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The impact of the choice of strategy of third-party conflict intervention on reducing conflict intensity: case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014 - 2021)

MA Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In a modern-day world, proxy wars as a type of conflicts, where at least one side represents not a unitary actor, but a proxy-sponsor pair, becomes more and more widespread. Due to the more complicated structure of conflict in case of the proxy wars, the existing literature does not provide any evidence on how third-party conflict interventions work in a proxy war setting, and which specific strategies lead to the biggest decrease in the conflict intensity change. This study analyzes the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a period from April 2014 to October 2021 to test, how the third-party conflict intervention strategies affect the change in the conflict intensity during the observed period. The study sees Russia as the sponsor of the sponsor-proxy pair, and so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhanks People's Republic" as Russia's proxies, while third-party intervening in the conflict are Ukraine's partner states, such as United States of America, United Kingdom, member states of the European Union and others.

The study derives three main strategies of third-party conflict intervention from the relevant literature, and tests them in the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine. The study is based on the rational choice theory, and assumes that the proxy-sponsor pair uses war as a tool for achievement of their political goals based on the cost-benefit calculation. Third-party conflict interventions are aimed to alter the cost-benefit calculations and thus decrease the conflict intensity. Economic sanctions are aimed to increase the cost of war for Russia, provision of military aid is aimed to increase the capacities of Ukraine and thus increase the cost of war for Russia's proxies, and mediation is aimed to reduce the costs of war for all the parties involved.

This study finds that in the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine from April 2014 to October 2021 neither implementation of the economic sanctions against Russia, nor provision of military aid to Ukraine by its partner states have increased the costs of war for Russia or its proxies significantly, and did not result in a decrease in conflict intensity. Mediation efforts allowed the proxy-sponsor pair to pursue their strategic goals with lower costs of war, and thus had strong connection to decrease in the conflict intensity.

Keywords: *proxy war, Ukraine, Russia, conflict intervention, conflict intensity, military aid, economic sanctions, mediation*

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List of Abbreviations

DPR - Donetsk People's Republic

DV - Dependent variable

EU - European Union

GDP - Gross domestic product

HMMWV - High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle

IV - Independent variable

LPR - Luhanks People's Republic

MDSD - Most-different systems design

MSSD - Most-similar systems design

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OSCE - Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

TCG - Thrilateral Contact Group

UK - United Kingdom

UN - United Nations

UN OHCHR - United Nations Office of The High Commissioner for Human Rights

USA, US - United States of America

1. Introduction

It was not always a case in the history of humankind that a war would have a goal of total destruction and devastation of one's adversary - rather, quite more often the goal was to gain some important territories, establish trade routes or protect one's titles. But it was only due to the post-World War II developments that the concept of "limited war" became clearly formulated and frequently used: technological progress, international alliances, and economic interdependence make global wars undesirable, as they can potentially lead to the destruction of conflicting parties, and bring more losses than benefits (Osgood, 2019). "Limited war" is generally defined as a concept of war, where a party does not use all of its available forces and resources in the fighting, but limits their use according to the political goals they seek to achieve in the war (Schweizer, 2022). It would be fair to say that the second half of the XXth century was dominated by limited wars, where two global rivals - the United States of America and the Soviet Union - never openly encountered each other, but supported other states and actors in various military conflicts all over the globe.

As the pattern of supporting one of the sides in a local conflict to protect their global interests was repeated by superpowers, the scholars came up with a new concept to describe it - "proxy war" (Deutsch, 1964, Mumford 2013, Dunér 1981, Bar-Siman Tov 1984, and others). However, proxy wars, in which states use other states or non-state actors to achieve their strategic goals with military means while denying their own involvement and reducing the costs of war for themselves (Carson, 2018; Byman, 2018), have not disappeared from the globe after the Soviet Union has collapsed. As put by Vladimir Rauta, "Out of the list of 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2020 presented annually by the International Crisis Group (Malley, 2019), seven conflicts are shaped by proxy wars in one way or another: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iran-Israel, Libya, Kashmir, Ukraine, and Yemen" (Rauta, 2020, pp. 4-5). It appears that switching from bipolarity to multipolarity in the global international relations now means that the tools and approaches, formerly used by two global powers can now be implemented by pretty much any local actor - and abundance of proxy wars, for example a Houthi war in Yemen, actions of Iran-supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, and finally also Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine resemble the statement.

This study is going to focus on Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a period of April 2014 - October 2021. Following the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, Russia annexed Crimean peninsula in March 2014, and by April 2014 helped to establish self-proclaimed

entities of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” in the East of Ukraine. From that point of time, Russia used those entities as its proxies in a war against Ukraine. While Russia itself tried to avoid being connected to the war, it was providing the proxies with material, financial and military support. Therefore, the proxy-sponsor constellation of Russia and the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” worked together against Ukraine with a goal to destabilize it and change its geopolitical orientations.

The war in the East of Ukraine was quickly judged by the international community. The European Union and its member states, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its members, United Nations and most of the states of the world admitted Russian involvement in the war and judged it. To support Ukraine and its sovereignty, many attempts of third-party conflict interventions were made. To seek a diplomatic solution via mediation and talks, Germany and France led mediation in between Russia and Ukraine in a format of “Normandy Contact Group”. To restrain Russia, many states and supranational institutions (NATO, EU, USA, UK, Norway, Japan, Switzerland) imposed sanctions and other economic restrictions against Russian economy. Finally, to build up Ukrainian defensive capacities to resist the proxies, some states (UK, USA, Lithuania) sent packages of military aid, both lethal and non-lethal.

When it comes to the analysis of the existing literature on proxy wars, we face a paradox: despite already quite a long history of the concept and its active use, there are surprisingly few studies that would go further from theorizing and conceptualizing proxy wars to testing more practical aspects of it. For example, as Ward puts this, “Subject of proxy wars is understudied and analysis of mediation and proxy conflict has been all but ignored to date” (Ward, 2021, p.229).

The Cold War researchers of proxy war, referred to by Rauta as “Founders” (Rauta, 2020: pp 5-7), focused on conceptualizing the proxy wars as a conflict of regional states supported by global superpowers, which substitutes the conflict between those superpowers (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1984). The modern wave of proxy war literature focuses more on a principal-agent relationship between the sponsor, who fights an indirect war by proxy and supports it by different means; and the proxy-agent, who actually takes part in the conflict (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019; Fox, 2019; Rauta, 2021). The balance of principal-agent relations in proxy war is one of the most important features of modern proxy war scholarship: no matter how dependent on the sponsor’s support, proxy agents always have some autonomy (Costantini, 2020). Other such studies apply a theoretical lens to the matters of reasons for

involvement in the proxy war (Byman, 2018), or factors that influence the duration of the proxy war (Plana, 2020).

The question of conflict dynamics - from the change of conflict intensity to the actual conflict resolution in a proxy war is also quite understudied. As in any other conflict, reducing the conflict intensity and limiting violence is an important and desired step *per se* (Clayton and Sticher, 2021; Smith, 2018; Sticher and Vuković 2021). We know, that due to the globalization and shift towards multipolar world a bigger variety of proxy forces appeared, and due to emergence of more sophisticated ways of supply and funding, it became easier to sponsor both states and non-state proxy agents (Rondeaux & Sterman, 2019). Proxy wars also tend to be bloodier due to the fact that proxies do not have a need to get support from local population, and thus are more often to commit atrocities (Salehyan, Siroky and Wood, 2014).

However, while this means that the literature has gone some way in conceptualizing proxy war, and some of its features, to my knowledge, there is no study that would identify factors that affect the conflict intensity specifically in the context of proxy wars. Even more, there are no studies analyzing how a third-party intervention in a conflict, classified as a proxy war, can influence conflict intensity in such a setting. One of studies that comes closest to exploring such effects was done to analyze the effect that the existence of pro-regime militias (e.g. proxies) has on conflict lethality – it concluded that the presence of such proxies increases the conflict lethality (Aliyev, 2019). An example of a proxy war research on a single-case study in Lybia has shown that although involvement of various sponsors to many groups in Lybia can not be called the main reason for the conflict itself, such involvement substantially prolongs the conflict duration and prevents peace (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019). Whereas the proxy war literature has not yet explored factors shaping conflict intensity in such a setting, and the effect of third-party intervention on conflict intensity in such a setting in particular, there is another strand of literature, which has extensively explored precisely this issue – yet with a focus on other conflict settings, not proxy wars.

The literature on conflict intensity considers the variation in violence as the main subject of interest (Chaudoin, Peskowitz & Stanton, 2017; Böhmelt, 2021). This strand may also include studies that have not focused on conflict intensity *per se* but studied very similar and connected phenomena. Part of this literature (see for example Escribà-Folch, 2010, Howard & Stark 2018) focuses on third-party conflict interventions, aimed at reducing conflict intensity and eventually ceasing the conflict. Such interventions are done by the use of some

specific measures (such as sanctions), and some studies aim to analyze how those measures affect conflict intensity.

For example, a study on the effect of economic sanctions on conflict intensity has shown that the longer the state is targeted, the higher the efficiency of sanctions and total embargoes backed by international organizations are the most efficient types of sanctions to reduce the duration of a conflict (Escribà-Folch, 2010). Another similar study focused on the effect of international sanctions on conflict dynamics has come to the conclusion that although arms embargoes are the most efficient, other types of sanctions tend to be counterproductive in decreasing conflict dynamics (Hultman & Peksen, 2015). The conclusion is, some sanctions under some circumstances can indeed reduce the conflict intensity - however, the effect is rather case-specific and can not be boiled down to a certain set of rules

Another part of the literature that explores factors determining conflict intensity focuses on factors internal to the conflict: a study on the effect of mediation on conflict intensity has shown that with mediation, conflict intensity slightly decreases at the start of negotiations, and if key conflict issue is addressed and agreed upon, the number of conflict fatalities tend to decrease up to 50% on average among studied conflicts (Ruhe, 2020). One study that looked into a complex network of alliances and its impact on conflict intensity has also shown that mediation and embargoes may lead to a sufficient decrease in conflict intensity (Koenig et al, 2016) - meaning, overall, that under certain circumstances, mediation can have the effect of reducing conflict intensity.

This shows, however, that while there are significant insights on how various strategies of third-party conflict interventions affect conflict intensity in a “regular” conflict between two or more sides directly involved in it – this has not yet been ascertained for a proxy war setting, considering the specific characteristics of the proxy war. Whereas in a “regular” conflict, the assumption is that there are two (or more) sides performing as a unitary force, and external measures are aimed either at all or at some of those sides; in a proxy-war setting, at least one side is not a unitary actor, but operates as a principal-agent constellation. Therefore, external measures can be expected to affect/alter calculations of this side differently due to the nature of this principal-agent constellation. Proxy-sponsor pair holds by the alignment of their goals, which does not mean their goals are identical, as is the acceptable cost for reaching the goal. Intervening in a proxy war, a third party may choose a

strategy that would lead to a misalignment of the goals of the proxy and the sponsor, or a strategy that would alter a cost-benefit calculation for proxy, sponsor, or both of them to a point, where it does not make any sense anymore for one of them or both of them to fight this proxy war.

This brings us to the gap in the existing literature – due to the more complicated structure of the actor constellation in the conflict, caused by the principal-agent relations between the proxy and the sponsor, proxy wars are different from regular conflicts, the latter being characterized by direct involvement in the conflict and defending their interest. Further, it takes us to formulate a research problem: *despite the existence of ongoing conflicts, classified as proxy wars, there have been no case studies in which hypotheses regarding the effects of third-party conflict intervention on conflict intensity in such a proxy war setting were tested.*

With a view on these differences in the conflict setting, and therefore in the way in which third-party measures unfold their effect on the parties involved in the conflict (namely, directly in the case of a regular conflict, indirectly/asymmetrically in the case of a proxy-conflict), there is a need to investigate whether the effect of external measures found by the literature on conflict intensity, such as economic sanctions, mediation or military aid, play out in the same way in such a more complex setting where at least one side is not a unitary actor but acts through a principle-agent constellation. With a view on the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, this means to investigate whether international sanctions against Russia, effort to build-up Ukrainian military, or to mediate the peace between Russia and Ukraine had any decreasing effect on the conflict intensity.

From the perspective of academic relevance, this research aims to narrow the gap in the existing literature by testing how third-party intervention strategies, applied in a regular conflict would affect conflict intensity in a proxy war setting, where due to the nature of relationship between the proxy and the sponsor form more complicated conflict structure . From the perspective of practical relevance, the research is important in relation to the current state of international affairs and military conflicts (Rauta, 2020). For a practical relevance, providing a solution to the research problem listed above will be of importance to the practical side of managing modern-day conflicts.

This research is going to fill this gap by exploring effects of third-party interventions that came with the attempt to reduce conflict intensity, or even end the conflict, in the context of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014-2021), widely classified as a proxy war (Heinsch, 2015; D'Anieri and Kuzio, 2019; Rauta and Mumford, 2017), as empirical case to test explanations, derived from a view on regular conflict constellations, concerning how third-party interventions affect conflict intensity reduction in regular conflicts, but in a more complex constellation of a proxy-war.

Taking into account the more complex structure that shapes calculations of at least one side in such a conflict, a condition likely to affect the way in which third-party interventions intended to reduce conflict intensity, this research tries to see how strategies of third-party intervention in a proxy war leads to changes in conflict intensity. More specifically, this study does so in the context of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014-2021).

Based on the existing literature on third-party conflict interventions, I have outlined three most common general lines of behavior – or, strategies of intervention to decrease conflict intensity. First of all, third parties, looking for a way to decrease conflict intensity, may intervene to establish peace talks and offer themselves as mediators. In the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, the example is the mediation effort in a format of a so-called "Normandy Contact Group", where France and Germany served as mediators between Russia and Ukraine. Secondly, third-parties can try to affect the attacker, or whoever they blame for the conflict, by increasing the cost of war for them through implementation of economic sanctions, limiting attacker's capability to fund the war. In the context of this case, sanctions were imposed by USA, UK, EU, Japan, Switzerland, Norway and other states and entities against Russia as a strategy of third-party conflict intervention. Third, in order to give an attacked party an upper hand and thus increase the cost of war for the attacker, third parties can supply the attacked side with weapon and other military-related supplies. In the context of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, this was done by USA, UK, Lithuania, and a few other actors by provision of military ai, both lethal and non-lethal, to the Ukrainian army.

Testing the impact of these strategies - economic sanctions, military aid, mediation - derived from the relevant literature, on the conflict intensity in the proxy war environment on the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine is the aim of this research. Change in the

conflict intensity can be put as a dependent variable for this research. Therefore, the main research question can be formulated as such:

How does the choice of strategy of conflict intervention by a third party affects conflict intensity in proxy war?

This general question will be studied in the context of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a period from April 2014 till October 2021. In this study, I expect to analyze three types of third-party conflict interventions, each aimed at a different actor(s) and exploiting different tools for the conflict intervention. Based on the rational choice theory (Fearon, 1995), I formulate hypotheses based on the principle of 'costs of war', assuming that (proxy) war is rational only for the sponsor and the proxy as long as it provides more benefits than losses.

To test the relative explanatory power of these strategies in a proxy-war setting, each targeted at a different element of the principal-agent constellation on the sponsor-proxy side (primarily the proxy, primarily the sponsor, or both equally), and to answer the research question in this way, the study is going to apply an analysis of choice of strategy of third-party conflict intervention, which serves as the independent variable (IV), and conflict intensity which serves as the dependent variable (DV) by looking into a Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a time period of May 2014 – October 2021.

To identify the effect of these strategies on conflict intensity, the study relies on process-tracing as the main method of research. To trace the changes in conflict intensity, this study will focus on the war in the East of Ukraine as the case and will apply the temporal scope of one month to analyze changes in conflict intensity. This means that the study looks at choice of strategy of conflict intervention and conflict intensity month-by-month in order to detect changes that occur since the start of the conflict in April 2014 and to the moment of starting the research (October 2021), which leaves us with ~90 observations (months).

