

Peace after War

5 peace plans to end the Russo-Ukrainian War



Background: war-mongering and peace-seeking in Europe

On 24 February, not only a local armed conflict broke out between Russia and Ukraine, but also a new era began in the European history. The birth of the European Union and – its history so far – was closely related to the values of peace and stability, since the establishment of the economic cooperation was a guarantee for these values. In 2012, the EU – and its predecessor organizations – was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its contribution to the promotion of peace over six decades, transforming Europe from a "continent of war to a continent of peace". Today, however, the European Union has become from being the main guardian of peace to one of the biggest financiers of war. It was a watershed moment when Member States, with the exception of Austria and Hungary, began to supply weapons to Ukraine from their own arsenals, and the European Union began to purchase arms to support an attacked country for the first time in its history.¹

The pro-war voices have intensified in the last nine months. A group of Brussels politicians who are the biggest proponents of economic warfare against Russia are a vocal part of this. One of the main spokesmen for this group is the Liberal MEP Guy Verhofstadt, who supports any means that threatens Europe's security: "Weapons, training, sanctions, energy..."² The Belgian MEP who has called for economic warfare says it is not too high a price to pay "if we suffer because of the ban on Russian oil and gas... we will survive."³

Typically, even organisations nominally set up to promote human rights also argue that assisting in war is the real moral duty. A lobbyist for the Soros Foundation, for example, says that seeking compromise and a quick peace deal would be a mistake, and that the war should continue until the enemy is defeated. The greatest danger is not to continue the war, but to compromise, he says, adding that "unfortunately, the quickest way to peace and the protection of civilians do not always go hand in hand."⁴ According to the pro-war narrative, pacifism is not only impractical, but its promoters – reminiscent of the worst times – are labelled as extremists and populists. Promoters of peace are accused of being pro-Russian, defeatist and nationalist, and voices opposing the war are portrayed as "toxic pacifism"⁵.

Although a vocal part of the Western world calls for further financing the war and demonises pro-peace voices, the more sober half of the world is struggling to stop the conflict as soon as possible and to stabilise security. The US mid-term election period has seen a marked change. For example, a letter from Democrats calling for peace has been leaked⁶, Joe Biden and

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's dispute has been reported in the US public⁷ and last week the US President even raised the possibility of talks with Putin.⁸ This turn of events shows that peace talks would not automatically mean accepting the status quo. Thankfully, we have not only hope, but also useful examples of peaceful settlements that can serve as a lesson for us. Historian Christopher Clark, drawing a parallel between the Colombian civil war and the Russo-Ukrainian war, refuted⁹ the war propaganda: negotiations are always timely, and should not only be started when hostilities end, but should run in parallel. Moreover, it is necessary to negotiate with each other even when the parties do not trust each other, and this is always the case with warring parties. Of course, peace negotiations are not a solution in themselves, but they do allow us to deal with the real and most difficult questions, while minimising casualties.

The warring parties are known to everyone, but it is not clear who could really negotiate for peace. Zelenskyy has previously stipulated in a decree that Ukraine cannot negotiate for peace as long as Vladimir Putin is the Russian president. In the same time, the United States and Russia are the ones who have real negotiating power. Despite the fact that they are not officially warring parties, they are the biggest financiers of the war. There is also the question of who could be the possible mediators in the negotiations. Many have already offered their services, including Pope Francis, Turkish President Erdogan, Israel, India and also Hungary.

Perhaps the biggest question is what compromises the parties would accept in any negotiations. Would they be willing to give up any part of Ukraine's territory, and is there any way back after Russia has annexed territories and validated them by referendums? Is there still a chance for Ukraine to join NATO, which was one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the war, but which could also be a guarantee that the aggression will not be repeated? Can the violation of the linguistic rights of national minorities in Ukraine be remedied at the same time? There is also the question of whose duty is to restore the destruction caused by the war, whether Russia can be obliged to pay compensation, and whether there will be any accountability for war crimes.

It is important that not only pro-war voices are expressed, but also the ideas that aim to end the war. The Nézőpont Institute presents five peace plans with concrete conditions that offer different answers to the above discussed difficult questions of peacemaking.

1. The precursor to peace-building: the Minsk agreements

The conflict in Ukraine did not start in 2022, and it was not always hopeless to settle it through negotiations. In 2014 and 2015, two Minsk agreements were reached to end the war in the Donbas region of Ukraine. The situation then was similar in some respects to the present one, for example because there was no agreement then on who the parties were. Ukraine saw Russia, which supported the separatists, as a negotiating partner, while Russia denied its involvement. Mercenaries were fighting then too on the Donbass front, and the issue of national autonomy was still central.

