



THE VOLATILE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AFTER THE WAR IN UKRAINE: 'LESSONS LEARNED' FROM HISTORY AND HOW WE PREPARE

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One of the fundamental reasons why history is so important is that it essentially provides access to a vast collection of “lessons learned” accessible to those willing to study and understand them. In the realm of international relations, national defense, homeland security, regional geopolitics, strategic foresight, and societal resilience, history becomes essential. This article undertakes a brief literature review in order to understand whether professionals continue to regard “lessons learned” as a valuable tool. Furthermore, it includes a comparative analysis of recent wars and their aftermath, in order to address a central question – which are the challenges we can expect to face and how will the world look like once the war in Ukraine reaches its conclusion? Historical evidence suggests that, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, we will be looking at a much more volatile security environment throughout the world. This will be due, especially, to the proliferation of emerging technologies, new military equipment and the new expertise developed in the war in Ukraine, which will be exported worldwide.

Keywords: *lessons learned, history, arms trafficking, war, mercenaries, instability.*

Introduction

On the international stage, some actors have global visions, others have imperial ambitions, while others – such as Romania – must adopt regional defense visions and strategies. When nations disregard history and neglect lessons learned

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from the equation, things become simple: they will no longer have such visions of their own, or their own projections regarding their security environment, their development, their very existence. They will have to rely on others – for both vision and the fulfillment of those visions –, and if the defense and security visions are no longer their own, then these will most likely not be intended for their own defense and security. Hence, the risks and dangers that a lack of vision, a lack of lessons learned, a lack of strategy and regional awareness pose to the Romanian society as a whole are to be regarded most seriously. It is therefore imperative to begin preparing proactively for the transformations that will follow the war in Ukraine.

1. Lessons Learned

“Lessons Learned” represent one of the most important and closely monitored elements within the analysis of security, defense, and international relations - not only in these fields, but also in many other domains. They are also essential to NATO’s organizational culture, as evidenced by the Alliance’s sustained commitment to this concept through dedicated conferences, an online platform and a highly important center: the Joint Analysis and Lessons Learned Centre (JALLC s.a.). For example, according to NATO, *“The NATO Lessons Learned Process is NATO’s formal process for identifying potential lessons and ensuring that, through analysis of the cause and potential remedial action, they are learned in such a way that allows the Alliance to transform to better meet the needs of the Allies.”* (JALLC s.a.)

In other words, “lessons learned” are about the systematic study of past experiences – our own or those of others –, in order to prepare for the future. Yet, this raises a critical question: how can a society engage in such learning if it stops studying the past and its own history? No matter how appealing certain ideologies narratives may find to erase national identities or national histories, in a region such as ours and in today’s global security context, this would be an inexcusable irresponsibility – one that would cause significant security damage to our entire society, both in the medium and long term.

“Lessons learned” are also essential for the United States, which likewise maintains a dedicated institution for this purpose – the *Center for Army Lessons Learned* (CALL s.a.). However, such processes are just as essential for any other responsible and professional actor within the international arena. Relatively recent articles authored by former or current high-ranking American officials in the field of strategic planning have emphasized that the U.S. must pay even more attention to the “lessons learned” from history when formulating major strategic decisions today (Lettow 2021).

These examples were presented because it is important to understand that experienced practitioners consider that the “lessons learned” from history continue,



to a large extent, to be valid today. Numerous examples, discussed in subsequent sections, further substantiate this perspective. Human nature, in its essence, remains largely constant across time. Depending on the era and the context, certain traits may temporarily take on greater importance than others. The only things that truly change are the tools, technological innovations, and the scale of their impact – yet, the core principles articulated by Sun Tzu thousands of years ago remain just as relevant today.

If we were to stop learning the writings of Sun Tzu and the events that have shaped human history over the last few thousand years, we would be forced to begin anew, gaining nothing from past experience. Who would benefit from us ignoring past experience? Obviously, it would serve the interests of our adversaries.