As the result of analysis of the case, this study finds that there is no clear evidence of supplies of military aid by third parties (USA, UK, Lithuania) to Ukraine having a decreasing effect on the conflict intensity. In some cases, after the military aid was provided the conflict intensity increases, but decreases in other cases. The findings regarding the second hypothesis show that the sanctions imposed by third parties (UK, USA, EU, Norway, Japan) against Russia were only implemented in the beginning in the conflict, and can not explain the

variation of the conflict intensity later on. Further look into the sanctions has provided evidence that sanctions did not cause any significant effect to Russian economy, and such factors as oil price change or COVID-19 crisis have hit it much harder. Conflict mediation by Germany and France within a Normandy Contact Group between Ukraine and Russia in the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine has proven to have the strongest link to the conflict intensity dynamics. Although in some cases conflict intensity increased after the mediation meetings, the study finds that the meetings that were evaluated as successful led to a decreasing dynamics of conflict intensity. Even more, it is in-person meetings of heads of states that usually had the best effect on the conflict intensity decrease.

Against the background of these empirical findings, the study argues that mediation as a strategy of conflict intervention worked with the best result in the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine because it helped the proxy-sponsor pair, Russia and so-called "DPR" and "LPR" respectively, to reduce the cost of war for them, while other strategies aimed to increase it. The magnitude of two other strategies, implemented in this case by third parties (USA, UK, EU, some of the EU member states, Japan, Norway), appears not strong enough to cause any significant increase of the cost of war for the proxy-sponsor pair, for whom this war seemed to be of great importance and the bar of acceptable costs was set high. This, however, led to a situation where the principal-agent relationship between Russia and the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" was not broken and the proxy-sponsor pair has kept their cooperation, using mediation in the format of Normandy Contact Group as a tool to achieve their political goals.

This research consists of five main chapters, the first one being the introduction. The next chapter is going to be dedicated to the theoretical framework, where a more detailed conceptualization of proxy war, third-part interventions, conflict intensity and other important concepts, as well as hypotheses formulation, will take place. The third chapter will oversee the general research design and methodology, implemented by the paper. In the fourth chapter, I will present the analysis of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014 - 2021) by tracing the process of implementation of economic sanctions against Russia, providing military aid to Ukraine, and mediation between Russia and Ukraine by third parties, and its outcomes. The fifth chapter is going to present discussion and, in the light of the empirical findings, alternative explanations to the findings of the study. Finally, the sixth

chapter will bear the conclusions, derived from the study and summarize the findings of the study, matching them with the theoretical expectations.

2. Theoretical framework: Strategies of third-party interventions in proxy wars and their effect on conflict intensity

In this section, the research is going to focus on conceptualization of the main terms and definition of a theoretical framework of the study. Mainly, it will focus on defining a proxy war and finding a key features that distinguish proxy wars from regular wars. Then, the study is going to briefly look at conflict intensity, and switch to the definition of conflict intervention and specific strategies. In the end, based on the outlined concepts, this section will introduce the theoretical framework of the study, and three hypotheses, which will be empirically tested in the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a period of April 2014 - October 2021.

2.1. Proxy wars as a specific type of conflicts

One of the most classic definitions of proxy war was coined by Deutsch (Deutsch, 1964, p 102; quoted in Mumford, 2013) as:

international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country, disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country, and using some of that country's manpower, resources, and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies .

However, as it often happens in social sciences, it is hard to frame a studied phenomenon in a single definition that would catch and include all of its distinguished features at once. Some of the other scholars define proxy wars as "inter-state conflicts fought via intra-state means" (Brewer, 2011) or as a "conflict in which countries oppose each other indirectly, through the use of surrogates, typically in a third country", although the author of the last definition admits it as a "deceiving, presenting a (Syrian) conflict in a Cold War framework" (Kragin, 2015).

The problem with the Cold War-times definitions is probably best characterized by Andrew Mumford, who calls Deutsch's definition "too state-centric as it ignores the role that non-state actors, such as insurgent groups, can play in proxy wars, and it unnecessarily internationalizes proxy wars" (Mumford, 2013). In his own words, proxy war is an "indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome", which can be achieved via sponsorship to the proxy in the form of arms, money, and other resources (Mumford, 2013). This approach to the conceptualization of proxy wars dwells

deeper into the core of the phenomena and allows us to see proxy war features in the conflict beyond Cold War times. In particular, Mumford's definition allows us to widen the proxy war understanding and by abandoning state-oriented model include conflicts, with much more complicated structures. While Deutsch mentions specifically two foreign powers, Mumford drops this criterion which is more relevant for the modern conflicts, such as wars in Syria or Libya, where a mix of states and non-state actors, such as insurgent movements, terrorist organizations, and rebel groups are often backed by other states, coalitions or international movements/groups. In the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, the role of the proxy is played by the self-proclaimed entities of the so-called "DPR" and "LPR", while Russia, as the sponsor avoids the direct involvement in the war, and Ukraine as a unitary actor fights the proxy-sponsor pair. Mumford also avoids the description of exact ways of engagement of a third parties, which can take various forms in a modern world, including but not limited to provision of training for troops, cyber-war capacities, media support, etc. In fact, some other researchers speak of the need for a "*longue durée*" perspective in proxy war research claiming that proxy war features have existed in conflicts as early as First World War, Dutch protestant revolt against Spain, and even Ancient Roman campaigns against Carthage (Rauta, 2021).

The abundance of definitions - and approaches to definitions - nevertheless allows us to distinguish some of the most fundamental features of the proxy wars, which make them different from "regular" wars or any other forms of conflict. It distinguishes itself from "regular" inter-state war in the sense that proxy wars are characterized by a more complicated structure, where at least one of the fighting parties is a proxy, fighting on behalf of its sponsor that prefers not to be involved in the conflict directly but possesses some control over the proxy actions. For example, as in the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, the whole existence of the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" was provided by Russia, and thus Russia was able to control their actions and guide their fighting effort against Ukraine. It distinguishes itself also from civil war in the sense that proxy wars are not entirely internal and have a third-party factor in them. For example, the Civil war of the United States of America was fought internally without foreign powers being directly involved in it, while in the case of this study, Russia created the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" on the Ukrainian territories and used them as proxies to fight instead of Russia itself.

More specifically, it distinguishes itself from internationalized intra-state conflict in the sense that proxies are not simply an internal groups, supported by a third-party at some point, like in the case of Korean War where USA and USSR supported two different sides, but agents that operate to fulfill the sponsor's agenda and are controlled by the sponsor at least to some extent. A good example of this could be found in Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese militant group that was established, and by this day is trained, armed and funded by Iran.

A defining feature of a proxy war that distinguishes it from other forms of conflict is a principal-agent relationship formed between a proxy, who fights the actual war achieving the goals of the sponsor and of its own, and a sponsor, who tries to achieve its goals by military means without being directly involved in the conflict. As put by Rondeaux and Sterman (Rondeaux, Sterman, 2019):

If there is one major point of agreement, however, in the existing literature, it is that proxy warfare is characterized by a distinctive relationship between a principal-sponsor who delegates some authority over the pursuit of strategic war aims to a proxy-agent.

For Duner, the key elements of proxy war were compatibility of interests between a proxy and a sponsor, an asymmetric nature of the relationship that defines the leading role of sponsor, and provision of resources by a sponsor to proxy (Dunér 1981), and Fox calls principal-agent relations one of the three dominant features of proxy wars (Fox, 2019). The whole notion of a principal-agent relationship is formed around a certain “contract”, according to which a principal-party formulates the tasks and/or desired outcomes, and the agent is set to achieve them. In return, the agent is provided with some form of support from the principal that allows them to carry out the outlined tasks. A key feature of the principal-agent dynamics here is an alignment of interests – agents are not simply “contractors” or “guns for hire”, but have a common interest in achieving the principal's goals. This feature also serves as a source of the main dangers for the principal-agent relationship: the whole system works as long as those interests align; in some cases, the agent may not be interested in putting all the efforts for the principal's goals; the specific methods chosen by agent may not be desired for the principal, and so on (Braun & Guston, 2003).

Considering all of the abovementioned, this study is going to understand a proxy war is a special type of armed conflict, where at least one of the fighting sides - usually, the initiator of the conflict, - is a proxy-sponsor pair. Both sponsor and especially proxy do not necessarily need to be states: non-state actors, such as terrorist organization, insurgent groups,

movements and so on can also take those roles. The proxy-sponsor pair is held together by the alignment of their political interests, and to achieve them, each of the pair plays a specific role: proxy would typically take part in the actual war and fight on the battlefield while sponsor would provide proxy with various resources and refrain from direct involvement in the conflict.

This very feature makes proxy wars more “popular” among actors who wish to pursue their goals by violent means but desire to not bear the cost of war themselves. The sponsors seek proxies and involve in a proxy-sponsor relationship because it is simply convenient in many ways. First of all, it allows states to “cross the ‘red lines’ without consequences”, as any blame for the violation of international law, wartime atrocities, and destruction is simply put on the executioner, hence, the proxy (Rondeaux and Sterman, 2019). Secondly, proxy war reduces the costs of war for the sponsor, who only helps that much, while the actual fighting and casualties are taken by the proxy (Byman, 2018). This means that engaging in a proxy war serves as a convenient way for the actors who want to fight limited wars and not spend much own resources for the fighting. Engaging in a proxy war also allows to avoid internal destabilization connected to the need of explaining the reasons for war, mobilizing the nation, taking responsibilities for the losses and damage, etc. On the international level, where in modern normative-based environment fighting wars is considered abnormal, having a proxy allows actors to lift off responsibility for the aggression and potentially committed atrocities, as well as keep good relations with the international community by letting proxy do the “dirty work”. This was particularly desired for Russia in its proxy war in the East of Ukraine, as officially Russia denied any kind of involvement in the war despite screaming evidence of it.

Coming back to the rational choice theory and cost-benefits calculation, the principal-agent relationship thus proves beneficial for both proxy and sponsor, as long as their interests and goals align. For the principal, establishing such relationship allows to avoid direct involvement in the fighting and reduce the cost of war from having to bear the consequences on both domestic and international level to simply providing resources to the agent. For the agent, this opens a door for a flow of the resources they need to achieve their goal, which they would hardly be able to acquire in any other way. For both parties this means better cost-benefits ratio.

This also shows the potential for risks and limitations when it comes to using proxies by sponsors: while the relationship is asymmetrical, the proxy always maintains some degree of

autonomy instead of strictly following orders. This, in return, may backfire on the sponsor if the proxy chooses to escalate the conflict further than the sponsor wishes, or if the proxy wages war by unconventional means, committing war crimes and resorting to an unjustified degree of violence (Pfaff, 2017). Even deeper than that, the interests and goals of the proxy and the sponsor may vary significantly, which is seen as one of the main risks of waging a proxy war (Brown, 2016). This may lead to a situation, where at a certain point the proxy won't find it reasonable to keep fighting for the sponsor's interests, or the sponsor won't see the support to the proxy as beneficial. In such a case, the proxy-sponsor relationship becomes so fragile it can simply vanish, which significantly decreases predictability and increases the risks of proxy warfare (Plana, 2020).

Considering all of the mentioned above, the important conclusion for this research consists of a few points. First of all, the proxy war as a concept isn't a remnant of Cold War times - it is a phenomenon that is largely occurring at present all around the world. Modern understanding of proxy wars has developed from a state-centric approach towards the broader inclusion of actors for the roles of sponsors and proxies, such as unrecognized states, militias, rebel groups, terrorist groups, etc. Waging a proxy war is tempting for sponsors for a number of reasons: it allows sponsors to pursue their goals by military means without direct intervention; it is relatively cheap compared to direct intervention; it offers sponsors a right to deny their involvement, therefore decreasing possible escalation and taking away responsibility for the committed actions. At the same time, a proxy war can be risky as the sponsor never has full control of the proxy, and therefore can not guarantee the achievement of desired outcomes by employing a proxy war approach.

The very nature of the relationship between a proxy and a sponsor, described as a principal-agent relation, is the core of the phenomenon. Engaging in such a relationship is beneficial for both principal, who pursues their goals while avoiding direct involvement and thus increasing their cost-benefit calculation, and for the agent, who gets needed resources from the principal and thus achieves better cost-benefit calculation for themselves. Due to the fact that proxy always keeps some degree of autonomy, proxies can both go too far beyond the level of conflict, desired by the sponsor, and can bail out of conflict as soon as it won't be useful to them. This feature distinguishes proxy war from classic conflicts, where "sides" of the conflict are viewed as unitary actors. Therefore, proxy wars are much harder to predict, analyze and transform compared to classic conflicts, or non-proxy conflicts. Based on this

understanding of proxy wars, this research claims that conflict management in proxy wars works differently than in any other setting. Thus, there is a need for analysis of how conflict management - in particular, conflict intensity reduction, - can be achieved in the proxy war setting.

2.2. Factors shaping conflict intensity

While any war implies devastation and death, some wars are far more devastating than others. Conflict intensity is a concept that helps to analyze and differentiate conflicts by the harm they have brought and/or about to bring. Of course, the criteria of what is “high” and “low” conflict intensity are relative - one of the studies of conflict intensity defined high-intensity conflicts “*inter alia*, on a threshold of one thousand dead per annum which is comparatively low” (CRED, 1996). However, the most common and obvious measure for conflict intensity still is the number of battle-related fatalities. This measure is widely used by such famous projects as Conflict Barometer of Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, Peace Research Institute Oslo and Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

The reasons behind the difference in conflict intensity can be uncountable. There is a clear link between economic differences and the intensity of civil wars - a study has found that each additional logarithmic unit of income per capita decreases the number of casualties by more than 300 on average (Blundell & Bond, 1998). Other studies, however, found that the decrease in income is not strongly related to the conflict intensity or the duration of a conflict (Bazzi & Blattman, 2014). A study of 138 conflicts from 1960 to 2008 has shown that ethnic polarization also can cause a significant change in conflict intensity (Esteban, Mayoral, and Ray, 2012). However, a study of civil wars from 1946 to 2002 has also shown that neither economic power, state capacities, nor ethnic diversity can explain the variation in conflict intensity. What does have a significant effect is the availability of foreign assistance to combatants (Lacina, 2006). What is missing, and what is one of the focuses of this study is an effect of an external, third-party conflict intervention on a conflict intensity in a proxy war setting.

The latest findings provide us with a reason to believe that proxy wars tend to be bloodier, and it is the very nature of proxy wars that is causing this. As mentioned in the previous section, external support and assistance is the core of a principal-agent relationship between a proxy and a sponsor. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that an approach aimed to break

this relationship by altering the cost-benefit calculation for one or both of them would also lead to a decrease in the intensity of a conflict, classified as a proxy war. Since when we talk about conflict intensity, we talk about human lives, reducing the conflict intensity and limiting violence is an important and desired step *per se* (Clayton and Sticher, 2021; Smith, 2018; Sticher and Vuković 2021). Concluding, this study is going to analyze conflict intensity as a measure of battle-related fatalities. While, as mentioned above, it can be influenced by a whole range of factors internal to the conflict, it can also be influenced by external intervention – which is what this study is going to focus on, taking a proxy war setting as a key factor.

2.3. Third-party intervention as a means to reduce conflict intensity

Conflict intervention as one of the most common tools for conflict transformation and resolution can be described as an attempt to change the conflict structure by the intervention of an outsider party, normally with a goal to lower conflict intensity (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). This term doesn't necessarily implies military intervention, or any form of direct military action, but rather is used to describe involvement of a third party, that was not a part of the conflict on the initial stage. For example, in addition to direct military intervention, third-party interventions can take the form of economic sanctions, mediation, provision of military aid, etc. Such an intervention can have a "biased" or "unilateral" nature if they are used to support only one side of the conflict and their ultimate goal would be a victory of the supported side. Contrary to those, "neutral" or "external agency" interventions seek to resolve the conflict (Regan, 1996). A good general example of a conflict intervention would be United Nation's interventions in a conflicts: sometimes as a mere observational effort like in case of Georgia in 1993; sometimes as a military peacekeeping mission like in the case of South Sudan starting from 2011.

