Peacemaking Russian Style: Negotiations as the Continuation of War by Other Means

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There is more to the Kremlin's maneuvering around the seemingly unproductive efforts at achieving peace in Ukraine than just an intention to placate an increasingly impatient U.S. President Donald Trump. Even though the current Ukraine war is very different from all other conflicts Russia was involved in and sought to end since the breakup of the Soviet Union, experiences from, and the patterns developed in, multiple experiences in conflict management are informative for examining the Kremlin's current policy. Moscow may decry any proposal that resembles the 2015 Minsk agreements, but it seeks, in essence, to negotiate an armistice that would grant it the ability to control the implementation of a ceasefire in Ukraine, influence political developments inside Ukraine, and exploit divisions in the Western coalition. Maintaining maximalist demands is perceived by the Kremlin as demonstrating strength, with the Kremlin's biggest concern about accepting any compromise being not to show weakness. Achieving a deal that can be presented as a material victory is crucial not only for domestic purposes of ensuring regime stability, but also for boosting Russia's global profile.

The Kremlin's Track Record in Peace Negotiations

A reexamination of Russia's intense and improvised political maneuvering and diplomatic activity aimed at ending hostilities in multiple conflicts triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union can yield results relevant for the current efforts to end the Ukraine war. A team of researchers at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is building a dataset on this as part of the Russian Approaches to Peace Processes (RAPP) project, funded by the Research Council of Norway. Although this work is yet to be completed, the gathered data on five cases (Transnistria, Georgia [including Abkhazia and South Ossetia], Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan, and Chechnya) makes it possible to identify some recurrent features, as well as shifts in priorities.

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The eruption of several violent conflicts in the post-Soviet region was perceived by the Russian leadership as an acute security challenge, requiring urgent measures to prevent further escalation. Each conflict had a particular combination of local drivers, and Russia's ad hoc responses were shaped not only by the need to engage with unconventional warring sides, but also by a lack of resources on the Russian side. Moreover, the structures of government in Russia itself were in flux, which culminated in the October 1993 crisis, so in retrospect, it is quite impressive that Moscow mostly succeeded in pacifying all areas where there had been acute clashes by the middle of the 1990s, before it became mired in the First Chechen War.

Russia was also involved in multilateral operations to resolve the conflicts in the Balkans, meaning it was abreast of the international debates on, and experiments with developing, effective frameworks for peacemaking/peacekeeping. Moscow, nevertheless, presumed the urgency of the task of ending conflicts in the post-Soviet region required that various norms and rules be bent. Russian politicians had no problem, for example, with treating secessionists as legitimate partners in negotiations, thereby effectively securing the establishment of several illegitimate quasi-states under the negotiated ceasefires. Moscow sought to bring in international organizations, including the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to legitimize the impromptu agreements and monitor their implementation, while asserting that the main responsibility for managing conflict and post-conflict developments would stay with Russia.

In hindsight, one might ascribe to these often-incoherent efforts some proto-imperialistic ambitions, alongside a Russian desire to dominate its "sphere of influence," but the fact is at that time the Kremlin was too preoccupied with domestic problems to effect designs for projecting power. Assuming authority over former Soviet troops stationed in areas like Transnistria or Tajikistan, Russia's newly formed Ministry of Defense had trouble asserting control over the commanders and cooperating with the reshuffled Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moscow was certainly keen to manipulate conflicts rather than waiting for a "mutually hurting stalemate," which would make them ripe for a compromise solution. Fusing the role of a mediator and that of a party to the conflict was a typical feature of these Kremlin manipulations. This "forceful mediation" enabled Russia to impose arrangements disagreeable to other parties.

This heavy-handedness might have worked better had it been accompanied by sustained investments in peace-building, but in their absence, nearly all "Russian" deals have sooner or later fallen apart. In Tajikistan, the peace treaty that ended the civil war in 1997 was twisted from a power-sharing agreement into a brutal dictatorship, which to this day persecutes any opposition. The arrangements for South Ossetia and Abkhazia were nullified by the August 2008 Russia-Georgia War (on which more later), and the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh was broken by Azerbaijan's 2020 and 2023 offensives, meaning

Transnistria remains the only case where the Russian peacemaking operation, while generating constant friction, continues.

The most impactful of all Moscow's attempts to manage post-Soviet conflicts was Chechnya, and the military operation launched in December 1994 to quell the rebellious region was supposed to be another success by overwhelming force, which turned into a humiliating disaster. The peace treaty signed in Moscow in May 1997 left the traumas of brutal hostilities unaddressed. It was then violated in late 1999 with the Second Chechen War, which marked the beginning of the Putin "era"—when Russia gradually unlearned the difference between war and peace.

The Road to Minsk and Beyond

One striking feature of the Second Chechen War was Moscow's blunt refusal to negotiate with the rebels, best illustrated by the difference between the Budyonnovsk hospital hostage crisis in June 1995, resolved by a compromise, and the Beslan school siege in September 2004, ending in a horrible tragedy. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, winning Russia's "war on terror" became a defining political experience, yet the despotic regime of Ramzan Kadyrov, installed in Chechnya (after the assassination of his father) to ensure Putin's victory, now constitutes a major security problem for Russia. Against the backdrop of the Second Chechen War, Russia discontinued its participation in NATO-led peacekeeping missions in Bosnia (SFOR) and Kosovo (KFOR).

