

Towards Dialogue And Negotiations: Conflicting Narratives And The UN's Potential Role In Ending The War In Ukraine



Heikki Patomäki - Photo: University of Helsinki

11-25-2024 ~ The war in Ukraine appears to be nearing its end. It is time to start considering what the peace process could look like.

Introduction

Military solutions received the most attention in Europe and the US during the first two and a half years following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In late 2024, the situation has started to change. In the West and Ukraine, peace negotiations are now discussed more widely. What a lasting peace between Ukraine and Russia would look like and how could it be achieved? For example, after the June 2024 "Ukraine Peace Conference" (held in Bürgenstock Resort in Switzerland on 15-16 June 2024), both the Swiss organisers and President Zelensky have said that Russia should be involved in the next phase of the Conference. In September 2024, Zelensky explained that Ukraine's attack on Russian territory was pre-emptive and part of his plan to force Russia to negotiate. President Putin has in turn said he would be willing to revive negotiations on terms

first discussed at talks in Istanbul at the start of the full-scale invasion.

The shift also reflects changes in the domestic politics of various countries. According to many reports, there is deep war weariness in Ukraine and the tension between stated goals (winning the war) and actual situation and actions (willingness to sacrifice for a common cause) is becoming sharper. Although Russia's economic situation has remained relatively good despite the war and sanctions – and probably [also because of them](#) – the long-lasting war of attrition is eroding the legitimization basis of Putin's regime. In Western countries, right-wing populism favours peace negotiations, and it is difficult for conventional parties not to react to their proposals. In the US, President-elect Donald Trump has promised to negotiate an end to the Russia-Ukraine war. In Germany, as a response to the rise of the nationalist-populist Alternative for Germany (AFD) and the more left-leaning party of Sahra Wagenknecht, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has said it is time to rekindle diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine. Moreover, from a global perspective, it is clear that the vast majority of humanity is either ambivalent about the war or inclined to adopt a Western-critical attitude towards it and background factors such as the expansion of NATO. Russia is a key member of the expanding and evolving BRICS coalition, which is increasingly partaking in articulating the voice of the global south.

Despite signs that the willingness of the parties to negotiate is increasing, the war continues and, simultaneously, the tendencies toward further escalation remain strong as witnessed by the decision of President Biden to allow Ukraine to strike Russia with long-range US missiles and British Prime Minister Starmer to do the same with UK Storm Shadow missiles. Increasingly daring strikes and attacks on Russian territory, on the one hand, and threats of retaliatory strikes or other escalatory measures, on the other, mean that the war could expand further, possibly even into a nuclear war. And despite expressions of willingness to negotiate, many key Western actors continue to bolster their commitment to exclusively military solutions. A case in point is the European Parliament which in September 2024 called for lifting restrictions on the use of Western weapons and strengthening sanctions against Russia while neglecting diplomatic paths to end the war. Moreover, NATO is considering concrete steps toward Ukraine's membership even while the war is waging on. Meanwhile, in Russia, there is a vocal group both inside and outside the Putin administration demanding increasingly drastic measures to resolve the war in Russia's favour.

Under these circumstances, de-escalation requires creative solutions, indicating the need to problematise and reframe the prevailing stories, to find room for negotiations where issues can be discussed, debated, and agreed upon. This requires reframing and reimagining goals. Also, new ideas regarding institutional arrangements are needed. In this piece, I first discuss the possibility of telling better stories about the conflict and its possible solutions; and then consider institutional solutions that could enable overcoming the currently prevailing zero-sum logic. I propose an international transitional administration (ITA) in Eastern Ukraine led by the UN. ITA refers to the temporary responsibility for providing the principal governance or functions of government by an inter- or supranational organisation. The UN has many historical experiences of such arrangements, applicable to the situation in Ukraine. The UN experience has not been used to consider ways of ending the Ukraine-Russia war, but priorities may now be changing, as peace negotiations can be expected to resume in early 2025, even if this remains contingent on various developments.

Narratives about the war in Ukraine

In any conflict, the prevailing narratives in conflicts tend to be selective, biased, and simplistic. Narratives are also interactive and dynamic, i.e. they evolve during the conflict. Narratives can be functional from the point of view of the unity of the political community as well as intertwined with established interests, or with interests that have developed as a result of a conflict. Apart from the actions of the other – framed and interpreted in terms of the ego’s dominant narrative – a variety of social mechanisms can maintain and reinforce particular narratives within the parties of the conflict, and these mechanisms can involve anything from encouragement and reward to public shaming and punishment and censorship. Although each conflict is historically specific, types of narratives are common and appear across many different conflicts. The war in Ukraine is no exception to the rule.

