflicts' dynamics.

Kristian Skrede Gleditsch argues that a country's domestic characteristics cannot be the only factor contributing to the probability of civil war as the country's linkages to other states sometimes matter even more (Gleditsch 2007, 293-309). He identifies some external factors which can influence the probability of civil conflicts, such as transnational contagion, conflicts in neighboring states, and different types of connections between states (e.g., ethnic, political, or economic) (Gleditsch 2010, 294). Thus, the so-called "closed polity" approach cannot provide sufficient insight into the influence of external parties during the conflict.

The question of third parties' general influence in domestic conflicts has been investigated by numerous authors, such as Martin Austvoll, Michael Brown, David Davis, Paul James, David Lake, Will Moore, Erik Gartzke, Lotta Harbom, Peter Wallensteen, Patrick Regan, Stephen Saideman, Idean Salehyan, and others. Theoretical frameworks used to describe the topic are the theories of hybrid and proxy warfare, and a theory of state building by Charles Tilly. Combining the abovementioned approaches might be analytically useful for studying the role of foreign involvement into the conflicts in changing domestic political institutions.

Hybrid threats have become dominant in modern military conflicts. Frank Hoffman defines a hybrid threat as *“any adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the battlespace to obtain their political objectives”* (Hoffman 2010, 442). Consequently, both state and non-state actors can be defined as sources of hybrid threats. Furthermore, as the means of hybrid warfare are wide and unrestricted, we can state that it reflects a changing character of contemporary conflicts as a struggle for obtaining political or economic benefits rather than the goal of merely capturing land, destroying infrastructure, or killing the population. In contemporary conflicts, we observe a mixture of regular and irregular tactics, combatants, and non-combatants as actors on the battlefield, blurring the line between legal and illegal methods of battle and the interference of local and international dimensions of the conflict. Thus, the notions of a traditional battlefield and military front are blurred. The one who uses hybrid strategy is usually not limited by neither the permitted methods of struggle nor potential targets for violence. This fact violates international norms of warfare. Therefore, hybrid warfare cannot be perceived as a limited or total war, rather a constant manoeuvring between them.

Speaking of the peculiarities of hybrid threats in the so-called “fragile states” (i.e. those who cannot maintain their existence as a viable political and economic entity), we should note that hybrid threats are often accompanied by the formation of a national identity in the territories controlled by non-state actors. However, this identity can have its origins in the culture of a beneficiary state (i.e. the source of the hybrid threat that uses it for achieving its political aims). Thus, we can observe the emergence of a certain ideology or usage of religion to meet this goal (Bond 2007).

It must be said that the use of a hybrid strategy allows de facto armed confrontation without clearly recognizing and admitting it. Consequently, this type of war becomes dominant because it is relatively cheap, efficient, and has minimal legal consequences. Hybrid forces are also usually not limited by any normative legal acts regarding permitted methods of warfare. Therefore, favourable conditions for applying such a strategy were present in both Syria and Ukraine.

We must admit that in both countries we see the broad activity of “volunteer” illegal armed groups operating on both sides of the front. Also, governments themselves tend to rely on such formations and justify their actions by counterterrorism (not civil war). It supports the view that information warfare is an essential component of hybrid wars because the struggle for recognizing the legitimacy of both government and anti-government formations occurs through the use of informational strategy (Radkovec 2014, 37).

Of course, the theory of “hybrid warfare” has many flaws. For this reason, we use it only as an operational and explanatory approach and abstain from any assertions about hybrid war as a winning strategy. Bettina Renz and Hanna Smith note that this paradigm is grounded on very specific military successes (Renz/Smith 2016, 3). Hence, it cannot be perceived as a scenario or a winning formula as these successes are not easily repeated because every hybrid war is deeply context-dependent. Therefore, this approach is not analytically sufficient for managing war or predicting its outcomes.

Moreover, we should distinguish war-shortening and war-lengthening strategies that can be considered under one framework of hybrid war. The first one can resemble so-called “grey-zone” conflicts (e.g., the annexation of Crimea), but this strategy is hardly repeatable. War-lengthening approaches have drawbacks because they increase the costs of warfare and risk losing control over the proxies (Renz/Smith 2016, 51). Use of this approach can be seen in the Donbass armed conflict. However, we cannot assume this was an original idea of the Russian Federation.