Although unilateral interventions sound much like a principal's role of the proxy-sponsor relationship, there are two important differences. First of all, one of the features of proxy-sponsor relationships is discretion, by the means of which the sponsor avoids involvement in the conflict, while a third-party intervention this study implies takes open forms. Second, the very definition of conflict intervention implies that a third party is entering in between a conflict that has already started and is going on, while sponsors of the proxy-sponsor constellation are normally the ones who start the conflict by approaching the proxy to fulfill their goals. This was not the case for the Ukraine and its international partners

in the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, and therefore, the actions of the EU, USA, UK, separate efforts of the EU member states and so on should not be seen as a marker of proxy-sponsor relationship between them and Ukraine, but rather an evidence of a third-party conflict intervention.

Approaches to why outsider parties intervene in conflicts - even if the intention of intervention is neutral, - are various: realists argue that the reason to intervene is only when their own national interests are involved, while the idealistic approach argues that reducing violence and preventing casualties can also cause outsider powers to intervene (Regan, 1998). Other assumptions state that conflict intervention is guided by ethnic factors (Carment & James, 1995), desire to prevent destabilization in the region by the flow of refugees (Dowty & Loescher, 1996), etc. However, the notion of "why" outsider parties intervene in a conflict is not crucial for this research.

Since this study uses the term "intervention" to describe any type of attempt from an outsider party to alter the intensity of the conflict, it is not limited to direct, military interventions only. General conflict interventions strategies can rely on military aid or direct military action, but also can be aimed at increasing the cost of war for one of the parties by the variety of economic tools, or a strategy of diplomatic regulation can be chosen if an intervening party believes that a compromise, satisfying interest of the conflicting parties can be achieved (Carment & Rowlands, 1998).

Therefore, for the purpose of this study conflict interventions strategies are seen as tools, aimed at altering a cost-benefit calculation for the proxy, sponsor or both of them, eventually leading to the collapse of mutually-beneficial relationship and thus the reduction of conflict intensity. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to look for an approach for conflict intervention that would lead to a conflict intensity reduction in a proxy war setting. By "third-party conflict intervention" this paper is going to understand any efforts of parties, not involved in the conflict initially, to decrease conflict intensity. In the case of this study, the efforts of the states and non-state actors, aimed to support Ukraine and restrain Russia and its proxies is seen as a third-party conflict intervention.

2.4. Choice of conflict intervention strategies and effect on conflict intensity

Whatever may be the goal of an actor who decides to intervene in an ongoing conflict and bring conflicting parties to its resolution, the choice of strategy boils down to the use of some

specific tools. In fact, outsider parties have a wide selection of tools they can use towards conflict intervention, including, but not limited to: conflict mediation, economic or political sanctions, embargoes, development programs, financial or material support, peacekeeping, and so on (Regan 2002).

Whereas third-party intervention in a regular conflict directly affects the cost-benefit ratio of the two sides for being engaged in conflict (and therefore conflict intensity), in a proxy-war setting, third-party intervention affects the cost-benefit ratio indirectly/mediated through the principal-agent relation (and depending on the distribution of costs between principal and agent).

In a proxy war setting, however, not only tools matter, but also who are they aimed at, since at least one of the conflicting parties isn't a unitary actor but a pair of proxy and a sponsor. Therefore, with this in mind, it is then possible to distinguish different strategies and to explore the effect of different intervention strategies, each aimed at either a proxy, a sponsor, or both of them.

First of all, one of the suggested ways of decreasing violence in proxy war is breaking the principal-agent union by possessing an existential threat to one of the parties (Fox, 2019). Since proxy is not just a regular mercenary but an agent whose interests align with the ones of the sponsor, the proxy-sponsor relationship only works as far as it is beneficial for the both. This brings us to the concept of "costs of war", rational choice-based estimation of benefits and losses each party will get as the result of the fighting. Assuming the rational behavior of a proxy and a sponsor, we may say that waging a war, and keeping the principal-agent relationship alive, is only rational for them as long as it brings more benefits than losses. If, however, by any means the cost-benefit calculation for the parties changes, and it just does not prove to be beneficial for them anymore, both proxy and sponsor can bail out of this agreement and stop providing resources in case of the sponsor or actually fighting in case of proxy.

For proxy, this means that fighting a war on behalf of the sponsor must pay off in the long term. Since the proxy is the one who's actually fighting and taking casualties, they bear most of the costs of war. Sponsors may compensate them for their losses and provide them with all the necessary resources to continue the fight - however, if the proxy loses more than gains and risks of war become existential, the proxy may actually cease violence and quit the

conflict (Byman & Kreps, 2010). Considering this, intervention in terms of the provision of arms and other war-related supplies to the opponent of the proxy-sponsor pair can strengthen their capacities, thus increasing the costs of war for a proxy. This way, the proxy may take more damage than initially expected, which can lead to either a situation in which proxy loses significant amount of its fighting capacities, or loses enthusiasm of further fighting fearing for more losses and damage for themselves. In both cases, this will eventually lead to decrease in the conflict intensity as proxy will lose potential and/or willingness to keep on the fight.

This assumption allows us to distinguish one of the conflict intervention strategies: provision of war-related resources to a party, involved in a proxy war. The hypothesis we form regarding this strategy of intervention may sound as follows:

H1: The more increase in military-related support to the side that fights with proxy, the more decrease in the conflict intensity in a proxy war.

Aiming to increase the costs of war directly for the sponsor side may be another strategy to decrease the conflict intensity by making the war too costly for the sponsor and disrupting the principal-agent relationship. Since the sponsor is not involved in the conflict directly, the increase in military capacities of their rival will not change much for them as long as the proxy keeps fighting with at least some degree of success. However, if the sponsor is directly targeted and starts to lose more than it distributes to the proxy, this may change the initial cost-benefit calculation. Economic sanctions are the tool that can be used to target the sponsor directly – specifically because the sponsor is not involved in the fighting, and because fighting a proxy war is usually cheaper for the sponsor. Despite some evidence that economic sanctions may actually increase the conflict intensity (Hultsman & Peksen, 2015), other findings state the efficiency of sanctions, especially in a form of arms embargoes (Strandow, 2006). Still, economic and political sanctions are widely used to contribute to conflict intensity reduction (Lektzian & Regan, 2016; Escribà-Folch, 2010).

Although deniability and distancing from the conflict are some of the main advantages of proxy war for a sponsor, it may not be always possible to refrain from open support of proxies and remain in the shadows. This is connected to the issue of control and actorness inside the principal-agent relationship: the more the sponsor wants to control the proxy to ensure the sponsors' interests are being accounted for, the harder it gets to hide this

relationship (Rondeaux and Sterman, 2019; Byman, 2018). A large degree of control over proxy may lead to a “smoking gun” effect when deniability of own involvement gets really complicated for a sponsor (Byman & Kreps, 2010). And it gets even harder to avoid consequences for sponsoring a proxy when conflict tends towards large human rights violations and civilian abuse, which is generally the case for proxy war conflicts (Salehyan, Siroky and Wood, 2014).

The use of sanctions seems like a good strategy choice to target a sponsor, for whom reducing the costs of involvement may be one of the key reasons to engage in a proxy war. Imposing sanctions on the sponsor should force them to withdraw from the conflict by limiting or ceasing the support to the proxy. If it happens, the principal-agent constellation here will be disrupted, and even if the proxy is still willing to fight, the loss of the support from the sponsor will eventually lead either to a more limited fighting capacities and military defeat, or change their will to keep on fighting. In a long run, this should correlate with a decrease in conflict intensity. Therefore, the second hypothesis can be formulated in this way:

H2: The more international sanctions on the sponsor, the more decrease in the conflict intensity in a proxy war.

Finally, another widely-used tool for the reduction of conflict intensity is mediation (Richmond, 2018). The very definition of it assumes the intervention of a 3rd party: “mediation involves the intervention of a third party; it is a voluntary process in which the parties retain control over the outcome (pure mediation), although it may include positive and negative inducements” (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse and Miall, 2011). It is considered and proved to be an effective tool of conflict intensity decrease and conflict resolution. Studies have shown that successful mediation that enables parties of the conflict to discuss the key issues has a long-lasting and large effect on conflict intensity (Ruhe, 2020).

In a proxy war environment, however, mediation is different: it makes sense only when all parties, including both proxy and sponsor, are engaged in the process (Ward 2021). It may be more complicated to bring to mediation a sponsor, to whom deniability of involvement is one of the main benefits of proxy war. However, if such mediation is achieved, this strategy would aim at all the parties of the conflict, including both partners of the principal-agent pair. For the proxy and sponsor mediation may serve as a way of even further reduction of the cost

of war, as an attempted compromise could help them or one of them achieve their goals with a very limited fighting, or without fighting at all (Melin, 2013).

The normative environment of the international relations also makes even non-democratic states behave like peace-seeking democracies (Mitchell, 2002). Thus, unwillingness of the proxy-sponsor pair to engage in a mediation can lead to a condemnation from the world community, which eventually may lead to a further sanctions or other form of interventions, which would increase the cost of war for one of the proxy-sponsor pair or both of them.

Therefore, the third hypothesis can be formulated in the following way:

H3: The more mediation meetings are in place, the more decrease in the conflict intensity in a proxy war.

Summing up all of the above, this paper takes proxy war as one of the key concepts and argues that proxy war isn't an outdated, state-centered concept, but rather a type of conflict that is characterized by a principal-agent relationship between a sponsor and a proxy, both of whom can be either states or non-state actors. The case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine provides the example of such constellation between Russia as a sponsor and a principal, and so-called "DPR" and "LPR" as proxies and agents.

Actors engage in proxy war because their goals align, but as long as it brings more benefits than losses: at any point, both proxy and sponsor can leave this relationship or at least limit their commitment to it if due to the changes in cost-benefit calculus it doesn't help them achieve their goals.

Conflict intensity is the concept that basically analyzes the level of violence in the conflict by measuring fatalities. The decrease of conflict intensity is understood as a part of larger processes of conflict management/conflict resolution, however, a decrease of conflict intensity is understood as a desired step in any conflict, for the obvious reason.

Conflict intervention is understood as the involvement of an outsider actor, whose goal is to cease the violence and bring conflicting parties to peace. While the motives of such an actor can be various, this paper is mostly interested in strategies of intervention. It argues that proxy wars, unlike classic conflict, have a more complicated structure where one of the sides

isn't a unitary actor, but a principal-agent connection of proxy and its sponsor, who in most cases enjoy the benefit of deniability of their own involvement.

From the existing literature, this paper derives three such strategies: support in the form of military supplies to the side that fights with a proxy to increase the costs of war for the proxy; economic sanctions against sponsor to increase the costs of war for the sponsor; mediation process that would involve both proxy and sponsor.

In the following, the three hypotheses will be tested by studying the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over a period of April 2014 - October 2021. Testing those hypotheses will require a justified methodological framework and research design, which is going to be the purpose of the next chapter of this paper.

3. Methodology

The study analyzes the case of the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014-2021). To answer the main research question and test the hypotheses derived from relevant literature, this study implements process-tracing as a method of analysis to find if there is a causal link between the suggested strategies of conflict intervention - economic sanctions, military aid provision, and mediation used by third-parties - and change in conflict intensity. The research model is going to be a single-case study, and the war in the East of Ukraine from April 2014 till October 2021 will serve as such case. Overall, the research is going to relate on a second-source, publicly available data to compile a dataset and test they hypotheses using it.

3.1. Research design and method of analysis

Despite the fact that proxy wars are common among modern armed conflicts, finding a suitable case(s) becomes a complicated task. One way to achieve the aims of the research and collect the required amount of observations is to form a dataset from different conflicts, classified as a proxy war, in which different types of conflict interventions would be tested. More than that, choosing several units of analysis to collect and observations from would require them to be suitable to form either a comparative most-similar systems design (MSSD) or a most-different systems design (MDSD) (Anckar, 2008).

Another way, taken by this study, is to take one case and to study it over time, with multiple observations, with the aim to identify the relationship between variables at each of these moments of observation, so that eventually it can be established what is the effect of the studied variables on the independent variable, if at all. Multiple observations in this case are needed to identify this relationship, as the variables are able to change at any interval of the proposed observations.

This study adopts a single-case research design, aimed to test hypotheses on a third-party conflict intervention in a specific setting of proxy war, on the case of Russian proxy war in the East of Ukraine from April 2014 to October 2021. Single-case research design is a good choice for the studies in the field of international relations, which allows deeper level of analysis and serves the purposes of testing existing and building new theories (Willis, 2014). In the case of this study, single-case design will allow to test the hypotheses, derived from existing literature on a case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, and evaluate their relevance in a proxy war setting.

Choosing Ukraine as a case this study also adopts a monthly scope instead of annual one. In order to have sufficient number of observations, the analysis occurs along multiple within-case observations in which the conflict is ongoing into several time-periods. In this way, it does not study the conflict, and third-party intervention, as such, over the entire period, but it studies it at multiple moments in time, by months, which gives a more fine-grained analysis, corresponding with the deployment – and effect - of intervention strategies at several moments in time rather than just observing the overall cumulative effects over the entire period.

Thus, the thesis looks at the war in the East of Ukraine on a timeline from the start of the active phase of the war in April 2014 and to the moment of starting the research in October 2021. In sum, this leaves us with 89 observations (months).

The method intended to use in the research is called process tracing, a method that “can be used to make within-case inferences about presence/absence of causal mechanisms” (Beach, 2012). Among three possible types of process-tracing, this research is going to apply theory-testing process tracing, as in our case we have a theoretical assumptions on how strategies of third-party conflict interventions should change conflict intensity, we know of implementation of such strategies in our case, and we know the outcome of the change in conflict intensity. Process-tracing will allow this research to establish a causal mechanism between the choice of the strategy of third-party intervention and the change in conflict intensity, by following the steps indicated in the theoretical discussion of how each intervention strategy is assumed to affect the calculations of one or the actors on the sponsor-proxy side, and see if the suggested hypotheses pass the necessary tests to confirm a causal link between them.

The causal link would be looked for by an analysis of evidence of interdependence between the consequent events. Simply put, in the case of this research, we would expect that after a certain conflict intervention takes place, it would change the cost-benefit calculation for the proxy-sponsor pair, the conflict intensity will be reduced, and there will be evidence of specifically that intervention leading to the decrease of the conflict intensity. The strength of the evidence will be described and measured by the use of four tests, common in process-tracing research (Bennett & Checkel, 2012).

The first one is called “straw in the wind test”, and neither passing it proves the hypothesis, not failing it excludes it. In the practical example on the studied case, this would mean, for example, that analyzing the provision of military aid to Ukraine by its partner states takes place along with some change in the conflict intensity. However, we do not know if the change means decrease, and if it was caused by the military aid provision.

The next one is “the hoop test”: failing it excludes the hypotheses, but passing it does not confirm the hypotheses either. It can be counted as passed if the available evidence can not deny a possibility that the hypotheses leads to the outcome. In our case, on example of the military aid hypothesis, passing it would mean that we know there were provisions of military aid to Ukraine, and they aligned with decrease in the conflict intensity in time. Failing this test would mean that provision of military aid have not led to a decrease in the conflict intensity - and thus will reject the hypothesis.

The “smoking gun” test confirms the hypotheses, if passed, and to pass it, there should be a clear and confirmed evidence of the hypotheses leading to an observed outcome. In the case of Russia’s proxy war in the East of Ukraine, this would mean that in example of provision of military aid, there would be a strong evidence of such aid aligning with the decrease in conflict intensity, and some evidence from the Russia’s proxies - so-called “DPR” and “LPR” - on their acknowledgements of the increased capacities of Ukrainian army that now deter them from active fighting.