In the West, there are two different competing narratives about the war in Ukraine that started in 2014 and expanded into a full-scale invasion in 2022. Leaving aside the deep-seated continuities, the role of background theories, and manifold contingent historical developments, the (still) prevailing Western narrative can be summarised as a struggle between the “bad guys” and “good guys”. Russia led by dictator Putin represents imperialism and is alone responsible for this unprovoked war which violates international law, whereas Ukraine represents freedom and

democracy as well as courage and heroism. The prevailing Western framing also involves the idea that countries are and must be free to join NATO or any military alliance if they so wish. The forces of evil must be won decisively, so NATO should be strengthened further. The likelihood of conflict escalation is played down as it would lessen the resolve to reach a total victory.

To the extent that the Ukraine war is seen through moral prescriptions, as a struggle between good and evil, tendencies toward further escalating the war are strong. This framing generates a curious mixture of liberal idealism and power politics. It is (neo)liberal and universalising in the sense that it assumes the superiority of “our side” in every confrontation, justifying moralising interventionism, while it is also based on an asymmetrical cynicism and militarism: the evil others only understand the language of force. In this black-and-white, moralistic framework, it is not surprising that only a few peace proposals have been presented and that actors tend to resort to increasingly harsh military measures, stricter sanctions, and further escalation of conflict. Militarists have become the oracles of the future and politicians and diplomats their servants. From the narrative-analysis viewpoint, what is of particular concern is that this narrative involves the negation of the narrative of the other party in the conflict; anything associated with the other’s narrative can then be labelled as propaganda or misinformation.

The main Russian narrative provides a sharply contrastive view of locating the good and the evil. Attempts in the 1990s to seek Russian identity and place in the post-Cold War (neo)liberal world order were complicated and disturbed by developments such as the rapid concentration of wealth, major socio-economic difficulties, widespread crime and murder (another indicator of insecurity of everyday life), partial state collapse, and a sense of humiliation. As the West-recommended reforms failed, all political forces in Russia started to stress the importance of *samobytnost*’ or the national distinctiveness of Russia. The counter-hegemonic framing and story emerged already in the 1990s but evolved further and started to shape developments in the 2000s.

During the extended Putin–Medvedev era, “the new Russia” of Boris Yeltsin has gradually been replaced by a discourse stressing long-term continuities in Russian history. This discourse has redefined the identity and aspirations of Russia. A turning point was the 2007 Munich speech, where Putin warned against NATO’s eastward expansion and that the unchecked US dominance would lead to an arms

race. Particularly since the turning points of the 2000s and early 2010s, the “nationally distinct” identity has included elements such as competitive victimhood (i.e., the belief that one’s own nation has suffered more than the others); distinction between the decadent values of the postmodern West and the more authentic and traditional values of Russia; belief in the importance of a developmental state for economic stability and growth; the idea that a full recognition as an equal (great power) requires economic and military power; securitisation of Western attempts to interfere in the domestic politics of the former Soviet states and especially Russia itself; concerns about EU and NATO expansion; and last but not least, criticism of Western exclusionary practices and double standards. All this is consistent with a global vision of cultural and political pluralism in a multipolar international system, sometimes associated with claims for more democratic decision-making, sometimes with power balancing.

This sense-making narrative is not only itself historical (for example, during the 2013-14 events in Ukraine, the geopolitical othering of the EU and the West became stronger and the majority of Russians turned against the EU and the West. It also concerns world history and involves narratives about Russia’s place in the wider scheme of things. While various beginnings and conflicts appear important for mainstream Russian stories, since the 2000s, it is the great patriotic war (WWII) that has shaped most of them. Given the dominance of the prevailing framings and narratives, it is easy to understand how, from this point of view, the expansion of the EU and NATO and related episodes such as the Euromaidan have appeared as threatening to Russia’s distinctive identity and security. Under these circumstances, the expanding West (both the EU and NATO) has increasingly, especially since 2013-14, assumed the role of a potential or actual enemy. Also in Russia, anything associated with the enemy’s narrative can then be labelled as propaganda or misinformation. Moreover, in Russia, the increasingly autocratic state (though in its own official documents Russia continues to be defined as a democratic country) has tended to forcefully prevent the presentation of dissenting views, especially so in times of war.