By extension, the same reasoning applies to the broader study of history – the only ones who do not want us to benefit from the “lessons learned” of the past are our adversaries. All major actors on the international stage are aware of this reality, and they place great importance on “lessons learned” and history.

2. What Will Follow the War in Ukraine

Returning to the central topic, history is very useful because it will illuminate certain aspects and outcomes likely to emerge once the war in Ukraine ends – *regardless of the manner in which it does so*. Of course, this represents only one of the many lessons that can be learned from the war in Ukraine. A critical issue, however, that will affect us globally – and one that few people are considering today – concerns what will happen to the vast number of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers at the frontlines and in supporting roles. Also, what will happen to the enormous amount of military equipment and war experience accumulated during the war in Ukraine?

Once the war ends, irrespective of its outcome, a considerable proportion of those currently mobilized will be demobilized. The size of that number will depend on the durability of the future ceasefire and the peace in Ukraine.

According to some estimates from 2024, Ukraine had over one million people engaged in this war within its defense and security forces (Kottasová and Gak 2024). Russia, by most accounts, had likely many more people directly involved in the war. Naturally, not all of these individuals are deployed on the front lines – but modern warfare involves more than just trenches and direct assaults. It also includes logistics, research, planning, analysis, intelligence, strategy and policy-making, among other domains. Beyond those directly involved, various assessments indicate that each side has likely suffered over 500,000 wounded and killed soldiers (France24 2025).

Once the war ends, some of those currently on the front lines or mobilized in various capacities will return to their homes, professions, and their pre-war



routines – because such large standing force cannot be sustained indefinitely by the state. However, a significant number of individuals will seek to continue doing what they have learned during the war -especially since there will be third parties or international entities interested in exploiting their expertise, and willing to pay handsomely for it.

At present, considering how the war has been fought in Ukraine, both Russian and Ukrainian soldiers possess unparalleled practical experience in the world in the application of new technologies and combat tactics. No other armed forces in the world currently match the level of hands-on proficiency in modern warfare than the Ukrainians and Russians fighting in Ukraine.

This accumulated expertise will make them highly sought after by states around the world, whether in Africa, Latin America, Asia, or Europe. And Western nations will be looking for Ukrainian ‘advisors’ as well. However, such engagements will not always be just for ‘advisory’ roles. For example, only a few years ago, everyone was talking about the famous Russian mercenaries, the Wagner Group, who initially numbered no more than a few thousand experienced individuals (before increasing their numbers through massive recruitment of more inexperienced personnel). Let us picture what will happen when hundreds of thousands of ‘Wagner-like’ Russians and Ukrainians, with far more experience than the Wagner mercenaries of 2022, are spread across the international environment, actively operating with great success in Africa and the Middle East.

Undoubtedly, the post-war international environment will be much more dangerous and turbulent, particularly across regions such as Africa and Asia. However, unpleasant surprises could also emerge in other parts of the world. The expertise acquired by soldiers who participated in the war in Ukraine will make them highly sought after not only for authoritarian regimes but also for regional rivalries, and for coup interests from various state or non-state entities in the Arab world, Russia, China, the Western states, or, why not, Ukraine. This will make the world far more dangerous than it is at present. Africa is likely to experience the most pronounced destabilization (even more than it is at present!), with humanitarian consequences and migration-related issues that are difficult to anticipate. It is possible to see a revival of the Libyan conflict while the Middle East may once again provide fertile ground for the escalation of regional tensions and proxy confrontation.

3. Wars and What Followed. Examples: Chechnya, Former Yugoslavia

Why do we refer to history as a vast repository of “lessons learned”? Because, time and again, it has demonstrated recurring patterns of human behaviour. Throughout history, soldiers with experience in the latest military tactics and techniques have frequently become highly sought as mercenaries once their own wars ended. One of



the most famous examples is that of the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine emperors (preceded by at least a century by other Viking mercenaries), who took advantage of the combat experience of the Vikings to hire them for their own conflicts. A similar dynamic is likely to unfold in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine.