Finally, the “doubly decisive test” is passed when the evidence in favor of the hypothesis allows to both confirm it and prove all other hypotheses wrong. In the case of the study and on the example of the theory of military aid provision, passing this test would require a decrease in the conflict intensity, and a strong evidence of exceptionally provisions of the military aid to cause the decreasing effect on conflict intensity. Such an evidence, for example, could be a prove by representative of Russia or its proxies about the build-up of the Ukrainian army to that point, where fighting it on the battlefield simply makes no sense, and it is due to this specific reason they had to decrease their efforts on the battlefield.

The choice of conflict intervention strategy, which serves as the independent variable (IV) will be tested establish a causal connection with the level of conflict intensity which serves as the dependent variable (DV). For the purpose of the study, third-party conflict interventions aimed to reduce conflict intensity are going to be viewed and referred to as conflict intensity

reduction strategies. Third-party conflict intervention is a common tool for conflict management when it comes to any type of conflict - third parties tend to intervene in conflicts “because the resolution of the conflict is to their benefit, they are called upon, or they are expected to assist in the conflict resolution” (Wall & Callister, 1995).

Operationalization of the independent variables will require some explanation. First of all, it would be hard to evaluate the effect of the imposed sanctions on the Russian economics in a long run. Although by some estimates cost Russia more than \$50 billion per year (Atlantic Council, 03.05.2021), and there is available data that show the economic decline of Russia in 2014-2015 (World Bank Open Data), there are many other factors which could affect it besides the imposed sanctions. The sanctions lasted for all the observed time period, and their long-term effect, as well as Russian ability to adapt to them, are significantly difficult to estimate.

For the purpose of this research, however, it will suffice to look at the timing of sanction packages application and analyze the change of the conflict intensity in the following time period. This study also considers anticipated costs first and foremost, which means the perception of the damage of such sanctions on the Russian economy and their power to alter the cost-benefit calculation of sponsoring the proxies. Thus, a temporal scope of one month allows to see if such alternation has taken place and was reflected on the conflict intensity. Therefore, by the economic sanctions this study is going to understand the actual application of the abovementioned sanctions.

Economic sanctions as independent variable is going to be analyzed on a dichotomous scale, as it is only the presence/absence of application of economic sanctions during a certain month is evaluated by this study.

Developing the causal mechanism for this hypothesis, this study suggests that the following steps should happen in order to provide causality between this strategy of conflict intervention and the outcome, leading to the change in conflict intensity. The basic precondition for this is the existence of a proxy war - a proxy and a sponsor should emerge as a partnership, starting a war in which proxy is involved directly, and the sponsor provides help for the proxy while not getting into the war directly. The next step - is a reaction from a third-party, that would boil down to a response in a form of imposing economic sanctions against the sponsor, since it is sponsor who is providing resources for the proxy and targeting

proxy with sanctions does not really make sense. Then, as the result of the imposed sanctions, certain most important sectors of economics of the sponsor must feel the effect, and therefore should suffer economically. Thus, the general economic indicators of the sponsor should show some regression, and the costs of war for the sponsor therefore gets decreased. After the decrease of the cost of war, the sponsor should rethink the cost-benefit calculation of involvement in this proxy war, and start the withdrawal from the proxy-sponsor partnership, which eventually should lead to a decrease of the conflict intensity.

When it comes to the arms supply, this study is going to focus on the military-related supplies of goods, weapons, equipment, etc. Provision of other forms of aid, such as financial grants some of which could be used by Ukraine for the purpose of funding the army is hard to trace, and therefore ignored by this study. Likewise, the training mission for the Ukrainian army, organized by some of the other states are hard to properly locate on a timeline, and arguably are not sufficient to be a gamechanger on its own. Therefore, the actual supply of any military related aid, either paid by the third party or bought by Ukraine with an agreement from a third party will be analyzed in this study as a military aid, aimed to increase the cost-benefit calculation for the proxy, deter it from further fighting, and thus decreasing the conflict intensity.

Provision of military aid as independent variable is going to be analyzed on a dichotomous scale as well, as it is only the presence/absence new packages of military aid during a certain month is needed to see trace the effect on the conflict intensity.

The causal mechanism should be the following: after the attack is made by sponsor and its proxy, and the third party or parties decide to intervene, they may choose to increase the defensive capabilities of the attacked party. This, in turn, makes the fighting more complicated for the proxy as they are going to face a better-prepared and equipped enemy. The cost of war for the proxy is thus increased and eventually should lead to the point where a proxy is either unable to keep on fighting or loses the will to do so and stops acting in the interests of the sponsor, breaking the principal-agent relationship. In both cases, the proxy is no longer taking an active part in the war, and that means that the conflict intensity is going to decrease.

Lastly, mediation efforts is going to be looked at by the presence of Normandy format meetings. Looking separately at the effects of each meeting, this study will try to trace the

causal link between the mediation meetings, change in the calculations of the cost of war for the proxy-sponsor pair, and the change in conflict intensity dynamics. Ideally, to confirm the hypothesis the study would find a strong evidence of only the such meetings having effect on the conflict intensity dynamics, or at least find some strong evidence of those meetings on the conflict intensity dynamics as none-exclusive explanation. As in the case with the other two independent variables, mediation efforts are going to be measured on a dichotomous scale, as only the indication of presence/absence of a mediation meeting is important for the study.

After the proxy-sponsor pair starts the war, and a third party decided to intervene, mediation as a tool of intervention is a very reasonable choice: it involves almost zero cost from the side of the intervening party, unlike sanctions that can backfire and hurt interdependent economies, or military aid that is to be provided by the intervening party's expenses. Even more, mediation and attempts to seek solutions to conflict through diplomacy, not war, is very "popular" in a modern, norm-based environment of international relations.

Thus, by choosing mediation as the intervention tool, the third party intends to resolve the conflict or at least decrease its intensity. For the proxy and sponsor, mediation provides a chance to decrease the cost of war - after all, the wars are fought to achieve a certain goal(s), and mediation efforts of an intervener allow the proxy and the sponsor to state their interests and hope for a compromise that would satisfy them without a need to actually fight. If the process of mediation is going in some way, acceptable for all the sides, there are some agreements and regulation plans created step by step. With each step, the parties would try to avoid further escalation, and thus conflict intensity should decrease.

The dependent variable, the conflict intensity, represents the monthly number of casualties on of the Ukrainian army, and is measured on a ratio scale. Such operationalization allows this study to capture conflict intensity by looking at number of deaths among those who fight, which logically means that the more casualties are recorded for a certain month, the more intense fighting happened, and vice versa. Such measure is also used by respective think tanks and analytical centers, studying wars and conflicts, such as Uppsala Conflict Data Program. The study, however, uses only data on casualties of the Ukrainian side.

The main and only reason for this is the lack of the detailed, monthly-based data on the casualties from a so-called "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic". General data claims around 6500 casualties on the side of the so-called "DPR" and "LPR" by

the end of the year 2021(UN OHCHR, 27.01.2022). There is also annual data on casualties of the so-called “DPR” (Uppsala Conflict Data Program - DPR) and “LPR” (Uppsala Conflict Data Program - LPR), which shows a range of 200-300 casualties a year for “DPR”, and usually below 100 for “LPR”, but this data is only available from the year of 2015. Even more, there is none of it available on a monthly scope. The change of the scope would significantly change the character of this study and will simply prevent it from seeing the consequences of observed conflict intervention strategies at the moment of their implementation and shortly after.

The other reason behind the lack of data from the Russia and its proxies is that some part of it may be hidden and not disclosed on purpose. While it is common for all the parties at war not to disclose their losses, in case of Russia’s proxy war in the East of Ukraine a part of the reasoning is that for Russia, who had to use some of its special agents, servicemen and specialists in the field admitting their losses would undermine the whole effort of distancing itself from the conflict. It is very hard to even estimate the numbers of Russian citizen who died fighting in Ukraine, and many efforts were put to hide them (BBC News Україна, 15.06.2017). In case of Ukraine, the picture is quite opposite as every death and injury was reported as yet another evidence of aggression against Ukraine and was constantly used by Ukrainian government in an effort to receive more assistance.

Overall, according to United Nations Office of The High Commissioner for Human Rights , during the period from 14.04.2014 till 31.12.2021 a total of up to 14200 people were killed in the conflict. This number includes at least 3404 civilians, around 4400 servicemen of the Ukrainian forces and around 6500 members of armed groups of the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (UN OHCHR, 27.01.2022). This study has data on total of 4477 casualty from Ukrainian side, which makes the precision of the available data very high. While the lack of data from the Russia’s proxies, the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” is likely to be one of the biggest flaws of the study by letting it to see only roughly the half of the total information on conflict intensity, considering the outlined research design and the unavailability of reliable data of sufficient precision concerning fatalities on the Russia/separatist side, the measurement of conflict intensity on the basis of Ukrainian fatalities only still depicts the dynamics, even if imperfectly as the available data provides roughly half of the picture at least, and the effect of the conflict interventions, if exists, should be seen withing this data at least to some extent.

3.2. Case selection: Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014 - 2021)

Since this paper looks into the variation in conflict intensity over time, by observations we can accept a unit of time within the duration of a studied conflict. In such a case, we will see how the implementation of chosen strategies would change the conflict intensity at several moments in time. More commonly, studies (Medeiros 2015, Böhmelt 2021, Chaudoin et al., 2017) and datasets (UCDP - Uppsala Conflict Data Program, Konfliktbarometer) use years as a unit of measure - however, this approach has some limitations. The most important one for this study is the fact that conflict intensity can change rapidly due to the conflict development, and a year-level change may not show us a proper correlation with some of the conflict intervention strategies.

The selection of a proper case was limited to a very few cases, among which I decided to choose the Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine, also known as the war in East of Ukraine, on the timeframe of May 2014 – October 2021. This case is the one that has all of the following: a single conflict, classified as a proxy war; it can provide enough observations; all of the discussed conflict intervention strategies were used in attempts to resolve this conflict.

The Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine latter can be considered a proxy-war with attempts of third-party intervention, and therefore fitting the purposes of this study, because the war in the East of Ukraine thus got all the features of proxy war, with so-called "DPR" and "LPR" being the proxies who fight Ukrainian Armed Forces on the ground with the support, provided by Russian Federation as the sponsor. The war in the East of Ukraine has already been widely classified as a proxy war in the relevant literature (Hughes, 2014; Heinsch, 2015; Rauta and Mumford, 2017; D'Anieri and Kuzio, 2019; Laruelle, 2019; Fox, 2021).

Moreover, studying third-party intervention in the case of the Ukraine war is particularly good and insightful for the study of these dynamics, because since the beginning of the war, there have been many attempts from outsider parties to intervene and resolve it. One of the first actions taken by the wide part of the international community (including the United States of America, European Union, United Kingdom, and the countries of the Commonwealth) was the implementation of economic sanctions against Russia. Various attempts have been made to foster the dialogue between Ukraine, Russia, and so-called

“DPR” and “LPR”, the most important being the Normandy format, or Normandy contact group - a series of meetings between Russia and Ukraine, mediated by France and Germany (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 09.02.2022). At the same time, Ukraine has received a vast amount of support in terms of arms, non-military resources, and money from the international allies, the most significant sponsor being the USA, the EU, and some of the member states, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Reuters, 25.02.2022; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 26.09.2019).

All of the abovementioned make Ukraine a very good case for the purpose of this research. First of all, the case represents an instance of the proxy war along the criteria outlined above, and the proxy nature of the war is widely admitted. Secondly, the war is ongoing since 2014 and the dynamic of violence is non-linear, with outbreaks of violence throughout the time.

It is important to note here that this study aims to analyze the effects of a third-party intervention on conflict intensity in a proxy-war setting on the case of the war in the East of Ukraine. However, there are alternative factors that can influence the conflict intensity in this case, which although are not analyzed within this study, but have to be kept in mind. The most important factor here would be the actions and intentions of proxy-sponsor pair: depending on their goals, they may try to fuel or reduce the level of conflict intensity at any point of time. This is the reason for this study to focus on the timeframe prior to the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine which happened on 24.02.2022, as such a move escalates the conflict intensity dramatically by a sole wish of the sponsor, and in fact breaks the whole notion of “proxiness” in this war as Russia chooses to be directly involved in it.

Third, in the war in the East of Ukraine, all of the strategies of conflict intervention, outlined for the research, can be seen: outsider parties have aimed at sponsor by introducing economic sanctions against Russia; outsider parties were providing Ukraine with military and non-military support to increase Ukraine’s defensive capacities and target proxy; mediation efforts, aimed at both proxy and sponsor also take place in the format of “Normandy meetings” as a mediation effort between Russia and Ukraine with the assistance of Germany and France. This means, it is possible to study the effect of this on conflict intensity reduction in the context of this case. Although Ukraine doesn’t officially negotiate with so-called “DPR” and “LPR” because the Ukrainian government sees them only as “puppets” of Moscow (Ukrinform, 28.04.2021), this study argues that the interests of proxies are largely represented by Russia in the framework of Normandy format. Therefore, despite Ukraine’s

official positions, the mediation efforts of Normandy meetings actually aim at all parties of the conflict.

3.3. Data availability and limitations

To conduct this research, a significant amount of data will be required. As far as I know, at the moment of writing this paper, there was no dataset that would combine the data I require for the purpose of the research. Therefore, the dataset, used for the correlation analysis is compiled by the author using the open-source data.

Data on the conflict intensity, measured in the number of fatalities along the contact line for the Ukrainian side is publicly available and well-recorded. Ukrainian officials keep well-recorded statistics of casualties in the battle zone, and the “Book in Memory of the Fallen for Ukraine” provides data on the daily basis while OSCE keeps detailed statistics of ceasefire violations, and civil population casualties (Book in Memory of the Fallen for Ukraine, assessed on 11.02.2022, OSCE | Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe).

Secondly, data for the different independent variables will be collected mostly via media reports. Information on the supply of military assistance to Ukraine is widely recorded and corrected by media outlets (Reuters, 25.02.2022; CSIS, 26.09.2019). While there is a factor of non-public support, this study assumes that the most significant and valuable packages of military aid are hard to hide, and thus are made public. Information on the international sanctions is also recorded by media (Reuters, 14.09.2014; CBC, 29.07.2014; Reuters, 12.09.2014) as well as official institutions, imposing sanctions (White House, 06.03.2014; European Council, 13.01.2022). The character and timeline of sanctions have already been analyzed in the academic sphere, and this data can be used to distinguish the timings of the most significant packages of sanctions (Atlantic Council, 03.05.2021). Finally, the meetings of TCG, are well-recorded in wide media and by OSCE, the mediator force in the group (OSCE website, assessed on 11.02.2022). Normandy format meetings are also much highlighted in the media and public information on the timing of such meeting is easily available (Deutsche Welle 06.06.2014, BBC 07.02.2015, Reuters 12.02.2015).

4. Analysis: testing hypotheses within the case of Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine (2014-2021)

This chapter will serve as a research part of this study, and will consist of a few subsections. First, a brief explanation of the overall conflict intensity change over the observed period will be made. For the purpose of the research, a mean value of the conflict intensity will be coined and discussed. Secondly, the application of economic sanctions will be applied to the timeline to see if a causal mechanism can be established in this case, to test the strength of this hypothesis and see its correlation with the conflict intensity change. Respectively, the same will be done with two other hypotheses regarding arms supply and mediation efforts.

