



Exclusive to OpEd News:

OpEdNews Op Eds 9/18/2023 at 9:56 PM EDT

With Zelensky at WH and UN, Biden Can Propose Peace in Ukraine

By Robert Weiner and Dante Masucci



Robert Weiner

Denial in Kyiv and Moscow, But Needed Russia-Ukraine Peace deal Will Not be Total Victory by Either

By Robert Weiner and Dante Masucci

With Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky now visiting both the White House and the U.N., U.S. President Biden can propose a peace in Ukraine that would work. There is denial in both Kyiv and Moscow, but a needed Russia-Ukraine peace deal will not be a total victory by either.

As the war in Ukraine has gone on, a recent Ukraine "Peace summit" in Saudi Arabia was "productive" but with had no conclusions. Divisions have emerged within the White House and NATO, even though both say it must be Ukraine's decision, about what Ukraine's goals for victory should be. Given the massive amount of aid, totaling to over \$150 billion, that the United States has committed and given to Ukraine, the winners of this policy power struggle will hold significant sway over how the war ends. Those who push either for a total restoration of Ukraine's pre-2014 borders or a total destruction of Ukraine's sovereignty have their goals, but ignore the realities of the demographics in any ambitious condition for total victory.

Although many pro-Ukrainian leaders, including Zelensky himself, believe that Russian occupation is universally hated by those in the occupied territories, it's not a fact. A poll from [Pew Research](#) found that in Crimea, pro-Russian sentiment is widespread, with 54% of those polled saying that they supported annexation from Russia. The poll, conducted after the Russian annexation of Crimea, also revealed that more than 90% of Crimeans believe that Russia played a good role in Crimea during and shortly after the 2014 annexation.

Previous Ukrainian administrations ignored the presence and danger of pro-Russian sentiment in Eastern Ukraine. When we asked about the polls that showed pro-Russian sentiment in Crimea and the East, Oleg Mahnitskyi, one of

former Ukrainian president Poroshenko's senior advisors, said, after a few seconds' hesitation, at a news conference at the National Press Club in 2014, that "polls will say anything". This sentiment clearly failed to resolve the crisis of Russian sympathies in Eastern Ukraine, given that the pro-Russian insurgency did not cease during his presidency and Crimea was not returned by Russia, despite his campaign promises to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Western leaders should also not forget that self-determination means allowing people to choose the wrong path for their future. Despite the fact that finalizing the Russian annexation would result in a great loss of freedom and civil rights, if the polling is accurate, those in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea who desire it should not be denied their right. If the Russian sympathizers in the East and Crimea wish to curtail their own liberties and prefer dictatorship to democracy, recognition of that desire could be the path to a peace deal.

Unmeasured is the change in sentiment that Moscow's brutal invasion may have caused--the brutality could well have backfired and caused a more pro-Ukraine mentality across even Crimea. Russian violations of human rights, such as their massacre of civilians in Bucha or their use of [rape as a weapon of war](#), could have caused those previously sympathetic to Russia to rethink their support of Putin's government.

Given how much territory Ukraine will need to fight to restore its original borders, the operations necessary to recover that territory will cost hundreds of billions of dollars more and tens of thousands of lives. Still more war will likely cause Russia to up their conscription once more, as just happened last month, forcing young Russian men into a war that they and their families want no part of

Ukraine has an incentive to end the war soon. The [Joint Research Centre](#) estimated that Ukraine may lose over 1/3rd of its population by 2052 should the war drag on, a number that roughly matches UN estimates. Even in the best-case scenario where the war ends soon, Ukraine recovers well, and experiences an immigration boom, their population will still decline by around 21%, according to the same European Commission report.

Ukraine has performed better than anyone predicted that they would before the invasion, while the Russian military has proved to be a trainwreck beyond the wildest dreams of Western policymakers. Nevertheless, Russia goes on and on with drones blasting Kiev and missiles bombing Ukrainian cities. Letting go of some of their pro-Russia Eastern territories might be Ukraine's best option in the long run--US negotiators tread gingerly on this point, with Blinken and his team only saying "any decision must be Ukraine's". Those in

the occupied territories who do sympathize with Russia would likely resist Ukrainian rule should the territories be liberated by Kyiv during this counteroffensive or later on during the war. This would effectively recreate the issues that started in 2014, with a pro-Russian insurgency in the Eastern part of Ukraine resuming and hampering any chances of a postwar recovery for the country.

Although Zelensky is not wrong to point out Russian occupation as heinous and a blatant violation of international law, Ukraine will be best served if he uses the Israel-Palestinian negotiating tactic of accepting a reality while talking further, in this case acknowledging even if privately that Russia will likely keep most of the occupied territory and beginning negotiations with that status-quo-ante. It's not defeat for both sides to choose a lesser evil,

and Ukraine and Russia both need to accept that their best option is to seek a cease fire sooner rather than later.

Robert Weiner is a former Clinton and Bush White House spokesman who also served as a senior staffer for the House Government Operations and Judiciary committees, Congressman John Conyers, Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, Ed Koch, Sen. Ted Kennedy and Four-Star Gen. Barry McCaffrey. Dante Masucci is a policy and research analyst at Robert Weiner Associate