
Why Putin Might Prefer a Compromise Peace to a Forever War

Description

by [Geoffrey Roberts](#)

Geoffrey Roberts is a British historian of World War II working at University College Cork. He specializes in Soviet diplomatic and military history of World War II. He was professor of modern history at University College Cork in Ireland and head of the School of History at UCC

1. Russian Casualties: the BBC-Mediazona research indicates that Russia has lost 40,000-50,000 soldiers – three times as many as during 10 years of war in Afghanistan and almost as many as the Americans in Vietnam. Russia's force conservation tactics and strategy are designed to minimize casualties but completing conquest of the Donbass may cost thousands more Russian lives. Capturing Kharkov and Odessa would be even more costly. Over-running and occupying Western Ukraine would require mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of additional troops. Ukraine's casualties are far higher than Russia's – a minimum of 150,000-200,000 and perhaps as many as 400,000 military dead. A precipitate Ukrainian military collapse is possible but Kiev just might, with Western support, be able to fight on for some time.
2. The Nuclear Danger: atomic war threatens the very existence of Russia as well as the rest of the world. The war's escalation into an all-out NATO-Russia conflict remains a real possibility. Never so high has been the danger of nuclear hostilities or of a catastrophic incident involving Ukrainian (or Russian) nuclear power stations.
3. Regime-Change in Kiev: the current Ukrainian regime will last as long as the war. Peace negotiations will be its downfall. Its replacement by an even more ultra-nationalist government is possible but would further weaken Western support – without which Ukraine cannot survive as a state. The odds favour a successor regime that will swallow the bitter pill of a peace settlement that suits Russia – an outcome that Ukrainian public opinion will hate but accept as the least bad alternative.
4. Russian Public Opinion: Polling data indicates that the majority of Russia's citizens will support the war for as long as it takes but would also like to see a ceasefire and peace negotiations as soon as possible. The westernising sections of Russian elites are quiescent but they, too, will push in the same direction if and when a possible peace settlement appears on the horizon. A small, but vociferous and not insubstantial, minority of Russians favour totalwar and complete victory over Ukraine and the West. Putin's power and popularity means he can over-ride these so-called turbo-patriots, though they could hamper any peace negotiations.
5. Pressure from the Global South. Russia's friends, allies, partners and wellwishers in the Global South oppose a long war and want a ceasefire as soon as possible. If and when Ukraine and the West begin to court peace, China, India, Brazil, South Africa and other independent actors will be a formidable lobby urging Putin to pick up the ball and run with it.
6. Reconstruction of Incorporated Territories: the retention of Crimea and the four other incorporated

provinces are the minimum Russian war aim. While its achievement is now virtually guaranteed, it will be a pyrrhic victory if Moscow is unable to rapidly reconstruct and re-populate the devastated lands of southern and eastern Ukraine. The longer the war, the more mammoth that task. Putin went to war to destroy the growing Ukraine-NATO military bridgehead on Russia's borders but also to protect pro-Russia Ukrainians. Ending the war may be the best way to guarantee their lives and livelihoods

7. Slavic Solidarity: Putin's July 2021 claim that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially the same people provokes outrage in some quarters, even though it was a statement that at the time was supported by 40% of Ukraine's citizens. Russia has fought the war under the banner of multi-nationalism not mono-ethnic nationalism. It has, for the most part, treated its Ukrainian opponents with respect. The identified enemies are Ukrainian neo-Nazis and ultra-nationalists, corrupt officialdom, exploitative oligarchs and sell-outs to Western interests. Ideologically, Russia is committed to healing the wounds of war it has inflicted on what it still considers a brother nation. At best, healing will take a very long time; a long war could make the gulf between Russia and Ukraine unbridgeable for generations.

8. Restoration of Russo-Western Commerce: Russia has weathered the Western sanctions war very well. Russia's war-economy is booming and significantly out-performing Western arms manufacturers. New relationships and markets have been forged with the Global South. Russia has more economic and technological sovereignty than it did before the war. China, Russia and the non-Western world are challenging US global financial hegemony. **But Western sanctions do hurt – ordinary Russians most of all – and the pain will likely intensify in the medium to long-term.** Detached from and in conflict with the West, Russia can survive and even thrive, but greater prosperity and opportunity lies in ending Western sanctions and restoring commercial and trade ties.

9. Global Co-operation. Russia and the West need each other to resolve a multitude of mutually pressing problems – nuclear proliferation, cross-border crime and international terrorism, dire environmental challenges, world health threats, global poverty and inequity.

10. Birthing a New World Order: Russia aspires to an international system based on sovereignty, multipolarity, multilateralism, mutual security, international law and the re-balancing and re-invigoration of global and regional institutions. Immanent in Russia's vision of the future is an implicit preference for benign spheres of influence in which great powers provide stability and order and help secure justice for all states. A new global order is within Russia's grasp – provided it avoids the nightmare of a forever war that begets the Orwellian dystopia of a permanently divided world of warring blocs