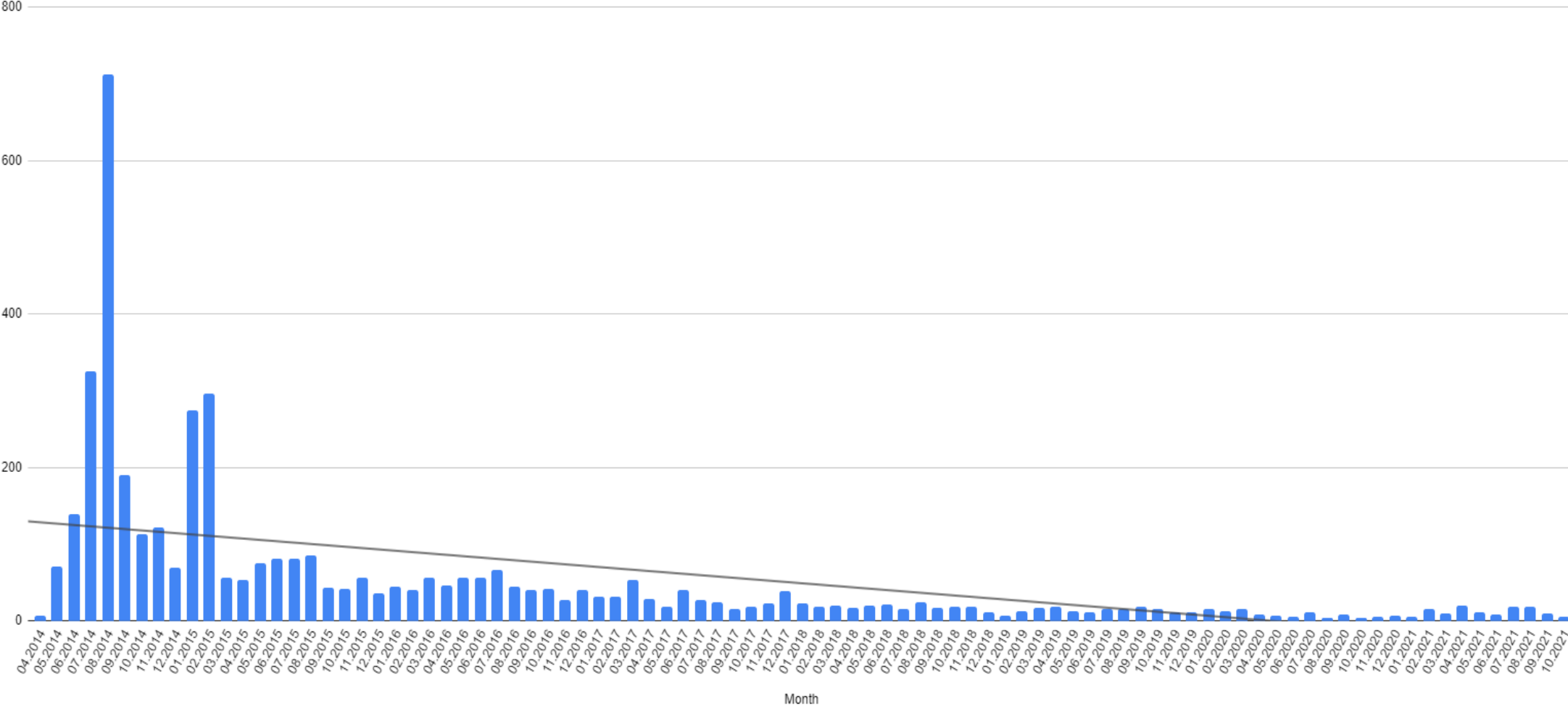
4.1. General observations of conflict intensity change in the period from April 2014 to October 2021

This study looks at the timeframe from May 2014 to October 2021 as it is within this period the war in the East of Ukraine could be classified as the proxy war. Prior to that, no real armed conflict was happening in the East, and the annexation of Crimean peninsula by Russian armed forces has happened without a use of any kind of proxies. The upper limit - October 2021 - was chosen as it was about this time when this study has been started. The further escalation in the form of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine that happened on 24.02.2022 is only a few months away, and from this point it is no longer possible to apply the framework of proxy war to this war.

This leaves us with 89 months of observations, during which the conflict intensity has changed dramatically. The overall dynamics is clearly visible on the graph in the Figure 4.1 "Casualties of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, by month 2014-2021".

The two clearly visible peaks represent the two bloodiest battles of the war at the time - the battle of Ilovaisk (BBC News, 28.08.2019) and the battle of Debaltsevo (Noorman, 2020). Further dynamics of conflict intensity has a clear decreasing trend, with some minor spikes occurring in the years of 2016-2017, and an increase in the conflict intensity in the end of 2021.

Figure 4.1: Casualties of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, by month



This leaves us with a picture, in which there's a clearly seen dynamics of conflict intensity, that has an obvious decreasing trend. The meaning of it is that there are factors, that cause the conflict intensity to decrease, which means the suggested hypotheses can be tested here and may prove to be relevant to the decreasing trend. Secondly, some outlying peaks and phases of the increasing conflict intensity, as well as decreasing phases afterwards, are hints to some actions taking place around that time that had an effect on the conflict intensity change.

Bearing this in mind, while testing the outlined hypotheses against the general dynamics of conflict intensity, it is necessary to see how the specific actions, suggested by the hypotheses, align with this trend, as well as with the specific, clearly visible increases and decreases of conflict intensity. One helpful tool in this regard is finding the mean value of conflict intensity change. Represented as a mean line on the graph, it will allow us to see if a certain increase of the conflict intensity is higher than the defined mean value, and if so - can be considered as a real increasing outlier. Respectively, it works for the decreasing outliers: if at certain point of time the level of conflict intensity falls below mean, there is a good evidence that some factor has worked to decrease it in the prior month.

It is also required to say that some actions, taken by third parties as part of their intervention strategies can not deliver its full effect on conflict intensity over night. However, tying some long-term effect with a certain action over the course of years does not seem reasonable and possible within the framework of this study, Therefore, this thesis is going to evaluate the effect of an action, that happens at some time T over the period of $T + 1$ month, meaning that, for example, if a certain mediating meeting takes place in August 2016, we would expect to see the effect of it up till September 2016, and if no decrease in the conflict intensity would be observed, this study would conclude that it had no effect on the conflict intensity change.

4.2. Economic sanctions against Russia and their impact on conflict intensity

As was outlined in the theoretical part of this study, sanctions as a conflict intervention strategy should work as a tool to increase costs of war. In order to pass the “straw in the wind” test, we need to have evidence of a decrease in the conflict intensity over time, and presence of the economic sanctions. For the “hoop” test, there should be evidence of sanctions actually having effect on the Russian economy and that the sanctions have led to an economic recession. “Smoking gun” test would require evidence of the sanctions, causing economic problems to an extent, where Russia ceases to support its proxies or reduces the

amounts of it. Finally, “doubly decisive test” can be passed only if there will be a strong evidence of Russia suffering economic losses, reducing or ceasing support to its proxies, and that this whole process is caused by the economic sanctions.

In the case of the war in the East of Ukraine, we see that the sanctions were implemented by third-parties - UK, USA, EU, Norway, Japan and other states, and there are both general decreasing trend in conflict intensity, as well as particular periods of decrease, which allows us to trace the whole process and see how the hypothesis relates to the actual outcome. First, the starting point of the Russian-Ukrainian war is often considered to be the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in March 2014. However, at this stage the Russian involvement is direct - even if Russia operate coverly, it uses its own troops and later admits its own involvement in the whole process.

Therefore, the starting point for us is the war in the East, where Russian agents, receiving support from Russia itself start the creation of separatist entities, the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR), and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR). Although to support the newly-created proxies Russia had to involve many of its own secret services and army officers, and eventually even discreetly send some of its regular troops (Mitrokhin, 2015), limited involvement in the war allowed Russia to deny its presence in the East of Ukraine (Washington Post, 28.05.2015). Thus, Russia has been able to distance itself from the war as such while supporting the proxies with ammunition, weapons, resources, and sometimes - their own specialists, and even troops.

While Russian officials largely denied the supply of the arms to the self-proclaimed entities in the East of Ukraine, claiming those weapons were found by the fighters of Donbas in the warehouses or captured in Battles (Gazeta.RU, 10.02.2017), much evidence even back from 2014 has shown that it was Russia who supplied its proxies with means to fight (Reuters, 29.07.2014). Further studies have shown that most of the weapons, used by the so-called DPR and LPR are, in fact, manufactured in Russia (Conflict Armament Research, 2021).

Shortly after the outbreak of the armed clashes in the East of Ukraine, the international community started to react to these developments (UN Press, 17.04.2014), while some of the states condemned Russia and threatened it with economic sanctions (Reuters, 13.04.2014). Later that month, the United States of America announced a round of sanctions on Russia “ In response to Russia’s continued attempts to destabilize eastern Ukraine”, targeting seven

Russian officials and 17 companies, including a couple of large Russian banks, oil company “Rosneft” and arms manufacturers (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 28.04.2014).

Due to the escalation of the war, the United States of America extended the sanctions on the 17th of July, including two more financial institutions and two more energy companies (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 16.07.2014). The European Union resulted in a burst of sanctions on the 25th (EUR-Lex, 25.07.2014), 30th (EUR-Lex, 30.07.2014), and 31st of July (EUR-Lex, 31.07.2014). This sanction package included sanctions against 23 individuals, among whom were Russian state officials as well as representatives of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, and 21 entities such as arms-producing facilities, enterprises taken from Ukraine during the annexation of Crimea, and armed formations of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”. The last of the July sanctions included an embargo against Russia on arms and dual-use goods that could be used for weapons production, as well as stricter control on the exports of the equipment needed for the oil industry. In late August, Switzerland also joined the sanctions, limiting access to the financial instruments to five Russian banks, targeting a list of Russian officials, and imposing an embargo on arms and dual-use goods (The portal of the Swiss government, 27.08.2014).

The next round of sanctions from the United States came into being on the 12th of September 2014, when additional restrictions were introduced against arms producers, banks, and oil-producing companies (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 12.09.2014). On the 24th of September, Japan banned the issue of securities for five large Russian banks and increased control over the exports of arms (BBC News, 24.09.2014). Following the battle of Debaltsevo, the European Union extended the list of sanctioned persons and entities to include mostly armed formations of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, as well as a few Russian officials (EUR-Lex, 09.02.2015).

While the sanctions listed above as well as the entities which implemented them are not the only ones who reacted to the outbreak of the war by using this tool, this study does not include all of them on purpose. First of all, for the purpose of this study, there is no point in looking at the sanctions, implemented against Russia for the annexation of Crimea, as the study only aims to analyze the war in the East of Ukraine. Secondly, some of the sanctions implemented by such states as Norway, Australia, or Canada couldn't have any significant economic impact on Russia - as of 2014, the abovementioned states had less than 1% of the total share of Russian imports or exports (OEC - The Observatory of Economic Complexity,

assessed on 28.11.2022). Therefore, it does not add to the general understanding of the effect of economic sanctions as a tool of conflict intervention and its effect on conflict intensity change in this particular case.

Looking at the global economic indicators, we can clearly see a recession in the Russian economy that started in 2014 and lasted till the end of 2016. In 2014, Russian annual economic growth was 0.7% of GDP contrary to 1.8% in 2013. In 2015, the growth fell as low as -2%, followed by a slow recovery of 0.2% in 2016. It was only in 2017 that the Russian economy reached the pre-war rate of growth (World Bank Open Data, assessed on 28.11.2022). However, as many studies on the effect of sanctions on Russian economics have found, although the effect of sanctions is present and significant, the fall of the oil prices of 2014-2015 had a much more devastating effect on the Russian economy (Korhonen, 2019; Korhonen et al, 2018; Gurvich & Prilepskiy, 2015).

Still, we are able to see the effect of the sanctions against Russia in a more detailed timeframe by looking at the Russian rouble dynamics, as well as Moscow stock market indices. While the Russian rouble does not react to the sanctions immediately, by December 2014 it is falling significantly compared to the euro or American dollar (European Central Bank, assessed on 28.11.2022). Moscow stock exchange shows even more interesting dynamics, resulting in immediate falls after each round of sanctions in April, July, and September 2014 (Trading Economics, assessed on 28.11.2022).

To trace the effect of the implementation of sanctions on the conflict intensity, the graph provided in Figure 4.2 was made. Marked in red are the months when the sanctions, related to the war in the East of Ukraine imposed by significant Russian trade partners were applied. As seen, the sanctions applied in April 2014 did not lead to a decrease in the conflict intensity, as expected - on the contrary, the number of battle-related fatalities increased significantly in the following month. A similar pattern is observed in July 2014, when the applied sanctions did not decrease the conflict intensity in the following month, which happened to be the bloodiest month of the entire observed period.

The sanctions of August 2014 were implemented by Switzerland and consisted of limitations on access of some of the Russian banks to financial instruments, as well as an embargo of arms. Although from August to September 2014 a significant decrease in conflict intensity took place, this effect is very unlikely to be directly connected with the implementation of

Swiss sanctions. The sanctions of Switzerland were not much different from the sanctions implemented by the EU in the previous month which led to no decrease in conflict intensity, even though the EU and Russia have far bigger economic interdependence.

The implementation of sanctions in September 2014 leads to a more significant decrease in the conflict intensity, making the numbers fall below the mean line. September was a time when a number of actors sanctioned Russia simultaneously, which could have led to significant pressure on the Russian economy and thus increase the cost of war. The sanctions implemented in September 2014 by the United States included sanctions against Russian oil companies, which is a crucial sector of the Russian economy, which makes the claim of the effect of the September package of sanctions on conflict intensity even more plausible.

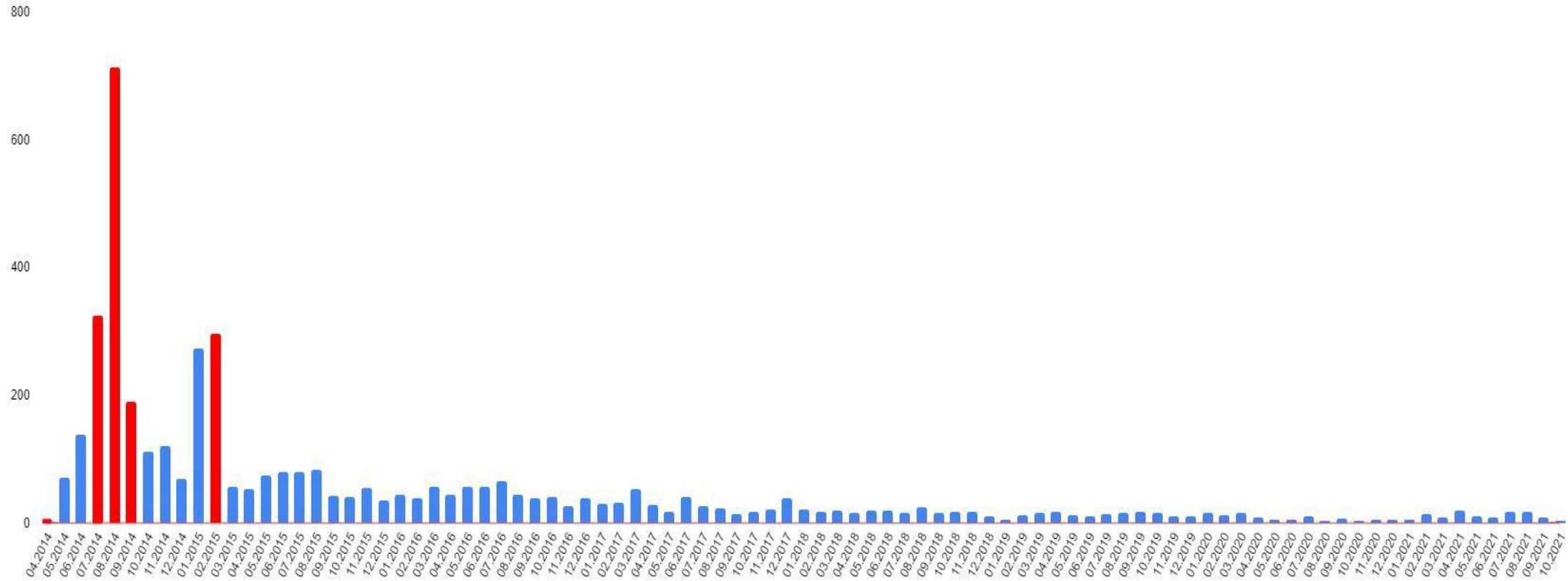
As for the sanctions, implemented by the EU in February 2015, the dynamics of the conflict intensity in the following month show a negative trend. This package of sanctions, however, did not include anything radically new and simply expanded the list of sanctioned entities and individuals. Thus, such a significant drop in the conflict intensity is more likely to be explained by other factors.

