

288
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WAR IN UKRAINE: peace-talking versus peace-making

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There has been no dearth of peacemaking proposals since the very beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war. All, however, reflect a profound misunderstanding of what the conflict is about.

The war is not about Russia's alleged (in)security or "disputed" territories. It is primarily about Russia's coveted great power status and antiquated imperial identity, of which Ukraine, as a direct successor to Kyivan Rus, is a key part.

The only way to a stable peace in Ukraine and Europe is to help Ukraine win. This might be costly and risky, but all other solutions are strategically far worse.

As the Russo-Ukrainian war, initially predicted to last only a few days, drags into its second year, various calls for peace and negotiation proposals are coming from different corners – among the latest being the 12-point peace plan endorsed by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the symbolic date of February 24th, the first anniversary of Russia's all-out invasion. Some of these calls might, as most Ukrainians believe, be mere smokescreens – tricks to discourage them from fighting and to give Moscow a much-needed break to regroup its forces, replenish resources and resume its military advance. But in most cases peacemakers are

probably driven by a sincere desire to stop human suffering, bloodshed and the cruel destruction of an entire country. No piece of land, they believe, is worth human lives and terrible sacrifices. A bad peace is definitely better than a good war, and a "win-win" situation is always preferable to a zero-sum game.

Yet, abhorrence of violence and empathy for the victims are not the only reasons for the calls for peace. The war has had repercussions for the global economy, causing price rises, disruption to established supply chains and general instability and volatility in international markets. Hence, a latent "Ukraine fatigue" has taken hold, along with a widespread desire to end the conflict, remove the irritant and return to business as usual. **Russia's thinly veiled but perfectly calculated nuclear threats** that hint at the prospects of a global nuclear war, which almost nobody desires, provide another even more serious argument for the urgency of a peace deal.

While the moral indignation about the war and its horrific consequences is commendable, and the worries about nuclear Armageddon justifiable, the feasible alternatives to these gloomy developments remain unclear. In other words, how can the coveted "diplomatic solution" be viably outlined and realistically implemented? What plan, roadmap and tentative compromises could be acceptable to both sides?

Missing details and incompatible goals

Remarkably, all the calls for peace and negotiation proposals not only lack specificity, they are typically raised by people with very limited (if any) knowledge of Russia, let alone of Ukraine. And vice versa – no

reputable specialists on Ukraine, Russia or eastern Europe make such calls for a simple reason. They know that not all human beings (and particularly politicians in today's Kremlin) are rational and therefore capable of negotiation, compromise and, crucially, sticking to agreements. Some politicians may have *idées fixes* about, for example, a global Jewish–Masonic conspiracy or existential threats to the German nation. In this case, it is the idea of Ukraine as a menacing “anti-Russia” and Ukrainians as “Nazis” inasmuch as they are Ukrainians. One challenge, then, is how to hold the coveted “dialogue” with people living in parallel worlds in which so many categories are distorted, and for whom chutzpah is the major principle of their international politics?

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agreements – to defend its legitimate, internationally recognised borders and protect its sovereignty, freedom, dignity and the identity of its citizens, Russia's goal is the opposite – to scrap international law, to occupy Ukrainian territory, eradicate Ukrainian identity, exterminate the Ukrainian elite as the mythical “Nazis”, and make the remaining free citizens of the democratic nation into voiceless subjects of a despot. How can these two goals be reconciled? What is the middle ground on which liberal Kyiv and totalitarian Moscow can compromise?

Classical peacemaking templates are not applicable here. The war is not about territory. Russia was not satisfied by taking the Crimea and part of Donbas in 2014 and nor will it be by other territorial gains. It also is not about security and the proverbial “NATO threat” – since 2012 Ukraine has officially been a neutral (“non-allied”) country, exactly like Finland, the Baltic states and Afghanistan were at the time the Soviets invaded them. The war is certainly not about the mythical “Nazis” led by an (initially) pacifist and cosmopolitan, Russian-speaking Jew who replaced his allegedly “ultra-nationalist” predecessor in free and fair elections. And it is definitely not about “oppressed” Russophones – the primary victims of Putin's shelling today in south-eastern regions. Ukraine is as much their country as it Ukrainophones', perhaps even more so, because the entire post-Soviet elite was primarily Russian-speaking, including five out of six Ukrainian

presidents. They express the same level of civic patriotism and commitment as Ukrainian-speakers. In fact, there is really no clear dividing line between these two groups, which exist more on paper – in sociological surveys – than in the fluidly bilingual reality.

