Discussion Article

Imagining peace and producing knowledge about the war in Ukraine

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Abstract

After two and half years of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, experts around Europe are increasingly tempted to picture peace in Ukraine and security in post-war Europe. Peace researchers have a few useful principles to guide the way. The legacy of Johan Galtung proposes that not just any peace is better than conflict. The kind of peace that is suitable should be defined by those affected by the conflict. To support the emerging debate, this discussion article asks, what do we know about what peace means for Ukrainians? The answer is not that much. Debates about peace and security in Europe have long sidelined perspectives from the 'periphery' and Ukrainian voices continue to be dismissed despite the on-going war. Moscow's perspective, in contrast, has historically been influential in shaping European debates, manifested in the silent acceptance of Russian imperialism in its self-described sphere of interest. This discussion article proposes that in order to leave behind the European security order that enabled Russia's aggression in the first place, the perspective of the 'peripheries' should be placed at the forefront of imagining future peace and security in Europe.

Keywords

Ukraine, peace, European security order

Introduction

After two and half years of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, experts around Europe are increasingly tempted to picture peace in Ukraine and security in post-war Europe. The legacy of the father of Nordic peace studies Johan Galtung warns that we are entering a dangerous period: *"[f]ew words are so often used and abused - perhaps, it seems, because 'peace' serves as a means of obtaining verbal consensus - it is hard to be all-out against peace"* (Galtung, 1969, p. 167).

Just weeks before the "Summit on Peace" organised in support of Ukraine in Switzerland, the aggressor Russia signalled that it would be in favour of a ceasefire in Ukraine. A debate followed among Ukraine's supporters on whether Russian President Vladimir Putin actually seeks peace or has hidden motivations. Since February 2022, no single day has passed without a new European news piece analysing Putin's objectives, red lines and minimum requirements for the outcome of the war. At the same time, there has been surprisingly little interest towards the Ukrainian goals, minimum requirements, red lines or vision for peace.

There are not many shared principles among peace researchers, but the concept of 'local ownership' is widely accepted. It suggests that any process towards peace should be based on the analysis and understanding of peace in the local context, and the process – including means, timetable, priorities – should be planned by the people experiencing and involved in the armed conflict (see e.g., Leonardsson and Rudd, 2015; Höglund and Fjelde, 2011; Ljungkvist and Jarstad, 2021). Imagining peace in Ukraine with a focus on analysing Russia's point of view provides an unsustainable starting point for the debate.

According to Ukrainian authors, the Ukrainian perspective continues, however, to be missing from debates about peace in Ukraine. This continues a trend in which the perspective from the 'peripheries' has been sidelined in European debates about peace and security in Europe (Kurylo, 2023; Oksamytna, 2023; Khromeychuk, 2022; Sonevytsky, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Kazharski, 2022). Studies of Eastern Europe in particular have been influenced by Russia's imperial perspective (e.g., Lehti, 2023). This asymmetry has had concrete consequences since production of knowledge is not disconnected from policymaking. Aligned with the bias of knowledge production, the European security architecture predating the war was based on arrangements between the centres instead of reflecting the point of view of the neighbourhood in between.

This discussion article aims to contribute to the emerging academic and expert debate about peace in Ukraine and security order in Europe by discussing, firstly, the lack of Ukrainian perspective in the debate, and secondly, by providing an elementary introduction to that perspective by reviewing recent Ukrainian literature and commentary. The discussion article echoes the proposal of many Ukrainian and other authors that to leave behind the European security order that enabled Russia's aggression in the first place, the perspective of the 'peripheries' should be placed at the centre of imagining peace and security in Europe from now on.