The conflict was initially resolved through the mediation of Germany and France, without the active intervention of the United States. The first Minsk agreement, adopted on 5 September 2014, focused on reversing the escalation and included the implementation of an immediate ceasefire as a central element. It was an extraordinary diplomatic achievement that the agreement was signed by the leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic.

Although the first agreement did not provide a definitive guarantee of peace, the second, more detailed Minsk Agreement¹⁰ adopted on 12 February 2015 proved more effective, again announcing an immediate ceasefire in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. It required the withdrawal of heavy weapons on both sides on equal distances, thus creating a 50-140 kilometres wide security zone depending on the calibre of the guns involved. Amnesty was granted by the adoption of laws prohibiting the prosecution and punishment of persons related to events in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. They also ensured the release and exchange of all hostages and unlawfully detained persons, to be completed on the 5th day after the withdrawal. release and exchange of all hostages and persons illegally detained, to be completed on the 5th day after the withdrawal. As part of the disarmament, it was agreed to withdraw all foreign armed formations, military equipment and mercenaries from the territory of Ukraine under OSCE observation. An attempt was made to legislate on the special status of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and some degree of self-government was also granted.

Although the fighting did not end completely, after the agreement was signed, the heavy clashes subsided. A Minsk 3 agreement should make the Russian and Ukrainian promises accountable, but the European Union, which has acted as a mediator in previous agreements, questions how much power and authority it has left to play a peace-guaranteeing role.

2. Ukrainian peace: a "just peace" with conditions

The official Ukrainian peace plans understandably present themselves in a war narrative, but in recent times there has been a somewhat greater willingness than before to communication towards negotiations. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's oft-repeated peace conditions had previously ruled out the possibility of a deal with Russia: he issued a decree that Ukraine would not negotiate with Russia while Vladimir Putin was president, thereby blocking any contact. But in his speech in early November¹¹, he already talked about the terms of the negotiations which included the restoration of territorial integrity, respect for the UN Convention, reparation for the devastation of war, the punishment of war criminals and guarantees that aggression would not be repeated. However, the terms of the talks no longer included Putin's name, which some sources say was the result of US pressure on Ukraine to show a willingness to end the war peacefully.¹² According to other reports, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Kherson was not only a military necessity, but also a rapprochement by Russia in the hope of a temporary ceasefire.¹³

This development does not mean that the two countries will conclude a peace treaty that will settle the conflict as a whole, but it does open up the possibility in principle of a ceasefire for the duration of any negotiations. But Zelenskyy's conditions raise problematic issues. The territorial integrity agreement is undermined by the fact that Russia has annexed 5 provinces since 2014, and it is doubtful that they are ready to take this as a basis for negotiations. As regards respect for the UN Convention, it is interesting that Russia is able to veto decisions taken against it in the Security Council. As a result, the UN was unable to adopt a resolution condemning the attack on Ukraine in February, or condemning the referendums in four Ukrainian provinces in the autumn, while calling on all countries not to recognise Russia's territorial acquisitions. It is also doubtful that Russia would recognise any war crimes or that Ukraine would accept a general amnesty. On guarantees, there is also the question of whether Russia would accept Ukraine's accession to NATO in exchange for other favourable conditions. In any case, a "just peace", which the Hungarian head of state is also calling for, can only be achieved with significant concessions on both sides. In addition, all this is preceded by the question of how to bring the opposing sides from the battlefield to the negotiating table, saying that "a hundred hours of failed negotiations is better than a shotgun blast".¹⁴

3. Peace with a constitutional solution: the "Swiss cantonal model"

Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder met Vladimir Putin in person in Moscow in August to discuss peace options. The former prime minister was heavily criticised for his good relations with the Russian president by the German pro-war public, despite his condemnation of the attack on Ukraine on the first day of fighting.¹⁵ In fact, a group of German Social Democrats wanted to expel the ex-chancellor from their own party¹⁶ and he resigned as head of the Russian oil company Rosneft in response to pressure. During this time, he has tried to use his relationship with the Russian president to mediate, as there are few channels of communication left between Russia and the West in the current conflict.

The basic idea of the peace plan he put forward was that a compromise on the Donbas region was needed instead of a peace dictate. On the one hand, this could be based on the "Swiss cantonal model"¹⁷, which would presumably mean constitutional change and semi-autonomy for the disputed region. Although he did not spell out the exact essence of the plan, the Swiss model is based on the spatial and ethnic principles of the so-called consensus democracy, which could be used to steer the conflicting relations between different ethnic groups towards peaceful coexistence. For example, the members of the government would be delegates from political parties, from which a president with representative functions would be elected on a rotating basis for a one-year term. The semi-autonomous provinces (cantons) could exercise partial sovereignty in areas outside the federal competences laid down in the constitution, such as the organisation of education or the cultivation of culture. Following the example of the Swiss legislature, the unicameral parliament could be replaced by a bicameral parliament, to one of which the inhabitants of the "Ukrainian cantons" could be elected in proportion to their population, and to the other in equal numbers, in a spirit of equality. Conflicts between the federal and provincial levels would have to be resolved through negotiations.