The war is first and foremost about status and identity. In Ukraine, Russia is fighting against the collective West, of which Ukraine is believed to be just a proxy. It is fighting for equal status with the US – status Russia arguably deserves in duly assigned spheres of influence, but is unjustly denied. Russia is fighting for the new world order where might makes right and brutal force and nuclear blackmail reign supreme.

This is also a war about identity – a perverse, paranoid, megalomaniac idea of “Russianness”, endowed with a special mission and primordially opposed to the West, built up since the 18th century and embedded in the culture, mentality and imperial politics. Putin has not invented anything new, he has merely taken that old ideology to the extreme, wrapped it in jingoistic rhetoric and translated it into genocidal practices.

Drawing on invented traditions

Ukraine happened to be at the centre of that *idée fixe*, of Putin's obsession, insofar as the entire Russian imperial identity hinges heavily on a toxic historical myth that places Kyiv and an imaginary Kyivan Rus at the core symbolic centre of invented Russianness, and establishes non-existent political continuity between two very different entities, five centuries and thousand kilometres apart from each other. One of them is the medieval Kyivan Rus that ceased to exist in 1240 after the fateful nomadic (Mongol-Tatar) invasion, and the other is the 17th-century Moscow Tsardom that evolved in the north-eastern outskirts of the former Rus under a vassalage to the Golden Horde, a part of the Mongol Empire. It completely ignores the fact that the core lands of Rus (today's Belarus and Ukraine) were incorporated in the 13th and 14th centuries into Poland and Lithuania, and have evolved since then in a fundamentally different (European) cultural and political milieu. By the first decades of the 18th century, when Peter the Great transformed oriental Moscow Tsardom into a more Westernised Russian Empire with the new capital in St Petersburg, the core lands of the historical Rus were still a part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (until the Polish partitions in 1772–1795), and differed from Muscovite lands in all possible terms (especially political culture) nearly as much as today's Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine differ from Putin's Russia.

Ironically, it was Ukrainian intellectuals hired by Peter the Great for his Westernisation project who invented a noble historical pedigree for the new-born empire officially created in 1721. At the turn of the 17th century, they developed a bipartite model of Rus as an imaginary common space of Orthodox Slavs – “Great Rus-sians” in Muscovy and “Little Rus-sians” in Polish–Lithuanian lands. The model was imbued with historical symbolism as it replicated the bipartite arrangement of ancient Greece, with Graecia Minor as the core lands on the Peloponnese and Magna Graecia as a wider space of Mediterranean colonisation. Ukrainians considered the empire-building to be a common project, a “joint venture” in which they owned shares. Despite being smaller in size, they believed that, as the cradle of Rus, they had richer symbolic value. But this idealistic view was a miscalculation, and they were ultimately squeezed out by the major shareholders who did not wait for long to take the symbolic shares from the smaller shareholders in raids.

But Ukrainians, in fact, themselves opened the way for such a development when coining the new name “Rus-sia” (a quasi-Latinised form of Rus) for Peter’s empire and developing all the quasi-historical narratives that legitimised the appropriation of the name of “Rus” by the remote Moscow Tsardom. It was Ukrainians working at Peter’s service who established an imaginary continuity between the present-day Moscow and ancient Kyiv just to enhance their own symbolic weight and legitimate claims to shares in the imperial project. There were, of course, some dynastic, ecclesiastical and other connections between 17th-century Muscovy and medieval Kyivan Rus, which ceased to exist five centuries earlier, but the semantic equation of these two very different and historically very distant polities was nearly as nonsensical as equating modern Romania with ancient Rome.¹

That equation, however, not only allowed Muscovites to appropriate four centuries of Kyivan Rus history and to promote a stereotypical image of (allegedly) “thousand-year-old” Russia in the common imagination, this tricky semantic manipulation also facilitated Muscovites’ claims to the core lands of historical Rus (today’s Belarus and Ukraine), which never actually belonged to Muscovy or the Golden Horde, as upon the collapse of Rus they were

incorporated into Poland and Lithuania. By the end of the 18th century these lands had been conquered and “legitimately” angeschlossen into the Russian Empire as its alleged historical core, though its real core was in fact in Vladimir-Suzdal and later Moscow, far from Belarus and Ukraine (called Ruthenia at the time, a single post-Rus entity).

