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No peace without a military victory

Real negotiations will only begin again when both Russia and Ukraine conclude that there is more to be gained from a truce than from fighting on

Russia has been at war with Ukraine for more than 10 months, with no end in sight and with just as little prospect for direct negotiations between the warring parties. These were last broken off mutually on 17 May 2022. Since then, there have been repeated calls in Germany, whether in opinion articles or open letters, for more diplomatic efforts to end the hostilities. Such calls were often combined with demands for the federal government to cease arms deliveries to Ukraine: when all is said and done, peace is achieved not with arms, but with a truce, the argument goes. And continuing the war with the already unrealistic goal of a Ukrainian victory and the recapture of all the territory occupied by Russia would only mean useless bloodshed. These calls are all too understandable given the horrific images of suffering and destruction that reach us daily from Ukraine. Even so, it would be wrong right now to urge Ukraine to negotiate – or even give up parts of its territory and the people living there.

Surely, no one wants the guns to go silent more than the Ukrainians themselves. They are the victims of this war. It is their hospitals, kindergartens and schools that have been destroyed by Russian missiles and drone attacks. Many have lost their homes. When the air raid sirens sound, it is they who sit in the shelters and who go without heating, electricity or running water, often for hours or days on end. The exact number of soldiers who have died at the front is unknown; US estimates put the count at up to 100,000. And yet, the Ukrainian government wants to continue the fight against the Russian aggressor – and only negotiate directly with Russia if and when the Kremlin first answers for its war crimes before an international tribunal and withdraws all troops from Ukraine, including from the illegally annexed areas. In this, the government is supported by the vast majority of the Ukrainian population.

Putin wants total control of Ukraine

It is clear to the Ukrainians that the Russian President Vladimir Putin is not interested in finding a way for a secure coexistence with a sovereign and independent Ukraine that can determine its own future. He wants it gone. In his view, today's Ukraine is nothing more than a 'colony with a puppet regime', an externally controlled and hostile 'anti-Russia', set up against the 'real cultural, economic and social interests of the people and the true sovereignty of Ukraine'. For Putin, Ukraine and Russia are 'one people'. A Ukraine that is independent of Russia and wants to open up to Europe along the lines of its central European neighbours is unacceptable because it calls into question the very foundations of the Russian imperium, which Putin is determined to prevent from falling apart.

The repeatedly expressed assumptions that Russia is ultimately only concerned with preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, or only has geographic interests in the Donbas, are wrong. In truth, Moscow wants Ukraine to relinquish much more: its freedom, its identity, its self-determination, its culture. The destruction of Ukrainian life, Ukrainian art and Ukrainian statehood, together with repressions – from murder to rape to abduction – in the occupied territories are clear demonstrations of this.

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So far, there is no reason to believe that Putin's thinking has changed in recent months. On the contrary, with every further step, Putin makes clear that he is not ready to make concessions. Although he and other members of the Russian government regularly mention the word 'negotiations', they have so far not presented a concrete option. As recently as the end of December 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeated the call for the 'demilitarisation and denazification' of Ukraine and described the illegally annexed areas of Ukraine as Russia's 'new territories'. Clearly, Putin has not abandoned his goal of complete political control over the country but has merely adjusted his approach and timeline. Because Russia was not militarily successful, the devastating airstrikes on the Ukrainian civilian population and the energy infrastructure are now intended to break the population's will to resist and to wear down the country – until

Russia is able to launch a new offensive in the spring.

Putin is also counting on the fact that the western supporter states – also under pressure from their populations – will soon tire and run out of weapons, ammunition and money for Kyiv. If the West were now to press for a ceasefire or peace negotiations, perhaps with the threat that it would otherwise end support for Ukraine, that would signal to the Kremlin that its method is working and that all it has to do is wait until we lose patience. So far, none of the advocates of an imminent ceasefire have been able to convincingly explain how Putin can be persuaded to make concessions without exerting further military pressure on him.

Preventing Russia from dictating peace

We Germans, in particular, have for years been repeating the mantra that 'there is no military solution' to this or that conflict. Unlike Vladimir Putin: in Georgia, the Crimea and Syria, he has learned that he can very successfully use military force to achieve his political goals. In the current conflict, therefore, only Ukraine's military successes prevent such a dictated peace from happening. In other words, Russia must first be stopped and pushed back militarily before there can be any chance of real diplomacy. It's about enabling Ukraine to hold its own against the Russian invasion and showing Putin that even a new military offensive in the spring has no chance of succeeding – and that this won't change over time.

The West itself has a paramount interest in Putin not making any gain from his war of aggression. His ambitions are a danger to all of Europe. If he gets away again with using force and nuclear blackmail to bring parts of another state under his control, this invites repetition elsewhere, be it by Russia or another state. The goal of an overall revision of the European security order, which is essential for peace and prosperity also here in Germany, was announced by Russia in the treaty texts of December 2021.

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The decision by Germany, the US and France to now also supply Ukraine with armoured personnel carriers and reconnaissance vehicles is therefore logical. It emphasises that the major military powers of the West will not force Ukraine into an unacceptable deal with Russia. Of course, the danger of escalation must always be kept in mind when providing military support. However, the reactions after missiles

fell on the Polish-Ukrainian border in particular has shown that the West is aware of this and is reacting prudently and is capable of risk management.

Real negotiations will only begin again when both Russia and Ukraine come to the conclusion that there is more to be gained from a truce than from fighting on. Perhaps the cards will be reshuffled after spring — if the 'hot autumn' and the 'winter of fury' in Europe fail to materialise, if the western democracies continue to stand firmly on the side of Ukraine and if a new Russian offensive proves unsuccessful. What is certain is that any negotiations and compromises will reflect the resulting balance of power between the parties. Our goal must therefore be to get Ukraine ready as well as possible for this point in time and to prepare together with Kyiv for the moment when the window for diplomacy indeed opens.



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