The chances of this peace plan being implemented were significantly reduced by Russia's annexation of the provinces of Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, Donetsk and Luhansk, confirmed by a referendum under its control. Schröder's peace plan dealt separately with Crimea, and the former chancellor considered the Ukrainian president's idea of a military reoccupation of the region absurd. At the same time, he suggested that Ukraine's status as an international ally could be an alternative to NATO membership, with the 'armed neutrality' that is also characteristic of Switzerland. Although, as things stand, the Swiss model would involve both belligerents abandoning their current demands, some form of alliance would be better for Russia than the pre-war status quo and for Ukraine than the current status quo.

4. Fixing the status quo before the war: giving up Crimea

Ukrainian interests are not entirely aligned with those of their Western partners, and Ukraine's Western backers would also need a vision of how to end the war, in which they have already shouldered a heavy share of the costs. Emma Ashford, a regular analyst of international security policy issues, argues that for peace to be achieved, only the enduring, but not the ultimate, goals should be kept in mind: Ukraine's sovereignty and the protection of its population.¹⁸

Not only the strategic but also the practical objectives must be narrowed down in the light of the need to serve sustainable peace rather than escalation. According to the expert, the starting point should be what the Russian leadership would be willing to accept in the first place. Since it cannot accept an offer that is equivalent to total defeat, a deal must be reached that is acceptable to the Russian public. For example, a full reunification of the pre-2014 Ukrainian territories cannot be pursued on the basis of this concept, as Russia would be worse off than it was before the war broke out. A renunciation of Crimea would therefore greatly increase the chances of a lasting agreement. The author also argues that a more territorially and ethnically united Ukraine, which gives up Crimea and part of Donbas, could be more stable and defensible in the future.

Similar ideas have been put forward in other places. One of the best known is Elon Musk's Twitter post¹⁹, where he made four points for achieving peace between Ukraine and Russia. Among other things, new elections should be called in the occupied regions under UN supervision, the results of which would be taken into account by Russia. He said that it should be accepted that Crimea is part of Russia and that its water supply should be guaranteed. Finally, Ukraine should remain neutral.

As early as May, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger indicated that Ukraine would have to give up territory to achieve peace.²⁰ He saw then that the situation should return to that of 24 February, i.e., accepting that Crimea and the breakaway region of Donetsk would be brought under Russian rule. In Davos, he said he hoped that "the heroism of the Ukrainians would be accompanied by wisdom." In August, he also predicted a settlement in which Russia retains the advantages it gained in 2014 by seizing Crimea and parts of the Donbas region, but that following the events, Ukraine would be treated as a NATO member in one form or another, which is already pointing towards a more mixed peace plan.²¹

5. Peace with painful resignations: avoiding losing face

The protracted war has created an apparent stalemate in which there is no longer any progress to be made in the war, and the actors will have to negotiate with each other sooner or later. It is in this context that security expert George Friedman, who wrote in 2008 about the risk of a conflict in Ukraine around the 2020s, has written his analysis.²² He argued that the fear that the parties involved might be seen as the losers seems to make an agreement impossible. The Ukrainians cannot concede on any territorial issue because it concerns their sovereignty, but they cannot continue the war without the United States. The US leadership, however, does not see an end to the war, as Russia can prolong the war as long as it wants, even though it cannot win it. The United States cannot withdraw from the war either, because that would be a sign of weakness.²³

According to the US analyst, an agreement could be reached in which all countries would have to give up something without it being seen as a defeat. Russia would have to withdraw all its troops from Ukraine, which would allow both the US and Ukraine to say that they have achieved the protection of the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state. Ukraine, in turn, should renounce US military support and NATO should guarantee that it will not accept Ukraine as a member. This would satisfy Russia's security demands before the war. Overall, this neutrality would resemble the 1955 model of Austria. Friedman argues that a fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine should be set up within the UN, with donations from NATO members, and that Russia should participate. This would somewhat spread the burden of responsibility for the destruction.

Somewhat the reverse of Friedman's proposal is the option that does not build on the status quo of 24 February, but creates a new situation in which the territorial and security needs of the opposing parties are combined. The idea is that Ukraine would recognise Russian sovereignty over the occupied territories in exchange for the rest of Ukraine becoming a member of NATO.²⁴ This would allow Russia's territorial claims and the Ukrainians' security guarantees to be asserted, while at the same time requiring major concessions to the other side. Both countries would gain strategic advantages that would prevent them from ending the war with a unilateral political loss of face.

