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Negotiations yes, but on my terms!

About Security Radar 2025

Conducting polls during wartime presents significant challenges, requiring cautious interpretation of the results. In Ukraine, ongoing hostilities in Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk regions prevented their inclusion in the sample, affecting the survey's representativeness. The war has also altered Ukraine's demographics, with millions of people, particularly women, leaving the country and many men serving at the front.

Wartime conditions also increase the likelihood that people will provide what they perceive to be socially desirable responses, potentially skewing results. This may be especially the case in Russia, where repressive laws exacerbate this tendency. Despite these challenges, including Russia and Ukraine in the Security Radar survey remains crucial because of their significant roles in European security. The survey was last conducted in Russia and Ukraine in 2021, a few months before the full-scale invasion. More information can be found on our [website](#).

Key messages:

- There is growing acceptance in Russia and Ukraine that it's time to start negotiations.
- Positions on both sides remain entrenched, however.
- But while concessions to the other side are regarded as necessary, reciprocity is not a given.
- Both the Russian and the Ukrainian populations still believe they can emerge victorious and that their cause is just. The positions of the two governments are mirrored in the poll.
- A certain war fatigue is discernible in the survey. Potential stepping stones towards a negotiated settlement can be outlined, but it will take political will on both sides, as well as a propitious international environment to bring the parties to the negotiating table.



Introduction

»Negotiations« has become the new buzzword in relation to Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine since Donald Trump won the US elections in November 2024. Fears of a direct deal between Washington and Moscow, throwing Ukraine under the bus, is driving a recalibration of positions, at least on the part of the Ukrainian government (for instance, a cautious recalibration of the formula »territory for peace«). The incoming Republican administration in the US is just one factor contributing to this new positioning. [War fatigue inside Ukraine](#), as well as inside the Western support coalition and the increasingly disadvantageous situation of the Ukrainian armed forces on the battlefield are two other drivers of this development.

Negotiations are not likely to be straightforward or one-off; they have a variety of levels and dimensions. A central point of reference for political decision-makers is their domestic audience. The public stance on negotiations and an outline of what might be acceptable, and where potential red lines might be drawn, are thus important factors. It is on this basis that the commencement and framing of such a process between Russia and Ukraine can be established and potential outcomes envisaged. This is particularly the case for democratic Ukraine, but even in autocratic Russia public opinion is relevant for political decision-makers. Our survey data gathered in the two countries in September 2024 is thus a valuable source from which to assess political room for manoeuvre.

Entrenched positions

Public positions on negotiations are generally favourable. Some 76% of Russians and 56% of Ukrainians reject the option of »no negotiations at all«. Attitudes in both societies are particularly clear with regard to whether negotiations should begin without any preconditions. Absolute majorities – 57.4% of Ukrainians and 54% of Russians – favour such an approach. This is a solid basis for attempting a diplomatic initiative.

Both publics are understandably entrenched in their respective national positions, however. They partly reflect the demands of the respective governments and the dominant media discourse when it comes to conditions for negotiations or scenarios regarding how the war could end. In some cases public opinion is more resolute and less flexible than the evolving position of the respective government. Examples include the public insistence in Ukraine on recapturing all occupied territories, including Crimea, and their strong rejection that the conflict stop at the current frontline.

On both sides, there are fairly insistent demands that the other party come to the negotiating table, but concessions are not deemed correspondingly imperative. In Ukraine this is expressed in the insistence that Russia agree never to strike at Ukrainian territory again (83%), but a reciprocal position that Ukraine never strike at Russian territory is acceptable to only 29%. Mirroring this, in Russia 82% want Ukraine to cease hostilities as a condition for starting negotiations, but almost 50% do not think it is acceptable that Russia does the same.



Some positions are simply incompatible. In Ukraine, an overwhelming majority (83%) demand a Russian withdrawal behind the borders of 1991 and only around a fifth of Ukrainians can even contemplate ceding territory. In Russia, on the other hand, 73% of the public believe that Ukraine will have to recognise Russia's sovereignty over the annexed parts of its territory before negotiations can commence.

Ukrainians also hold that the Russians must contribute to the reconstruction of Ukraine as a condition of ending the war. Not only that, but nearly 80% of Ukrainians deem a change of leadership in Russia a necessary condition for starting negotiations. It is difficult to imagine either coming to pass, especially before negotiations even get going.

One particularly fraught issue is Ukraine's potential membership of NATO and the European Union (EU). Among the Ukrainian population, there is an overwhelming desire for NATO and EU membership, with over 80% in favour. Waiving these goals in the negotiation process would be acceptable to only a small fraction of Ukrainians: 16% in the case of NATO and a mere 12% in the case of the EU. Among Russians, on the other hand, NATO and EU enlargement towards the East is still seen as a danger to European security by an absolute majority, 69% in the case of NATO and 51% with regard to the EU. The prospect of Ukraine joining one or both organisations meets with probably even stronger resistance. It should be kept in mind, however, that the EU and NATO accession processes are long and complex, subject to consensus inside the two alliances. According to our survey, in crucial states such as Germany, France, Italy and even Poland there are currently no majorities in favour of Ukrainian membership of NATO.