Throughout history, different populations that have accumulated significant military experience have always been highly sought after and used as mercenaries, as well as models for training and developing domestic armed forces - the Scythians were used by the Persian Empire, Philip II used mercenaries to train and build his own Macedonian army, and later the Macedonians were often employed as mercenaries by the Greeks and others, the Cumans, Albanians, even Aromanians and Romanians were sought for their military experience. The Tatars, the Circassians (especially following the genocide (ECR Group, 2022) committed against them by the Russian Empire), were used by the Ottoman Empire for their military experience. These examples represent only a fraction of the historical precedent demonstrating how militarily experienced populations have been mobilized across different powers and contexts. A more recent example, not so much with mercenaries *per se*, is how the Soviet Union and the U.S. sought to acquire the expertise of Nazi scientists and access to German military technology, at the end of World War II. At that time, technological knowledge and research capabilities were in high demand and now it will be the practical military experience, the way modern technologies are used on the battlefield, that will be highly sought after.

3.1. Chechnya

Immediately following the Second Chechnya War in 2000, military analyst G.D. Bakshi pointed out how this conflict boosted Russian arms exports (Bakshi 2000). Likewise, it is reasonable to anticipate that both Russian and Ukrainian arms exports will increase substantially after the war in Ukraine ends, regardless of its outcome. Significantly increased arms exports will undoubtedly mean significantly increased global volatility. The same army analyst pointed out in 2000, in the aftermath of the Russian victory in Chechnya, that “Such an economic and military revival of the Russians could greatly hasten the onset of a truly multipolar or polycentric world order in place of the existing unipolar one. At the operational and tactical level, there are many useful lessons to be learnt from the Chechen military campaign” (Bakshi 2000). We cannot fail to see how these words seem to be very actual today and they bear a remarkable similarity to what is happening today, to what concerns us today.

Also, the war in Chechnya was a constant source of fighters for foreign conflicts. For example, Chechen fighters reportedly fought alongside Taliban forces in Afghanistan against the U.S. and its allies and were also reported to have participated in the Syrian civil war, engaging against government forces and contributing to the lasting instability in the region (Steinberg, 2014). The wars in Chechnya continue



even today to represent a source of terrorism, and some Chechens even reportedly had links to al-Qaeda (Bhattacharji and Jeffrey 2010). These very short examples show just what we mean by “lessons learned” regarding the consequences and the arms and fighters exports that follow ended wars. They show just how much the small local wars in Chechnya contributed and still contribute to global instability and security concerns. This historical perspective naturally prompts reflection on the potential regional and global consequences of the eventual conclusion of the war in Ukraine.

3.2. Former Yugoslavia

As Joel Fraser explicitly noted in a 2020 article, “It’s been almost 20 years since the Yugoslav Wars ended, and the Balkans are now at relative peace. For Western Europe, however, the shadow of Yugoslavia’s wars continues to haunt with a serious security threat” (Fraser 2020). And the author highlights specific instances of how arms originating from the former Yugoslavia have contributed to security challenges in Europe. For example, Zastava M70 rifles and ammunition used to carry on 12 ruthless killings in France in 2015 by al-Qaeda gunmen were purchased from Bosnia. In November 2015, a Yugoslavian rifle, an AK47 from Communist Albania and another one from Bulgaria were used by Islamists in another attack at the Bataclan Theatre. The author concludes that “The task of efficiently tracking and stopping the flow of illicit arms from the former Yugoslavia is almost impossible” (Fraser 2020). However, this is only one aspect resulting in the aftermath of the war in Yugoslavia. There was also radicalisation of Muslim fighters in Bosnia, foreign Muslim combatants that had joined the war in Bosnia and later on spread their experience worldwide. There were also ex-fighters that joined or created human and drug trafficking cartels, and these, alongside the arms trafficking mentioned above, are direct security threats that made the whole of Europe less secure following the war in Yugoslavia.

