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Navigating the Lure of Russian Negotiation Theatre: What Europe Should Talk About When There's Talk of Talks

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By design or by default, Europe may soon find itself in a situation where the current murmurs about a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine grow louder and more tangible. Scenarios in which such notions could gain momentum include a Trump victory in the upcoming US elections. It could also occur gradually, as a result of dwindling Western support due to increasing defaitism and a mistaken belief that such negotiations are deescalatory. The lessons from 2014 and the Minsk agreements need to be at the forefront of European policy. Back then, Western "pragmatic" responses to Russia's actions led to an emboldened Russia and renewed aggression in 2022. Genuine negotiations are unlikely as long as the Putin regime remains in power; instead, the immediate risk is becoming entangled in a Kremlin speciality: *negotiation theatre.* If and when that happens, European countries, having a direct stake in the outcome, need to clearly articulate their interests.

Any outcome of Russia's aggression, whether through negotiations or otherwise, that allows Russia to reap the rewards of its aggression and nuclear blackmail will have far-reaching and damaging consequences for European security. Such an outcome would come at a tremendous cost: enabling Russia to rebuild its military, sacrificing Ukrainian lives and sovereignty, and paving the way for renewed aggression. While Russia's war against Ukraine is only a symptom of a broader Russia crisis, ensuring Ukraine's success—both militarily and politically—must be central to any credible strategy to address the Russian threat. The Kremlin's motivations—undermining international law, the UN charter and the European security order, ensuring regime stability, and destroying or subverting Ukrainian sovereignty—are consistent and unlikely to shift as long as the Putin regime remains in power. This holds true even if a settlement is reached: Putin is playing the long game. A Russian military defeat

in Ukraine is a necessary, though insufficient, condition for Russia to change at some point in the future.

Despite this, the siren song of negotiated solutions is tempting to some and is gaining momentum. Whether by default, through insufficient Western aid and Ukrainian setbacks, or by design, via Trumpian dealmaking, European countries may soon find themselves in a situation where negotiations are on the table. This means that the interests and ambitions of staunch Ukraine supporters in Europe—such as the Nordic-Baltic states, Poland, UK and the Czech Republic—could be overtaken by events. How can these countries, being directly affected by the ongoing Russian crisis, navigate this landscape?

Amidst the magical thinking surrounding the prospects of various talks—whether "ceasefire negotiations," "a deal," or "a peace conference"—we must remember that there are many dimensions to the issue of talks: Who should talk? To what end? When? About what? And what comes next? All these questions need careful consideration.

One key factor is Russia's willingness to engage in talks. Ukraine's supporters often take comfort in the belief that Russia is not ready to negotiate. This is both true and false. Russia will only be willing to engage in earnest negotiations if and when the Kremlin sees its current strategy failing and is ready to change. This is highly unlikely in the near term. Even with continued Western support to Ukraine and enhanced Western deterrence and defence efforts, such an erosion of the Putin system will not happen quickly and will require Western endurance.

The real near-term risk is instead becoming ensnared in Russian "negotiation theatre," much like what happened in Georgia in 2008 and during the Minsk process from 2014 onwards. This would occur at the worst possible moment for Ukraine (and consequently for European security) - a time when doubt over continued Western support is growing. Instead of negotiating from a position of strength, Ukraine would be negotiating from a position of weakness.

Empirically, we can see that the Kremlin follows a clear playbook in such negotiations. The general steps include:

1. Create a problem.

2. Put the international community in a position where it feels compelled to devise a "solution" to the problem (often due to humanitarian or broader concerns).

3. Ensure that Russia is part of this "solution" (via a negotiation format or process) but is not held accountable.

4. Foster a belief in the West that Russia's participation in the "solution" is a concession from the Kremlin that must be nurtured, even if Russia's actions continue to be a violation.

5. Drag out the process until the process itself becomes the focus, while discussions of the underlying issue are seen as an irritant, effectively undermining the possibilities of holding Russian accountable.

While the stakes are higher today, there is no reason to believe that this playbook has changed. Historically, solution-oriented Western approaches, combined with the Kremlin's playbook, have not de-escalated tensions but escalated them in the medium and long term. Western solution-seeking has emboldened Russia, and each subsequent aggression has been worse than the previous one. This is a key lesson from the Minsk agreements and the process that followed. In fact, the Minsk agreements of 2014–2015 laid the groundwork for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Moreover, Western entanglement in negotiation theatre affects Western mindsets. In a context where negotiation and peacemaking—however difficult—are "in the air," there is a penalty for being perceived to disrupt the process. This can manifest in public opinion and in relations with friends and allies directly involved. It's not unimaginable that a future US administration, possibly with the support of other countries, could pressure Russia and Ukraine to agree to a ceasefire or broader peace deal. How, then, can European countries safeguard their interests?

Here are some recommendations for navigating such a landscape:

1. Educate partners and the public early on the dynamics of Russia's negotiation theatre. Highlight the risks and distinguish between genuine negotiations that may happen at some point in the future, and the more likely theatrics we may witness in the nearer term. Counter claims that negotiations are the only way to end wars: many wars end because one side stops fighting. In this case, there is still a window to ensure that it is Russia that stops fighting.

2. Don't let the atmosphere of negotiation theatre slow down European efforts to build deterrence, defence, and resilience. In fact, negotiation theatre is likely to lead to an even more dangerous situation, so rather than scaling down efforts, they should be intensified.

3. The same is true for Ukraine: do not let negotiation theatre be an excuse to scale down military support for Ukraine.

4. Resist normalisation: Hold onto potential bargaining chips for as long as possible. Measures such as lifting sanctions or ending isolation should be reserved for serious negotiations where Russia is genuinely engaging and willing to change—not prematurely discarded in a show of negotiation theatre.

5. Hold onto accountability: The legal processes against Russia and its leadership are the long-term framework for upholding the rules-based order and establishing the correct historical narrative. Continued - and even strengthened - support for these efforts is even more important in a context of negotiation theatre. Mindful of the connection between external aggression and internal repression, this should not only include crimes directly related to the war, but also encompass Russian obligations related to human rights, democracy and rule of law.

6. Highlight the situation in the occupied territories - population displacement, oppression, torture, deportations, and property seizure. These are the direct human costs of compromise on territorial integrity.

7. Insist on ironclad safeguards for Ukrainian sovereignty. This means no infringement on Ukraine's right to choose its political path, and credible security guarantees. The latter is best achieved through NATO membership, as alternative solutions (e.g., nuclear deterrence like Israel's, or US troops on the ground as in South Korea) are costly and unrealistic.

8. Finally, don't stay silent. In 2014–2015, silence may have been a pragmatically defensible choice, but today we better understand the nature of the threat and the stakes are even higher. European governments cannot rely on others to pursue their direct security interests. Being a silent bystander or accepting ambiguity is not a safe option.

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