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Preventing Peace

With negotiations for a peace agreement in Ukraine now underway, and Washington signalling a possible détente with the Kremlin, European states are doing everything they can to obstruct the process. New sanctions are being slapped on Moscow. Weapons are being rushed to the frontlines. Money is being freed up for rearmament, with Britain, France and Germany aiming to increase their defence budgets to at least 3% of GDP, and the EU planning to create a ‘voluntary fund’ of up to €40 billion for military aid. Macron and Starmer are seeking to deploy troops to Ukraine in the event of a possible ceasefire, supposedly to offer ‘reassurance’ – despite the no-brainer that only neutral soldiers could act as credible peacekeepers.

While some EU leaders have half-heartedly recognized Trump’s demand for diplomacy, the bloc’s dominant position since February 2022 – that the fighting must not end without an absolute victory for Ukraine – remains largely unchanged. Its foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, has long opposed efforts to de-escalate the conflict, declaring last December that she and her allies would do ‘whatever it takes’ to crush the invading army. She was recently echoed by the Danish Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen, who suggested that ‘peace in Ukraine is actually more dangerous than war’. Last month, when negotiators raised the possibility of lifting certain sanctions to end hostilities in the Black Sea, the European Commission spokesperson on foreign affairs, Anitta Hipper, affirmed that ‘Unconditional withdrawal of all Russian military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine would be one of the main preconditions’.

This position appears to assume that Ukraine is capable of extirpating the Russians and recapturing all the land it has lost – a claim which is patently divorced from reality. As early

as autumn 2022, General Mark Milley, then Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, conceded that the war had reached a stalemate and that neither side could win. Valery Zalushnyi, then the supreme commander of the Ukrainian armed forces, made a similar admission in 2023. In the end, even these bleak assessments proved too optimistic. Over the past year, Ukraine's position on the battlefield has been steadily deteriorating. Its territorial losses are mounting and its gains in the Russian region of Kursk have been almost completely reversed. Each day brings the country closer to collapse, as it loses more lives and piles up more debts.

It is unlikely that Kallas, Fredriksen and Hipper actually believe that Russia will withdraw from the Donbas and Crimea, let alone unconditionally. By insisting on this as a precondition for lifting or even amending sanctions, they are in effect taking the prospect of sanctions-relief off the table, and thereby forfeiting one of their most concrete means of exerting pressure in the negotiations. One might think that the EU would have a clear interest in putting out the fire on its doorstep. Yet it continues to pour more oil on it, compromising its own security interests as well as those of Ukraine. Instead of positioning itself as a mediator between the US and Russia – the only rational option given its geographical position – it continues to alienate both major powers and increase its own isolation.

How to explain this seemingly irrational behaviour? Vijay Prashad suspects that European elites are primarily invested in preserving their own legitimacy. They have invested too much political capital in this goal of 'victorious' peace to walk away now. It is still too early to tell what kind of deal the Kremlin would accept, given its strong position on the battlefield. But were Moscow to agree to a ceasefire, then the narrative that the EU has propagated for the past three years – that it is impossible to negotiate with Putin, that he is determined to conquer other European states, that his military would soon fall apart – would be fatally undermined. At that point, a number of difficult questions would be raised. Why, for instance, did the EU refuse to support the Istanbul peace talks in spring 2022, which had a significant chance of ending the conflict, preventing hundreds of thousands of casualties and sparing Ukraine a succession of bruising defeats?

A viable peace deal would also cast doubt on the frenzied rearmament drive now taking place across Europe. If it is proven that Russia's aims were always strictly regional, to guarantee its influence and fend off potential threats on its Western perimeter, then higher arms spending could no longer be justified with the notion that the Kremlin is plotting to invade Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania before marching further West. By extension, it will no longer be as easy to win public consent for dismantling the welfare state, which Europe supposedly can no

longer afford, in order to build a warfare state. The call for more austerity – eroding public health services, education, transport, climate protections and social benefits – will lack a convincing justification.

Noam Chomsky once observed that the project of gutting social programmes in favour of the military-industrial complex stretches as far back as the New Deal. While the welfare state strengthens people's desire for self-determination, acting as a check on authoritarianism, the warfare state generates profits and growth without the liability of social rights. It is therefore the perfect remedy for a European elite struggling to reproduce its power amid economic stagnation, geopolitical volatility and unruly publics.

Another reason why the EU may be reluctant to engage in constructive diplomacy, however, is its relationship with a new, more hostile administration in Washington. If the EU maintains that a victorious peace is achievable – knowing full well that it is not – then it can present any Trump-brokered compromise as a betrayal. This will allow Trump's opponents, in both the US and Europe, to argue that he has stabbed Ukraine in the back and bears sole responsibility for its territorial losses – which, in turn, will help to obscure the disastrous mistakes of Biden and his EU allies in handling the earlier phases of the war. Opposing peace becomes a helpful way of creating historical amnesia.

The destructive effects of this strategy cannot be overstated. It will strengthen forces inside and outside Ukraine who want to either continue an unwinnable war indefinitely or sabotage a peace agreement after the fact. It will raise the likelihood of both civil war in Ukraine and direct confrontation between the EU and Moscow. If European leaders genuinely cared about the 'security' of their countries, they would be well-advised to acknowledge some painful truths – among them, that the Western approach to the conflict has been a comprehensive failure; that the decision to focus on arms deliveries and reject diplomacy was a mistake; and that it has needlessly prolonged a war that could have been avoided in the first place. Securing peace on the continent requires a radically different orientation. The EU must finally engage in the negotiating process instead of torpedoing it from the sidelines.

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Read on: Tony Wood, '[Matrix of War](#)', NLR 133/134.

<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/preventing-peace?pc=1668>