Knowledge about Russia's war against Ukraine

According to Ukrainian and other scholars, the academic production of knowledge about Russia's war on Ukraine has been characterised by epistemic imperialism, 'Westplaining', and the exclusion of Ukrainian perspectives (Kurylo, 2023; Oksamytna, 2023; Khromeychuk, 2022; Sonevytsky, 2022; Hendl, 2022; Kazharski, 2022). Panel discussions and debates about the war continue to be organised without a Ukrainian expert or even a 'Ukraine expert' (Khromeychuk, 2022; Hendl, 2022). Ukrainians

have had "to fight not only Russian troops but also the toxic spell of its imperial knowledge" (Riabchuk, 2023, p. 4). At the same time, Ukraine has lost seven percent of its scientists because of the war (de Rassenfosse, Murovana and Uhlbach, 2023).

Kurylo (2023) identifies several hierarchies that shape the production of knowledge about the war: one between Europe's East and West, one between the elite and the everyday, and one between the objective and subjective. According to Hendl (2022), people from the "East" have long been framed as irrational, paranoid or biased when speaking about Russia in comparison to the noble, rational and impartial Western experts. Oksamytna (2023) notes that Ukrainians' access to global academic dialogues was already limited before the war due the hierarchies of international academia. During the war, academia was selective in terms of what type of argumentation it welcomed into the debate, and too often Ukrainians were perceived as "warmongers" if supporting military resistance to the aggression (Oksamytna, 2023, p. 679).

Several Ukrainian researchers, experts and other professionals have brought up the traumatising experiences and pressure from their well-meaning Western colleagues to cooperate with Russian experts, artists or citizens on (grass-root level) projects related to the war (see e.g., Dostlieva and Dostliev, 2022). Glybchenko (2023) highlights that such "(neo-)colonial/imperial interactions" happen without real consent and compromise the security of the "colonized" (p. 3). One example of the problem emerged among feminist circles when international feminists published an anti-war manifesto (Smyth et al, 2022) that fully sidelined the Ukrainian perspective in not attributing accountability of the war to the perpetrator and pushing aside Ukraine's right to self-defense (Hendl, 2022). Kurylo (2023) believes that the reason for international feminists' lack of support is that they fail to recognise agency that does not follow fixed conceptions in critical IR (p. 687). Hendl, in contrast, wonders whether the Western feminists do not see Ukrainians as deserving of the same standards of living, freedom and self-determination as Western feminists (2022, p. 67).

The asymmetry in the production of knowledge is not only theoretical but has material consequences. Many believe the current war to be one such consequence. Gorodnichenko and others suggest that had there been better understanding about the region before the war (not overly Russia centric), it could have been avoided. "[K]nowledge is power. This includes the power to prevent wars by knowing who is capable of what, what to expect, and what is at stake." (Gorodnichenko et al, 2022, n.p.). Now, the biased understanding about the region and the war is materialising in the calls for peace negotiations. Riabchuk (2023) argues that negotiations are mostly called for by people that do not know Ukraine, Russia or the region.

Why is there a lack of knowledge of Ukraine in academia? Khromeychuk (2022) points out that the lack of Ukraine expertise is particularly striking considering that Ukraine is the largest country in Europe. Mälksoo (2022) suggests that the lack of interest towards studying Ukraine's history has been linked to the legacy of Russian imperialism that has led many westerners to not differentiate between Ukrainian and Russian subjectivity. Sonevytsky (2022) argues that academic debate around Ukraine has been characterised by "epistemic imperialism", namely the "hubris of believing that what one knows or studies from a privileged perspective, as within the Anglophone academy, can be exported wholesale to contexts about which one knows little or nothing" (Sonevysky, 2022, p. 22).

As a result, the war-time debate about Ukraine and the war has been shaped by 'Westplaining' by scholars and experts from Western centres, while the Ukrainian view of Russian imperialism in the region has been marginalised (Sonevytsky, 2022). Kazharski (2022) defines 'Westplaining' as "speaking without sufficient expertise but from a position of authority, often making false projections and assumptions that are based on the Western experience but are not necessarily relevant to the

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region in question" (n.p.; see also Smoleński and Dutkiewicz, 2022). 'Westplaining' has manifested as Russo-centrism, in applying the same structural theories in any context (Kazharski, 2022), considering Nato's expansion the main reason for the war, or seeing Russia's security concerns as relevant but not the rest of Eastern Europe's (Smoleński and Dutkiewicz, 2022).

