

Navigating Post-War Relations: Ukraine's Foreign Policy Toward Russia

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Abstract. *It has been established that a potential peace treaty between Ukraine and Russia will face many challenges. The sudden post-war 'normalisation' of relations between the two countries is impossible. There is a plenty of possibility that the normalised border between the two countries would reproduce new, localised conflicts between the population due to unforgotten grievances that will stem from the war crimes Russia has committed, with the majority of the Russian population not having raised the voice of protest to stop the war. The study outlines the main trends in the foreign policy of Ukraine, Russia and other countries of the world, with an idea to form the form the guidelines for the potential post-war foreign policy of Ukraine. It was noted that such processes should be built on broad security guarantees from both, the European Union and the United States. It was determined that future security arrangements should be based on the historical foundations of the development of Ukrainian-Russian relations, awareness of the real aspirations of the Russian side and its potential future territorial encroachments.*

Key words: *Ukraine's foreign policy, post-war relations, peace treaty, armistice terms, international relations, demilitarized zone, security agreements, Ukrainian-Russian relations.*

Problem statement.

In the author's view, the war in Ukraine is more likely to conclude within the next year than to evolve into a prolonged frozen conflict, akin to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Imagine a scenario where the war ends with a peace treaty based on Ukraine ceding the territories already occupied by Russia and committing to neutrality, foregoing NATO membership, in exchange for the recognition of Ukraine's independence and sovereignty as well as a lasting peace. Such an agreement could be supported by a multilateral framework involving key global powers, including EU member states, the USA, China, the UK, and, naturally, the two primary parties to the conflict: Russia and Ukraine. Would neutrality realistically guarantee peace, given Russia's historical actions? In this context, Ukraine would need to quickly redefine its foreign policy toward Russia and determine the nature of their future relationship to safeguard itself from Russian meddling and influence. Would this mark the beginning of a new 'Iron Curtain' between the two nations?

State of the study. The concept and signs of Ukraine's foreign policy toward Russia were studied in their scientific works by many scientists, including: O. Andriadze, P. Baker, M. Dabrowski, Z. Darvas, H. Grabbe, A. Kappeler, L. Léry Moffat, K. Oksamytna, A. Sapir, P. Short, J. Roozenbeek, C. Sylvester, G. Zachmann, etc. However, in light of potential restructuring of the foreign policy orientations of a number of countries, especially European

ones, this problem requires a new scientific understanding in order to develop possible ways to implement these changes in Ukraine's foreign policy.

Purpose and objectives of the study. The purpose of this article is to identify the main trends in Ukraine's foreign policy in the context of the potential end of the war with Russia. This goal leads to the setting of the following tasks: firstly, to explore the historical aspect of Ukrainian-Russian relations and their impact on the present; secondly, to identify certain regulatory, ideological, and political aspects of a potential future peace treaty; thirdly, to analyze the features of the potential creation of a demilitarized zone.

Scientific novelty of the study. The study outlined the main trends in the foreign policy of Ukraine, Russia and other countries of the world, which form the basis for potential future peacemaking processes. It was noted that such processes should be built on broad security guarantees from both the European Union and the United States. It was determined that future security arrangements should be based on the historical foundations of the development of Ukrainian-Russian relations, awareness of the real aspirations of the Russian side and its potential future territorial encroachments.

Presentation of the main material.

The historical aspect of the issue under study is also worth noting. It is necessary to clearly understand that the choice must be made by Ukraine on the basis of cultural, political, and ideological characteristics formed over centuries.

The legacy of the tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union is one of the crucial factors for an understanding and an explanation of current affairs in the post-Soviet space. This is especially true for Ukraine and for Russian-Ukrainian relations. Russia regards Ukraine as a part of its

own strategic orbit, while many Ukrainians want to liberate themselves from the Russian hegemony and advocate a closer cooperation with the European Union. This controversy culminated in late 2013, when Russian pressure led to a re-orientation of Ukrainian policy and a rapprochement with Russia. Russia uses the Orthodox Church and the traditional dominance of the Russian language as instruments for its policy. Not only Russian historians, but also politicians and even the Russian President try to impose the imperial narrative on Ukraine. Other Ukrainian historians and politicians use the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian historical narrative. The on-going “War of memories” is of special interest. Both sides use history as a political weapon, and the controversies about the heritage of Kievan Rus', the interpretation of Mazepa, the Holodomor and WW II are not only academic, but also political issues. They reflect the struggle over the geopolitical and cultural orientation of Ukraine which is of crucial importance for the future development of the post-Soviet space and of Eastern Europe¹.

Russia views Ukraine as a part of its own strategical objective, which does not give the ability to the latter to form itself as an independent and sovereign nation. The key issue is dedicated to the western role and its importance, which brings the occurring Russian-Ukrainian crisis on the global scale. The main reasons of the escalation of Russian-Ukrainian relations are factors, such as Ukrainian aspiration of joining NATO and the general integration process in the European Union, as well as the asymmetrical attitude between the two nations including Russian perception of Ukraine as underdeveloped and failed state. The main reason of these intensified relations is the fear of insecurity by the Russian Federation, which finds its roots from its loss of strategic influence on Ukraine.

