



GNSI DECISION BRIEF:

A Lasting Peace to the Russo-Ukraine War: Obstacles and Considerations



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June 7, 2023

June 07, 2023

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Overview

When the current conflict between Ukraine and Russia started in 2014, with Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of separatists in the Donbas, negotiated settlements failed to bring peace. Both Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 did little to return to pre-war conditions and instead created a frozen conflict that reignited with Russia's invasion in February of 2022. With that recent failure, how will opposing Russian and Ukrainian perspectives limit the success of any settlement to the conflict? Each of the belligerents in the current war in Ukraine has a distinct perspective regarding their nation's origins, historical experiences, and national identity. These perspectives will influence the peace process and shape the post-war order while largely determining whether this war ends definitively or simply pauses for a time before breaking out again. A lasting peace would be in the interest of the US and its allies in Europe. The obstacles that could block a negotiated settlement and how the key players might overcome them for a lasting peace will be examined below.

History and the Russian Perspective

Ukraine's capital city of Kyiv is the cradle of eastern Slavic civilization that is shared by present-day Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians. In 988, Prince Vladimir of Kyiv was baptized by a Byzantine priest in Chersonesos on the Crimean coast. His conversion to Orthodox Christianity represents a potent nationalist symbol for many Russians.ⁱ In December 2014, Russian president Vladimir Putin justified Russia's annexation of Crimea by stating: "Crimea, the ancient Kerson or Chersoneses, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilizational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism."ⁱⁱ

These are strong words, conveying the sense of ownership Russian nationalists claim over Ukrainian lands. In another speech, Putin insisted that Russia "was not simply robbed, it was plundered" when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to the Ukrainian Republic of the USSR.ⁱⁱⁱ In his lengthy 2021 treatise "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin claimed that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people," and that the West was turning Ukraine into an "anti-Russia" nation.^{iv} In a televised broadcast days

before the 2022 invasion, Putin asserted that "Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space."^v He claimed that modern Ukraine was a creation of the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and that Ukrainian territory constituted "historically Russian land." Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox church, a staunch Putin ally, has insisted that Russians and Ukrainians derive from "the same baptismal font" and denounced "the evil forces" that were undermining Russian-Ukrainian unity.^{vi}

These views may not only come from ultra-nationalists. After the 2022 invasion, Putin intensified his attacks on perceived internal enemies and has repeatedly warned of domestic instability provoked by "opponents of Russia and their agents," making public opinion in Russia difficult to gauge. A fierce crackdown on dissent, including 15-year sentences for expressing opposition to the war, has caused many to flee the country.^{vii} Opposition leaders Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who have been poisoned by the regime, may die in prison. Many Russian citizens oppose the war, but many more are either disengaged and resigned or share Putin's views to varying degrees. Not all Russians believe that their country should have initiated a violent assault against its neighbor, but many have internalized a colonial or statist worldview that inclines them to support or justify their government's actions.^{viii} The Russian elite, particularly dependent on Putin's personalist dictatorship for their status and security, have shown few signs of dissent.

History and the Ukrainian Perspective

The development of a separate Ukrainian identity, literature, and language emerged in the 17th century, and by the mid-19th century, Ukrainian identity was grounded in peasant traditions and national aspirations of intellectuals.^{ix} The Russian tsars, fearful of rising nationalism and separatism within the empire, treated Ukrainian culture and language as a matter of national security, even banning the language for a time. The period of upheaval that coincided with WWI and the 1917 Russian revolution provided the circumstances for Ukraine's brief period of independence in 1918. Ukraine was one of the key battlegrounds during the 1918-1922 Russian Civil War, but the Soviets eventually crushed Ukrainian independence movements and declared the

Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1922. For Ukrainians, the twentieth century under Soviet domination was a period of crushed independence movements, executed intellectuals, and starved peasants. A vast segment of Ukraine's rural population was displaced or deported to forced labor camps during Joseph Stalin's violent campaign of collectivization and dekulakization. The resulting 1932-1933 famine, now known as the Holodomor (literally "death inflicted by starvation"), was the consequence not only of collectivization but of Stalin's desire to crush Ukrainian nationalism and prevent what he called "Ukrainian national counterrevolution." The total number of Holodomor victims is difficult to determine, but most estimates by scholars appear in the range of 3.9 million.^x Stalin also initiated mass political repression, arresting thousands of Ukrainian intellectuals, church leaders, and Ukrainian Communist party officials who had supported pro-Ukrainian policies in the 1920s. Ukrainians know this history, but many Russians do not. The history of the Stalin era has been fundamentally rewritten during Putin's presidency, with tragic consequences. Russian leaders' ignorance of Ukrainian history is one reason why they misjudged Ukrainian national sentiment and determination to resist.

