

WHOSE PEACE IN UKRAINE?

The ongoing war in Ukraine has reached a point where all major interested parts are declaring readiness to deescalate, terminate hostilities and go to negotiate the post-war order. After President Zelensky, whose country's territory and population are actually an object of those negotiations, declared in Washington that he was ready to discuss 'territorial solutions', the red line was crossed and the logic of development was reversed from war-oriented to peace-oriented. But whose peace is going to be this one? Who will profit and who will lose? Whose post-war situation will be better than the pre-war one? This is the subject matter of the ongoing talks and this article is an attempt to present a synthetic panorama of all main actors' postulates.

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Introduction

The war in Ukraine will determinate not only Ukraine's own future. Although a local, bi-lateral conflict in itself, it is a part of much larger, systemic confrontation where several actors are present and actively acting to influence the situation in their own favour. Ukrainian war is not only about Ukraine, Russia, USA, the European Union (EU) and China also understand that this conflict will result in a change of parameters of the international system that will shape the framework for their own international activity for years, and even decades to come. By attacking Ukraine, Russia not only broke her sovereignty but also damaged a regional, continental and global order based on the acceptance of rules, on which Ukraine's existence was based. Deeply disappointed with its own territorial shape, strategic potential and political position, Moscow tried to adjust the order locally, but by doing that, it touched basic elements of a more general order. And once they are broken in relation to Ukraine, they are perceived as non-existing by the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, which forces them to revise the system of guarantees that links them with Western Europe and the USA. If the EU



and NATO do not react to the change of regional order imposed by Russia (the violation of Ukraine's buffer status existing since its independence until 2022), it is not impossible that further adjustments are done with major modifications for all the rest of states that exist between Russia and the West. If Ukraine is not any more the pivotal buffer between the two, a new 'grey zone' has to be established or there will be a direct, "cold" or "hot" confrontation. The first option is exactly what Russia is looking for (ex-USSR under its direct control and ex-Warsaw Pact as a new buffer) and exactly what NATO's Eastern Flank is trying to avoid. Western European and the USA are all somewhere in between of those two extreme points seeking the maximum of profit with the minimum of loss, through which they can draw out of the whole turbulence on the regional level in Eastern Europe. And by doing that, they turn the Ukrainian question into a continental, and – in case of the USA and China – into a global one. The approaching peace negotiations and their outcome will be a crucial phase of this international game of influence.

Russia's Position

If Russia's actual situation is to be referred to its own official position expressed in the so-called Lavrov's Ultimatum of December 15th 2021, Moscow has not reached any of the strategic aims it set for itself right before the war. Ukraine remains an independent state and a part of international reality, it's neither 'demilitarized' (unable to defend itself) nor 'denazified' (unable to govern itself). Obviously, it is not in a position to join NATO or the EU, but unlike it is presented by Russian propaganda and possibly believed in Moscow, Kiev's membership was never an actual or even imaginable question for both organizations. Paradoxically, by 'preventing' Ukraine from joining the West, Russia made it not only possible but real for millions of Ukrainians who joined EU and NATO individually. The fact that Russia is not terminating this war despite its strategic failure and a lack of any chance to achieve it in future, means that either the real aims of this war were different from those officially declared and thus the war is a process independent from reaching them, or that the declared aims match the real ones and any ceasefire or peace arrangements are perceived as temporary, until such time as Moscow is ready to play the second stage of its Ukrainian gambit. The first is true in the sense, that

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from the perspective of Vladimir Putin and a governing elite around him, keeping control on Russia is much more important than control on Ukraine. The start, the process and the end of war in Ukraine are all instruments of prolongation of the existing regime in Moscow and will be activated or deactivated according to the situation in Russia and not as a result of international order. Internal factors are decisive and external ones not. Ukrainian war was started to petrify the regime by integration people around the flag, neutralizing opposition, blocking social lifts, strengthening the state structures and gaining a new (war-time) legitimization. All that was realized with great success and as a result of war-motivated internal adjustments. Vladimir Putin has turned Russia into a country where he and the elite around him may feel perfectly well and engage in a process of organizing future transfer of power inside the elite. From their point of view, the war may continue or not, as – in the actual state – it does not affect the stability of the regime and their personal position in it. The war has already played a positive role in petrifying the regime and prolonging Putin's power so long as he is physically apt to exercise it. A 'second round' of Ukrainian war will always remain possible until the maximalist plan of restoring 'just borders' and establishing 'fair and stable' regional order is realized by the Kremlin. The ongoing negotiations with Washington demonstrate that Moscow is perfectly flexible in modifying the means. It uses to convince its partners to accept its claims to respect its exclusive zone of interests in Eastern Europe.

