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What Do We Mean When We Speak of Peace in Ukraine?

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"The strong do what they can," reflected Thucydides in his work on the war between Sparta and Athens, "while the weak suffer what they must." As Russian leader Vladimir Putin's large-scale aggression against Ukraine continues unabated, the Greek historian's classic maxim comes to mind.

The consequences have been immense – for Ukrainian sovereignty and stability, for the integrity of international law, and for the millions of people caught in the whirlwind of war. That voices calling for a negotiated ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine have grown stronger comes as no surprise. Donald Trump has declared his willingness to negotiate a peace deal directly with Russia, without Ukraine's involvement. European leaders, on the other hand, emphasise Ukraine's place at the negotiating table as a prerequisite for a just peace.

What this means in practice, however, is not immediately obvious, and well-sounding words like peace and negotiations can easily be misleading. Experience shows that the end of a war does not necessarily equate to the end of conflict. A single war may cease without its underlying objectives and causes disappearing. Nor does a ceasefire necessarily mean an end to abuses, acts of violence, or persecution – post-war situations can, on the contrary, be marked by continued and prolonged instability, where interstate conflicts evolve into internal political struggles or spread from one place to another.

To understand the choices that have led Europe to its current point, but also to better understand the Kremlin's intentions, the historical context is central. The Russo-Ukrainian war began in February 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea. This was followed by the invasion of eastern Ukraine, initially consisting of paramilitaries, political extremists, and locally recruited personnel. It was not until August – after a successful Ukrainian counteroffensive had threatened Russian positions – that the fighting involved regular Russian troops as well.

Common assumptions in the West were that the war was due to a possible misunderstanding, or alternatively, internal Ukrainian issues, and that Russia's objectives were limited. Negotiations were based on the premise that the conflict could be isolated and managed separately from the broader context of Russian foreign policy. In line with this, the EU advocated a "two-track policy," where sanctions against Russia would be combined with diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges. The OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, was unable to name the aggressor and spoke euphemistically about the "conflict in and around Ukraine," as if it were a matter of weather conditions rather than interstate conflict.

As my colleagues Julia Kazdobina, Jakob Hedenskog, and Andreas Umland recently pointed out in a report Why Russia's initial assault on Ukraine was misinterpreted politicians and the public in the West allowed themselves to be misled by wishful thinking and Russian rhetoric. Russia's calibrated and measured behaviour was not so much an expression of moderation as a way to achieve the country's goals without triggering genuinely effective countermeasures. Thus, the international community could be lulled into the belief that the conflict had a "pragmatic" and "peaceful" solution, while Russia consolidated its control over occupied areas and prepared for future escalation.

The West's inability to uphold the international security order, in line with its economic and political capabilities, became destabilising in this context. Putin's revisionist ambitions became a more widely accepted realisation only with the large-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Talking points from Western capitals about supporting Ukraine "for as long as it takes," or that "Russia must not prevail," have in practice masked a lack of strategy, a circumstance that Trump, with all his well-documented unpredictability and capriciousness, has now brought to light.

The outward behaviour of Russia has been characterised by confidence and assurance. Evidence that Putin has seriously considered negotiations with Ukraine is conspicuously absent. The demands have remained unchanged and maximalist: that the Ukrainian government surrender four regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson – despite the fact that these regions are not fully controlled by Russian military forces; that Ukraine be "denazified" and "demilitarised," and thus integrated into the Russian sphere of influence; that all occupied territories be recognised as Russian in international agreements; and that Western countries lift their sanctions against Russia.

The negotiation dilemma can be expressed relatively simply. From a Ukrainian standpoint, talks must be conducted with consideration for certain fundamental security needs. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has expressed a willingness to make concessions, both territorial and political, but not to surrender. Putin, on his side, must be able to frame any agreement as a Russian victory, however that may ultimately be defined. A negotiated solution is only possible where both parties can find common ground – without it, one or both sides have an incentive to keep fighting.

Lately, it has become fashionable, often with reference to Russian military advances in eastern Ukraine, to speculate about an impending Ukrainian defeat. However, war is fought on multiple dimensions, with territory being just one of them. Through the use of drones and longer-range weapons, Ukraine has dramatically increased the costs for Russia. Attacks on Russian military infrastructure and oil depots have now become a daily occurrence.

Of Russia's total losses of 790,000 dead and wounded soldiers, over 54 percent were lost in the past year. At the current pace, Russia will need another two to four years of war to occupy the remaining regions it currently claims, with additional comparable losses in manpower.

The Ukrainian defence is not without its problems. However, the overall picture is dynamic and more nuanced than what individual news reports suggest. In discussions about Russian-Ukrainian talks – whether referred to as peace talks or something else – both defeatism as well as magical thinking must be avoided. The key factors in any context are the substance of the talks, who participates in them, and what happens next. There are no simple answers, and each individual point requires careful consideration.

Several major obstacles can be mentioned. First: the humanitarian situation in Russian-controlled areas. Since 2014, persecutions and imprisonments have been used there to silence opposition members and independent journalists. Russian authorities have deported thousands of Ukrainian children and placed them in orphanages pending adoption. Schools, libraries, and other public spaces have undergone a systematic "de-Ukrainisation" aimed at eradicating all traces of the Ukrainian language and culture in the region. A negotiated solution on Russian terms will only serve to permanently cement these conditions.

The Ukrainian side is seeking guarantees against renewed Russian aggression, preferably in the form of military deterrence. This could be achieved in various formats, such as NATO membership, bilateral security agreements, or robust military and financial support similar to the relationship between the USA and Israel. Ukraine's economic recovery depends on stability, which the Russian side undermines by opposing foreign troop presence on Ukrainian territory – while at the same time, the Kremlin has allowed the recruitment of thousands of North Korean soldiers for the defence of Kursk.

The safe assumption is that there is no clear plan for Ukraine. The West's actions have thus far been reactive, partly suppressed by Russian nuclear threats. In the absence of a strategy for Ukrainian victory, decisions have been shaped by events on the ground, effectively handing the initiative to the Kremlin. As a result, the potential to influence Putin's calculations about the future has not been optimally utilised, despite the West's otherwise superior financial and military strength.

The problem with territorial concessions is not their difficulty to implement – on moral, legal, or political grounds – but that they do not necessarily result in a lasting peace, let alone a just one. For Ukraine, the war is about security from Russia, and true peace is only possible based on such an outcome. Russia's goal is to prevent a Ukraine that is both independent and secure simultaneously – and to force the country to choose between the two options. Ultimately, the annexations of territory aim at this, a permanent source of instability that can be exploited to destabilise Ukrainian attempts to assert its sovereignty.

The conditions for achieving a negotiated solution to the Russian-Ukrainian war are not non-existent. However, the limitations are significant. Peace, as Thucydides noted, has historically been nothing more than a ceasefire in an ongoing power struggle. In such a situation, negotiations become a theatre, laying the groundwork for continued antagonism. The stakes for Europe are considerable. If Ukraine becomes the first victim of an order where might makes right, it will not be the last.

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