4. What is Happening Today

The patterns described above have happened repeatedly wherever there had been devastating wars. Each of the historical examples discussed (and many others) stand as reasons to suspect that this may happen again after the conclusion of the war in Ukraine. There already have been numerous accounts of U.S. arms or financial aid intended for Ukraine, but ended up “unaccounted for” or used for illicit actions or sold on the black market instead. For example, in early 2024, the Pentagon’s Office of Inspector General reported there were one billion dollars’ worth of weapons sent by the U.S. to Ukraine, unaccounted for (NPR, 2024). A 2022 CBS documentary, citing a statement that “only around 30% of aid was reaching the front lines in



Ukraine” was partially retracted (Baker, 2022), yet it nevertheless did cast doubt on what is happening to U.S.-made military equipment. Especially in the aftermath of what happened to U.S. military equipment in Afghanistan. In late 2024, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) bluntly pointed out that “recent evidence shows early signs that organized arms trafficking is on the rise in Ukraine” (GI-TOC, 2024). Such developments are to be expected in an active war zone, and they reinforce the central argument of this paper, and we have no reason to suspect that illicit arms trafficking is not having an impact on the Russian army as well.

To provide additional examples, one of the many unanswered questions concerns a 2022 incident in which a plane leased by a Ukrainian company - allegedly transporting ammunition from Serbia to Bangladesh – crashed in Greece, despite the fact that Ukraine was constantly requesting ammunition donations (Stamatoukou, 2023). Ironically and tragically at the same time, Ukraine, a current theater of war, was transporting ammunition from another very recent theater of war in Europe, namely Serbia. This episode serves, so to speak, as a foreshadowing of what Ukraine and Russia will be after the war ends. A related question arises regarding the factories that now produce hundreds of thousands of FPV combat drones. While some facilities will close, others will shift to different production, but some will continue to supply war theaters or organizations in other parts of the world as well as the needs of their own national forces. Recently, a helicopter of the Colombian armed forces was apparently shot down by a drone belonging to drug cartels (Altman and Rogoway, 2025). This underscores the broader pattern noted earlier: technical and military expertise from the war in Ukraine is being exported. It is no coincidence that there have been publicly reported cases of ‘volunteers’ from Mexico and Colombia fighting in Ukraine (DefenseRomania Team, 2025), and who are in fact infiltrated in order to learn new combat techniques and later employ them within their criminal organizations or for other actors willing to pay for their expertise.

We can also talk about possible acts of state terrorism. In the case of the Russian Federation, this comes as no surprise, since the assassinations committed against critical journalists, such as Anna Politkovskaya, or political opponents of Vladimir Putin are well known and documented (Leopold, 2024). As are the acts of state terrorism carried out by the U.S.S.R. since its very inception, through brigades of activists, saboteurs, Comintern members, the NKVD, etc., all of which were sponsored, trained, and coordinated by the Soviet state institutions and officials.

It is noteworthy that Ukraine is also adopting some of the same methods historically associated with Soviet-era practices. From the infamous Mirotvorets website which maintains close ties to Ukrainian secret services and was supported by high Ukrainian officials (Johnson, 2024), on which names and addresses have



been listed – including those of Ukrainian¹ (Kramer, 2016) and U.S. journalists (Kramer, 2016) or officials who, in the view of some Ukrainians, might deserve to be “punished” for harming Ukraine’s interests, earning the nickname ‘kill list’ (Armstrong, 2022) – to the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines, which could not have been done without the knowledge and resources of Ukrainian institutions (Pancevski, 2024). More recently, the 2025 assassination of Andrei Portnov in Spain, a former Ukrainian official and potential political rival to President Zelensky. Oleksiy Arestovych, formerly close to President Zelensky and now a political rival himself, also preparing a presidential bid, stated openly what many people already suspected at the time: “The murder of Andrey Portnov is 99% likely Zelensky preparing for elections.” (Arestovych, 2025). All the more so given that there is information according to which Andrei Portnov had apparently just been summoned to meetings with high Ukrainian officials in Kyiv, and had met them just a few days before being assassinated (Melanovski, 2025), leaving open the possibility of either Ukrainian, or Russian involvement.