The atrocities that Ukrainians experienced during the Stalin era have been called genocide due to the destruction of Ukrainian national elites (political and cultural leaders), the assault on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the starvation of the Ukrainian farming population, and the replacement of Ukrainians with non-Ukrainians on their territory. In a stunning repeat of history, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has included the arrest, detention, torture, starvation, and execution of Ukrainian politicians, journalists, and other citizens. Russia has deported Ukrainian children in an act that prompted arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court.^{xi} For Ukrainians, such brutality has characterized their colonial experience within the Russian/Soviet empire.

Obstacles to a Lasting Peace

Any negotiated settlement to the current Russo-Ukrainian war all sides must contend and account for the intractability of these contrasting worldviews and experiences. Given that Russians and Ukrainians both consider the current conflict as an existential struggle, any lasting peace may appear elusive. It is in US interest to avoid the prospect of an ongoing conflict in Europe that poses a security threat to critical allies. If this were only about NATO expansion or about Crimea or Donbas, the parties might have resolved the conflict by now.

A military solution appears less likely as well. Over the past year and a half, the enormous costs of the war (plus evidence of war crimes) have hardened positions on both sides. On the battlefield, Russians are not going to convince Ukrainians that their national territory and

aspirations are artificial constructions, nor are Ukrainians going to convince Russians that Ukrainian lands are rightfully theirs and that Ukrainians have agency to decide their global alliances. Neither side feels like it can afford to lose. Ukrainians are fighting for their country's existence, and many Russians feel the same, as the following sentiment demonstrates: "I don't support the war. But unfortunately, the very existence of my Motherland (Russia) is at stake. I don't want to see the collapse, the destruction of my country."^{xii}

The Russian and Ukrainian perspectives explored in this brief may lead some to conclude that a negotiated settlement and lasting peace are out of reach. The world saw the breakdown of the Minsk agreements in 2014 and 2015 leading to an eight-year standoff that ended with Russia's 2022 invasion. As Lidia Powirska surmised, "Ukraine signed the Minsk agreements under pressure from the West, which saw them as a means to end the open military conflict, but did nothing to resolve the overarching disagreement between Russia and Ukraine."^{xiii} Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev recently asserted that the conflict would persist for decades punctuated by occasional cease-fires.^{xiv} US officials have predicted a similar generational frozen conflict like that on the Korean Peninsula.^{xv} If Putin cannot achieve his goals in Ukraine, he may just wait it out since Russia has used this strategy in other frozen conflicts such as those in Moldova and Georgia.^{xvi}

Modifying Expectations

It is unlikely that Russia and Ukraine will agree to terms for a lasting peace without significant global pressure. Major players like the US and China will be needed to establish a durable peace plan. As [Daniel Blumenthal](#) declared after reviewing the negative effects of the war on Russia, "The Russians are now the junior partner of the Chinese, however this war turns out."^{xvii} China will exert massive leverage over Russia while the US does the same with Ukraine. A negotiated settlement will probably require the participation of a broader range of allies and partners, such as the EU, Turkey, and others.

The US role as mediator will be complicated by the fact that Ukraine and Russia view the US very differently—as an invaluable ally versus a mortal enemy. Putin's obsession with Ukraine for many years derives in part from the fear of having pro-Western governments in territories he considers Russia's "sphere of influence." Putin uses anti-Western narratives to consolidate Russian national identity and to discredit his domestic opponents as "agents of the West."^{xviii} Ukrainians, on the other hand, aspire to a European future, as they showed during their 2014 Maidan "revolution of dignity." Ukraine has a right to join NATO and the EU, despite Russia's objections. The West should not be deterred but should expect Ukraine to remain under constant Russian pressure, much like the Baltic states.

Decision Points

- How will the United States and its allies create a peace or cease-fire with outcomes more favorable than those of the Minsk agreements after the 2014 invasion?
- How can the US and China exert pressure on their allies to arrive at a peace settlement? Can each side involve more parties to broaden the pressure on both sides to agree and accept terms for a long

peace?

- How can the United States and the West offer post-war security guarantees to Ukraine to help reduce the chance of another Russian invasion?
- Is the US prepared for a new containment policy directed at both China and Russia?
- Can the US help to shift Russian opinion of the West and Western institutions like the EU and NATO?
- Will Russian colonial attitudes towards the countries of the former Soviet Union diminish over time?

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