

ISSUES AROUND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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This paper has grown out of a series of informal discussions on issues surrounding the war in Ukraine within a small group of academics, think-tankers, and former EU and national officials. The group included, apart from the author of this article, Jean-Louis De Brouwer (Director of the European Affairs Programme at the Egmont Institute), Nicole Dewandre (Senior Associate Fellow at the Egmont Institute), Tom Saver (Professor in International Politics, Universiteit Antwerpen), Philippe Van Parijs (Philosopher, UCLouvain and KU Leuven), Edouard Xia (Researcher at the Institute of Political Science Louvain-Europe (UCLouvain), and two other colleagues who prefer not to be named. The author writes here in a personal capacity. The views expressed do not commit TEPSA nor the TEPSA Secretariat in any way.

The war has now raged for more than three years and causes immense suffering and destruction. It jeopardises security in Europe and creates new divisions. All members of the group agreed on the need for the EU to bring its contribution to ending this war. But opinions diverged on how to achieve that aim. In this summary of our discussions, I present the divergences and commonalities in a fair and objective manner with the objective of contributing to a much-needed public debate of the main questions arising from the war in Ukraine.

On the origins of the war

This war, like any war, has roots in past developments. It helps to remember where we come from. Not to settle old scores, but to

better understand the underlying problems and the realities of today, and to draw lessons for the future. (This is what the Western leaders did after WWII when they decided not to repeat the errors of Versailles after WWI). If one follows the debate in Europe there are two conflicting theories:

- After 1989, the West missed the opportunity to integrate Russia into the global system as a trusted ally. By raising early on [1] the idea of extending NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia, the Americans signalled to Russia that it still considered it as a potential enemy. This then turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The handling of the negotiations on a trade agreement with Ukraine compounded the problem because it amounted to asking Ukraine to choose between Russia and the EU.
- Ever since his arrival to power in 2000 Putin has tried to reconstitute a sphere of influence around the new borders of Russia. This has gone together with a gradual return to an autocratic regime internally stifling democracy and debate. Over the years the rhetoric against Ukraine has become ever more hostile and in fact amounts to denying a Ukrainian identity.

Lessons to be drawn

There are arguments to support either theory. No side can ex post prove that they were right. The truth lies somewhere in-between. The most important thing today is to draw the right lessons for the future.

- The first is that it is important to understand the security concerns of the other side. Those concerns may be ill-founded in our view; we do not consider that NATO would ever have attacked Russia. But the Russian perception, partly based on the hostile rhetoric used by various EU and NATO

[1] Talk about this started already in some circles in the US, in 1997, at a time when Russia was a member of the G8, and no one had heard of Putin!

members, was that it could have happened. Another observation in this context: the European decision to cut off all dialogue with Putin and his government (at least at the EU level!) was a mistake. The attempt in 2021 by Merkel and Macron to organise a summit with Putin was thwarted by some other Member States. It is impossible to assert that this would have prevented disaster from happening. But there should have been at least an attempt at a dialogue.

- The second is to be watchful of what the other side does on the ground and in its argumentation. The behaviour of Russia in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should have raised alarm bells earlier than it did. The events in 2014 signalled a crossing of the Rubicon by Putin. Putin's imperialist speech in 2021 should have provoked a stronger reaction. The rhetoric about a "fascist" government in Ukraine and the wide-spread rhetoric denying a distinct Ukrainian identity cannot be left unanswered because it will make any potential peace deal unstable.

How to put an end to this war?

We all agree that the war should be ended as quickly as possible. Some of us think that any initiative to do so should be welcomed and that any solution is better than continuing the bloodshed; they argue that the reality of the battlefield is such that Ukraine has nothing to gain from continuing the fight. In that sense they consider the Trump initiative positive, especially since the EU, apart from calling for "staying the course," has not produced any coherent position of its own to reach a cease-fire and a peace deal.

Others contest this point. They argue that while the new US administration's attempts to move things to get out of the impasse are indeed welcome, the way this has been done up till now is wrong and dangerous. By offering Putin unreserved support for all his demands from the outset, Washington has opened a Pandora's box; the grab for Ukrainian minerals by the Americans also leaves a bitter taste. They also warn against a bilateral deal between Trump and Putin without direct involvement of Ukraine and indeed the EU. The concern here is that a cease-fire cobbled together under those circumstances will not hold anyway. And if it did, it would mean de facto the disappearance of Ukraine as an independent state.

This is a substantial disagreement. But there is agreement on the following key points:

- The EU and Europeans must keep supporting Ukraine. Some members of the group consider that however big the challenges the EU should accelerate the accession process, while others are sceptical in this respect.
- The EU (together with the UK^[2] and other European countries as well as with Canada) should develop its own ideas for a cease-fire and a peace deal and take this to the various parties; it is not good enough to criticise the US approach without offering an alternative.
- The EUCO should ask those it mandates to talk to Zelensky, Trump and Putin to use as their starting points the general principles set out in the declaration on Ukraine adopted on 6 March 2024.^[3] It should then work on a more detailed proposal with ideas for putting an end to this war.