It is also essential to acknowledge assassinations most likely carried out by Russian actors. For example, in 2024, Maxim Kuzminov, a Russian pilot who had defected to Ukraine, was assassinated in Spain (Chiappa et al., 2024). Not to mention the assassinations carried out by Ukraine and Russia within their own territories. In addition, it is no coincidence that the Russian Federation negotiated a prisoner exchange with the U.S. and released the notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout, who, according to some reports, has already resumed activities in the international arms trade (Al Jazeera, 2024).

In Mali, the ongoing conflict provides an example of how the war in Ukraine is extending beyond its immediate theater. Government forces in Mali have been supported and trained by Russian mercenaries, while at the beginning of 2025, a Ukrainian official hinted that Ukraine may have helped Islamist rebels with ‘intelligence’ to shoot down a government forces helicopter using a drone: “a Ukrainian military intelligence official, Andriy Yusov, implied thereafter that Kyiv had provided the rebels with information to aid their attack. Ukraine later denied that it provided intelligence, as well as reports that it had supplied rebels with drones” (Staff Writer With AFP, 2025). There is no doubt that the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation is also being fought outside Ukraine and is exporting violence and weapons.

The events described above represent only one part of the export of violence stemming from the war in Ukraine; they are only the tip of the iceberg we are seeing now. This dynamic is likely to continue even after the war on Ukrainian territory have ended.

¹ “A pro-Russian commentator living in Kiev, Oles Buzina, whose home address was publicized in a *Myrotvorets* post last year, was shot and killed on a street not far from his home days later” (Kramer 2016).



Therefore, unfortunately, it is reasonable to predict that the arms, the ammunition, the operational experience and methods, the people who have gone through the war in Ukraine and their military experience will continue to fuel conflicts and instability, worldwide. We will encounter Russian and Ukrainian ‘advisors’ or mercenaries in various forms in many countries around the world, from Latin America to Asia, from Africa to Europe and Australia. It will only depend largely on the responsibilities of global and regional leaders, who will shape how this military experience is applied in the post-war environment.

5. How to Prepare

The main idea is that Romania must prepare intensively to address the security challenges that the upcoming years will bring – a world that is much more conflictual, much more turbulent, characterized by the potential for additional armed conflicts, increasingly dramatic challenges generated by climate change, large-scale migration, the irresponsible internal division of our societies, challenges generated by the unethical and aggressive use of new technologies, and others. For example, regarding Artificial Intelligence, global regulation is unlikely to align with the EU’s local framework. And any excessive regulation, when adversaries do not impose comparable constraints, represents a loss of competitiveness and a vulnerability, as the U.S. Vice President mentioned some time ago. Moreover, Romania must also consider the expansionist tendencies of some regional actors (Russia, for example), or the unpredictability of other important regional actors like Iran. These are just a few of the challenges we can anticipate to some extent. Certainly, there will be others that cannot be anticipated at present.

What can Romania do to prepare for future challenges? Things are relatively simple. On the one hand, we need to prepare in terms of the technological dimension of the armed forces’ equipment, the research and innovation sector; on the other hand, we need to work on the societal dimension, fostering social cohesion and healing internal fractures, rather than exacerbating polarization. Achieving this requires effective communication and education that responsibly address issues of national identity (which have been ideologically neglected for decades, weakening and significantly making us more vulnerable to events just like the ones that are happening today). Of course, none of these efforts can succeed without appropriate concern for economic development. Our analyses have consistently tried to address these two main dimensions - military and societal. The military dimension was tackled in 2024, in an article titled “The Need for an Integrated Model of Smart Warfare”, which was published in the Bulletin of the ‘Carol I’ National Defense University. The article outlined some directions regarding how current warfare is changing



and how Romania should prepare for future security challenges. Unfortunately, the acquisitions, actions, and narratives of Romanian political decision-makers have not reflected an awareness in this direction, while international developments prove us right, confirming the urgency of those directions and the need for proactive engagement.