The conflict is not just between the West and Russia. There has been a low-intensity war in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. In February 2022, Russia started a full-scale invasion. The question of Ukraine’s identity and agency complicates the picture, as does the suffering of the Ukrainian people. The main “competition” about victimhood is thus between Russia and Ukraine. Since the collapse of the

Soviet Union, Ukraine's identity has been the subject of ongoing disputes, which have involved the entanglement of historical narratives about Ukraine with the relations between the West, Europe and Russia and their definitions. Until 2014, perhaps a third of the Ukrainian population identified Russian as their native tongue (the Bolsheviks transferred large parts of Russian territory into Ukraine); moreover, a majority of citizens used Ukrainian and Russian interchangeably in different contexts. The economy of the Eastern part of Ukraine remained entangled with Russia, whereas the Western part was increasingly geared towards the EU. Economic and cultural orientations changed in 2014-22. Especially since February 2022, Russian has become associated with the aggressor, leading many Ukrainians to adopt Ukrainian more fervently, even in areas where Russian was traditionally spoken.

Following the failed negotiations of March-April 2022, and half a year after the start of the full-scale war, Russia annexed four regions of eastern Ukraine, which, it seems, have been forcefully Russianised, though interpretations vary. Meanwhile, also as a consequence of the war, ethnic nationalism prevails in the rest of Ukraine (pro-Russian and leftist political parties are banned, etc.). The project of ethnic nationalism is thereby aligned with the EU and NATO definitions of democracy and human rights (and civilisation). This is enabled by the shared commitment to the idea of Ukrainian victimhood. Also, the dominant Ukrainian narrative has included the goal of "winning the war" against Russia. This narrative too has been reinforced through autocratic mechanisms, though it may now be changing.

The problem of revising the prevailing narratives

Contrasting narratives interact. Given a negative spiral, the further the mutual collapse of trust among states (or their coalitions) goes, the more each side begins to believe that the other's behaviour can be modified by force and deterrence only. Even under the circumstances, there has been a minority view in the West arguing that reality is more complicated than what the majority suggests. In this view, the unfortunate and shortsighted Russian invasion violates international law and has caused an enormous amount of suffering in Ukraine and turmoil, for the warring states, Europe, the US, and the world, but this invasion was not unprovoked. While there are different ways of articulating the specifics of the narrative, this storyline involves the idea that also the West and the US in particular bear partial responsibility for the tragic outcome of the long process of mutual alienation and escalation of conflict between Russia and the West. Moreover, the minority view

includes many alarmists who warn that the escalation has already continued or can continue to a point where the world is verging on nuclear war.

Although in the mid-2020s Russia, an explicit foreign policy opposition is largely suppressed and excluded from the public sphere, Russia remains a neo-revisionist power, criticising unipolarity and the one-sidedness of the rules (“who makes them?”) and their application in the current system rather than trying to drastically change those rules. The fact that Russia is committed to many of the existing rules – including via BRICS – and uses the inherent contradictions of the prevailing “liberal world order” opens possibilities for dialogue and an eventual overcoming of the war. Russia’s challenge to the US hegemony is in part based on the idea that Russia has the right to act like the West has always acted (i.e. it reserves the right to ignore rules that do not fit its priorities). This is an explicit and contested idea, but many background assumptions are considered self-evident – and may not even be noticed – by the actors. Even when A and B struggle violently against each other, they can share a number of the same, similar, or analogical background assumptions, some but not all of which may be conducive to dialogue. Resolving conflicts requires the possibility of changing understandings, rules, and practices. Adjustments to the rules or their application presuppose the revisionist’s or challenger’s reciprocal readiness to shoulder responsibility for the reformed order. A scenario is that a reformed global system creates a conducive context for Russian internal reforms, which in turn feeds Russian support for the system.

A mutual dialogue presupposes some readiness and willingness to revise, at least to a degree, the prevailing conflict narratives on each side. The problem of transforming violence into politics and diplomacy faces many obstacles, however. In open systems, attempts at a dialogue may fail due to the factors intrinsic or extrinsic to the dynamics of negotiations themselves. Both entrenched interests and the drive for community unity (also for the sake of winning the conflict) can sustain – together with the various homogenising mechanisms – the prevailing stories. The effects of the revisions of the narrative depend on the context. There is for example evidence that although a more inclusive narrative about suffering tends to reduce the support for aggressive policies toward the other, a concern about outside support (some trusted third party or a grouping of states and organisations) may reverse this connection. The other side of the coin is that the relevant third party can thereby be in a position to shape responses to the revision of narratives (Ukraine is not only dependent on the support from the West, but also

the role of less involved outsiders such as Brazil, China, and Turkey can be important). Moreover, the peace interest does not lie in the attempt to overcome all contradictions or causes of conflicts, but rather in handling the transformation from violence to politics and diplomacy in a sufficiently acceptable and sustainable way. This requires a degree of de-polarisation and de-escalation of the conflict and thus at least some adjustments of the prevailing narratives, often in terms of reframing or reimagining goals.