Defining peace by Ukrainian authors

It is not possible to undertake a systematic review of Ukrainian thinking around peace in this discussion article, and my position as a non-Ukrainian author sets limitations on the comprehensiveness of the review, not least the language barrier. In this section, I aim, however, to highlight at least some key arguments and observations made by Ukrainian researchers, authors, activists and political actors about the current war and path to peace, including President Zelenskyy's peace plan. As mentioned in the previous section, these observations should be interpreted in a context where the war-time circumstances, previous limitations in access to international academia, and the war-time phenomena such as 'Westplaining' complicate the work of Ukrainian authors and experts. To make the perspective inclusive, I do not limit the review to peer-reviewed articles, and, while many of the referenced authors are scholars, I also reference other relevant agents for peace in Ukraine.

Yurchenko (2023, n.p.): "The peace demanded is violence", and hence Ukrainians need to define their own peace[1]

The above quote highlights that not just anything served as 'peace' means peace for Ukrainians. Riabchuk (2023) argues that the current calls for peace in Ukraine are not motivated by empathy for the victims of the war but rather by the negative effects that the war has on the global economy, prices and supply chains. Yurchenko (2023) highlights that the peace proposed for Ukraine could mean the continuation of the genocide of Ukrainians in occupied territories and rid Ukrainians of their collective identity. Ukrainian authors are afraid that the foreign proposals for peace in Ukraine are affected by Russian narratives and propaganda, framing events and developments based on imperial knowledge (Riabchuk, 2023).[2]

In general, Ukrainian analyses of the war advise against simplifying the conflict into a territorial question (e.g., Riabchuk, 2023). International supporters of Ukraine should not expect to know what Ukrainians consider an acceptable solution to the conflict but to expect unexpected answers (Oliynyk, 2023). It should not only be the elites that are consulted when trying to understand what peace and war mean for Ukrainians. Kurylo (2023) points out that the perspective of Ukrainians located far from the "presumed centres of power" (p. 688) is particularly easily sidelined. She proposes bringing the everyday experiences and mundane wartime practices of Ukrainians to the centre of knowledge production about the war. Without analysing mundane experiences such as children's wartime drawings, looted homes or other "everyday material horrors", part of the catastrophe remains uncovered (Kurylo, 2023).

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1 The cited author is a Ukrainian political economist: at the beginning of her analysis, she notes: "Being a political economist, activist, feminist, ecosocialist and a Ukrainian who was in the country when the war started informs my following comments" (n.p.).

2 One particular point of view to Ukrainian ownership of their peace is that of "peace-tech" suitable to support the peace process. According to Glybchenko (2023), peace-tech developed in other contexts does not necessarily meet the needs for peace in Ukraine: it has often focused on facilitating dialogue, while in the Ukrainian context, for instance, virtual reality solutions for connecting with allies, the modeling of destroyed cultural artefacts or virtually conveying the everyday experience of the war to foreign audiences come into question.

Riabchuk (2023, p. 4): "all the war crimes and crimes against humanity should be properly investigated and criminals brought to court, and all the due reparations should be paid by the aggressor state" [3]

For the time being, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's peace formula can be consulted as one particularly legitimate Ukrainian proposal for peace in Ukraine. Zelenskyy continues to enjoy popularity among the Ukrainian population[4] and his peace proposal is positively or neutrally acknowledged in Ukrainian sources[5]. Zelenskyy's formula defines peace broadly. It not only concerns the restoration of the nation state's territorial integrity, but also addresses several other topics that deal with the foundations of a peaceful, secure and prosperous life for citizens in Ukraine and abroad: nuclear safety, food security, energy security, the release of prisoners and the protection of the environment, among others (Official Website of the President of Ukraine, 2022; BRAND Ukraine and the MFA of Ukraine, 2023).