Furthermore, although the characteristics of hybrid warfare enable us to analyze the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts to some extent, it does not say much about the issue of an intersection between local and global in any conflict. Hybridity itself is more about the strategy and tactics of war, while we are interested in the underlying concerns of adversaries that make them stick to a certain strategy and the degree to which this strategy depends on external actors.

To analyse the geopolitical dimension of contemporary conflicts, we need to use the concept of proxy warfare. It is defined as a conflict in which a third party carries out an indirect intervention to influence the strategic outcome of the conflict in its favour. This type of warfare is a product of the relationship between the beneficiary (who is always territorially outside of the conflict and may be represented by both state and non-state actors) and the intermediaries selected by him, to whom the beneficiary supplies weapons, provides funding, and assists with training (Mumford 2013, 40). Thus, a proxy war allows states to carry out their strategic goals without direct participation in the conflict.

The main advantage of proxy warfare is it allows achieving strategic political objectives by using the human resources, economic capabilities, and territory of another country. This makes it appealing and its usage became widespread after the end of so-called “world wars”. Apparently, non-state actors can also be involved in proxy warfare. They are usually intermediaries (or proxies) who receive support from the beneficiary of the conflict. However, we should not overestimate the role of external

factors in proxy wars because the roots conflict always lie in internal instability, so it cannot be entirely imposed from the outside. These internal factors can be seen in both Syria and Ukraine, as the conflicts are deeply rooted in domestic conflicts within the society which are being fueled by external actors.

Charles Tilly's theory of state building is used to refer to the process of the collapse of state institutions. He argues that state building is a result of organised crime as war-making gradually leads to the creation of the central organisational structure of a state. He identifies four separate activities conducted by state agents: war-making, state making, protection, and extraction, and states that *"the costlier the activity [...] the greater was the organisational residue"* (Tilly 1985, 181). Therefore, if war-making no longer needs extraction from the population to wage war, the organisational structure of a state will degrade. In the era of transnationalised conflicts, we observe that war preparation and war-making can be done with the help of external actors without any need to extract resources from within the country. As a result, the elite is no longer subject to negotiations with the population or regulations. This leads to the perception that the state institutions are more likely to collapse.

As can be seen, engaging in war does not mean merely direct armed participation in the conflict, provision of weapons, or funding armed battalions. It also involves a settlement process and informational strategy. Some political scientists state that war has become transnationalised rather than internationalised as its preparation and conduct engages a wide variety of actors (both states and non-state) and must obey international legal norms and restrictions (Heydemann 2000).

Moreover, transnationalisation has become a strategy which elites tend to use broadly. For example, seeking support abroad can help states to overcome the shortage of resources (people or economic) or legitimise a political regime by earning international recognition. Non-state actors can also seek the assistance of foreign actors to expand their resource base. Also, it does not have to be states or political entities. For example, Islamist organisations often raise funds through religious institutions or diaspora mobilisation. Recruiting has also become a transnationalised process as the Internet facilitates recruiting fighters from all over the world.

The transnationalisation of war also means it functions in the global rather than local economy. We can observe this through the evidence of foreign funding of governmental and rebel forces as well as terrorist organisations. However, the latter often create their economies on the foundation of state infrastructure, for example, oil production and trade by ISIS and coal mining on the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) territories. Despite the political isolation and

non-recognition of these entities, they manage to find consumers for their fossil fuels abroad. Therefore, we see widespread involvement in the conflict by foreign states who are attempting to achieve their own strategic goals by using internal political instability.

In considering the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts, we should start with the levels of foreign involvement and its influence on the conflict's dynamics and state institutions, and then proceed by comparing these two cases. Foreign involvement can be seen at three levels: global, regional, and local. In Syria, we can observe tensions between "superpowers" on the global level. It could be perceived as a war for resources and political influence in the Middle East between the Russian Federation and China (who support Assad's government) and the so-called "Western countries" (who support rebels).

One source of tension, which is continuously present in the UN Security Council concerning Syria, is a question of the possibility of applying and interpreting international norms of warfare. Here, we observe the contradictions between the United States, France, and Britain on one side and the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the other side. The first group of countries declares the need for a peacekeeping mission in Syria while the Russian Federation and the PRC disagrees with this idea (Asseburg/Wimmen 2012, 53). The Russian Federation opposes this idea, as it was perceived as a serious threat to Assad's regime and Russian strategy concerning the Middle East. China's interests are more economical than political, so its position on this issue is an attempt to support Russia and counterbalance Western countries.