Reframing and reimagining the goals: the potential role of the United Nations

Given the prevailing narratives and the fight over territories in Ukraine, it is thus not surprising that in 2024-25 the conflict in Ukraine tends to be framed in zero-sum terms. In the March-April 2022 negotiations, Russia would have been satisfied with the situation that existed before the February invasion assuming Ukraine's commitment to neutrality and disarmament and some other conditions such as ensuring the status of the Russian language inside Ukraine, but after Ukraine ended negotiations under pressure from the Western leaders, NATO, and domestic opinion, Russia decided to annex the four oblasts in clear violation of international law. In 2024, Russia regards the newly annexed oblasts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, in addition to Donetsk and Luhansk within their administrative borders, as part of its territories, while Ukraine and the West regard the internationally recognised borders of 1992 as valid. The diametrically opposed perceptions of the other party's actions and justice appear to mean that the territorially defined zero-sum situation can only be rectified through military force. In this kind of context, the transformation from violence to politics and diplomacy could be achieved by partially de-territorialising the conflict.

Russia's view of international cooperation has traditionally relied on the UN system, where it has a special status as a permanent member of the Security Council. Also Ukraine, the EU, NATO and the US are committed to the principles of the UN. Commitment to rules and principles does not mean that they are always followed or that they are interpreted impartially and consistently, but they can nevertheless provide, in principle, a basis for dialogue, some kind of cooperation, and a possible agreement. Also, dialogue and negotiations about the situation in Ukraine may be helped by modifying the wider context to be a degree less threatening and cooperative. Consider for example the possibility that NATO starts to plan and prepare for the withdrawal of all US nuclear warheads from Europe and Turkey prior to negotiations. The actual withdrawal would be carried out once

peace terms were agreed between Ukraine and Russia. In the situation of 2024, this proposal could also include a tentative promise to refrain from placing new American military bases in the Nordic countries (partly right next to the Russian border, where the permanent military presence of the US and NATO especially on Finnish territory constitutes from a Russian viewpoint [a threat to Russia's national security](#) - in line with the standard security dilemma).

These kinds of moves would not weaken NATO militarily but could get Russia's attention and might facilitate dialogue and the ensuing negotiations. In the literature, such a strategy is called "altercasting". The point is to persuade the other (alter) by casting/positioning them in a new way in relation to oneself. The idea is to propose a new relationship so that the other will be inclined to act in that new role, in this case involving a move from the logic of deterrence to a more cooperative orientation. This is what Michail Gorbachev did with regard to Ronald Reagan in the mid-1980s. Any reciprocal action on such an initiative from the Russian side could restore confidence to the point where dialogue and negotiations may be recommenced.

The war in Ukraine concerns peace and security in the world as a whole, and the UN was built to tackle such problems. The mutual conflict between the members of the Security Council prevents the effective functioning of the UN, but that does not mean that the UN cannot have other ways to intervene in the course of events. For example, in the current situation involving the risk of nuclear escalation, the UN Secretary-General could resort to a rarely used leadership measure the founders of the UN Charter endowed to him: the use of Article 99 of the Charter. The Article says that the Secretary-General can "bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security". It is difficult to imagine a more urgent and appropriate use of Article 99 than the increased risk of nuclear war in Ukraine. Secretary-General Antonia Guterres has warned about the risks of escalation and nuclear war several times. Even if the Security Council turns out to be unable to act despite the warnings and Article 99, the UN General Assembly could also take the initiative. Many peace processes also require third parties to act as mediators. Third-party facilitators and mediators should come primarily from countries that are seen as being sufficiently outside of the conflict by both parties (for example, Indonesia or Thailand) and they could include representatives from institutions such as the International Court of Justice or the Permanent Court of Arbitration. Also, various

ad hoc contact groups and attempts at Track 2 diplomacy could be helpful.