[2] To be noted: the summit between the EU and the UK on 19 May is an important moment in terms of their cooperation on security and defence.

[3] Declaration at 26, paragraph 4: "... a) there can be no negotiations on Ukraine without Ukraine; b) there can be no negotiations that affect European security without Europe's involvement. Ukraine's, Europe's, transatlantic and global security are intertwined; c) any truce or ceasefire can only take place as part of the process leading to a comprehensive peace agreement; d) any such agreement needs to be accompanied by robust and credible security guarantees for Ukraine that contribute to deterring future Russian aggression; e) peace must respect Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity." (Doc EUCO 10/25 of 6 March 2025)

- The EU should also offer to the US to set up a working group of Senior officials between the EU and the US[4] to work on ideas. Washington may not accept this, but the offer should be made.
- The EU should conduct an active diplomacy with other global players.

How to look at security in Europe in a medium-term perspective?

Any cease-fire or peace deal needs to be embedded into a longer-term strategy. This requires two things:

- Security guarantees for Ukraine. This is a delicate issue. All lessons should be drawn from the failure of Minsk II. A NATO operation is out of the question. An operation comprised of troops from NATO members only will also be problematic. A mix of troops including troops from third countries can be a solution, with a UNSC mandate. The efforts to find a solution to this dilemma spear-headed by President Macron and Prime Minister Starmer are very welcome.
- A reflection on a future European security architecture including Russia. If there is a workable and fair peace deal, there is no reason to insist on keeping Russia as an eternal adversary.[5] This provides a transition to our next question.

What to think about re-arming Europe?

The immediate response to the present crisis has been a significant move towards a much stronger European and EU involvement in defence matters. This primarily concerns the creation of a European defence industry, but the debate now also includes more fundamental questions about NATO and the delicate issue of nuclear deterrence without the US. In our discussions, varying positions were expressed in this regard.

Some argued that this was a natural and necessary move in view of the emerging multipolar world. They pointed out that the Americans had for a long time asked the Europeans to do more for their own defence (especially since the pivot towards Asia under Obama). This would strengthen the joint defence. But it would also be a reinsurance policy in case the Americans really stop caring about European security and diminish or stop their participation in NATO. In view of the present relations with Russia, there is also in their view a need to quickly ensure that Europe (including the UK and Norway) can defend itself against a Russian attack.

Others were more critical about this turn of events. First, they fear that a massive arms-build up will signal to Russia that Europe sees them as a permanent enemy and that it does not believe in the possibility of building a new security structure including Russia. They also fear that a heavily armed Europe will one day be tempted to start other wars. And finally, they point to the financing problems and the

[4] This would be just between the EU and the US. The EU is in constant contact with Ukraine.

[5] In the early nineties, there was a special relationship between NATO and Russia. This could have led to NATO becoming a kind of European security structure. This did not happen, for reasons well explained in Mary E. Sarotte, "Not one Inch: America, Russia, and the making of Post-Cold War Stalemate." Yale University Press, 2011.

risk that defence expenditure will crowd out social and cohesion and education expenditure because of the tight debt situation across Europe.

The positions are apart. But common ground can be found around the following elements:

- Europe must strengthen its own defence. This is true even if the relationship with the US remains one of partnership and an alliance. It is even truer if that is not the case.
- That does not mean that Europe should go full steam ahead with a massive military build-up. Presently, the expenditure of the EU MS plus Norway, Turkey and UK reaches almost five hundred billion euros annually, and the trend is upwards. This is roughly four times the (strained) Russian budget.[6] The first priority should be to better use that money, by building a European-wide industry, ensuring joint procurement, pooling and sharing, reducing the number of competing arms systems, and working on the areas where Europe is presently dependent on the US.
- Europe has a strong social security and health system. This is one of our key assets. It is part of our DNA. It would be folly to scupper that for a massive build-up in arms.
- Concerning NATO: an abrupt collapse of NATO would create problems in the short term. But Europeans should strengthen their presence in NATO immediately (EU or European pillar?). And prepare for a more substantial change if Washington limits its participation or stops it. The question here is whether there are ways for the Europeans to “take over” the NATO structures. But this question will also depend on whether it is possible to establish a joint European security architecture with Russia.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine brings huge suffering and is a factor of instability in Europe and globally. It is in the vital interest of the EU and the other European countries that it stops. This means talking to all the parties concerned, including Russia. The declaration on Ukraine adopted at 26 on 6 March lists key principles that guide the action of the EU and serve as its starting points for the talks. The Europeans must be more active, more present, and more imaginative and set out their own ideas for peace and the future shape of the continent. The EU needs to build political strength in the current context. Uniting to help ending this war would go a long way.

[6] Tusk: « How is it possible that 500 million European ask 340 million Americans to protect them against 140 million Russians? »

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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