Recently, direct participation in the conflict is not a debatable question as the appearance of ISIS provoked an increase of American and Russian military presence in Syria. It provided grounds for not only Russian and American airstrikes within Syrian territory but also cooperation between two geopolitical blocks. The most recent initiative is a joint military operation that would include Russian, Turkish, and Iranian forces.

On the regional level, we see an intersection of the interests of many states who seek regional leadership. In general, we can divide these countries into two blocks – Sunni and Shia. The first one is led by Saudi Arabia and the second one by Iran. In the Gulf States' (primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar) opinion, the Syrian conflict can serve as a basis for weakening Tehran's influence, which has recently begun the process of assimilating into the global economic and political system. Furthermore, the Gulf States are interested in strengthening their political positions with Saudi Arabia as a

regional leader. For the Western block, the war in Syria is considered a factor that can weaken Iran enough to prevent it from developing a nuclear program. Therefore, they support the Sunni countries at this point.

However, Tehran hopes to be a leading force in the Arab world regarding the fight against Israeli-American influence in the Middle East. Syria is a crucial part of this ambition as it has Shia leadership and can support Iranian politics. The war in Syria is perceived as an element of the Israeli and American policy of isolating Tehran, aimed at further regime change in the state. Thus, Iran positions itself as a stronghold of ideological and strategic struggle against US-Israeli hegemony in the region (Asseburg/Wimmen 2012, 54).

The position of Iraq and Lebanon is peculiar because these two states support both the Syrian government and the opposition. Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iraqi government are assisting the Assad regime, while Sunni politicians in Lebanon and Sunni tribes and jihadists in Iraq stand on the side of the rebels. Thus, here we see the logic of political mobilization on confessional grounds.

Turkey is one of the most engaged and inconsistent actors in the Syrian conflict. From the first stages of the conflict, the country was home for the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army's operational base. Therefore, it supported the rebels. Of course, Turkey was significantly affected by both the spillover of the conflict near its Syrian border and the multitude of refugees fleeing the conflict zone. The presence of Syrian refugees contributes substantially to destabilizing the situation in border areas between Syria and Turkey because the Allawi population lives there; the Allawis are afraid of the rebels and are often sympathetic towards Assad. Turkey is also fearful of potentially exacerbating the Kurdish problem, which might cause the emergence of another autonomous Kurdistan, but now within Turkey's territory.

Turkey's position changed significantly after a military coup attempt and cooling of its relationship with the West. The country began actively cooperating with the Russian Federation in Syria. Heretofore, the global media has suspected Turkey of assisting ISIS in fighting with Rojava. Turkey has been directly engaged in the conflict since it launched Operation Euphrates Shield in August of 2016. This operation was useful not only for fighting ISIS but also for dividing parts of Rojava (self-governing territory on the north of Syria under Kurds control) as its militias no longer can act together as a united front. Thus, Turkey has become one side of the conflict, as it occupied parts of Syria's territory. Therefore, we suppose that the Turkish strategy is domestic and aimed at stabilising the situation on the Syrian border. For this reason, Turkey tends to collaborate with whoever helps to weaken the Kurds.

On the local level, we observe the active involvement of foreign armed battalions, militias, and foreign fighters. For example, the Arab Nationalist Guard, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Quds Force, Basij, Hezbollah, Badr, Liwa Fatemiyoun, Slavik corps and others operate on the side of Assad's government. On the rebels' side, we see the broad engagement of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and others. An Al-Qaeda network stands separately; it was part of the rebel movement but later started its own struggle. Jabhat Fateh al-Sham remains involved but is a relatively independent actor.

The transnationalised aspect of the Syrian war can be seen in Assad's request for foreign support. He used Russian and Iranian support to overcome the shortage of a social base and resources. Also, it allowed him to pursue his policy by exploiting the conflicts between his "sponsors" without losing his subjectivity. Nevertheless, this led to a complete dismantlement of state institutions as waging war was not connected to internal resources and extracting them from the population.

From the Syrian conflict's very beginning, there were no fully autonomous actors who were not engaged in global political strategizing of some kind. The self-governed Kurds, which can be perceived as an almost autonomous player exclusively pursuing its interests, receives direct military support from the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Kurdistan Patriotic Union) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (Skidmore 2014). Moreover, Kurds are materially supported by the US in fighting ISIS.