During the rest of the observer timeframe, no additional packages of sanctions were implemented by any states or supranational organizations that could have any significant economic ties with Russia. The fluctuations of the conflict intensity in the following period, thus, could not be explained by this factor. Although one can argue that the implemented sanctions had a long-term effect and were aimed to slowly erode the Russian economy and thus increase the cost of war over time, it is quite hard to trace that effect and differentiate it from other factors, that could influence the Russian economy. For example, the Covid-19 crisis led to the fall of the Russian economy of -2.7% in the year 2020, which is more significant than the fall of -2% in 2015 (World Bank Open Data, assessed on 28.11.2022).

Tracing the effect of imposed sanctions on the cost of war for Russia has shown, that there is no evidence of Russian government altering its cost-benefit calculation of waging a proxy war against Ukraine has changed. Even more, the the rhetorics of Russia regarding sanctions were mostly mocking them, and the president of Russia Vladimir Putin in one of his interviews said that Russia does not care about the sanctions at all (Коммерсантъ, 16.03.2020).

Figure 4.2: Sanctions vs casualties of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, by month

*In red, the months are marked during which the implementation of sanctions occurred. Red marking stands for indication of presence/absence of the sanctions, while the size of the bar defines the number of casualties during the respective month



Analyzing the strength of the first hypothesis using process tracing as a method implies applying a set of tests to it. In this case, based on the results outlined above, the study can conclude that the hypothesis of economic sanctions against sponsors leading to the decrease in conflict intensity can indeed pass the so-called “straw in the wind” test. Based on the other studies and the indicators of the Russian economic growth, the rates of the Russian rouble, and indexes of the Moscow stock exchange, it is clear that the implementation of sanctions aligns in time with the noticeable decrease in the Russian economy and at least in some cases corresponds to the decrease of the conflict intensity. However, there is no evidence for sanctions to cause a decisive effect on the fall of Russian economic growth in 2014, disrupting the causal mechanism suggested for this hypothesis. Therefore, this study argues that due to the relatively weak recession of the Russian economy in 2014, and due to the evidence that the major factor behind that recession was the drop in the oil prices and not economic sanctions, this hypothesis fails to pass the “hoop test”.

Even more, the dynamics of conflict intensity have a very limited alignment with the implementation of sanctions, and the periods of radical conflict intensity decreases can not be explained by the implemented sanctions as they do not vary radically from the previous packages of sanctions. Therefore, this hypothesis can not be considered significant to explain the dynamics of the conflict intensity in the war in the East of Ukraine.

4.3. The military aid to Ukraine and their impact on conflict intensity

The next choice of strategy of third-party conflict intervention this study is going to test in the conditions of the proxy war in the East of Ukraine is an idea to arm the defending side, which is attacked by the proxy-sponsor pair. To pass the “straw in the wind test”, this hypothesis needs evidence of the decreasing dynamics in conflict intensity and the presence of military aid to Ukraine during the observed period. To pass the “hoop test”, stronger evidence is required, proving that the military aid was able to strengthen the capacities of Ukraine and thus deter proxies, which would result in a decrease of conflict intensity with each new military aid provision. “Smoking gun test” requires evidence of the military aid being significant enough to deter proxies, and evidence of proxies ceasing the active fighting specifically due to potentially expecting far bigger losses than at the beginning of the conflict. The “Doubly decisive” test can be passed if there is evidence from a proxy side that the conflict intensity had to be reduced specifically due to their fear of dramatic losses thanks to the increased capacities of the Ukrainian army.

Despite having strong international support in the war in the East, Ukraine did not immediately receive an unlimited supply of modern weapons and military equipment. The very idea of providing lethal weapons to Ukraine caused a large amount of debate among thinkers, diplomats, and policymakers in the United States (C-SPAN.org, 22.09.2017). The other part of the question is what exactly should be considered military aid: during the observed period, some of Ukraine's partners have provided only non-lethal equipment which was still meant to bolster the capacities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. And for many other states, the aid to the Ukrainian army was limited to training missions only. Even more, some weapons in the hands of the Ukrainian soldiers were made or bought from other states without their direct involvement, and were delivered through private parties.

To make it clear, this study argues that in order to see the effect of third-party intervention in a form of military aid, we need to look only at the cases of direct support from third-country governments or international institutions. Such support can come as a package of lethal or non-lethal equipment, aimed to strengthen the capacities of the Ukrainian armed forces. As for the training missions, although possibly important and helpful in the long run, measuring their effect on the Ukrainian defensive capabilities and thus on the conflict intensity change is a very complicated matter, as neither the content nor the efficiency of such training is well-known. Thus, this study looks only at the military aid, provided to Ukraine directly or with some help of third parties, mostly partner states.

The first package of military aid came as early as June 2014, when the United States provided a \$5 million-worth package of non-lethal military aid, including night vision devices and communication equipment (Fox News, 04.06.2014). The next package was sent in November and included anti-mortar radar systems (Espresso.tv, 24.11.2014). Already next month, the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine received 35 armored jeeps from the United States (Моя Вінниця, 22.12.2014).

At the beginning of 2015, Ukraine received, probably, the first package of aid that contained lethal weapons. Lithuania sent something that was described as “weapon elements”, thus making Lithuania the first NATO member and the first state generally to send lethal military aid to Ukraine in response to the war (Європейська Правда, 05.01.2015). In March 2015, the United States announced another package worth \$75 million to provide communication equipment, drones, and cars to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (National Vanguard, 15.03.2015). In June 2015, Ukrainian Border Guard Service received a package of assistance from the

European Union (Liga.net, 15.06.2015), and Ukrainian Navy received military-grade motor boats from the United States (Ukrainian Military Pages, 19.06.2015). Already next month, 100 HMMWV cars arrived in Ukraine from the United States of America (Апостроф, 18.07.2015).

After a significant break, the first shipment of 2016 came from the United States in August and consisted of a few medical evacuation cars based on HMMWV (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 27.08.2016). In September 2016, Lithuania sent over 150 tonnes of ammunition for soviet-era guns (DW, 03.09.2016), and additionally supplied 146 heavy machine guns during an unspecified period of the year 2016 (Укрінформ, 28.01.2017).

Under the Trump administration, Ukraine has received its first package of aid from the United States in May 2017. At least \$350 million of the \$560 million worth package were supposed to be spent to increase defense capabilities of Ukraine (The Ukrainian Weekly, 12.05.2017). In December, 40 additional medical evacuation cars based on HMMWV were delivered to Ukraine from the United States (Ukrainian Military Pages, 06.12.2017). In November 2017, Ukraine receives a new batch of soviet-era weapons and ammunition from Lithuania (Unian, 27.11.2017). Also, that month the United States government approved an export license for light weapons for Ukraine, allowing Ukraine to purchase certain types of weapons from manufacturers in the USA (The Ukrainian Weekly, 22.12.2017).

In March 2018, Ukraine has received its first package of military aid from the United States that also included lethal weapons, with long-awaited “Javelin” anti-tank missiles (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 01.03.2018). In August 2018, the United States sent two additional counter-battery fire radars (Мілітарний, 17.08.2018).

In June 2019, Lithuania send an additional package of more than one million ammunition pieces to Ukraine (Delfi, 11.06.2019). After a long pause and a major political scandal, a new batch of lethal aid from the United States arrived in Ukraine only in September 2019 (Reuters, 12.09.2019). The next packages of military aid of the year 2020 arrive from the United States in June, and consists of \$250 million worth of lethal aid (Defense News, 15.06.2020), followed by a \$600 million worth provision of 16 Mark VI patrol boats (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 17.06.2020).

In 2021, the first package of 20 HMMWVs arrives from the United States in January, filled by another 35 HMMWVs in March. During February 2021, the United States also provide 84

military-grade motor boats, and Latvia provides seven medical evacuation jeeps (АрміяInform, 11.01.2022). In June, the United States provide an additional \$150 million worth of military aid (U.S. Department of Defense, 11.06.2021), and the United Kingdom agrees to transfer two mine hunters and eight missile boats to the Ukrainian Navy (UK Defence Journal, 22.06.2021). In September, the United States provides an additional \$60 million worth of lethal aid, (Defense News, 01.09.2021). Finally, in October 2021, Ukraine receives additional ammunition and anti-tank missiles from the United States, and 20 mine-sweeping cars from the United Kingdom (АрміяInform, 11.01.2022).

To see and compare the dynamics of conflict intensity in relation to the supply of military aid to Ukraine, a graph from the Figure 4.3 is used. Overall, tracing the effect of military aid on conflict intensity does not provide any clear evidence to confirm this hypothesis and eliminate the others. After the very first military aid package the conflict intensity increases dramatically - however, of all the packages of military aid, this was one of the smallest. At the end of the year 2014 - the beginning of 2015 a set of military aid packages is sent amidst a significant spike and fall in the conflict intensity. After two packages of military aid are sent to Ukraine in the middle of 2015, there is a certain fall in the conflict intensity in the following months - however, one of the two packages consisted of boats and was aimed to strengthen the Ukrainian Navy, while the war in the East of Ukraine did not feature any sort of naval battles whatsoever.

Some similar dynamics of conflict intensity are observed after the package of lethal aid arrives from Lithuania in 2016, but although this episode fits the general theory, the decrease in conflict intensity that lasts till the beginning of 2018 is barely noticeable. The \$350 million from the first package of 2017 is significantly more than the worth of the previous aid packages - however, shortly after it there is a rise in the conflict intensity. A short spike in the conflict intensity at the end of that year happens among a few new packages of help, including quite an important political decision to allow Ukraine to buy US-made weapons, and some decrease in the conflict intensity follows after it.

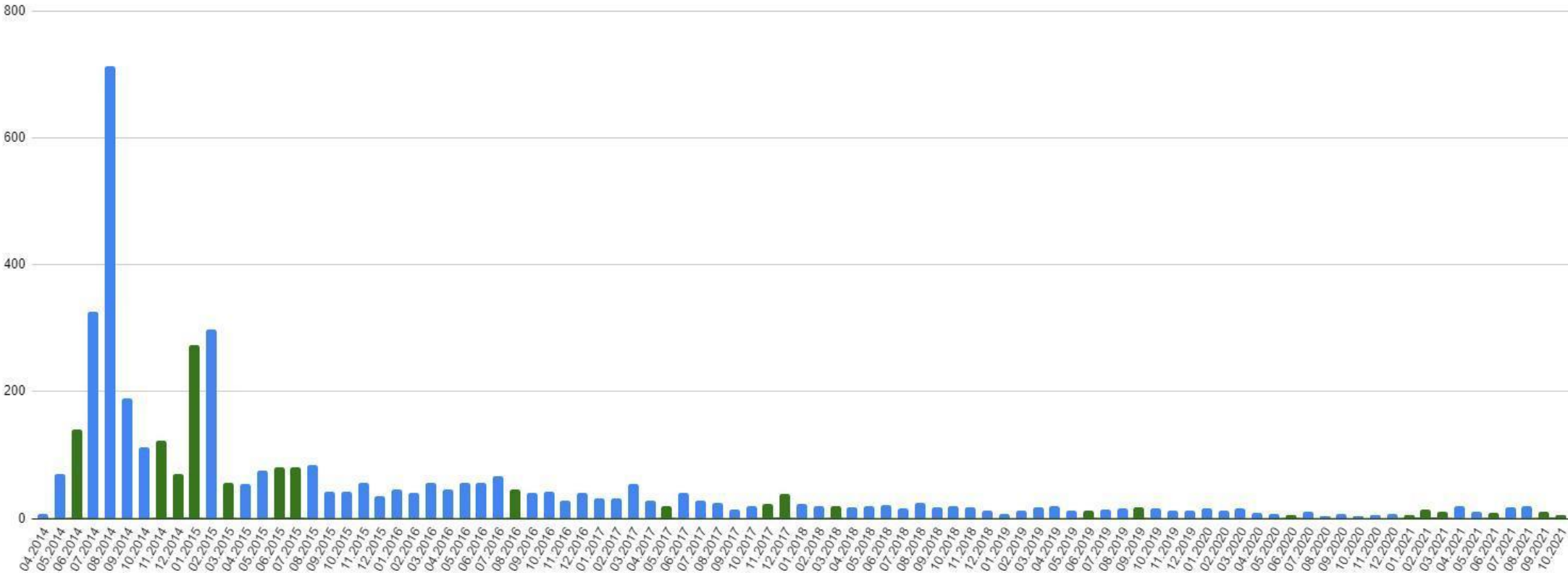
In 2018, the first big package of military aid from the United States arrives, including lethal aid for the first time - however, over the next year, there are ups and down in the conflict intensity dynamics. The same is also valid for the rest of the observed period - it is hard to see any relationship between the military aid supply and any change in conflict intensity. A partial confirmation of the hypothesis can be by comparing the general numbers of

battle-related fatalities before and after the first packages of military aid arrived. In such a case, however, a rise in the conflict intensity that happened in 2021 after the number of battle-related fatalities dropped below 10 per month after March 2020 breaks the assumption that the possession of lethal aid helped to decrease the conflict intensity. However, there are no evidence whatsoever on the leaders of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, or their armed group commanders on perceiving the provided military aid for Ukraine as a significant factor to build-up the capacities of Ukraine and thus to alter the cost-benefit calculation for the Russia’s proxies.

Speaking of the strength of this hypothesis, in the end, we must admit that although there are periods when the supply of military aid aligned with a following decrease in the conflict intensity, we can not find clear evidence of the connection between these two events. The stronger packages of military aid, including lethal arms, were sent to Ukraine after the significant decrease in the conflict intensity has taken place, which allows this study to assume that whatever caused the decrease was not connected to the military aid. Even further, there is no evidence whatsoever from either Russia or its proxies in regard to a significant build-up of the Ukrainian army, that prevents them from further escalation. The strength of this hypothesis is thus minimal, and it is very unlikely that providing military aid in the case of the war in the East of Ukraine has helped to reduce the conflict intensity.

Figure 4.3: Military aid vs casualties of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, by month

*In green, the months are marked during which the military aid was provided. Green marking stands for indication of presence/absence of the military aid provision, while the size of the bar defines the number of casualties during the respective month



4.4. Mediation efforts of the Normandy contact group and their impact on conflict intensity

The causal mechanism behind mediation as a tool for conflict intervention relies on cost-benefit calculations as well. To pass the “straw in the wind test”, in addition to the existing decreasing trend in the conflict intensity, there should be evidence of third-party mediation in the case of the war in the East of Ukraine. The “hoop test” would require evidence of mediation efforts leading to significant drops in conflict intensity. To pass the “smoking gun test”, the evidence would need to confirm that it is specifically thanks to the mediation efforts the conflict intensity was decreased, while the “doubly decisive test” requires such evidence to state that it is the sole responsibility of mediation and no other factors had an effect on the conflict intensity dynamics.

The most important mediation campaign of the war in the East of Ukraine is the Normandy format, or the Normandy contact group, where Germany and France serve as mediators between Russia and Ukraine. Although this format excludes the representatives of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, the meetings are held less regularly and usually include high-ranking officials, such as ministers of foreign affairs of each state or the heads of those states. As a consequence of the Normandy format meeting, another format to mediate peaceful resolution was established - a Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), led by Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This format included representatives of “DPR” and “LPR” as a part of the Russian delegation, which makes it quite different from the Normandy contact group. Nevertheless, TCG meetings were held on a lower level among the specifically created delegations, who did not themselves possess decision-making power. The role of this format was more “technical” and those meetings were supposed to help to reach a compromise on the practical realization of steps, needed for conflict resolution. Therefore, these meetings were happening more often, and are less likely to directly cause an effect on the conflict intensity as all the major decisions would still be accepted by those who meet at the Normandy contact group talks.

