**Peace Plans for Ukraine**

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We know that the future of the Russian-Ukrainian war is hanging in the balance for both military and political reasons. Nobody can honestly and confidently say where the war is heading at this point. There are too many known unknowns, and some unknown unknowns may also emerge.

I will start by stating two basic points. The first is the responsibility for the war. This is a war of aggression where one of the parties, Russia, is hundred percent responsible. Ukraine, on the other hand, has zero responsibility for the war. It is defending itself, which is its natural right. If there has ever been moral clarity regarding the war, this is it.

Secondly, the Ukrainian people deserve peace. This statement is not only based on humanitarian grounds, however important those might be. The war has been dragging on for over three years, and neither side appears to be heading for a clear-cut victory. There is a sense of an impasse. It is only natural to seek formulas for peace – as the title of our panel also suggests.

Both of these statements may seem obviously true, but there is an inherent tension between them. Any peace agreement that can be realistically discussed now can only be a compromise. However, this compromise, if achieved (and we understand this is a big “if”), is bound to be at the expense of Ukraine, hence unjust. This is hard to accept because bracing for a compromise peace implies readiness to underwrite injustice.

This time, three years ago, we, discussing the issue at the same venue, were looking forward to a just solution. This would imply transferring to the Ukrainian jurisdiction all lands that Russia has conquered since 2014. A regime change in Russia following its crushing military defeat and its replacement with a more responsible, if not necessarily liberal and democratic, regime would be a welcome addition to that. Punishing Putin as a war criminal would crown it all.

This solution would not only be just for Ukraine. It would be vital for international peace. It is in the interest of the global community not to allow a precedent of a big and powerful country conquering its neighbor’s lands. If Russia can get away with conquest, nobody is safe, and this does not only apply to its immediate neighbors. Defeating Russia and restoring justice for Ukraine would not only be morally satisfying; it would also be a wise realpolitik.

Today, however, we no longer speak in these terms. This is not because our understanding of justice or foundations for a stable international order has changed. It is because we were mugged by reality. Ukrainian perseverance and heroism, in combination with Western support – or, to be more precise, the level of support that the West was prepared to propose – proved insufficient for the victory as one could imagine before.

We can and should discuss why we came to this, but I understand I don't have time for such a discussion here. It is enough to acknowledge that we are in a completely new territory from two or three years ago.

At this point, supporters of Ukraine and of international peace have two options. Either the support for Ukraine must be elevated to a qualitatively higher level, making a military breakthrough possible. Or we should accept some compromise peace relatively soon.

I will start with the second option. There are two problems with it: a normative and a pragmatic one. As said, a compromise peace can only be fundamentally unjust. It can also be very dangerous in the long run.

However, justice is not an abstract idea that only exists in the minds of dreamers; it must be linked to reality. If a just peace is unattainable, but the alternative to peace is disastrous, one should accept an unjust peace. Any peace that does not imply a complete restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity will be unjust. The best we can hope for in this case is the least unjust peace.

This is a highly uncomfortable situation to be in. Underwriting injustice cannot be a good thing. This will be especially difficult for President Zelensky, as it will inevitably be used against him by his political opponents. However, it is also uncomfortable for Western leaders because accepting an unjust peace is a recognition of weakness and a tacit encouragement of the aggressor.

The historical analogy could be Yalta. It was an extremely unjust settlement that was achieved at the expense of the Eastern European “captive nations” to be. However, the balance of power at the moment of its conclusion left few alternatives. The world was fortunate that the war that emerged from this peace agreement was only a “Cold” war.

Because this situation is so uncomfortable, it creates a temptation to blur the moral clarity that the war brought about, at least in the democratic West. This is a temptation to share the blame for the war, which should lie with Russia alone.

This temptation is evident in some statements made by President Trump and other representatives of his team, but there are also people in Europe who may be moving in this direction. People have started to remember that Ukraine is corrupt and not fully democratic. Some Western politicians and analysts repeat tropes of Putin’s anti-Ukrainian propaganda. This is a form of moral self-defense: if Ukraine is also at fault, accepting peace at the expense of its legitimate interests starts to look more justified.