The forceful stabilization of the North Caucasus gave Moscow the opportunity to restore its position of power in the wider Caucasus region, and Georgia became its next target—not so much because of its futile aspirations to join NATO, but mostly because the leadership style of President Mikheil Saakashvili made it easy to ensnare him in Russian provocations. What is relevant here is Putin's consent for the emergency mediation of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who essentially tried to restore the status quo ante. Russia indeed had no desire for that "little war that shook the world" to generate so much resonance, and the reached compromise paved the way for a "reset" with the new U.S. administration and a "partnership for modernization" with the European Union. Even the Kremlin's significant departure from the Sarkozy peace deal with the formal recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "independent states" was calculated so as not to derail Moscow's plans for expanding ties with the West.

What did derail those plans was Putin's decision to return to the Kremlin as president in 2012, as the unexpected street protests in Moscow indicated to him that stakeholders in Russia's modernization are opposed to his maturing autocracy. The road from Georgia to Ukraine was, therefore, not a straight one, as it is often argued with the wisdom of hindsight. On the contrary, it involved a major mutation of the political regime in Russia. The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 amounted to another step in this mutation, and Putin's belief in the tremendous importance of that land grab for his envisioned political

transformation of Russia underpins his demand that this illegal annexation be recognized today in the still-elusive "peace deal."

The enthusiastic public reaction in Russia to the swift success of the Crimean "reunification" prompted Putin to proceed with a "hybrid" intervention in the Donbas, but that gamble turned out to be much less lucrative. It took only a few months for the Russian autocrat to recognize the changing cost/benefit balance, and as early as summer 2014, he engaged in talks to terminate the conflict. Although the first agreement failed to check the hostilities, the second, reached in mid-February 2015, succeeded in "freezing" them. That compromise, hammered out at an intense summit of the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany in Minsk, has become the subject of such bitter criticism and scorn, both in Russia and in the West, that a balanced reexamination requires resistance to temptations in Western academia to allocate blame to the now-known villain in the Kremlin.

Putin arrived in Minsk in a position of supremacy on the battlefield and with the intention to weaken European support for Ukraine as the victim of his aggression. His first nonnegotiable demand to the European mediators was to exclude Crimea from the agenda of the talks, in which he prevailed. His second demand was to establish Russia's role as a mediator and not as a party to the conflict, building on the experiences of early-1990s peace processes, and in this he also mostly succeeded. The third demand was to bring in the leaders of the Donetsk and Luhansk quasi-states as legitimate participants in the talks, which his counterparts refused to do.

One key assumption in Moscow was that for Germany and France, economic ties with Russia, only very slightly affected by sanctions, would matter more than solidarity with Ukraine. Russia sought, therefore, to put into the agreement conditions that Ukraine, faced with the prospect of military defeat, would have to accept but would never be able to implement due to domestic political discord. France and Germany would then be obliged to put pressure on Kyiv—and go back to business as usual with Russia. For years Putin had good reason to believe that this plan was producing entirely satisfactory outcomes, but the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as Ukrainian president in April 2019 changed his calculus. Even though the inexperienced leader failed to negotiate any alterations to the Minsk II agreement, he generated a new momentum in Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU, and the Kremlin saw that reenergizing of democratic reforms as a direct security threat.

Zigzags in Peace Talks: From Istanbul to Anchorage—and Washington, D.C.

The outlook for ending the current Ukraine war, which has gone on for more than 1,350 days now, looks dim as of this writing, yet it behooves the author to point out that Moscow showed a readiness to negotiate a termination of its aggression as early as a few weeks after launching it. The raw draft document produced at the talks in Istanbul in March-April 2022 continues to serve as a reference point in the Russian discourse on an

acceptable end of the war, even if the situation in the battlefield has changed drastically and Russia's stance has been inevitably altered by the constitutionally established annexation of four Ukrainian regions. The recycling of that "non-paper" stands in contrast with the Minsk agreements, which Putin describes as a Western attempt to "lead us by the nose." The Trump administration also finds it opportune to assert that a new peace deal "must not be Minsk 3.0." The basis of this rejection is, however, quite different for Moscow and for Washington D.C., as well as for Berlin and Paris.

Putin's main goal is to ensure that a rump Ukraine is subjugated by Russia and distanced from NATO. Moscow may give pro forma consent for Ukraine joining the EU, knowing full well that Ukrainian accession faces tall hurdles and that the costs of a hypothetical new "Marshall Plan" for Ukraine are prohibitively high. Georgia, deeply traumatized by the August 2008 war and disappointed in its European aspirations, serves as an illustration of this Russian vision. Another key point is rejection of "treacherous" European mediators, along with a clear preference for a bilateral Russia-U.S. arrangement.

In the Western, as well as Ukrainian, resolve not to replicate the Minsk model, the focus is on creating security guarantees that would deter a possible new Russian aggression. The plans for a meaningful "reassurance force" are early in the making at best, and Moscow's categorical objections may dissuade some potential participants and curtail a necessary U.S. contribution to the force. Key European collective security stakeholders believe, nonetheless, that security guarantees for Ukraine would work both ways, as a Ukrainian "steel porcupine" will limit Russia's ability to make aggressive moves against Western neighbors.

Putin's rigid insistence on maximalist demands might seem irrational and shaped by distorted ideas about a declining and demoralized West. It might, however, be more shrewd, informed by Russia's experiences in conflict management, in which the West was often inclined to swallow its reservations and let Moscow end violent conflicts as it saw fit. The Kremlin's apparent inability to draw lessons from past failures and admit errors of judgement, even in such cases as Nagorno-Karabakh or Syria, limits the value of these experiences, in which Putin never faced an egocentric maverick like Trump or encountered a Europe set on rearmament and deterrence of Russian power games. The stubborn pursuit of a political triumph in what is an unwinnable war may prove to be a blunder of the same disastrous proportions as the decision to launch the blitzkrieg in February 2022.