The constitution of Ukraine enshrines the all-party consensus about European integration as a sole option for Ukraine's regional integration. The EU institutions and member states saw the granting of candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022. In Kyiv, candidate status enhanced the new self-confidence of the government in regard to the outside world and especially towards its Western partners. The EU saw it, however, as a necessary political gesture to a country that was fighting for European values.

Thus, the political buy-in of such a treaty by Ukrainians should be addressed, which is one of the most pressing concerns for the Ukrainian government and its Western partners. Giving up nearly 20% of the territory of Ukraine for the potential peace deal to be agreed upon would create a pushback from the citizens, who will not be able to agree on such a deal, knowing that some of their family members who fought in the war and gave their lives

to it died for nothing, only for Russia to gain the occupied territories. But it is not how it looks strategically. Ukraine was able to preserve itself, and that is the main goal. If I may add my personal insight into public opinion as a Ukrainian having all of my family there, I can see the only thing many families whose fathers and sons are fighting in Ukraine would want is for them to stop and never have to do it again. Because it is very difficult to convey on the pages of this work what you experience when dozens of missiles and hundreds of drones fly into your hometown every day, destroying houses, shops, and streets where you were walking with your parents and friends just yesterday. There is no rationality in fighting back to regain the 1991 border territories till the last drop of blood. If there will be no Ukrainians (particularly the working population and men, many of whom are at the frontline). That is why if a fast victory on the battlefield cannot be achieved, which doesn't seem feasible in any time soon, the least bad option would be the mentioned peace treaty.

At the same time, some scientists hold a fundamentally opposite position. In reality, Ukrainians want peace, just not on Russia's terms. Any settlement that does not involve the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity is unjust and likely unsustainable. It would give Russia an opportunity to re-arm, extracting resources from the newly occupied Ukrainian territories. Russian officials showed no intention of abiding by any potential agreements with Ukraine, reiterating their goal of destroying the Ukrainian nation and state. That can be visible when analysing the Russian military strategy in the beginning of the full-scale invasion, when Russia was trying to take control of Kyiv airport to later take control of the capital and install a puppet government. Since the aggression against Ukraine did not attract widespread opposition within Russia and garnered quite a few enthusiastic supporters, a change in Russian policy seemed improbable as of summer 2024. The continuation of armed resistance against the Russian invasion is Ukraine's only choice².

It is also important to consider that preserving human lives is extremely important. C. Silvestre's article calls on International Relations to turn its view of war around and start not with states, militaries, strategies, conventional security issues or weapons, and not with the common main aim of establishing causes of war. The challenge is to conceptualise war as a subset of social relations of experience, on the grounds that war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied from a down-up approach, from people who experience it in myriad ways and not only from abstract places of International Relations theory. To study war as experience requires that the body comes into focus as a unit that has war agency and is also a prime target of war violence. It also requires exploration of the concept of experience³.

¹Kappeler A. Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial past and Competing Memories. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. 2014. No. 5(2). Pp. 107-115.

²Oksamytna, K. The moral and strategic clarity of supporting Ukraine's self-defense: Why accepting Russian colonialism should remain a taboo. *Environment and Planning C-Politics and Space*. 2024. No. 42 (7). Pp. 1133-1138.

³Sylvestre C. War Experiences/War Practices/War Theory. *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*. 2012. No. 40 (3). Pp. 483-503.

It is undeniably troubling that establishing DMZ would “almost legitimise the occupation” of parts of Ukraine and cement the Kremlin’s control over Ukrainians living in these territories. Yet, the harsh reality is that there may be no less painful path to resolving the war. As a senior official, the Belgian Representative to NATO privately told me, “Ukraine lacks the necessary weapons, and the European member states do not have sufficient stockpiles that can be delivered to Ukraine to make a decisive impact on the battlefield”. Sending costly machinery like fighter jets will be extremely hard to do politically, as many Western European countries lack the broad citizenry support for such political actions.

Another pressing concern is whether neutrality could realistically ensure peace, given Russia’s historical actions. Many people continue to think that the invasion has been provoked by NATO enlargement⁴. However, one has to read Putin’s own 5,000-word poor history published in 2021, where he refuses to accept Ukraine’s existence as an independent state, in order to understand the real picture⁵.

Since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, Russia has consistently sought to assert control over countries within the post-Soviet sphere, particularly those with a shared Slavic identity. Russia’s strategy involves fostering favourable relations with these nations while encouraging them to adopt neutral or even adversarial stances toward the West. This approach became especially evident in the early 2010s, when Russia had fallen behind in its efforts to become a great economic power. Putin seemed to be saying it would become a moral beacon, radiating out to the rest of the world illiberal, conservative values⁶. For countries like Ukraine, this means relentless efforts by Russia to maintain control, either by promoting pro-Russian candidates in domestic politics or, when that fails, by destabilising the country to install a puppet government. This strategy effectively places a “leash” on these nations, ensuring they remain compliant and incapable of aligning with the West.