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be an armed one, it may be elegantly diplomatic and peaceful. But until Western partners accept Russian vision of international order in Central and Eastern Europe, the risk of a renewed war will be constantly used by Moscow to convince them that the negotiated 'compromise' peace is better than the lack of it, which will automatically mean potential conflict. This overreactive stance towards any activity perceived as a sign of foreign influence, comes from a deep psychological complex of insecurity traditionally resented by Russian rulers long before Putin came to power. As they lack strong and unambiguous internal and external legitimacy, they tend to enlarge the security margin that shall protect them 'in case of' a revolution. And an internal turmoil is believed to be inspired, sponsored and orchestrated from outside, 'exactly' as two Ukrainian revolutions had been.

Russian regime is economically, socially, culturally and technically dramatically incompetent in comparison

to the Western one and it is well-known. As a result, Putin and Russian elite function in the state of a (sometimes well justified) latent paranoia of losing control over the country as a result of external influence. To neutralize this imagined threat, the Kremlin needs to isolate Russians from that influence which means exactly what happened after the war started: expelling the opposition, incarcerating or eliminating the activists and controlling the passive rest. What Russia requires from the post-war construction of Eastern Europe is not a guaranteed control over Ukraine or any other territory, but a guarantee that none other actor, especially the Western one will be in a position to actively act and influence reality anywhere near the Russian borders. From Russian point of view, the devastated, depopulated and demoralized Ukraine is a solution better than any Ukraine apt and able to receive Western influence.

Ukraine's Position

Ukraine is not, and taking into account all currently existing factors that can be identified and analysed, will never be a safe, strong, wealthy and efficient country. It will remain a buffer state between two geopolitical blocks competitive and confrontational to each other. This means that Ukraine will for undetermined future



remain a territory under a constant threat of attack and devastation with all demographic, economic and social consequences of such a status. It will never, in the foreseeable future be a place offering optimal conditions for living, both from the perspective of European as well as Russian civilizational standards. It will be a 'space' taken and treated with all geopolitical technicity rather than a normal country where people may plan and follow their everyday life. But a buffer state is also a state. Ukraine, although reduced in size and deprived of all perspectives of civilised development, remains a part of international reality.

The fact that Russia invests so much in an attempt to conquer it and the West still keeps supporting it demonstrates the major geopolitical value of this piece of territory and this will not change in time. A role of a buffer between Russia and the West is an important role, and such a structure requires competent management that opens wide and interesting prospects, if not for Ukrainians as a nation, at least for the Ukrainian elite. For almost three decades of its independence after the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine proved that it's institutionally, economically and socially incompatible with Western values and standards. At the same time, it does not want (for understandable reasons) to be a part of Russian zone of influence. It wants to be like Europe but it can't be, it doesn't want to be like Russia but it can't escape from it. As a result of its mentally rooted institutional, legal and technical conditions, the only possible international role of Ukraine is to remain a buffer between the two and this buffer is currently under construction.

The West is not mentally ready and technically apt to defend Ukraine in its full legal territorial size but it is interested in maintaining its actual existence for a very real and long-lasting reason: as long as Ukraine exists, Russia will always have to attack it before it attacks any of the NATO or EU countries. Ukrainian political elite shall understand – and as far as president Zelensky is concerned, it probably perfectly understood – that the only option of keeping Ukraine a place where they can stay in power is maintaining its status of pro-Western, anti-Russian bumper. An imagined pro-Russian Ukraine is not only useless but potentially dangerous for the West which makes also a strategic U-turn a non-option for the Ukrainian elite. The gloomy reality is that Ukraine, socially and economically cannot become a 'second

Poland' or 'second Romania'. Any option other than an armed buffer implies a compromise with Moscow and that, in turn, means an acceptance of Russian participation in European affairs with all the Russian influence it brings, which is exactly what the West and especially the East of the West (Central Europe) wants to avoid. And Kiev has no other option than to accept the game on these rules, because without economic, material, infrastructural assistance of its immediate neighbours, Ukraine would cease to exist independently. This is the cruel impact of geographical factor that makes Ukrainian decision-making corridor as narrow as it is. If Ukraine wants to be independent from Russia, it can be only in its actual status of a buffer borderland. If it doesn't accept this status, the West will lose its interest in assisting it with all troublesome questions fighting this war will bring alone.