A key characteristic of President Zelenskyy's peace formula is the call for "just" peace, in comparison to "any" peace, insisting that war crimes need to be investigated and punished, and Russia needs to compensate for the damage caused by the war (Official website of the President of Ukraine, 2022; BRAND Ukraine and the MFA of Ukraine, 2023). In comparison, China's peace formula proposes that any peace in Ukraine should be supported by the international community (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

The same principle of "just" peace is repeated in researchers' and activists' accounts (e.g., Pigul et al, 2022; Yurchenko, 2023). Many argue that had Russia been punished for its violations in 2014, the current war could have been avoided (Zabuzhko, 2022). Yurchenko (2023) and Bilous (2022) particularly criticise the Western "anti-war" Left for failing to hold Russia accountable for its violence and crimes in Ukraine: "With this kind of 'left', how is one to fight for social justice?" (Yurchenko 2023, n.p.).

Pigul et al. (2022, n.p.): "[T]he essential difference between violence as a means of oppression and as a legitimate means of self-defense" [6]

The appeal by Pigul and others (2022) is part of a manifesto by Ukrainian feminists that responds to and criticises a previous international "Feminist Resistance Against War manifesto" (Smyth et al., 2022) for denying Ukrainians their right to self-defence. The perspective is central in Ukrainian analyses on the war: Ukraine does not have the "luxury" of opting for pacifism – it is an option that one cannot afford under an imperialist invasion (Yurchenko, 2023). Ukraine's military resistance is in line with international law and agreements, while Russia's objectives breach the same legal framework (Riabchuk, 2023).

It seems important for many Ukrainian authors to highlight that Ukrainians are not motivated to fight

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3   The cited author is a Ukrainian political analyst and scholar who has extensively covered nation-building, postcommunist transition, nationalism and Eastern European politics in his books and articles.

4   The current postponing of presidential elections is widely accepted and considered necessary by Ukrainians (Haran, 2023, p. 37). At the same time, there are previous experiences of Zelenskyy reshaping powers in favor of his presidential administration in non-war circumstances (Minakov, 2022), which advises against over-simplifying his legitimacy.

5   See e.g., "Call from the expert community for broad and high-level participation in the inaugural Peace Summit" (Maksak, 2024); Krupenya and Tututchenko (2023); Maksak (18.6.2024), Vyshnevsky, Y. (18.6.2024); Sydorenko (5.6.2024); Freedom (16.1.2024). Texty.org.ua (15.11.2022).

6   The cited author is a Ukrainian activist and a member of the NGO "Social Movement". The cited "manifesto" in which she is the first signatory has already been signed by 893 people and 73 organizations, including a great number of Ukrainian researchers (Oksana Dutchak, Oksana Potapova and Daria Saburova on the top of the list), journalists, artists, activists and other experts as well as non-Ukrainian contributors.

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because the US is asking for it. Such interpretations deny Ukrainian agency and mock the sacrifices that Ukrainians make to "live in a free country" (Kukharskyy et al, 2022). The right international contextualisation for Ukraine's self-defence is that of "history of genocide, cultural oppression, and constant denial of the right to self-determination" (ibid, n.p.; see also Perepelytsia, 2023).

On the other hand, the ability of Ukrainians to defend themselves depends on international military support. Many Ukrainians hold their international supporters accountable for making the defence effort difficult (e.g., Soldodkyy, 2024; Zabuzhko, 2022). "[E]very coffee break you are taking during your discussions about how to interfere without provoking Putin to go further, costs someone's life" (Zabuzhko, 2022, n.p.). Ukraine's right to pursue NATO membership is interpreted in the context of the right to self-defence: a sovereign nation can make alliances to defend itself and this right cannot be denied from it by agreements between foreign state leaders (Kukharskyy et al, 2022).