This is inexcusable. The Ukrainians know better than anybody that their political regime is not perfectly democratic, and corruption is a huge problem. Moreover, war is a condition in which state power must be concentrated for victory, which cannot be the best time for flourishing political pluralism. However, when it comes to levels of freedom, Russia and Ukraine are on different planets; moreover, even if Ukraine were a dynastic monarchy, this still would not justify an entirely unprovoked invasion.

Another way of relieving Russia of its responsibility for the war is putting the blame, or part of the blame, on the West. I cannot rule out that people sharing specific versions of political realism truly believe that Russia had justifiable grounds to consider NATO enlargement to the East a security threat to itself, though I have never heard a convincing argument for such a view. Some people even repeat Putin’s lie that Ukraine’s (as well as Georgia’s) peaceful democratic revolutions were somehow orchestrated by Washington – again, without a shred of evidence.

People believe such things not because they stand to reason but because it’s expedient for them to believe in them. They make it easier to justify uncomfortable concessions to Russia.

This is fundamentally dishonest. We should acknowledge that sometimes we don't have enough power to achieve the best and have to settle for less than just solutions in order to avoid the worst. However, this should not be a reason to blur the differences between right and wrong.

At the end, a couple of words about more practical issues. If a compromise peace is achieved at all in the near future, the main "red lines" are pretty evident. Any agreement will imply some territorial concessions from Ukraine’s side, though we want them to be as limited as possible. What is most important, Ukraine should stay a viable and sovereign that can pursue its purpose of becoming part of the European family of nations. This means that there should be stable security guarantees for it. Nobody can say exactly what shape they will take. Full NATO membership would be a just and preferable solution, though this may not be possible due to divisions within the alliance. With Trump in the White House, Europeans will probably have to take the lead. Some coalition of the willing may be the most likely solution.

If we look at the matter from a broader perspective, Russia should not be allowed to look like a clear-cut winner. Putin likes to say that this is also his war against the "collective West," and he is not wrong. This war did put the resilience and unity of Western democracies, their commitment to their values, and their power and capacities to a severe test. If the outcome of this war is seen as their defeat, it will be a massive setback for the idea of liberal democracy, as well as the prospects for a relatively stable international order.

If we look at the results of this test so far, the picture is mixed. At least until the Trump presidency, the unity of the West in standing behind Ukraine was impressive and reassuring. However, this level of support proved insufficient. It was enough to prevent Russia from winning but not sufficient for a Ukrainian victory either. Nobody can say for sure how different the situation on the battleground would be had the Americans and Europeans been less cautious and hesitant in their military aid, though a more consistent and forthcoming approach would probably have had an effect.

So far, the overall result of the standoff between Russia and the West is an impasse. For Putin, this is a success: Russia might be much more powerful than Ukraine, but it is much poorer and weaker than the West. If this is a Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine is an underdog. If this is a war between Russia and the West, then Russia is seen as an underdog.

During this war, a significant portion of the world chose not to commit to either side and adopted a wait-and-see approach. If and when peace is achieved, most observers will not so much look at exactly where the dividing line between Russia’s and Ukraine’s effective jurisdictions lies but rather whether Russia or the West will be seen as the winner. Based on this, they will take the lesson: is autocracy a more efficient regime than democracy? Does it pay to play by the rules, or have we all returned to a world where power and assertiveness are the only thing that matters?

I come from a country, Georgia, where we feel this effect of the war most acutely. The Russian invasion immediately led to an internal political standoff, which continues to this day. The incumbent government staked its interests on Russia's victory, which resulted in the effective suspension of relations with the West and a rapid drift towards authoritarianism. The pro-European and pro-democratic opposition, which represents the majority though is not well organized, put its stakes on the Ukrainian (and Western) victory. If Russia is seen as the winner in the war, an average Georgian citizen will probably agree that an autocratic government has played its cards more wisely in not allying with a losing party.

However, at this point, these considerations may be theoretical, as Russia does not look interested in an agreement because it considers its position more beneficial. It is not losing on the battlefield, and it senses weakness and confusion among its opponents. The rift between the US and Europe has its positive side effects as well: Europe understands that it should become strategically more self-reliant and increase its defense spending. This is a welcome development, but its effects will be evident in the long run. But the Ukrainians are dying as we speak.

To achieve the least unjust peace, the West should negotiate from a position of strength. This is not the case yet. Therefore, one may look for the second option: The US and Europe will have to qualitatively enhance their support for Ukraine before the least unjust peace becomes a realistic option.