EU's Position

The end of the Ukrainian war confronts European Union with a strategic choice towards Russia and its place (if any) in European politics. Europe will have to choose its stance towards Moscow from three options: 1) 'business as usual' that means a return to engaging Russia into economic cooperation with an aim of selective convergence; 2) escalating confrontation that means arming Ukraine and a general increase of its activity in all other post-Soviet states with an aim of Russia's isolation and degradation; 3) negotiated coexistence, which means establishing boundaries and buffer zones between two blocks with a modest aim of avoiding an escalated armed confrontation. In all three variants, relations with Ukraine are not an independent track of European policy, they remain a function of EU's relations with Russia. That's why, a return to the pre-war situation, that is a kind of normality is not very likely: although many European countries would like to reset relations

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with Russia, politically ‘forgetting’ everything that happened after February 2022, accepting the ‘realities on the ground’ and returning to constructive cooperation, it will hardly happen, precisely because Moscow, for its internal reasons, does not really want it. And, even if theoretically, one day Russia wants it, the Eastern half of the EU and NATO will oppose the new deal and try to derail it once it’s concluded.

The proactive raise of confrontation with an aim of making Russia durably unable to pose a realistic threat to EU member states remains very unlikely for subjective reasons, psychological in character that deserve a separate analysis. European nations and political elites are mentally not ready to change their approach to their own security or to be ready to fight a war to defend it and to risk any piece of their short-term material comfort to secure their values in long term. That’s why, the most probable variant of development of EU’s relations with Russia is a movement (a turbulent, not a linear one) towards a negotiated coexistence under a form of Cold War style political and strategic arrangements with provisional, temporary solutions in ‘difficult places’ such as Ukraine.

The wartime evolution of EU’s central institutions and its most influential member states demonstrate what European mainstream is and what it will most probably be: to instrumentally use the general sense of insecurity caused by Russia to reform the EU in the direction of higher centralization in the name of defending it from external dangers. Whether this process will result in a real increase of defensive potential vis-à-vis Russia is an open question, while it’s already clear that more competences of European Commission and other central instances will inevitably lead to a major transfer of competences

from nation-states to Brussels. The deal proposed by EU’s leading states to its junior partners on the Eastern Flank is the following: security in exchange for sovereignty and this trade off demands keeping Russian threat direct, actual and real. European identities, especially those freshly regained after the collapse of the Soviet dominator, turned too strong to dissipate in the institutional framework designed for nations with a different type of mindset, ambitions and problems. Seen from the perspective of European institutions, Russian threat is an almost ideal instrument of gaining more power in shorter time at a cost significantly lower than in the ‘normal’ times.

After a period of strategic hesitation, European bureaucracy and its social base among the member-states countries elites, adopted the ‘defence of Europe against Russia’ rhetorics as a new motivating idea of deepening the integration. At the same time, ‘more Europe’ automatically means ‘smaller Europe’: political consolidation means no enlargement, with all the consequences for countries like Türkiye, Serbia and last but not least, Ukraine. No friendship with Russia does not automatically mean Ukrainian membership in the EU, on the contrary, it quite obviously means the opposite. If Europe deepens integration by means of centralization that implies a major transfer of sovereignty from its nation-states to Brussels, a complicated, painful and lasting process. If it’s to be realized under an ideological motivation of defending Europe against Russia, the threat (that is to say the relations with Moscow) must be kept under constant control not to degenerate into a real kinetic conflict where real (modest to say the least) defence capacities of Europe would be tested with quite foreseeable results. Ideologically different Europe and Russia need each other as enemies for the same political aim: to change its internal structure under the pressure of external circumstances. To gain more power to fight a real war would imply risks of potentially destructive results.

USA's Position

The stake of the Ukrainian war for the USA is to use a regional case as an instrument of adapting its global position before an expected confrontation with China over the international leadership. The political aim is to perform a ‘reversed Kissinger’ manoeuvre, that

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is to say to tear off Russia from China and to secure Moscow's neutrality if not alliance in its approaching clash with Beijing. The USA, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, seem to believe that they are in a position to create a situation that will fundamentally revise Russia's strategic calculation and convince Kremlin (by fear or by greed) to detach itself from the anti-American block constructed by China and to play a role that China itself played towards the USSR starting from middle 1970's. Whether this belief is realistic or not is a good analytical question in itself, but its importance in the Ukrainian context is indisputably crucial as it sets the framework for American conduct vis-à-vis this war and its outcome. From Washington's perspective, the war in Ukraine is a demonstration of what may happen to Moscow here and in many other places if it doesn't comply with American strategic requirements concerning Russia's stance towards China.