The very first meeting of the Normandy format took place on June the 6th 2014 in France, where the presidents of Ukraine and Russia, accompanied by the president of France and German Chancellor were gathering to commemorate the anniversary of D-Day. This episode can hardly be called a proper meeting, as there were no official intention or the talks format prepared for this - it was rather a spontaneous encounter, as it was stated in various media

reports (Reuters, 06.06.2014). Later, in October 2014 the heads of the states met again, this time with a better-planned agenda and official status of the talks. The meeting did not result in any clear resolution, and was characterized by “mixed signals” from Russian president who claimed he does not want to see Ukraine divided or at war, however refused to judge the upcoming elections, organized by the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” on the temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories (The Guardian, 17.10.2014).

The year of 2015 was full of Normandy contact group meetings. The very first meeting of the year was held at the level of the ministers of foreign affairs of each state and used as a preparation stage for the big talks of the heads of the states (ReliefWeb, 12.01.2015). Shortly after another meeting at the ministers level was held due to the rapid escalation of the warfare - however, little success was reported after the meeting, the only positive note being a preliminary agreement from each side to draw a demarcation line and withdraw heavy weapons from both sides of it (DW, 22.01.2015). In February, as the result of a 16-hours long meeting between the heads of the states, a new ceasefire agreement was signed in Minsk. According to it, the parties agreed on the total and immediate ceasefire, withdrawal of the heavy weapons, increased monitoring, but also preparation for the new local elections, pardon for the people who fought against the Ukrainian Armed Forces, restoration of the Ukrainian control over the state border, withdrawal of any foreign groups or mercenaries from the territories of Ukraine, and constitutional reform of Ukraine to provide permanent special status to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (BBC News, 12.02.2015).

Two additional meetings in February, one of which was in the format of the phone call, were held at the ministries level and were connected to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, as well as concerns over the ongoing use of heavy weapons despite the agreement (Reuters, 20.02.2015; Jamestown Foundation, 27.02.2015). In March, another phone call was held between the heads of the states, and the question of the OSCE monitoring mission in the East of Ukraine was discussed (РІА Новості, 03.03.2015).

At the meeting in the beginning of April in Berlin, the ministers of foreign affairs have made a joint statement, in which they raised concerns over the violations of ceasefire agreement, and urged for the creation of working groups inside the TCG meeting format for the practical implementation of the Minsk agreements (Auswärtiges Amt, 14.04.2015). In June, the ministers of the foreign affairs met in France to discuss further violations of the ceasefire, established by Minsk agreements (DW, 23.06.2015). Two additional phone calls were held by

the heads of the states in July to discuss the implementation of Minsk agreements and ceasefire, again (TASS, 23.07.2015).

At another phone call among the heads of states was agreed to have an in-person meeting in October (LB.ua, 09.09.2015). A couple of days later, the ministers of foreign affairs met to discuss the implementation of Minsk agreements, in particular - the local elections in Ukraine and the further constitutional reform (Факти, 12.09.2015). After the in-person meeting in October, the parties agreed to start the withdrawal of light weapons from the frontlines and agreed that any kind of self-organized elections in so-called “DPR” and “LPR” are unacceptable (Офіційне інтернет-представництво Президента України, 02.10.2015). In the meetings of the ministers in November, the parties agreed to keep on the Normandy contact group meetings in the next year to keep the dialogue going (Коммерсантъ, 07.11.2015), and the same was later confirmed in a phone call between the heads of the states (Korrespondent.net, 30.12.2015).

The first meeting of 2016 happened between the ministers of foreign affairs during the Munich security conference. The meeting was dedicated to discussion of the aspects of implementation of the Minsk agreements, but there are no details on the discussed matters or evidence of any breakthrough (DW, 13.02.2016). During the new meeting of ministers in March, the parties again discussed ceasefire violations and failed to reach compromise on the local elections in Ukraine, described in the Minsk agreements (Коммерсантъ, 04.03.2016). The same discussions with little effect were again both at the meeting of the ministers (LB.ua, 11.05.2016), and during the phone call between the heads of states in May (Український тиждень, 24.05.2016). In October, a four-hours long meeting between the heads of the states resulted in agreement to develop a roadmap on the ministries level, which will be signed by the heads of the states level. This roadmap should include detail steps of the implementation of the Minsk agreements. In particular, the parties agreed to fully withdraw troops on a single part of the demarcation line, and continue the process on three other parts. There was also initiatives to provide 24/7 acces for the OSCE mission, and even involve armed police mission of the OSCE to ensure the possibility of the local elections (Український тиждень, 20.10.2016). The final meeting of the 2016 at the ministers' level did not bring any new results (Коммерсантъ, 29.11.2016).

During the whole year 2017, there were only three phone calls of the Normandy format, held at the level of the heads of the states. The phone calls were not dedicated to any significant

developments, and did not result in any new resolutions, focusing mostly on the violations of the ceasefire in the East of Ukraine (Президент России, 18.04.2017; 24.07.2017; 22.08.2017). In March 2018, a joint statement of the heads of the states of Normandy contact group was made to reaffirm the commitment to Minsk agreements, agree on new ceasefires and accelerate the process of exchange of prisoners of war between the sides (Ukrinform, 29.03.2018). After that, only one meeting was held at the ministers level in June 2018, where the parties among other things discussed a peace keeping mission under United Nations leadership to assure ceasefire in the East, but failed to agree on the practical aspects of implementation of the idea (Reuters, 11.06.2018). Few other meetings that are considered of Normandy format were held at the time, but they did not include representatives of all the involved states, and thus are skipped in this study.

The next meetings of the Normandy format happened, when Ukraine had a new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected in May 2019. One of the key messages of Zelensky's presidential campaign was to seek for the diplomatic solution of the war in Ukraine more actively, and as elected president, he insisted on the need to make some actual progress within the framework of the Normandy contact group and implementation of Minsk agreements (Президент України, 17.06.2019). Already in September 2019, the first meeting of the representatives of the states of Normandy contact group was held to re-initiate the format and prepare the meeting of the heads of the states (Коммерсантъ, 02.09.2019).

The first meeting of the new Ukrainian president and the other heads of states happened in December 2019. This meeting was considered as a big step and success, as the parties agreed to make full exchange of the prisoners of war, reassured the ceasefire agreements, and agreed to implement the troops withdrawal that were planned back in 2016. Political part of the Minsk agreements were the hardest part of the meeting, and Ukrainian president stressed there will be no federalization of Ukraine although all the parties agreed on the need of implementation of so-called "Steinmeier formula". The formula is the plan, suggested by former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, Frank Walter Steinmeier, that was proposed by him back in 2015 talks, and should result in the local elections on the uncontrolled Ukrainian territories according to Ukrainian law, and further provision of the special status to those territories (Укрінформ, 10.12.2019).

The next meeting of the Normandy contact group happens in July 2020, and is held on the level of "political advisors" to the heads of the states - an innovation, contrary to the

meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs. At that meeting, the parties discussed the implementation of the agreements, reached in December 2019, but failed to agree on any joint statement in this regard (DW, 04.07.2020). During a new meeting with yet another representative from Ukrainian side, the parties discussed new violations of the ceasefire and perspectives of another meeting of the heads of the states (Президент України, 15.09.2020).

However, no new meetings happened up till March 2021, when the advisors to the heads of the states met online to discuss the violations of the ceasefire again (Українська Правда, 18.03.2021). Another online meeting on the same level in April was dedicated to implementation of the Minsk agreements and resulted in similar fashion (Reuters, 19.04.2021) One last attempt during the observed period to organize a new meeting of the head of the states and implement the results of the previous agreement was made in August 2021, and brought no results as well (Коммерсантъ, 22.09.2021).

Connecting the complicated and long-lasting process of the Normandy contact group meetings and the dynamics of conflict intensity in the East of Ukraine on the graph from Figure 4.4, the study receives an interesting picture.

The very first meeting of the Normandy format did not result in reduction of the conflict intensity - on the contrary, the number of casualties spiked in the following months. However, the very first meeting can hardly be called “the meeting”, meaning there was no official status to it, no actual agenda or readiness from the parties to discuss anything particular. The whole meeting was rather a random conversation between the heads of the states, and thus was very unlikely to have any effect on the conflict dynamics.

The next meeting, held in October 2014 also didn't bring any positive dynamics for the decrease of conflict intensity - however, that meeting was hardly a success, since no serious agreements were made. The meetings of February 2015, which resulted in Minsk agreements, however, perfectly align with a major drop of conflict intensity in the East of Ukraine in the following months. The increased conflict intensity of the summer 2015 resulted in more frequent contacts of the parties, and by the autumn 2015 the conflict intensity has noticeably decreased again, as more details of the implementation of Minsk agreements were discussed.

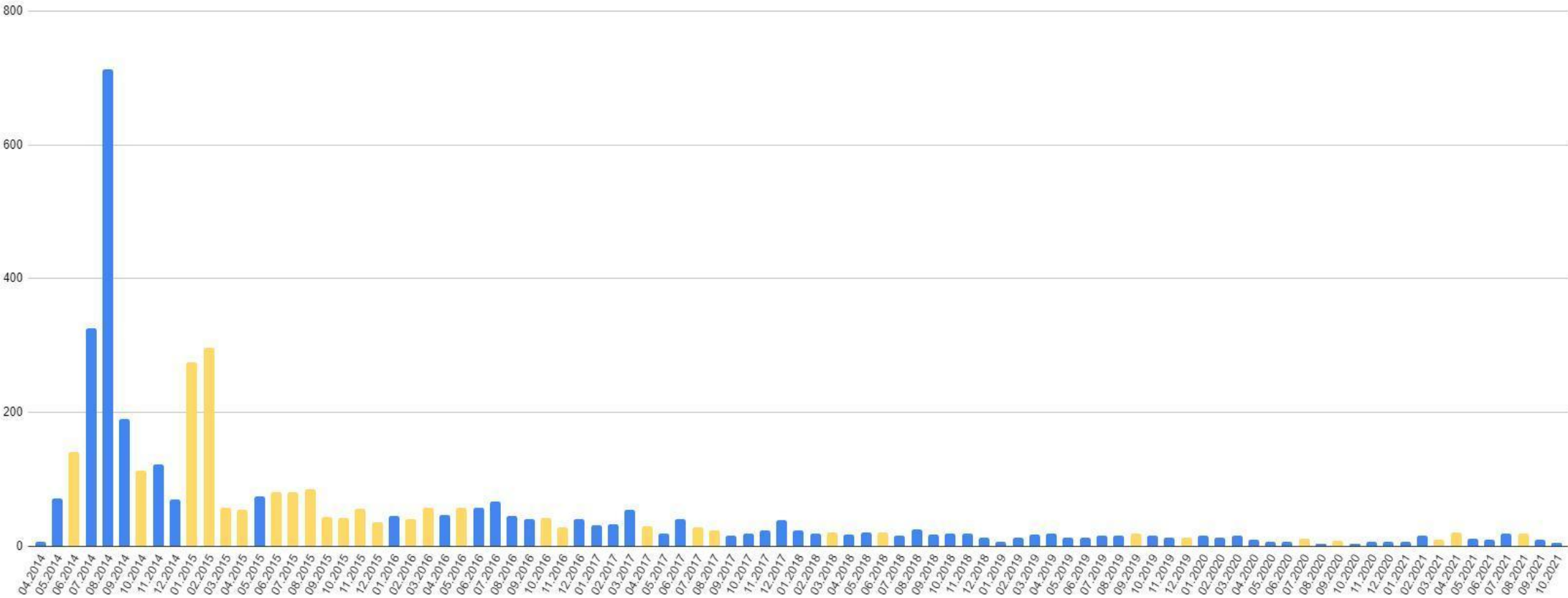
The meetings of the beginning of 2016 were more reactive to the violations of the ceasefire, rather the proactive contacts aimed at establishing additional agreements and deals. Interestingly, the meeting of the heads of the states in October 2016, which was considered as

a certain breakthrough since the parties agreed on the creation of a roadmap for implementation of the Minsk agreements, the conflict intensity immediately decreased in the following month. The same dynamics is clearly seen for the contacts of 2017, even considering those were just a phone calls on the levels of the heads of the states.

In 2018, the conflict intensity was considerably low compared to the earlier periods of the conflict, and the meetings of the Normandy group did not result in any new major statements, thus, the change of the conflict intensity in this period is not significant. A more than a year to the next meeting in 2019, the conflict intensity remains low. A certain decreasing trend is visible after the meeting of advisors to the heads of states in September 2019, during which they agreed on the in-person meeting of the heads of states in December. Although December meetings, when the new president of Ukraine met his Russian counterpart were generally recognised as successful, there were no clear agreement on the political part of the Minsk agreements, which aligns with a short spike in the conflict intensity.

Figure 4.4: Normandy format meetings vs casualties of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, by month

*In yellow, the months are marked during which the Normandy format meetings occurred. Yellow marking stands for indication of presence/absence of the meeting, while the size of the bar defines the number of casualties during the respective month



The period starting from April 2020 and till the end of that year was characterized by the lowest conflict intensity during the observed period. This is unlikely to be connected to the meeting of the Normandy format, as by the results of the meetings of the political advisors to the heads of states, no joint statements were made and no progress was reported. This period of silence is thus should be explained by alternative factors, among which Covid-19 pandemics can be one of the best-fitting.

Finally, the failure of the further meetings of 2021 led to some increase of the conflict intensity, although the general numbers of casualties in this period is significantly lower that during the first years of the war.

Considering the strength of this hypothesis, the study finds strong evidence of alignment between the Normandy contact group meetings and conflict intensity decrease. Particularly, it is thanks to the ceasefire established along the Minsk agreements, signed in February 2015, that the number of casualties was significantly reduced which was widely reported by various observers (Epthinktank, 17.03.2015; European Parliament, 16.07.2015; Crisis Group, 11.04.2015). Despite further escalations and all the ceasefire violations, after the Minsk agreements the conflict almost never reaches pre-minsk level of intensity, and the even more decreasing trend is clearly visible.

It is also fair to say that in many episodes during the observed period, the conflict intensity has decreased after or during the Normandy contact group meetings. In particular, the decrease occurred more often after or during in-person meeting of the heads of the states, which were rather rare occasions but yielded far better results than the meetings of ministers of foreign affairs, meetings of political advisors or phone calls, that in practically all of the observed episodes have not led to any decrease in conflict intensity whatsoever.

Speaking of causal mechanism, the study argues that thanks to mediation, the proxy-sponsor pair were able to outline the goals which led them to involve in fighting in the first place. A little has been achieved during the meetings where heads of states were not present - which makes perfect sense as their roles as supreme decision-makers in international relations can not be fulfilled by other statesmen, and thus such meetings could not result in any firm agreements. However, during the in-person meetings of the heads of states, in at least some cases the parties were able to agree on some compromises, and thus for the proxy-sponsor pair the achievement of their goals became closer without the need to keep on fighting with

such an intensity and at such a cost. So, when the agreement during the mediation efforts were satisfiable for the proxy-sponsor pair and allowed them to reduce the cost-benefit calculation of achieving their goals, they were ready to decrease their level of fighting and start withdrawing from the war.

As for the role of the proxy in this process, although they were not represented in the mediation talks, and for the most of the observed period Ukraine resisted any involvement of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” in negotiations in any format, allowing it for the first time on a TCG level only in 2020 (Atlantic Council, 14.03.2020). Nevertheless, the interests of the proxy was represented by Russia, as the main demands and conditions of the Minsk agreements for Russia included special status to those entities and constitutional change in Ukraine.

Coming to a stronger evidence of Russia or its proxies admitting the mediation was the reason for them to alter the cost-benefit calculation, the study admits that there is no such decisive evidence. Something along those lines, for example, was said by the leader of the so-called “DPR” Denis Pushilin, who admitted that the full realization of the Minsk agreements would lead to a permanent peace in the region (Sputnik Абхазия, 12.08.2019), but it was never the case that the leaders of Russia’s proxies or Russian president admitted that mediation allowed them to achieve their political goals with lower costs of war.