The role of transnationalisation of the conflict is broad. One of the consequences, which we observed during the early stages of the conflict, was the opposition's radicalisation and Islamisation. This happened due to the unevenness of external aid, which was largely given to the Islamist organisations (Holliday 2012, 14). As a result, religious factor came on top in both domestic and regional relations. Therefore, owing to broad external participation, the religious component of the conflict became more prominent, although it was not the case in the very beginning of the civil war.

Also, since it is perceived as a zero-sum game by its sponsors, the conflict has become much more severe and prolonged due to foreign involvement. The interested parties have not hesitated in investing more resources into their proxies in case rapid changes occur in the status-quo. This means the situation is hard to change as any intervention causes counterbalancing interventions from another party.

In Ukraine's case, we observe almost the same structure of foreign interests, although it is substantially subtler as we do not have such broad direct military participation in the conflict. Of course, the issue of external interference cannot be bypassed as one reason for the escalation in fighting, as it is known that the leaders of the insurgent groups have extremely close relations with the Russian Federation. They have also requested military assistance in Moscow repeatedly and received it.

External factors in the conflict's dynamics can also be considered multilevel, including geopolitical, regional, and local. The geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West plays an important role regarding the collision of two civilizational perspectives attempting to preserve and expand their influence in Eastern Europe. The Russian Federation cannot allow NATO to move closer to its borders because it would remove the buffer zone existing between the two blocks. Among the Russian elite, it is also believed that Ukraine should be part of the "Russian world" not only semantically, but also physically. This notion is supported by the religion and history they have in common. Therefore, any Western intervention is perceived to be a violation of the natural course of things. Moreover, the names of the supra state entities DNR and LNR proves a strong link to the Russian Federation (Novorossiya).

In investigating Russia's strategy concerning Syria and Ukraine, Oleg Kondratenko points out that these two regions are connected as they are both the objects of geopolitical struggle among the so-called Western block and the Russian Federation. He states that Moscow wants to use Syria as leverage in negotiating with the West along with diverting the Russian people's attention from domestic problems (Kondratenko 2016, 60). The first goal is connected to the Russian elite's desire to present themselves as inevitable players in all regions of the world. Thus, any Western politics should be aligned with Russia's position. The second goal is internal as conflicts have always served as a means of domestic mobilisation and unification against a common foe. Moreover, it has been stated that Russia wants to ensure its naval presence in both the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. This is one reason for keeping a military base in Tartus and the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, we suppose that Russia's concessions on Syria and active participation in fighting ISIS can be part of the strategy, with the goal of getting the economic sanctions imposed for annexing Crimea withdrawn.

The regional dimension of the conflict highlights internal divisions in the post-Soviet and European space, as there is a struggle between two economic and political blocks. In the EU, not all member-countries support sanctions against Russia, so this struggle also takes place inside Europe. However, the post-Soviet space is also divided to "pro-Europe" and "pro-Russian" blocks.

At the local level, we can discuss the participation of foreign volunteers and military contingents of foreign countries in the armed conflict in Donbass. Foreign militants are heterogeneous groups that vary from terrorists and professional soldiers to ideological groups and criminal elements. For example, there are Chechen battalions named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, Legion of Saint Istvan, Squad Jovan Sevic, Almighty Don Host, Cossack National Guard and others. At this level, these organisations are mere tools of proxy warfare. However, it is important to note that foreign volunteers also participate on the side of the Ukrainian army.

Furthermore, international observers confirm the presence of Russian troops in the Eastern Ukraine. Direct intervention in the conflict can also be proven by the supply of weapons and fighters to the DPR and LNR, recruitment of insurgent forces in Russian cities, and funding the insurgents. Also, Russian soldiers have repeatedly been seen and seized by Ukrainian security forces within Ukraine's territory.

Considering the role of transnationalisation as a strategy, we can state that Ukrainian and DNR/LNR elites both tend to use it broadly. However, Ukraine is not wholly dependent on the external support, and the latter primarily comes in the form of humanitarian aid, defensive weapons, training military forces, and consulting. Additionally, the Ukrainian government succeeded in mobilising society to support the military. For example, a mandatory military tax was introduced. Moreover, many volunteer civil society organizations were formed, who provide military funding, material aid, provisions, medicine, and so on. We can also observe the emergence of volunteer battalions for territorial defence. Therefore, the state did not weaken, but rather it strengthened.

Additionally, we see similar effects of external intervention on the dynamics of conflict. Fighting in Donbass has also become more intense as Russian military aid increased. We also observe the extension of the conflict as the Ukrainian Army's military success leads to intensified Russian participation.