The future shape of Ukraine is much more important for Russia than it did for the USA: Washington has no direct political, economic, strategic or ideological interest in whatever happens in Ukraine while Moscow has a lot to gain and to lose in all those senses. Risking almost nothing, the USA may pose a threat to Russia of a scale and consequences able to fundamentally change its place in the international system: while the rest of the

world will engage into a digital revolution, the conquest of the space and the adoption of new technologies, Russian economy will continue to make tanks in which its young generation will continue to die in a useless and incomprehensible war. This will be the price for not conforming to American requirements in its 'great game' with China. The major strategic importance of Ukraine for Russia, both from the point of view of its international position and internal stability makes it almost banally easy for the USA to manipulate Russia by use of the Ukrainian instrument. From the Washington's point of view, the importance of exact outcome of this war is insignificant: in any case, Ukraine will remain a perfectly utile, cheap and available tool of shaping Russia's position in international affairs, including places and matters really important for America. This will be actual until even a piece of Ukraine continues to exist as a formally independent state, and even in a very improbable case of total Russian occupation, it will present a perfect area to launch partisan-led hybrid operations that will engage Moscow's forces and effectively paralyse it from within. The mirroring side of this strategy is more than once suggested and demonstrated by Donald Trump America's readiness to trade Ukraine to Putin in case he is ready to reverse the alliances. The surprising efficiency of this position is due to Putin's belief that once things are arranged with Washington, everyone else will follow and

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everything will organize itself according to the framework elaborated by Russia and the USA. The weak and risky side of it, is that America is politically, strategically and economically not what it was in the previous turning points of the international system and its arrangements with Moscow may quite easily be contested by forces, it cannot control or neutralize. Yes, Europe or China are not strong enough to enforce their own ideas but still in a position to prevent realization of American or Russian and even Russo-American conceptions.

The Ukrainian war and its outcome demonstrate both tremendous ambitions of the failing unilateral hegemon and the limits of its power resulting in a stunning cognitive dissonance clearly resented by all capitals but Washington. The USA remains believing that its unique position of a single global ultimate decision-maker is to be maintained and the new world order, although modified, will still keep the unprecedented disproportion of influence between America and the rest. Whether America is unable or unwilling to project its power into Ukraine and maintain its status of a superpower in the middle of Europe is less important than the fact itself: it is not and this only motivates anti-American forces all over the world to profit from the decline of the former hegemon and take control over places and spheres where America is no longer able to extend or even maintain its exclusive control.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine started by Vladimir Putin to gain fresh legitimacy and prolongate his rule over Russia developed into a systemic conflict that is changing structure and dynamics of international relations on regional, continental and local level. Not only Russia's place in international relations but also European Union's internal structure, American position vis-à-vis China

and the starting positions of their rivalry over global leadership are involved. The ongoing negotiation process is less important in its direct meaning – that is in the exact shape of post-war Ukraine but more in the indirect one that demonstrates the power ratio between major involved forces (who can do what to whom, and who can offer what to whom). The post-war status of Ukraine as a buffer divided into three zones (Russian, Western and no-man's land in between) excluded from any formats of integration is already decided and seemingly, it was not the most important issue that Russia, the EU, USA and China were deciding when discussing the Ukrainian question.

The relations between the four of them are still in the making and several options remain on the table. What is already clear, is that the war in Ukraine symbolically terminated the romantic, Fukuyamian period of international relations where 'history ended' and major forces were solving problems without confrontations on the basis of a commonly shared consensus of non-reversible globalization that was making great powers closer to each other in the irreversible logic of cooperation, synchronization and convergence. After three decades of illusions, mistakes and ideological abuses, international relations return to what it always was in the history of humanity that is competition of states and its blocks over resources including old fashioned territorial wars.

The collapse of an idealistic vision of a major improvement of human nature after the fiasco of totalitarian projects that results in more peaceful comportment of the states brings the world back to the reality where war remains one of the common, 'natural' states of human activity and relations between nations. This raises the price of the peace but also its value. In the world where war was once again normalized, peace becomes a value in itself and every nation and individual not affected by war may consider itself lucky. From the axiological perspective, countries that avoided being invaded by Russia, especially those who share the border may feel deep and sincere relief and gratitude to Ukraine that this time it took Russian invasion on itself. When Ukraine exists, all other neighbours keep strategic depth and time to prepare themselves for the confrontation. In the world where a war may start in any moment in many places, the existence of a neighbour like Ukraine is a considerable asset.