Notes

¹ Statement by Ursula von Der Leyen on the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 27 February https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/hu/statement_22_1441

² Guy Verhofstadt on support for Ukraine and sanctions (twitter, 04.09.2022) https://twitter.com/guyverhofstadt/status/1566702622333091840?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

³ Guy Verhofstadt on the impact of energy sanctions in Europe (facebook, 09.03.2022) <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=684670609352512>

⁴ Natalie Samarasinghe: Die beste Friedenslösung bleibt ein Sieg der Ukraine. (Handelsblatt, 2022.11.21.) <https://www.handelsblatt.com/meinung/gastbeitraege/gastkommentar-die-beste-friedensloesung-bleibt-ein-sieg-der-ukraine/28818784.html>

⁵ Political Capital: Toxic pacifism - peace narratives on the Russian war against Ukraine (06.09.2022) <https://pcblogger.atlatszo.hu/2022/09/06/mergezo-pacifizmus-bekenarrativak-az-ukrajna-elleni-orosz-haboru-kapcsan/>

⁶ Liberals urge Biden to rethink Ukraine strategy (washingtonpost.com, 2022.10.25.) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/10/24/biden-ukraine-liberals/>

⁷ Biden lost temper with Zelenskyy in June phone call when Ukrainian leader asked for more aid (nbcnews.com, 2022.10.31.) <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/biden-lost-temper-zelenskyy-phone-call-ukraine-aid-rcna54592>

⁸ Biden Says He Is Willing to Talk to Putin About Ukraine, With Conditions (nytimes.com, 2022.12.01.) <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/01/us/politics/biden-macron-putin-ukraine.html>

⁹ Christopher Clark (»Die Schlafwandler«) über den Ukraine-Krieg: »Die Russen haben ein kluges Spiel gespielt« <https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/christopher-clark-die-schlafwandler-ueber-den-ukrainekrieg-die-russen-haben-ein-kluges-spiel-gespielt-a-5261ec6b-6e4e-41be-bab7-5039d8c6b6a5> (spiegel.de, 2022.12.04.)

¹⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/21b8f98e-b2a5-11e4-b234-00144feab7de>

¹¹ Video message from Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Telegram, 07.11.2022) https://t.me/V_Zelenskiy_official/3911

¹² Missy Ryan, John Hudson & Paul Sonne (washingtonpost.com, 2022.11.05.) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/11/05/ukraine-russia-peace-negotiations/>

Alexander Ward: Biden admin nudge led Ukraine to drop Putin condition for peace talks (Politico, 2022.11.08.) <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/08/biden-admin-nudging-led-ukraine-to-drop-putin-condition-for-peace-talks-00065679>

¹³ Andrey Pertsev & Emily Laskin: A 'military necessity' and an 'invitation to negotiate'. What's behind Russia's retreat from Kherson? (meduza.io, 2022.11.09.) <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/09/a-military-necessity-and-an-invitation-to-negotiate>

¹⁴ Viktor Orbán at the Cicero panel discussion on 11.10.2022

¹⁵ Germany's Schroeder Condemns Russian Invasion Of Ukraine (barrons.com, 2022.02.24.) <https://www.barrons.com/news/germany-s-schroeder-condemns-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-01645717507>

¹⁶ Germany's SPD calls on Gerhard Schröder to quit party over Russia links (theguardian.com, 2022.04.25.) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/25/germanys-spd-calls-on-gerhard-schroeder-to-resign-over-russia-links>

¹⁷ Gerhard Schröder says Russia wants negotiated end to Ukraine war (ft.com, 2022.08.03.) <https://www.ft.com/content/ee5ee70c-7b68-4a3f-99f6-27b841762487>

¹⁸ Emma Ashford: The Ukraine War Will End With Negotiations. Now Is Not the Time for Talks, but America Must Lay the Groundwork. (foreignaffairs.com, 2022.10.31.) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraine-war-will-end-negotiations>

¹⁹ Elon Musk's Twitter post (Twitter, 03.10.2022) <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1576969255031296000>

²⁰ Henry Kissinger at the World Economic Forum in Davos (24.05.2022) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfzK_bPPax4

²¹ Henry Kissinger Is Worried About 'Disequilibrium' (wsj.com, 2022.08.12.) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/henry-kissinger-is-worried-about-disequilibrium-11660325251>

²² George Friedman: The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century (2010).

²³ George Friedman: Negotiations (2022.11.07.) <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/pdfs/negotiations-geopoliticalfutures-com.pdf>

²⁴ Miklós Duray: Europe's power-spatial fragmentation from feudalism to the present day (May 2022, Bécsi Napló, Volume XLIII, No. 3) <https://felvidek.ma/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Orosz-Ukran-haboru-Becsi-Naplo-2022-majus-DM.pdf>