The thorny path to negotiations

Amidst these entrenched positions, however, three stepping stones towards the negotiating table are discernible on which public acceptance aligns.

First and most important, recognition of Ukraine's sovereignty. Here, in addition to the unsurprising 89.3% of Ukrainians in favour, a relative majority of 45% in Russia would accept this condition. Some 39% of Russians are opposed.

The second stepping stone is already tried and tested, garnering considerable majorities: Russia should release all prisoners of war. Some 80% of Russians and 90.4% of Ukrainians agree with this as a condition for negotiations. Accordingly, 89.3% of Russians deem it necessary that Ukraine release all Russian prisoners of war. Taking up this human aspect of the conflict has considerable potential for rapprochement and first attempts at a negotiation. Here, both sides can build on a track record of successive prisoner exchanges and develop a minimum level of predictability and trust that are conducive for a successful negotiation.

The third stepping stone is restraint in attacking critical infrastructure: 61% of Russians believe that Ukraine should cease such attacks on Russia as a precondition of negotiations, while only 10 percentage points fewer find a reciprocal end of Russian attacks on Ukrainian critical infrastructure acceptable. This means that an absolute majority of 51% in Russia exhibit some understanding of this issue as a precondition for starting negotiations. Naturally, in Ukraine as many as 90% favour such a condition. This goes hand in hand with the position of more than 80% of Ukrainians who would accept an end of the war if Russia ceased attacking their territory. Support for restraint in attacking critical infrastruc-



ture (almost 90%) is the third highest in the list of potential negotiating conditions, after »Russia withdraws its troops« and »Russia ceases hostilities«. This underlines how much these attacks are affecting Ukraine.

Finally, a certain degree of empathy, pragmatism or realism can be also found in the responses in Ukraine to the effect that not only Ukraine itself, but also Russia might need security guarantees from the West (34% think it is acceptable, 39% disagree).

Altogether this shows that despite more than 1,000 days of war, considerable parts of Ukrainian society still show an understanding of some Russian positions.

The table on the right provides an overview of the level of acceptance of potential political compromises in the warring societies.

The way forward

Launching negotiations towards a political settlement or even a ceasefire in this war will be difficult, highly complex and hard to conclude. The perspectives of the two public constituencies is just one among many factors affecting this process. Mapping the preferences of the Ukrainian and the Russian populations, however, makes it possible to outline potential areas of convergence and thus to guide political attention towards them.

Russia's war against Ukraine has become an international conflict, with different parties supporting the two warring parties. An internationalisation of the

If Ukraine were to start negotiations with Russia, which conditions should be fulfilled from your point of view?

Responses „acceptable“, all figures in %



* for this specific answer, the depicted values are responses "unacceptable"



mediation process will thus be necessary. Our survey indicates that Ukrainians are prepared to accept this option, while Russian opinion is split: 50% oppose it, but a significant 41% can imagine accepting international mediation. This level of acceptance is noteworthy, considering Russia's typical aversion to international involvement in its neighbourhood and national security matters. It indicates an openness to diplomatic engagement that can be built on. An international process including countries such as South Africa, Brazil and China might meet higher acceptance by both sides and would therefore be more difficult to reject by the respective leaderships.

While challenges remain, starting such a process should be a priority. The willingness on both sides to consider international involvement, albeit to varying degrees, as well as our three stepping stones

offer a foundation here. Combined with the advent of a new administration in Washington this moment could be crucial for establishing a framework for transitioning the war from active hostilities towards a form of settlement. But the willingness of the two parties to embrace this framework remains a question mark.

In Ukraine, [the perfect has become the enemy of the good](#). This is slowly dawning upon Ukrainian society and also parts of Russian society. The international partners of Moscow and of Kyiv should therefore support negotiations pragmatically. When neither a diktat peace nor a just victory are on the table, and only suboptimal outcomes seem within reach, there is still enough room to shape a positive outcome.

A silver lining in Russia

There is a clear silver lining concerning positions on negotiations with Ukraine in Russian society: young people have distinct standpoints on a number of issues. Four of these are particularly worthy of note:

- A majority of 52% of people below 40 years of age support the condition that Russia cease hostilities.
- Again, a majority of 52% of those below 40 years of age deem it acceptable for Russia to recognise Ukrainian sovereignty.
- When asked whether it is acceptable to withdraw all Russian forces as a precondition of launching negotiations, the youngest generation (18–29) is equally split, at 45% on either side of the argument.
- As many as 89% of the youngest generation (18–29) reject the idea that there should be no negotiations.

FES ROCPE in Vienna

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security. It also works closely with the OSCE on integrating young voices in European security debates and the interface between security and environment.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches.

In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris Charter (1990) and the Istanbul Charter (1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

- regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;
- a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;
- regular public opinion polling on security matters;
- cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

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