My proposal ([first made with Tapio Kanninen](#)) is that the UN could play an important role in de-escalating the conflict through deterritorialising, at least to a degree, the conflict in Ukraine. The process would involve also reframing and reimagining the goals of the parties. This idea is built on both current initiatives and historical UN experiences. For example, on 11 November 2022, the Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability issued a [Call for Armistice in Ukraine](#), signed by five former heads of State or Government. The initiative asks for a transition from a general cease-fire to a final peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine which is to be supervised by the UN and possibly other international organizations. Demilitarisation of the occupied areas and a larger demilitarised zone between the armed forces of the belligerents could be a part of an agreement. The plan also calls for immediate efforts to repair civilian infrastructure, including in the areas to be placed under temporary international administration, and to secure an adequate supply of food, water, health care and energy for the inhabitants. A somewhat similar proposal was made by Indonesia in June 2023. Indonesia's then defence minister Prabowo Subianto, now President of Indonesia, proposed establishing a demilitarised zone by withdrawing 15 kilometres from each party's forward position, observed and monitored by a peacekeeping force deployed by the UN. This could be a step toward a wider UN involvement.

The proposal is not only to establish a demilitarized zone like in Korea. The concepts of demilitarized zone and UN-managed territory could cover all the main areas contested in the war. Their long-term status could be specified later in diplomatic and democratic terms, following the principles of dialogue, cooperation, and the rule of law. An international transitional administration (ITA) in Eastern Ukraine could assume temporary responsibility for providing the principal governance or functions of government. The aim is to facilitate a future resolution and provide functions of government during the transitional period. ITAs are sometimes introduced to act as neutral arbitrators and mediators, ensuring that no particular ethnic group dominates the political process while the region transitions to a peaceful settlement. Important historical precedent cases include the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (1992–1993), United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) (1999–2002), and various similar authorities and administrations that were established in the former

Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

ITAs typically serve one of two purposes: they can manage conflicting sovereignty claims leading to a future resolution, or they can provide legitimate governance where there is none or is lacking for some reason. The legitimacy of ITA is of course anything but automatic and must be demonstrated in practice through clear processes and context-sensitive management requiring sufficient resources. What is important here is that the option of using the UN's presence in Ukraine is an already much-tested model for the de-escalation of war and building elements for peace. Instead of seeing the conflict as a mythic struggle between good and evil, what is needed is a sense of nuance, context and reciprocal process. The reliance on common institutions and especially the potential of the UN presence on the ground as a tool for de-escalation would be a step in this direction. Negotiations are always possible if there is a political will to engage in them.

The idea is that following a period of necessary back-channel diplomacy and negotiations, the UN Security Council could declare or the parties could directly negotiate a binding ceasefire, with the deployment of a peacekeeping force and other UN personnel. The areas of Ukraine occupied by Russian forces would become demilitarised and governed temporarily by the UN, with some flexibility in specifying the territories and their boundaries. The example of East Timor is instructive, although there are also significant differences between the cases and required processes. The tasks in East Timor included maintaining security and order, providing relief assistance, assisting in rebuilding physical infrastructure, administering the territory based on the rule of law, and assisting in the drafting of a new constitution and conducting elections. A key problem in East Timor was that locals often felt that they had no say in decision-making even during the ITA . The problem was solved with the transfer of power to the locals, but in eastern Ukraine, this issue is more complex, due to changes in the composition of the population (including those changes that have already occurred and those that will occur after the situation has become stabilised under the rubric of the UN) and a longer transition period.

Compared to East Timor, in Ukraine, a longer period of transition may be required, possibly as long as 10 to 20 years. Eastern Ukraine is also a large land area and would require large peacekeeping and other resources and administrative personnel. "The UN Transitional Administration of Eastern Ukraine" would also have the task of assisting in negotiating and drafting a new legal basis for the

status of these regions and conducting regular elections, as well as a possible referendum in the future. Ukraine's military non-alignment remains a key issue and must be part of negotiations.

The reframing and definition of goals and objectives cannot, of course, be limited only to those questions that concern disputed territories and competing sovereignty claims in Ukraine especially in Eastern Ukraine. The war is a consequence of decades of conflict escalation between Russia and the West, and in world politics and global political economy more generally. The construction and reproduction of the dominant narrative on each side concern interpretations of history as well as many theoretical, methodological, conceptual, and normative choices. Many social mechanisms powerfully maintain the prevalence of particular narratives. When a certain narrative is taken as the starting point for thinking and action, any deviation from it is easily seen as untruth or even as conscious lying (disinformation, propaganda). The central task of common global institutions is to provide a space where different narratives and frames of reference can meet peacefully and be reassessed through dialogue, debate, and compromise. The UN may be in many ways anachronistic, yet it remains the main institutional framework for reframing and reimagining possibilities.

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