Solodkyy (2024, np.): *"negotiations may not solve but increase challenges — or simply postpone them".*[7]

Many Ukrainian authors highlight that Ukraine has tried to resolve the conflict through negotiation. The negotiation process for peace in Donbas included a number of negotiation rounds and agreements (Kazdobina, 2024; Solodkyy, 2024). Zelenskyy in particular was mandated by his voters in 2019 to make peace in Donbas, which resulted in revised negotiation efforts in the Normandy format (Minakov, 2022).[8] After the full-scale invasion started, talks continued at the Belarusian border, and there was support from Ukraine's Presidential Office to arrange a bilateral meeting between the two Presidents (Perepelytsia, 2023, pp. 14-15). These attempts lead Kazdobina (2024) and Solodkyy (2024), among others, to conclude that negotiations with Russia do not bring peace. Russia would likely use a truce to mobilise and reorganise its troops.[9]

Ukraine-based and Ukrainian-speaking journalist Koshiw wrote in her analysis in 2022: "If Ukraine accepts Russia's interpretation of the Minsk Agreements, it could face indefinite Russian influence in its affairs". Koshiw's (2022) quote predates the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but it summarises what many Ukrainians highlight as the problem of peace talks with Russia: such an agreement would likely facilitate Russia's influence and control over Kyiv, for instance, through special status for Donbas (Koshiw, 2022; see also Allan, 2022). Control over Ukraine is the foundational objective of Russia if asked from Ukrainian experts: as Riabchuk (2023) puts it, Russia's goal is to "make the remaining free citizens of the democratic nation into voiceless subjects of a despot" (p. 2). This observation should inform the international calls for peace talks.

This does not, of course, mean that negotiations could never be opted for by Ukrainians. Oliynyk's (2023) analysis of Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (2024) data reveals that the public opinion on negotiations varies between social groups, between regions, and is linked to information sources that the respondents follow. In 2024, fewer Ukrainians than the previous year fully reject the option of recognising Donbas as part of Russia to end the war (KIIS, 2024). On the other hand, Kukharskyy and others (2022) highlight that, for instance, the question of Crimea should not be discussed without the

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7   The cited author is the First Deputy Director of the New Europe Center, a Ukrainian NGO that produces research to support Ukraine's European integration. The cited article continues a series of New Europe Center publications that aim to communicate the risks of negotiations to Western audiences (see New Europe Center, 2022; Solodkyy, 2022).

8   Not everyone in Ukraine was happy with his willingness to negotiate with Putin and to make concessions (see Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2022).

9   Eremin and Petrovich-Belkin, two IR experts that report having fled Russia after the war began, agree with the Ukrainian analysis: any agreement in the current situation would likely be fragile and the relapse of violent conflict in Ukraine likely. In order to achieve long-lasting peace in Ukraine, there should be a regime change in Russia, accompanied with changes in foreign policy agenda (Arkadiy and Petrovich-Belkin, 2023; see also Saari, 2023).

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point of view and testimony of Crimean Tatars who have already experienced violent deportations, occupations and one non-free referendum.

Kurylo (2023, p. 694-695): "[N]o longer accept the unjust and unequal status quo that robbed Ukrainians of our political agency as normal"[10]

The above quote is from Kurylo's autoethnographic account, but it summarises what many Ukrainian and other researchers argue well: the status quo before the war dismissed Ukrainian agency, and the concerns of Ukrainians were sidelined in the international arena (Kurylo, 2023). Yurchenko (2023) believes that discussions on peace between Ukraine and Russia need to simultaneously address the problem of the international legal and security architecture that left previous atrocities unpunished and hence facilitated the invasion.