A toxic spell of “imperial knowledge”

The imperial fantasies were not only backed by the imperial army, police and bureaucracy but also promoted discursively by imperial cultural and educational institutions. By the end of the 18th century, they had acquired international currency as both “scientific truth” and conventional wisdom, with a significant contribution from the French intellectuals on Catherine the Great’s payroll. No room was left in those

The Russian war in Ukraine is first and foremost about the status and identity. Russian imperial identity hinges heavily on a historical myth that places Kyiv and imaginary Kyivan Rus into its core.

narratives for a distinct Ukrainian history, culture and identity, which had been downgraded to mere Russian regionalism. “Imperial knowledge”, as a system of narratives aimed at legitimising and glorifying the empire, its supposedly great “universal” culture and “unique” historical role, as well as depreciating, marginalising and even appropriating the cultures of subordinate nations, made Ukraine and Ukrainians invisible and virtually non-existent for centuries. Empire monopolised a God-given (or history-given, under the Soviets) right to speak on their behalf and mediate between them and the external world, excluding subaltern – Ukrainian or pro-Ukrainian – voices from the public debate as allegedly “deviant” and “nationalistic”.

The West’s own imperial legacy and deeply ingrained tradition of cultural and political supremacism made it highly receptive to Russian imperial messages and ways of argumentation. Generations of Western scholars, politicians and journalists uncritically absorbed Russian “imperial knowledge” in Western universities, very often via textbooks produced by Russian émigré historians and their followers. There is good reason to consider this imperial knowledge to be a root cause of many eventual cognitive problems, including a centuries-long international misperception of Russia, ignorance of Ukraine, and disastrous Western policies towards both countries and eastern Europe as a whole.

1. The issue is discussed in detail by Edward Keenan (1994: 19–40). See also Serhii Plokhy (2006).

Nobody dared to call the Soviet Union an empire or Ukraine a colony, much less analyse their relations in these categories. In many cases, the established stereotypes still hinder the understanding of the war as a neo-imperial conquest on the Russian side and a national liberation struggle on Ukraine's – as a war not of shades of grey but black and white. It is difficult, in fact it is virtually impossible, to compromise on the issues of freedom, justice and dignity. This is why Ukrainians resist so fiercely and why all the recurrent calls for peace, armistices and “negotiated solutions” are futile unless Russian troops are stopped and expelled – as has been the case with all colonial armies throughout history.

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retains very strong positions in the Global South. Ukrainians have good reason to be wary of it since its protracted ascendancy in Western minds has largely determined Ukraine's benign neglect for centuries – whether in 1918 when **Woodrow Wilson's principle** of national self-determination was not applied (exceptionally) to Ukraine, or in 1933 when the genocidal famine in Ukraine orchestrated by Stalin was virtually silenced in Europe as a non-event, or in the 1990s when the new-born and war-torn Balkan states were offered membership prospects while a relatively stable and democratic Ukraine was firmly denied anything of the kind and even carefully not named “European” in any official EU documents.

Uncontested imperial knowledge still facilitates the penetration of Russian propaganda messages in Western societies, making them highly susceptible to Russia-suitable (and beneficial) naming and framing of many events and developments. For eight years, since 2014, the international media wrote euphemistically about the “Ukraine crisis”, thereby obscuring the essence of conflict, diverting attention from Russia as its main instigator and beneficiary and implicitly paving the way for Russian narratives about Ukraine's “civil war”. Here and there, the discussion of two fundamental issues – Russia's violation of international law and genocidal war in Ukraine – is persistently derailed and subverted by marginal or completely irrelevant bickering over the “NATO expansion” that allegedly “provoked” Putin, over Ukraine's revolution, which was allegedly a coup

d'état, over the Azov Battalion, which allegedly was and still is “far-right”,² and over Khrushchev's alleged “gift” of “Russian” Crimea to Ukraine (as if there were no indigenous people there with five centuries of statehood).³ Most curious of all are the rants against the alleged wrongdoings of the collective West in Iraq, Libya, Kosovo and elsewhere, as if Ukraine is responsible for any of that, and as if any of that could somehow justify an all-out military invasion of a sovereign state, the brutal destruction of its cities and villages, and mass killings of its population.

