

Opinion **War in Ukraine**

The west only listens to what it wants to hear from Moscow

Putin is in no hurry to negotiate the end of conflict in Ukraine

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Vladimir Putin will not tolerate any US president, even his old friend Donald Trump, playing the role of heroic peacemaker © ALEXANDER NEMENOV/POOL/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

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“A bit like talking to a mirror” is how diplomatic historian Sergey Radchenko describes Nikita Khrushchev’s preparation for negotiating with Dwight Eisenhower following the death of Joseph Stalin. The Soviet leader imagined what he would tell the US president, how Ike would at first reject his arguments but then yield to their logic as the only working solution.

“The difficulty of speaking to imaginary opponents,” writes Radchenko, “is that we unconsciously make them say what we want them to say.” We do not think what would happen if the other side resisted our logic.

I can detect a version of “talking to a mirror” in the west’s approach towards Moscow today. We listen only in order to hear what we want to hear, namely that Putin wants to negotiate the end of the conflict in Ukraine. But does he?

Like many analysts and most Europeans, I believe that the war will conclude in a negotiated settlement. Kyiv will be forced to trade territory for meaningful security guarantees. Yet even if negotiations are inevitable, I am not convinced that we are as

close to the end as many others hope.

There are at least four factors which make the situation unpredictable.

First, when it comes to the outcome of the war, Russia and Ukraine are in markedly different situations.

At present, the Kremlin is convinced that Russia is winning on the battlefield. It believes it has considerable room for manoeuvre when it comes to ending the war (even how to end the war).

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, by contrast, is in a precarious situation. Ukraine's military setbacks have weakened his political support. Ukrainians want the war to end as soon as possible but are still not ready to trade land for peace. This means Zelenskyy is forced to speak about victory even while looking for compromise.

Second, many of those who prattle on about negotiations assume they know what Russian President Vladimir Putin wants and what he is ready to concede.

During Zelenskyy's recent visit to the US, former president Donald Trump averred that "we have a very good relationship [with Zelenskyy], and I also have a very good relationship, as you know, with President Putin, and I think if we win . . . we're going to get it [the conflict] resolved very quickly".

What Trump meant by his customary braggadocio was that he has negotiated with Putin before and is confident he knows how to do so again. The problem is that no western leader has a firm grasp on Putin's current motivations. The prewar Putin and today's Putin are as different as the Stalin of 1940 was to the Stalin of 1944.

Third, Russia's objectives have changed over time. Putin's original "special operation" had a laser-like focus. Its primary objective was to break the west's spell over Ukrainian society. The assumption was that Ukrainians were "bewitched Russians" who needed a short war to wake up.

But the wake-up did not work. The special operation was defeated by September 2022. What we have witnessed since is a proxy war against Nato fought on Ukrainian territory. This is how Putin and most Russians see things. It is why Putin will not tolerate any US president, even his old friend Trump, playing the role of heroic peacemaker. Peace has to be a Russian victory. Fracturing Nato is one of Moscow's war objectives.

The fourth difficulty is that neither the US nor the EU has a long-term Russia

strategy. Ukraine was an intrinsic part of the west's Russia policy in the wake of the cold war. This policy had two sides. In its transformative version, the democratisation of Ukraine was viewed as an instrument for Russia's own democratisation.

But there was another version, one more focused on stability, in which a separate logic held: don't poke the bear. This double-headed policy contributed to the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

In the nearly thousand days since the war commenced, the west has been reluctant to allow Ukrainians to hit targets within Russia proper but "compensates" Ukraine by providing it with a licence to define how the west speaks about Russia. The west has outsourced its Russia policy to Ukraine. If Putin believes that Russia is in a war with the west, such outsourcing is self-defeating.

US and European leaders need to take back the initiative in dealing with Russia. Any meaningful negotiations will not only be about Ukraine but the future of the European order. As the old Russian proverb goes: "If you invite a bear to dance, it's not you who decides when the dance is over, it's the bear."

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