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Moscow's true fears

The current 'peace plan' is less about conflict settlement than about the Kremlin's fears and its desire to control Ukraine

Over the past two weeks, the so-called 28-point peace plan to resolve the Russian-Ukrainian war, which was leaked to the media and reportedly discussed by negotiating teams from various countries, has drawn maximum attention. But after the initial shock and sense of déjà vu – many of its points take us straight back to April 2022 and Moscow's first ultimatums – as well as the debate over whether this plan is a Russian special operation or was actually drafted by US representatives, it is time to look at the long-term implications of the proposals themselves and the details that reveal Moscow's true fears.

The Ukrainian side has long grown accustomed to the fact that Russia's supposed willingness to resume negotiations or propose another 'peace' plan typically appears on the eve of new restrictive measures against Russia, in the hope of delaying US sanctions. This time, the 28 points also emerged amid talk in Congress of new sanctions, including tough measures against the two largest energy companies, Lukoil and Rosneft. And although the US president initially opposed this pressure tactic, the Kremlin's repeated delays in agreeing to a ceasefire and in negotiations effectively strengthened Trump's resolve.

But Moscow's concerns run much deeper.

What does Moscow fear?

Despite shifting the economy onto a war footing, boosting growth through investment in the military sector and numerous social payments that have altered the socio-economic behaviour of certain regions, economists are already detecting the onset of recession, declining purchasing power and a gradual downturn in the metallurgical, banking and other sectors. The lack of cheap international borrowing, foreign investment and advanced technologies has its inevitable – albeit not immediate – effect. It was therefore hardly surprising to see once again

demands for 'Russia's reintegration into the global economy and the lifting of sanctions', even if Moscow repeatedly states that sanctions do not work.

What was more surprising was a demand for Russia's 'return to the G8', an influential yet informal forum of the world's leading economies. Moscow has repeatedly stressed the growing importance of groupings such as BRICS, in contrast to what it describes as the declining practical value and economic weight of the G7, dismissing the latter as useless. Yet G8 membership – like participation in other international formats or high-level summits – holds strong symbolic value for the Kremlin leader, confirming Russia's status and place among the great powers. And it is great powers, in his view, that should decide the fate of the world order, while countries like Ukraine can be ignored.

The second set of 'fears' relates directly to the security sphere. Attempts to limit the size of the Ukrainian armed forces, or the types of weapons and how they may be used, are a tacit acknowledgement of their effectiveness. They also show that should Russia wish to continue the war or strike European partners, Ukraine and the experience of its armed forces would become a crucial asset for defence. Normally, such restrictions are imposed on an aggressor state after it loses a war. There are instances of mutual limitations adopted by warring parties as part of a compromise settlement. But it is hard to find another case in history where the victim of aggression is unilaterally required to reduce its defence capabilities. There is, however, an answer to this — especially regarding long-range missiles.

Ukraine already has the capacity to strike deep into Russian territory.

Until recently, Ukraine was almost entirely dependent on its Western allies for long-range weaponry. This allowed Moscow to play on fears of escalation and dangle the prospect of negotiations to discourage Washington and European partners from supplying long-range missiles to Ukraine or granting permission to use them against targets on Russian territory. With active development of Ukrainian missiles such as Neptune and Flamingo, it has become clear that, given adequate funding, Ukraine already has the capacity to strike deep into Russian territory — and that these capabilities will only improve. And with domestically produced missiles, Ukraine would hardly need its partners' permission to choose targets. In this, Moscow is losing one of its levers of

influence.

Another fear is accountability for war crimes committed by Russian soldiers and officials during the aggression and occupation. Hence the appearance of the clause stating that 'both sides will receive full amnesty for actions during the war'. And although most Russian representatives may believe their guilt still needs to be proven – and they are hardly eager to travel to Europe, where they could be arrested – the psychological impact should not be underestimated. For Russia, narratives comparing current events with the Second World War – the Great Patriotic War – are extremely important, primarily in domestic political messaging. Russian rhetoric essentially paints a picture in which Ukraine is cast as the axis of evil (Nazis), Russians are liberators and descendants of the victors, and the war itself is portrayed almost as liberatory. This narrative is completely at odds with the fact that there is an international arrest warrant for the head of state, President Vladimir Putin, and for the Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova. The prospect of an international tribunal against the 'victors' and 'liberators' also contradicts the carefully crafted myth about the Russian–Ukrainian war.

Yet despite these fears, the so-called peace plan is riddled with blatant repetitions of Russia's long-standing demands: recognition of the occupation of Ukrainian territories, elections, Ukraine's NATO membership and the Alliance's overall enlargement, and the familiar calls (ongoing since at least 2009) for a new European security architecture, and so on.

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Further discussions, negotiations with the US side and even the reduction of the plan from 28 to 19 points represent only a partial victory for Ukraine. The problem is that Russia continues to control the discourse around the causes of the war and potential solutions. If even Ukraine's biggest ally – the United States – increasingly talks about the possibility of Russia seizing additional territory or about Ukraine never regaining temporarily occupied areas, then it matters little whether such demands are recognised de jure or de facto in a final agreement. Instead of discussing how Ukraine can reclaim these territories, what resources are needed to prevent further Russian advances, and how Moscow should be punished for the crime of aggression, we are allowing a discussion of options for 'rewarding' Russia with control over

occupied territories or with the right to influence the future of the North Atlantic Alliance.

It is striking how readily some European and American experts have begun to accept that territorial concessions by Ukraine are somehow basic and inevitable. Questions of international law and the long-term consequences – both for other territories in Europe and many countries worldwide, as well as Russia's potential claims against other EU member states – are for some reason being ignored. Likewise, demands to abandon the idea of fair punishment for the aggressor, including for war crimes, or to cede control over a nuclear power plant, set dangerous precedents for other regions of the world seeking to normalise similar behaviour.

The pattern of Russian demands has remained virtually unchanged over the past three years. It is important to understand that, regardless of the situation on the battlefield, Russia's demands for a peace settlement will only grow – and at times become absurd – because this opens opportunities for bargaining. In such circumstances, there is a high risk that the international community will focus on responding to secondary demands, while Russia will agree to 'compromise' by dropping them in order to preserve its core points. The result could be not a just peace, but a de facto victory for Moscow dressed up as 'compromise'.



Hanna Shelest
Odesa

Dr Hanna Shelest is editor-in-chief of *UA: Ukraine Analytica* and heads the security policy department at the Ukrainian think tank Ukrainian Prism.