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‘The war can only be ended with negotiations’

What will happen next in the Russia-Ukraine war? Peer Teschendorf and Marcel Röthig, FES representatives in Moscow and Kyiv, discuss various scenarios

For months, Russia had been building up its military forces around Ukraine. Yet many were surprised by the attack. Did we misinterpret the signs or did we want to miss them?

Teschendorf: It’s true that the military build-up was very visibly carried out – and it had been clear for some time that Russia could launch an invasion. Nevertheless, many considered this more of a threat to force concessions; or that at most it would be about an annexation of Eastern Ukraine. Many experts – including Russian analysts – assumed that an invasion would be illogical because it would involve enormous costs, especially for Russia. But we were wrong because we assumed that our rationality was also the yardstick of the Russian leadership’s actions. Since the Russian president’s speech on 21 February, it has become clear that emotional and irrational aspects have a strong influence on his decisions. In Europe, we live in a world where we negotiate things, weigh interests and options, and find compromises. We have forgotten to price emotions – such as disappointments, anger, humiliation – as a factor into political action between states. This is actually a civilisational advance. In the current situation, however, this has led to a grave misperception.

Röthig: We assumed for a long time that the worst-case scenario in the conflict could be the creation of military facts in the Donbass: That is, first the recognition of the two separatist regions Donetsk and Luhansk, flanked by so-called peacekeeping forces, as well as the possible expansion of their territories by two-thirds up to the borders of the two districts. At worst, this manoeuvre would be supported by air strikes on military targets throughout the national territory. Nobody in Ukraine, least of all the government, feared that things could get this bad – with an invasion from three sides.

We must learn the lesson that foreign policy decisions are no longer

made based on rational assumptions alone. We have to understand the motives that move some countries in their decision-making, such as striving for spheres of influence and the willingness to pursue these goals militarily if necessary. Previously, we thought that we had left this behind us in the 21st century.

We failed to recognise the early warning signs of this development. One was certainly the military escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh. The fact that a state used military means to change the status quo in its favour was a small prelude to what we are now experiencing in Ukraine.

Were Germany's, France's, and the US's efforts to negotiate doomed to fail from the start – or did we simply offer too little?

Teschendorf: Negotiations are never in vain. Firstly, no one could say for sure whether Russia might not be willing to reach a negotiated settlement. Secondly, it was important to make it clear to everyone that we were ready for serious negotiations. There were relevant issues on the table that would have significantly improved Russia's – and thus Europe's – security situation. And these were just the first steps in the negotiations.

In Russia, too, people noticed that there would have been opportunities for negotiations. Not everyone was happy with the Western reaction, but most would have perceived further negotiations as useful. Therefore, it's difficult to portray the West as a unilaterally aggressive actor internally. This will be the basis on which we can re-enter negotiations at some point – not in the near future, but at some point.

I don't think we could have offered more at this point. It doesn't make sense to me that a justiciable agreement on Ukraine's non-membership would have fundamentally changed anything. Russia constantly accuses the West of breaking its word, but interprets international law quite freely itself. Why should another legal document on Ukraine bring more security? Ultimately, it was a question of influence over Ukraine. But it's not up to us to question the sovereignty of another state. There were simply no other offers possible here.

Röthig: Every crisis and every war can only end with negotiations. The current war, too, can only be ended with negotiations. Otherwise, a development may repeat itself that we want to avoid at all costs, namely that of a second Afghanistan of the 1980s or Iraq in 2003 – only this time at the EU's external border. That would then be a situation in which Western partners supply weapons to the conflict for years and Russia is forced into a war of attrition. That is in

nobody's interest, not Russia's nor the West's – and certainly not Ukraine's.

Negotiations have taken place with considerable intensity in the run-up to the conflict. It was important that Russia was shown the consequences of an escalation in advance. However, Russia did not believe these warnings. It was assumed there that the West would very quickly return to a status quo ante after a military escalation, similar to the experience after the Georgian war in 2008. On the basis of this assumption, Russia made a decision and the threatened consequences have now materialised.

Now we are in a situation where negotiations are taking place again. Even though the Ukrainian and Russian sides came out of the first day of negotiations without results, there are positive signals. The fact that they negotiated for a very long time, that they want to continue negotiating and that they both indicated that they might be able to agree on some points is a good sign. However, it is only step one on a long road to a solution. It is tragic that the war continues in parallel. Nevertheless, it will only be resolved through negotiations.

Negotiations must also continue between Russia and the West. No one has an interest in the sanctions remaining in place forever. Their conditionality – their rapid withdrawal when the war against Ukraine ends – must be clearly communicated. We must not put up all the walls in Europe again and end up with a situation that could then become worse than the Cold War.

Where do we go from here? Is there still a chance for a diplomatic solution?

Teschendorf: Russia has chosen to impose its idea of a European order by force. I don't see how it will be possible in the near future to negotiate with a president who denies other states their right to exist and believes – without any factual basis – that he must carry out denazification in a democratic state. However, it is important to keep in mind that this war is not supported by the Russian people and that there are many experts, journalists, intellectuals who actively speak out against it. This is the basis for being able to resume negotiations in the very distant future and to find a security order that is fair to all. In the short term, the task must be to make it clear that change imposed by force can be neither beneficial nor lasting.

Röthig: From my point of view, there are now two possible scenarios. The first possibility would be a quick agreement between Russia and Ukraine, a compromise that allows both sides to come out of the situation with their faces preserved. For Russia, this would mean that it could consider its declared war goals to have been achieved. On the

one hand, it would include the demilitarisation of Ukraine – which has already been partially achieved through the destruction of a great deal of the country's military potential in recent days. Perhaps this could be combined with a Ukrainian assurance that the military will no longer be upgraded to the same extent, or that no Western military aid will be accepted, or that certain calibre sizes will be dispensed with. On the other hand, it would include Ukraine's renunciation of NATO membership now and in the future. And possibly, giving up some Ukrainian territory or recognising the loss of Crimea.

Nevertheless, this scenario would mean that whoever signs the agreement would come under massive domestic political pressure. If Zelensky remains in office, he would probably be exposed to attacks from the opposition, who would accuse him of selling out Ukraine. We can compare this to the atmosphere in Germany after the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles. It would be a scenario that could spare Ukraine massive bloodshed, but would leave it facing enormous divisions domestically.

In the second scenario, no agreement could be reached because Russia insists on maximum demands that Ukraine simply cannot meet. As a result, there would be a long, bad war of attrition with numerous victims on both sides, with millions of refugees, with a destroyed country and an ever-widening rift between Russia and the West. That is certainly the worst-case scenario.

Of course, completely unexpected developments may still take place. For example, the Minsk Agreement could play a role again. Donetsk and Luhansk would receive special status or Ukraine would be federalised. This would also be practical for Russia, as it would continue to have influence on Ukraine with the two territories.

Many things are still possible in the negotiations. One should never rule out the possibility of a diplomatic solution, even if it can only come about under the condition of still unimaginable concessions by both sides. In the end, Russia cannot have any interest in a growing number of fallen soldiers, an economic collapse, and increasing domestic tensions either.

This interview was conducted by Anja Wehler-Schöck.



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