All these issues can definitely be discussed but only *after* and not *instead* of the primary unequivocal statement: (a) Russia's war in Ukraine is absolutely illegitimate under international law and should be stopped by all possible means, without any concessions to the rogue regime; and (b) all the war crimes and crimes against humanity should be properly investigated and criminals brought to court, and all the due reparations should be paid by the aggressor state as a *sine qua non* precondition of that state's readmission to the international community.

Ukraine's existential fight

The failure to grasp the colonial essence of Russia's war in Ukraine is one but probably not the only reason for the (at best) naive “peace” proposals. The second reason is a failure to recognise the war's genocidal nature – manifestly apparent not only from the vast number of atrocities committed, but also in the quite openly declared intent: to wipe Ukraine from the earth as both state and nation. Suffice to read Putin's quasi-historical **treatises** or listen to the venomous statements of his **ideologists**, who vehemently deny Ukraine's existence (and right to exist), in order to understand both the underlying motives of the Russian aggression and its ultimate goal. In Putin's conception of history, Ukrainians are Russians who simply forgot who they were, and who should therefore be forcibly brought back into the Russian fold, whether they like it or not. Pliant subjects should be embraced and rewarded, the defiant should be “re-educated” and any that still resist should be exterminated as incurable “nationalists”, a.k.a. “Nazis”. In this perverted imagination, Ukraine is proclaimed “anti-Russia” – an existential threat both

2. For a comprehensive analysis of the issues see Anton Shekhovtsov (2020 and 2022).
3. Timothy Snyder argues in the video “**The Making of Modern Ukraine**” (Class 17, November 9, 2022) that the recurrent narrative on the alleged “gift” not only obscures the very pragmatic reasons for that transfer but also obliterates the entire history of the peninsula, which had never been “Russian” until the end of the 18th century and, worse, trivialises the tragedy of Crimean Tatars, who were subjected to the genocidal policies of both the Russian and Soviet Empires.

to Russian identity and the Russian state, and therefore doomed to annihilation.

Neither Putinists' words nor deeds leave any doubts about their intentions vis-à-vis Ukraine. Ukrainians are perfectly aware of this, hence nobody takes "negotiated solutions" seriously. The latest opinion survey (December 2022) carried out by the reputable Kyiv International Institute of Sociology indicates that only 8% of respondents support the idea of negotiations with Russia and some kinds of concessions for the sake of peace, while 85% vehemently oppose this. And the data from the south and east of Ukraine – the regions that suffer most from Russian attacks – do not differ much from the data from the relatively secure centre and west (80–82% favour fighting in one case and 87–88% in the other). And the number of "Russian-speakers" who support uncompromising resistance (76% vs 14%) does not differ much from the percentage among like-minded "Ukrainian-speakers" (89% vs 7%).

Ukrainians rally around the flag and demonstrate an unprecedented level of civic unity, support for the government and trust in state institutions, especially the national armed forces. One year into the war, as the "Rating" Sociological Group found out, 95% of Ukrainians strongly believe in a Ukrainian victory over Russia – a dramatic increase from January 2022, when the war loomed large but remained merely hypothetical. Back then, only 56% of respondents believed that Ukraine could win. No less indicative are Ukrainians' responses to the question of a possible reconciliation with Russia. Only 4% believe this might happen within a few years of the war ending. 33% believe it would take ten or more years; 58% say that it will never happen.