On the societal dimension, also drawing from historical ‘lessons learned’ and analyzing current trends, long before the recent internal events that have shaken Romanian society, we tried to draw attention on irresponsible developments and narratives that will divide and weaken our society if not adequately addressed. Which eventually has happened, unfortunately. Regarding these dangerous developments, more than three years ago we published an analysis in the Romanian language titled “The ‘Afghanistan’ of our society today – between ideology and the crises yet to come”. Additionally, over two years ago, we contributed an article to the *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review*, published by the “Mihai Viteazul” National Intelligence Academy, titled “What Is Communication And What It Should Be? Problems With Modern Public Communication”. In this work, we highlighted the societal processes that risked causing severe societal fractures in Romania and throughout the Western societies, thereby increasing vulnerability and amplifying security threats and risks.

These processes have accelerated in recent years and have only recently become fully visible to the broader public. We tried to draw attention to them long before their consequences became apparent. Even last year, right before the internal political turmoil in Romania which inflicted severe damages to our society, we published another article in Romanian, informal in tone but nevertheless explicit and direct titled “The crisis of our society. Caught between the grotesque parody of the Last Supper and Șoșoacă. Caught between the progressive far left and the Russian Federation”. In this article, we tried to draw attention to the same societal fractures previously identified, fractures that we needed to heal if we wanted to be able to withstand any adversary informational campaign directed against us from the Russian Federation or from anywhere else. The main idea of our article was that *we needed to fight ideological radicalization either from the right, or from the left, because ideological radicalization has a severe negative impact on national security anywhere in the world.*

Unfortunately, although these warnings have since proven accurate, no responsible measures have been implemented to heal the widening fractures in Romanian society or, at the very least, to prevent their further deepening. This has led to seemingly even more internal developments that harm us all and cause further division within our society.



Conclusions

Access to *lessons learned*, to history and its proper analysis are a guarantee that we will be able to maintain our own vision for both the present and the future. If we give up on history, we also give up on the privilege of having our own vision for our future and for how we will carry it out and defend it. And then, we will be the victims of others' visions. Unfortunately, our region has never lacked expansionist and imperialist visions. Historically, Romania has existed at the intersection of three empires: the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian, and the Ottoman. We are still caught today between similar expansionist visions. We return again to our choice – will we abandon history, or will we learn something from it to safeguard our society now and in the years to come? Regardless of anyone's ideological or political choices, we must still remember that the job description of all Government employees in Romania, beginning with elected representatives, states that they must act in the interest of the Romanian society, not in the interest of any other type of group, ideology or utopian society.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine does not depend on Romania; it does not depend on us. *However, the way we prepare for future security challenges does depend on us.* Again, recalling history, we would have said the same thing in the years preceding Second World War, and it would have been extremely important for Romania's leaders at the time to do exactly the same things we are encouraging today. Had Romania been adequately prepared (societally, militarily, technologically, economically, politically, etc.) for the challenges that were soon to follow, the consequences might have been far less devastating for our nation. Instead, back then, our leaders sank into endless internal crises, with pitifully small personal or political stakes compared to the challenges that followed, which caught us unprepared and caused so much harm to us as a nation and society. It is true, no one knew for sure back then that another world war would follow. But it would not have hurt to prepare adequately when it was clear that the security situation was degrading.

The same principle applies today: we do not know what the future holds, but we must prepare adequately for any crisis that might come. A stronger society, more united in the national interest, a stronger, fair, economy, a stronger military, adequately equipped and trained for the realities of the 21st-century, taking into account the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine, nonetheless, a strategy, a vision for the peaceful development of Romania and its role within the regional, European, and global context, would definitely help regardless of the challenges the future may bring.



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