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28 points later

The EU has deprived itself of a negotiating channel with Russia by rejecting any dialogue with Putin. Now, the fate of Ukraine is in Trump's hands

The 28 points do not amount to peace, nor are they even a plan. Trump's diplomacy has turned the classic negotiation process on its head, presenting European allies in particular with a difficult task. Until now, peace plans were prepared at length and in detail, refined in numerous rounds of discussions between foreign ministries before landing on the decision-makers' desks. The new US administration, on the other hand, initiated a kind of private shortcut diplomacy, which was already applied in Gaza. Negotiators personally authorised by the President agree on something that would correspond to a design study in the automotive industry: an excitingly sketched idea of what the new model could look like.

This sketch is now the subject of a very intense public debate, with key questions remaining unresolved. What the peace design study lacks is a structure for clarifying the often crucial details and for implementation. The extent to which the 28 points can actually pave the way for peace depends on three key aspects: Firstly, there is the question of the extent to which the substance of the design sketch is viable as a starting point for further negotiations. Secondly, it remains to be seen how Europe and Ukraine can help shape the further process and influence it in their favour. And thirdly, the extent to which the Trump administration remains committed to its attempt to bring about peace will be decisive.

Many of the reactions to the 28 points focus on particularly disturbing individual aspects and suspected Russian maximum demands. Taking a cooler view, however, it must be noted that some of the 28 points are highly likely to appear in any future peace plan and thus offer starting points for further negotiations. These include territorial arrangements, security guarantees for Ukraine, the size and armament of the Ukrainian army, the role of NATO, a path to reconstruction, and sanctions against Russia.

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Given the military situation, Ukraine will have no choice but to effectively cede some of its occupied territories to Russia. In return, it needs security guarantees that are as credible as possible. The possibility that the US could be part of these security guarantees, which has so far been only vaguely formulated, is a step forward given Donald Trump's previous positions. The announced strength of the Ukrainian army of 600 000 soldiers is also to be welcomed; after all, the country had only 250 000 under arms before 2022.

When it comes to Ukraine's NATO membership, the positions of the current US administration and Russia coincide. It is therefore not surprising that this option is categorically ruled out here. The ideas for reconstruction using frozen Russian assets plus a substantial European contribution most clearly reflect who came up with these points: the business buddies of the two presidents. For Donald Trump, some kind of profit sharing is key — and if this can be achieved with other people's money, so much the better.

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For Europe and Ukraine, the question now is how to deal with this proposal. The publication of the Russian-American proposals immediately caused outrage and consternation. Frantic diplomacy ensued, and a meeting in Geneva was quickly arranged. The result is apparently a version 2.0 of the 28 points. Europe and Ukraine put on a brave face, describing the proposals as a good starting point for peace, but nevertheless presented a track and changes version with a lot of markup (Merz).

This means that counter-proposals are being formulated in some areas, such as an upper limit of 800 000 soldiers for the Ukrainian army instead of 600 000, or the statement that NATO membership is not feasible at present but is not being ruled out. In addition, the points on sanctions and Russia's reintegration into the global economy are to be formulated in such a way that any concessions can be withdrawn should Russia violate the peace again. Furthermore, Ukraine and its allies are trying to prevent a 'let's forget about it' mentality from prevailing in the prosecution of war crimes. The direct response from Moscow to this is an expected 'net'.

A refusal to engage

Chancellor Merz and his colleagues are plagued by a fundamental problem: all they can do is react, not act. Europe has deprived itself of its own negotiating channel with Russia by rejecting any dialogue with Putin. Nor has it presented a common negotiating position that would be feasible under the current conditions. Or, as Foreign Minister Wadephul frankly puts it in the fourth year of the war: 'But we need time to think about what could be a reliable basis for lasting peace.'

Under these circumstances, it seems rather bizarre that at the same time they want to help shape the conditions for peace. With their refusal to engage, they are making it easy for the US and Russia to neglect Europe or even downgrade it to a mere accomplice in their own deal. Both Putin and Trump tend to underestimate or even despise Europe. From this position, Europeans must deal with the *fait accompli* of the 28 points without appearing to be peace obstructers or offended sourpusses.

The problem here is the unpredictability of the American president, who is also central to a peace agreement. There are fears that if the 28 points fail as a path to peace, or even if they are merely transformed into an orderly but slow bureaucratic process, Trump could throw in the towel. The fate of Ukraine would then be left entirely to Europe — and in the most cynical scenario, the US' economic relations with Russia would be re-established anyway. This would mean losing key levers for a secure future for Ukraine. After all, US involvement in a peace process at least increases the likelihood that Russia will abide by the agreements. In concrete terms, a security guarantee from the US is likely to be viewed differently in Moscow than one from Europe, and sanctions hurt much more when they also include trade with the US.

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So what happens next? Work on the blueprint will continue. Talks between the US and Ukraine will intensify not only over the weekend in Geneva, but also in the coming days. This form of shuttle diplomacy in the public eye is almost ideal for Putin. He can calmly analyse how the individual players are positioning themselves and, above all, how the balance of power is shifting in the decisive location, namely Washington. He has made it clear that, although he is open to peace, he can also continue the war without any problems, as he sees himself on the road to victory.

Europe is in a less comfortable position. Paradoxically, it has so far relied on Donald Trump to negotiate on its behalf. This leaves Europeans with a choice between three bad options.

One possibility is to continue to trust Trump and hope that they will still be able to somehow bring their own positions to bear in Washington. However, a likely solution in which Europe pays and the US profits, while Ukraine remains inadequately secured, would be grist to the mill for European populists. A second option would be to appoint a European special envoy who would represent European interests directly in all further negotiations. However, this would require urgent clarification, and probably heated internal debates, of what Europe actually wants to achieve. The time urged by Foreign Minister Wadephul has largely run out.

The third option for Europe is to sabotage the 28 points to prevent a peace that is unjust from a European perspective.

Ukraine will have to bear the direct consequences of Europe's decisions. For even if the 28 points are heavily and quite rightly criticised, they are still the most serious and realistic attempt to date to end the war while preserving Ukraine's sovereignty.



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