To summarise, the similarities between the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts lies in their hybrid and proxy nature which emphasises a wide scope of foreign involvement in the conflicts. One can see that the significant role of foreign actors in the course and settlement of conflicts can lead to the situation stagnating as the lack of internal resources and capabilities to resolve the disputes can result in a stabilisation of the status-quo. Moreover, this status-quo may not be a result of the disposition of forces; it can be an outcome of negotiations and arrangements between external parties. This means that a high level of transnationalisation in a conflict is more likely to turn it into a protracted one.

This hypothesis is consistent with the findings of Patrick M. Regan (2002). He states that *“either type of intervention [biased or neutral] alone greatly increases the expected duration of a conflict”* (2002, 28). However, the time of intervention does not matter. Also, he concludes that a biased intervention is likely to shorten the duration of a conflict compared to a neutral one (Regan 2002, 29). Idean Salehyan and his co-authors suggest that transnational linkages *“can lengthen conflicts through increasing the capacity of insurgents to resist government suppression”* (Salehyan/Gl-editsch/Cunningham 2006, 20).

In Ukraine, a proxy strategy is used by the Russian Federation, whereas in Syria some neighbouring states are struggling either for regional leadership or against Shia countries. In this case, direct use of a military contingent is not applicable to achieving these goals. Hence, individual military units, which are coordinated and trained by armed forces of the beneficiary and do not have to insignia are much more useful. The direct use of armed forces within Syrian territory under the auspices of fighting ISIS can also be part of the hybrid strategy, as these forces are also used to weaken the counterparts.

In considering the differences between the conflicts, we should note that during the years of conflict, the Syrian army has degraded and, consequently, this has led to the government’s inability to implement independent policy. We can state that behind every armed battalion or faction there is a certain external interest or support. Furthermore, state institutions and the economy have disintegrated, and this can be proven by the emergence of several political organisations and parallel economies (like ISIS) within Syria. In Ukraine, this did not happen. The army’s organisational potential and the state institutions’ ability to control the territory of Ukraine have increased tremendously compared to 2014. However, one can observe that a resource-extractive economy also exists in DNR and LNR.

We assume that the subject of struggle in these conflicts are citizens of the countries, while the existence of purely internal subjects is doubtful. On the other hand, in Syria, we cannot say that all internal parties in the conflict turned into the tools of proxy warfare as their interests are not so blurred. Still, there are some actors who use turbulent situations in regional and world politics to manoeuvre between interested parties and promote their interests (e.g. Kurds, An-Nusra). At the same time, ISIS becomes increasingly Syrian as Syria becomes the main place of their activity after its failure in Iraq and the fall of Mosul. This means that essentially, the external player becomes an internal one. The Kurds, another party in the conflict, tend to fall under the influence of the United States. However, they continue to be relatively independent as they pursue their own interests.

In Ukraine, due to the fewer number of external beneficiaries, rebel forces in the eastern areas turned completely into an instrument of foreign intervention (since 2015, when the rebel forces began to suffer defeat, and the extent of Russian military participation has increased). Currently, the rebel forces are no longer independent. One piece of evidence that proves it is the assassination of field commanders (e.g., Mozgovoy, Bednov, Dremov) and Strelkov’s escape. The remaining rebel “elite” fully supports pro-Kremlin policy.

As in Syria, there were initially more parties in the conflict compared to Ukraine, and this enabled them to balance the interests of external actors and skillfully manipulate them. There was also no initial disparity between the rebels and the government in Syria. In Ukraine, the imbalance between governmental and rebel’s fighting strength and economic capacity was severe, so the degree of external support was initially higher.

One social force being used for fulfilling the goals of international actors are refugees. In Syria, refugee camps became a social base for recruitment into battalions and terrorist organisations. In Ukraine, this did not happen as refugees did not leave the country’s borders. Refugees are an inevitable tool of hybrid and proxy warfare, which can be used for both accomplishing military goals and consolidating the political regime within the beneficiary country (as the presence of refugees contributes to the destabilisation of the situation).

To conclude, the transnationalisation of Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts contributed to their high intensity, as counterparts became stronger with external support. Moreover, external intervention prolonged them. Furthermore, extensive international influence changes the strategy of local actors as they do not extract resources from the population and choose to rely on external money instead. This means their connection to the population blurs and they do not represent any social groups. As a result, these groups do not develop state institutions, so over time they start to degrade. However, these effects may vary depending on the number of external actors and strategies employed by political elites.

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