Thus, coming back to the strength of hypothesis, there is evidence of at least few episodes when it is after an in-person meetings of the heads of the states the conflict intensity has dropped dramatically, the most important one being the Minsk agreements of 2015. The study argues, that the hypothesis of mediation efforts having decreasing effect on conflict intensity passes the “hoop test”, and in case of narrowing the hypothesis down to looking at particularly personal meetings of the state leaders, passes the “smoking gun” tests, thanks to existing evidence of the effect of such meetings.

Concluding this chapter, it would be fair to say that the hypothesis of mediation as a choice of conflict intervention to lead to decrease in the conflict intensity in the case of the war in the East of Ukraine proved as the strongest of the three, considered and analyzed within this study.

5. Discussion of the results and considerations of alternative explanations

The research part of this study has concluded, that the mediation as a strategy of third-party conflict intervention in the case of the proxy war in the East of Ukraine has proved to have strong causal connection to the change of conflict intensity. This, however, does not mean that the mediation effort was the only factor influencing the conflict intensity dynamics, as a number of alternative factors could be responsible for the changes in conflict intensity over particular periods. To name the few, this study did not consider the effect of internal Ukrainian weapon production and modernization process, that could be important for the increasing the capabilities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and thus increasing the cost of war for the proxy. Neither it looked at the effect of weather conditions on the conflict intensity, which could be a major factor for the success of military operations. However, all these possible alternative explanations were not in the scope of the study, as it was aimed at particularly third-party intervention strategies.

There is, however, one major factor that is not of third-party intervention, but has a direct connection to it, which this study needs to discuss. It is the reaction of the proxy-sponsor pair to the conflict intervention, and their actions in regard to it. To put it in a simpler way, this study only looked at the strategies of the intervening side, ignoring the possible strategies of response to the intervention of the proxy-sponsor pair. Although also not a focus of the study, this factor is too important to neglect it totally.

As put in a classic work of Clausewitz, war is merely a continuation of the politics by other means (von Clausewitz, 1918). For the very nature of the proxy-sponsor relationship, it is the rule of a thumb: the very reason to engage in such a relationship is to achieve the goals that lie outside of the battlefield, preferably with the lowest cost possible. Two out of three strategies for conflict intervention, analyzed in this study, suggest the increase of cost of war for the proxy or the sponsor. But it is not for the intervener, but for the proxy or the sponsor (or both of them) to decide, what cost is acceptable for them to reach the goals they try to reach by starting the proxy war. If the goal is to cease some valuable resources and gain profit, then in many cases fighting a war is not needed at all, as the use of political leverage and trade could gain the same result with lower risks.

If, however, the proxy-sponsor pair is aligned in a face of what they consider as an existential threat, there is no obvious limit to when the war is no longer profitable from the perspective

of cost-benefit calculation - in fact, there may be no limit. This study argues that in the case of the war in the East of Ukraine this is rather the case for both proxy and the sponsor. The very existence of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR” were dependent on the course of war and the readiness of Ukraine to accept their existence as somewhat separate entities. As for the Russia, independent and West-oriented Ukraine is perceived as a true existential threat, which has been noticed by scholars (The Conversation, 03.03.2022; Stanford News, 02.03.2022) and admitted by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin himself (Коммерсантъ, 30.11.2021; Интерфакс Россия, 21.02.2022; Baltnews, 28.02.2022).

In such a case, the acceptable cost of war against the existential threat for Russia should be very high, which practically means the increase of such costs caused by the third-party intervention should be enormous. The economic sanctions, imposed on Russia in 2014-2015 on the contrary did not cause any hard damage to the Russian economy. As was stated in the related chapter of this study, the economic recession of Russia in 2014-2016 was more connected to the drop of the oil price than to the sanctions, imposed by the EU, USA, Japan, Switzerland, Norway or any other states. Even more, the consequence of the 2014-2016 economic recession were less severe than the economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, this study argues that another explanation of why this hypothesis failed could simple be explained by the low magnitude of the sanctions: they simply did not cause enough damage to make difference for Russia.

The similar conclusion can be drawn for the second hypothesis of military aid decreasing the conflict intensity by increasing the cost of war for the proxy. Arguably, the acceptable cost of war for Russian proxies is equally high as for Russia, or even higher, since their actual survival as separate entities was put on the map. In the previous chapters of this study it was mentioned that the proxies received the absolute majority of its weaponry from Russia, and the actual cost of fighting the war was thus not significantly felt. Additionally, the amount and the nature of the military aid Ukraine received in observed period was very unlikely to significantly increase Ukrainian Armed Forces capabilities. While the war in the East largely featured heavy equipment, such as artillery, mortars and rocket systems, the content of the lethal military aid to Ukraine was limited to ammunition, spare parts and some amount of anti-tank missiles. Mostly, however, the military aid consisted of mobility aid in form of military grade cars, communication systems and other equipment - which is definitely important for the warfare but does not lead to an immediate increase in firepower.

Mediation, unlike the other strategies, offered not the increase, but *decrease* of the cost of war to Russia and its proxies. Thus, it allowed the proxy-sponsor pair to state their goals and demand some compromise with even lower cost, which was immediately used. By increasing the conflict intensity, Russia and its proxies managed to put pressure on Ukraine in 2014-2015, meanwhile supporting the diplomatic solution, beneficial for them. The tracing of the causal link between Normandy contact group meetings and the dynamics of conflict intensity has clearly shown that Minsk agreements led to a dramatic decrease in conflict intensity, and each further step towards its implementation was supported by another drop in violence. Even more, the longer periods of no progress in Minsk agreements implementation characterized by increased conflict intensity, and the periods during and after meetings more than once featured significant drop in the conflict intensity, providing evidence that it was most likely controlled process to put even more pressure on the negotiations.

In offering mediation for the war in the East of Ukraine, the intervening parties have created a mechanism for Russia to use. A couple of additional interesting observations can be made in this regard - coming back to the comparison of Normandy format meetings and conflict intensity, specifically the period of 2019-2021. Since the last contact in July 2018, there is no clear increasing trend in conflict intensity up to the first meeting of political advisors in September 2019. This study suggests that this can be connected to the expectations of Russia and its proxies regarding the new President of Ukraine. Looking at Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a president who promised to find the diplomatic solution to the war in the East, Russian leadership must have expected Zelenskyy's readiness to a far greater compromise than his predecessor.

The very first meeting, however, did not result in any gains in the political component of the Minsk agreements regarding constitutional reforms in Ukraine. Even more, during the talks Zelenskyy stated that Crimea is also considered as a part of Ukraine by him (Радіо Свобода, 09.12.2019), which Russia considered as an undisputable part of its lands by that time and refused to even talk about that prior to the December 2019 meeting (Коммерсантъ, 14.10.2019). In the following years, not only Zelenskyy did not become more open to compromise, but also became more radical in terms of Minsk agreements and started to more actively discuss the question of Crimea.

Looking beyond the scope of this study, we know the further developments of the events: the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, that started on 24th of February 2022. While at first

it may seem controversial that mediation was the most efficient strategy of conflict intensity reduction, and yet the full-scale invasion with far greater daily combat intensity shortly after the observation ends, it makes most sense on the second thought. Having ambitious political goals of keeping Ukraine in its sphere of influence, Russia and the President of Russia Vladimir Putin specifically started the proxy war in the East of Ukraine. Putting constant pressure on the battlefield through the use of proxies, Putin managed to get a peace deal that would eventually allow him to achieve his goals through the implementation of constitutional reform in Ukraine and control of the proxies, that would receive a special status inside Ukraine. As years go by, Russia used its proxies to putoil in the fire when the implementation of Minsk agreement was stalling, and had high hopes for the change of power in Ukraine in 2019. However, it did not bring any expected results and the actual implementation of the Minsk agreements became more and more distant. Realizing this, Putin decided on the all-in invasion of Ukraine, which was intended to be a rapid success and put the end to the story.

Thus, although formally France and Germany led the mediation, in fact it was Russia and its proxies who changed the conflict intensity to direct the mediation efforts and the following agreements in a way, most beneficial for them. It looks like the interveners cared, first and foremost, for the very number of casualties and ceasefire violations rather than for a long-term, justful solution to the war. Even more, the Normandy contact group did not produce any kind of punishing mechanism for the episodes, when parties refrained from implementation of their parts of the deal - despite many failures of the talks, spikes in violence and so on, the mediators did not threatened parties with more sanctions or any other potential incentive to keep the word. All the mediation efforts worked well for the reduction of conflict intensity as long as it aligned with the interests of Russia and its proxies, and fell apart the moment Russia decided to dramatically raise the stakes.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze what choice of strategy of third-party conflict intervention allow to reduce the conflict intensity level in a proxy war setting. The Russia's proxy war in the East of Ukraine over the period of 90 months from April 2014 to October 2021 was chosen as the case for the research, and theory-testing process tracing was used as a method of analysis. Based on the existing literature, three main strategies of conflict intervention were derived and used as hypotheses for the study: an analysis was conducted to see if any of the economic sanctions against sponsor, the provision of military aid to a party that opposes proxy-sponsor pair, or the mediation efforts lead to decrease in conflict intensity.

Answering the main research question, the study concludes that there is indeed difference in conflict intensity change due to a choice of a specific strategy of a conflict intervention by a third-party. In the case of this study, the evidence has shown that mediation efforts in Normandy contact group format, led by France and Germany were more successful in decreasing the conflict intensity than provision of military aid to Ukraine by UK, USA and other partner states, or implication of economic sanctions on Russia by UK, USA, EU, Japan, Norway and other states.

Based on the available data, the study was able to find the overall decreasing trend in the conflict intensity in case of the war in the East of Ukraine during April 2014 - October 2021. It then analyzed the outlined hypotheses to see how the implementation of each of the suggested conflict interventions strategy matches with the dynamics of conflict intensity. First of all, the study finds that the economic sanctions in this particular case can not be tied to a decreasing trend in conflict intensity due to the lack of evidence of such sanctions to cause significant impact on the Russian economy. Thus, the cost-benefit calculation for Russia could not be altered by the sanctions, and it is very unlikely that sanctions were responsible for the observed decreasing trend.

Secondly, the provision of military aid has also shown weak causal link with the overall decreasing trend in the conflict intensity: the most significant drops in the conflict intensity were not preceded by military aid packages, and the very content of the military aid was very unlikely to build up the military capacities of Ukraine to that extent when it would significantly alter the cost-benefit calculation for the Russian proxies and thus would deter them from fighting.

Finally, mediation efforts, especially when conducted on the level of the heads of states and held in-person, have shown evidence of being linked to the most significant drops in the conflict intensity during the observed period. However, as discussed in this study, this strategy worked because it allowed the proxy-sponsor pair to keep pursuing their goals while decreasing the cost of war for themselves, while other strategies were not able to increase it to an unacceptable level, as the war was believed to be conducted due to an existential threat. Therefore, mediation worked and led to decrease in the conflict intensity only while it was pushing the compromise towards the goals of the proxy-sponsor pair, and backfired when their goals were not achieved. In particular, this study argues that the further escalation and full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24.02.2022 can be explained by the proxy-sponsor pair realising their final goals could not be achieved through mediation after all.

While the findings of the study are case-specific, and different strategies could play out differently for the dynamics of conflict intensity in any other specific case, there are some general conclusions and wider implications regarding the findings. First of all, the study finds that the third-party intervention strategies do work differently in proxy war setting rather than in classic conflicts, as the proxy-sponsor pair consist of at least two different actors. Despite this case has shown that neither an intervention strategy aimed to increase cost of war for the proxym the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, nor the intervention strategy targeted at increasing the cost of war for the sponsor, Russia, worked as intended, we can argue that in case the magnitude of such measures was higher, the expected outcome could be observed.

Mediation, in this regard, seems to be a more universal tool as it allows to decrease the costs of war for the parties involved while allowing them to keep pushing towards their political goals. However, as in the case of Russia’s proxy war in the East of Ukraine, it does not necessarily mean to lead to a long-lasting decrease in the conflict intensity or eventual peace. If the proxy-sponsor pair perceives the goal they are trying to achieve by waging a proxy war as existential, the acceptable cost of war for them is high, and therefore mediation can provide only a temporary relief in case the ultimate goal of the proxy-sponsor pair will not be achieved through it.

Due to the lack of specific monthly data on casualties on the side of the so-called “DPR” and “LPR”, this study was limited in assessing the overall conflict intensity dynamics, and thus some of the evidence could be hidden that otherwise would lead to a different conclusions regarding the hypotheses on economic sanctions and military aid provision effect on the

conflict intensity. Therefore, further research in the field can aim to run similar case-specific studies where there would be no such problems with data availability, and different outcomes may be seen. There is also room for running larger comparative studies, or large-N quantitative studies testing how the third-party intervention in form of economic sanctions, military aid provision, and mediation efforts plays out in a proxy war setting due to some specific factors, or generally.

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8. Appendix 1

Dataset, used for the study, compiled from the open source evidence, including observations from April 2014 till October 2021

Month	Fatalities	Sanctions	Military aid	Normandy Format Meetings
04.2014	7	0	0	0
05.2014	71	0	0	0
06.2014	140	0	1	1
07.2014	325	0	0	0
08.2014	713	0	0	0
09.2014	190	0	0	0

10.2014	113	0	0	1
11.2014	122	0	1	0
12.2014	70	0	1	0
01.2015	274	0	1	2
02.2015	297	0	0	3
03.2015	57	0	1	1
04.2015	54	0	0	1
05.2015	75	0	0	0

06.2015	81	0	1	1
07.2015	81	0	1	2
08.2015	85	0	0	0
09.2015	43	0	0	2
10.2015	42	0	0	1
11.2015	56	0	0	1
12.2015	36	0	0	1
01.2016	45	0	0	0

02.2016	40	0	0	1
03.2016	57	0	0	1
04.2016	46	0	0	0
05.2016	57	0	0	2
06.2016	57	0	0	0
07.2016	67	0	0	0
08.2016	45	0	1	0
09.2016	40	0	0	0

10.2016	42	0	0	1
11.2016	28	0	0	1
12.2016	40	0	0	0
01.2017	31	0	0	0
02.2017	32	0	0	0
03.2017	54	0	0	0
04.2017	29	0	0	1
05.2017	19	0	1	0

06.2017	41	0	0	0
07.2017	28	0	0	1
08.2017	24	0	0	1
09.2017	15	0	0	0
10.2017	19	0	0	0
11.2017	23	0	1	0
12.2017	39	0	1	0
01.2018	23	0	0	0

02.2018	19	0	0	0
03.2018	20	0	1	1
04.2018	17	0	0	0
05.2018	20	0	0	0
06.2018	21	0	0	1
07.2018	16	0	0	0
08.2018	25	0	0	0
09.2018	17	0	0	0

10.2018	19	0	0	0
11.2018	18	0	0	0
12.2018	12	0	0	0
01.2019	7	0	0	0
02.2019	13	0	0	0
03.2019	17	0	0	0
04.2019	19	0	0	0
05.2019	13	0	0	0

06.2019	12	0	1	0
07.2019	15	0	0	0
08.2019	16	0	0	0
09.2019	18	0	1	1
10.2019	16	0	0	0
11.2019	12	0	0	0
12.2019	12	0	0	1
01.2020	16	0	0	0

02.2020	13	0	0	0
03.2020	16	0	0	0
04.2020	9	0	0	0
05.2020	7	0	0	0
06.2020	6	0	1	0
07.2020	11	0	0	1
08.2020	4	0	0	0
09.2020	8	0	0	1

10.2020	4	0	0	0
11.2020	6	0	0	0
12.2020	7	0	0	0
01.2021	6	0	1	0
02.2021	15	0	1	0
03.2021	10	0	1	1
04.2021	20	0	0	1
05.2021	11	0	0	0

06.2021	9	0	1	0
07.2021	18	0	0	0
08.2021	19	0	0	1
09.2021	10	0	1	0
10.2021	5	0	1	0

Appendix 2

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