It seems that Ukrainians have much better understanding of today's Russia, of the Kremlin regime, and of Putin's obsession with the "Ukrainian question" than their numerous international tutors and goodwill advisers. But all calls for peace make little sense until a simple question is answered: is Mr Putin able and willing to renege on his "Ukraine denial" which is effectively a root cause of his both genocidal rhetoric and war? Until he is (which seems highly unlikely), all "diplomatic solutions" are wishful thinking that indicates either the speakers' belief in miracles or the pursuit of a gentle way to abandon Ukraine and wash their hands of it. Because this is exactly what the pacifist "Do not arm Ukraine!" calls mean. Denying this support would neither stop Putin's advance nor discourage him from the "final solution of the Ukrainian question". What Western peacemakers would likely achieve in Ukraine by withdrawing aid is not the coveted peace but more Russian terror across the country and more mass graves like those in Bucha, Iziium, Mariupol and elsewhere.

The only way to make peace in Ukraine is to help Ukraine win. This may be a challenge, as the sceptics point out. "Ukraine fatigue" is a real threat but it is up to the Western elite, particularly political leaders, to communicate to their people what the war is about, what is really at stake in historical and international terms, and how minor the inconveniences are that Europeans are experiencing compared to the ordeals Ukrainians are enduring for the sake of what they believe are common values, common security and a common future.

Nuclear blackmail is a more complicated issue since nobody can provide a 100% guarantee that the besieged Russian forces in the Crimea would not deploy so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons as a last resort. Once again, this is a matter of communication: in this case how clearly and persuasively Western leaders explain to Putin the direst consequences of his recklessness. They should not repeat **President Biden's pre-war mistake**

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of ruling out direct military support for Ukraine. Ukrainians did not expect such support then, and nor do they expect it now. But this does not mean that the Russian hawks should not expect it either.

Putin might be psychopathic but he is not suicidal. Besieged Crimea is not the same as besieged Moscow. In any case, if politicians succumb to the blackmailer today, they would create a dangerous precedent for the future. They would send a signal to all rogue states that aggression pays off, war crimes may go unpunished, and that nuclear sabre-rattling can be profitable. By succumbing to the blackmailer they would not solve the problem but postpone it and multiply it.

The sad truth any prospective peacemaker should recognise is that Russia is ruled by a rogue regime that can neither be talked to nor trusted. That means no reasonable negotiations are possible until the regime changes. This may not happen soon, since Ukrainians continue to lack much of the weaponry they need to prevail. At some point, a stalemate may be reached, a war of attrition that exhausts both sides and brings an armistice by default. But this scenario will not deliver security to Ukraine and stability to Europe. Ukraine could flourish like South Korea in peaceful conditions but Putin is no Kim Jong-un and Russia is not North Korea – either in global ambitions or available military resources.

The future is full of contingencies that are difficult to predict. But what is already clear and should be taken into account by any peacemaker is that Ukrainians have their own political agency and would be unlikely

to accept any deal made over their heads. They are going through what **Timothy Ash** aptly calls their “State of Israel moment” and feel, like Israelis seven decades ago, that they simply have “nowhere else to go”. They are determined to defend their country, their freedom and dignity as long as it takes, and it would be neither morally fair nor politically wise to discourage them from resisting. As **António Guterres** recently reiterated, we should support the peace but “not any kind of peace – peace based on the values of the UN Charter, and peace based on international law”.

Conclusion

No matter how strong and commendable is the common desire to terminate the war in Ukraine and end the enormous destruction and human sufferings it inflicts, the calls for peace and “negotiated solutions” may bring more harm than help since they create an illusion that the end of the war depends on both sides of the conflict rather than on Russia’s decision to stop the aggression, withdraw the troops from the occupied territories and recognise Ukraine’s right to exist as a sovereign nation within internationally recognised borders. There are no signs that the incumbent regime in Kremlin is willing and able to accept anything of the kind, nor is there any chance that Ukrainian people and their democratically mandated government would ever compromise on the issue of national sovereignty-turned-national existence. The only feasible policy in the circumstances is to help Ukraine win, which means liberating all its territories and enhancing its defensive capabilities for the future in the hope that military defeat, international pressure and eventual regime change in Russia force its new leaders to reconsider their attitude toward Ukraine and, more generally, Russia’s international behaviour as a whole.

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