On the other hand, Kukharskyy and others (2022) demand that previous crimes that went unpunished in the International Criminal Court cannot serve as an excuse for not holding Russia accountable. In contrast, they believe that prosecuting Putin supports future peace by serving as an international precedent for state leaders with similar aspirations. Perepelytsia (2023), in turn, warns that after the war, the European security order will be shaped by the winner. If Russia is not defeated, Europe needs to be prepared to face and deter an even more aggressive and empowered Russia.

Conclusion: A Nordic word about Ukrainian thinking around peace

In this discussion article, I have taken a glimpse at Ukrainian thinking around the war and peace in Ukraine. I conclude the analysis with a few observations from a Nordic point of view. Firstly, it is obvious that Galtung's conceptual division between "positive" and "negative" peace backs the calls for "just" peace instead of "any" peace in Ukraine. Philippine scholar Primitivo Ragandang summarises Galtung's heritage well in stating that "*achieving true peace requires more than just the absence of war; it necessitates addressing the root causes of violence and injustice at their source*" (p. 5). I believe Galtung's concepts can especially help the peace building, peace mediation and peace studies communities in the Nordics and elsewhere to understand why Ukrainian authors view some peace proposals as violence and why peace talks with the aggressor state are feared.

As an example of Galtung's division between negative and positive peace, Ukrainian authors insist that Ukrainians do not only have the right to live free from continuing physical threats but also free from varying forms of structural violence and the oppression of their rights and freedoms from Moscow. As violence is not only physical violence but also includes indirect forms, peace requires social justice (Galtung, 1969, pp. 169-172). Moreover, Ukrainian authors underline that achieving a just peace in Ukraine necessitates that Ukraine uses its right to self-defence: dozens of negotiation rounds with Russia between 2014 and 2022 did not end Russia's imperial war in Ukraine. As I read it, Galtung's thinking backs this strategy: he insisted that when facing a "social wrong", doing nothing may count as supporting social injustice (p. 184).

The Ukrainian perspective has been sidelined not only in the production of knowledge about the history and politics in Eastern Europe, but also in the international politics from which the European security order was developed on the basis of Moscow-West cooperation. While the war brought

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10   The cited author is a Ukrainian scholar whose publications cover knowledge production in IR, security and Eastern European politics among many other topics. The quoted sentence starts with "I could" and is not in an imperative form as presented here.

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Ukraine to the centre of international attention, knowledge being produced about the war has continued to sideline Ukrainian voices. This leads to a risk that the future security order in Europe will also not reflect the lessons of the war from the Ukrainian point of view. The analyses reviewed for this article suggest that if the aim is to end Russia's imperialist status building era in Europe, the development of a new security order should start from placing the perspective from Kyiv (and other peripheric capitals) at the centre of the process.

Researchers from Northern-Eastern Europe have made similar observations. Lehti (2023) proposes that a decolonial perspective on Ukraine could be particularly relevant in thinking about the European order for security and peace after the war (see also Mälksoo, 2023). Lehti highlights that a "peace that reproduces old imperial and colonial power structures will not be sustainable" (Lehti 2023, p. 58, translated by the author), but new European architecture for security and peace should start from listening to Eastern European actors. Learning from Galtung, the challenge in rebuilding the European security order will be to recognise and address not only physical but also structural violence; ethical systems directed to prevent intended violence easily fail to recognise forms of structural violence (Galtung, 1969, p. 172).

There are already some positive developments in terms of centralising Ukrainian perspectives. The war has increased the international recognition of Ukraine as a nation state separate from Russia. The biggest achievements for Ukraine thus far have been the prospect of EU membership and convincing partners to support Kyiv's defence efforts militarily and to respect its strategy of non-negotiation with Moscow. The Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland in June 2024 provided one more opportunity for Ukraine to communicate its own vision for peace to its supporters. While the conference was criticised for limited participation (China absent, the US President absent, among others), the outcome of almost 80 countries signing a declaration in support of Ukraine's territorial integrity is a significant improvement to recognising Ukraine's vision for peace compared to the starting point of negotiations in the Normandy format a decade ago.

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