The fact has to be made clear: Putin is an autocrat who is currently bombing plenty of apartments and civilian targets in Ukraine. The sudden ‘normalisation’ of relations between the two countries is impossible. Firstly, there is a plenty of possibility that the normalised border between the two countries would reproduce new, localised conflicts between the population due to unforgotten grievances that will stem from the war crimes Russia has committed, with the majority of the population not raising the voice of protest to stop the war. From Ukraine’s perspective, the pre-war-like movement of people between the border would create insecurity for Ukraine, perceiving Russia as trying to exert its influence on the population in the eastern part of Ukraine and meddle into Ukraine’s politics and stances on regional integration. While Russia, its government perhaps, is likely to perceive such

normalisation as a threat to national sovereignty and erosion of the traditional anti-‘Gayrope’ views with the influx of liberal views from a “not controlled” Ukraine.

It is a well-established fact that every Russian outrage is likened to some Western perfidy⁷. That is why the post-war accession of Ukraine will inevitably trigger Russia with every step Ukraine takes closer to becoming a member of the EU, just like 10 years earlier. In fact, the view of a number of senior experts from Central and Eastern European countries is that kicking off the possibility of joining NATO by agreeing upon Ukraine being neutral will cut all the possibilities of joining the European Union as well. As ultimately, Russia perceives both organisations negatively in almost the same way.

That is a rationale behind the policy I propose: to keep a finger on the trigger (the idea of a strong Ukraine-Russia border) rather than putting the gun down (normalisation of relations and acceptance of gradual Russian influence through the influx of people, goods, services, and capital). Ukraine would have to define strong, hawkish foreign policy on Russia in order to resist such potential post-war interference. Ukrainians have to be united and brave if they want to preserve their identity, embark on the path of Europeanization, democratisation, and liberalisation, as well as have a good sleep without having to wake up at night due to the possibility of the horrors of 2013-2024 repeating themselves. I propose to cut off all the possible movement between Russia and Ukraine, whether of people, goods, capital, or services, in order for Ukraine to acquire the possibility to stabilise and strengthen itself, as well as join the European Union, without being meddled by Russia right after post-war reality Ukraine would find itself, where it will be vulnerable in geopolitical and strategic terms.

To achieve the proposed plan, Ukraine would have to use all of its diplomatic capabilities to conclude the peace treaty with Russia that mandates troops of a number of European countries and the UK to be stationed at the demilitarised border line from Ukraine’s side and, for instance, of Chinese troops on the Russian side if it were to require so. The DMZ itself is meant to be a non-militarised buffer zone. No troops, heavy weaponry, or permanent military installations are allowed within its boundaries. The detailed feasibility analysis, including cost and logistics for the peacekeeping forces at the border, as well as the question of the width of the DMZ, would have to be evaluated by the relevant specialists. Both Ukraine and its allied troops, as well as Russia and its potential allies, would maintain large numbers of troops in areas just outside the DMZ on their respective sides. These forces will be tasked with monitoring activity and ensuring security along the zone. The UN peacekeeping mission doesn’t necessarily have to station its troops permanently there, but to conduct inspections to monitor adherence to the armistice terms,

⁴ Short P. Putin: His Life and Times. Gloucester: Bodley Head, 2022. 864 p.

⁵ Putin V. On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. 2021. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁶ Short P. Putin: His Life and Times. Gloucester: Bodley Head, 2022. 864 p.

⁷ Baker P. Who Is Vladimir Putin? The New York Times. 2022. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/01/books/review/putin-philip-short.html>.

facilitate negotiations, and oversee limited joint patrols.

Only under such circumstances can Ukraine's neutrality realistically guarantee peace while safeguarding its sovereignty and security after ceding the occupied territories. The proposed DMZ would play a pivotal role in achieving these objectives. I contend that normalising Ukraine-Russia relations to allow for some liberalisation in movement or easing the DMZ would offer no substantive benefits for Ukraine in the near future. Instead, such policies would only pose significant danger to Ukraine, as a future successor to Putin, whoever it may be, is likely to hold a similar worldview.

Conclusions. In conclusion, the establishment of a DMZ as part of a peace treaty between Ukraine and Russia presents both opportunities and significant risks. While such a measure may temporarily halt active hostilities and provide Ukraine with a chance to stabilise, it comes

with the grave danger of legitimising Russian territorial gains and leaving Ukraine vulnerable to future aggression. That is why the need for the presence of the European member states militaries, as well as further security guarantees, is strongly outlined in the article. At the same time, future security agreements should be based on the historical foundations of the development of Ukrainian-Russian relations, awareness of the real aspirations of the Russian side, and its potential future territorial encroachments. Historical patterns and Russia's refusal to recognise Ukraine's sovereignty underscore the challenges of relying on a lasting settlement grounded in neutrality. A potential peace treaty must balance the immediate need to preserve lives and infrastructure with the long-term imperative of safeguarding Ukraine's sovereignty, democratic identity, and aspirations for European integration.

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