



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Putin's calls for peace talks - an attempt to extricate himself from his own trap



Vladimir Putin is becoming a hostage of his own insistence on opening peace negotiations with Ukraine, because those negotiations can lead to a solution that neither Putin, nor those surrounding him, particularly Russian citizens, did not want when they launched their aggression against their neighbour. Although it is persistently rejected in Kiev, Russia will not relinquish its call for peace negotiations, as an important part of maintaining the appearance of its military supremacy. But would those talks, if they were held tomorrow, confirm such a picture, or would they expose Russia as a loser who is seeking an honourable way out of the adventure?

The Russian public is in great confusion about the reasons for the attack on Ukraine, about the war goals, the need for a peaceful end to the conflict, and there is a major split between the expected (promised) war results and the real situation on the ground.

The majority of Russians want peace talks with Ukraine, according to a recent survey by The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in cooperation with the Russian Levada Centre. Support for the invasion of Ukraine is still high, at three-quarters of the population, but when compared to the possibility of peace negotiations, peace talks have a slight majority (53%) which has been a trend since October. Support for peace talks has increased strongly, to two-thirds, when presented as the end to the suffering of Russian soldiers and an improvement to the economic situation in the country.

Putin and Russia are in the absurd position of being held hostage by their own unrealistic expectations

As an authoritarian ruler, Vladimir Putin does not pay much attention to the views of his fellow citizens, preferring to shape them with his strong propaganda. However, it appears that the confusion he sowed since the beginning of the aggression against Ukraine is bearing unwanted fruits. Russian citizens want completely opposite things at the same time, which often cancel out each other. It is a rift

that has followed the so-called "special military operation" since day one. But with the string of military losses, tens of thousands of dead soldiers and a dramatic decline in the economy, this confusion puts both Russia and Putin in the absurd position of being held hostage by their own unrealistic expectations.

The Russians, therefore, simultaneously support the action in Ukraine, but also respect the desire of their state leadership to start peace talks. At the same time, they want an end to the war and the beginning of talks, but they do not want to concede any territorial concessions to Ukraine. Unlike in March, when the war began, they are no longer sure what the real goal of the invasion is, although they still support it. The only motive to end the war is to stop further suffering of soldiers, and the high costs of the operation, which are increasingly difficult to bear.

The Russian leader is certainly more influenced by the opinion of the elite that surrounds him than the opinion of the citizens, but things are not much better there either. Belief in victory is weakening, and plans for a triumphant ending are rapidly moving towards looking for some way out, which will nevertheless leave them in the saddle. "Until September, the Russian elites had made the pragmatic choice to support Putin as a guarantor against defeat. But matters have progressed so far that they may now have to choose among various losing scenarios. That makes Putin far more vulnerable, for he may just find that he and the elites settle on different scenarios", said Tatiana Stanovaya, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Putin's self-locking in the space between seeking peace, unrealistic goals and military defeats, unfortunately, presents a chance for a way out by influential Western leaders, who do not fully understand the gravity of the trap in which the Russian leader, his elite and the people have found themselves.

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Putin, especially since he announced that four regions of Ukraine were now part of Russia. Therefore the Russian dictator either has to be compelled to accept it, or the peace deal will have to be made with a Russia no longer controlled by Putin.”

Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative, is also calling for an end to the war, but the conditions under which peace would be reached seem like a surprise gift to Putin to get out of the maze he has locked himself into. "It could be a way out of the war", Borrell said recently in Barcelona. He mentioned that it would be necessary for the Ukrainian armed conflict to unfold as it did in Korea: "the Ukrainian and Russian sides withdraw from their positions" and give up demands, defence or conquest of territories.

This attitude of the EU's first diplomat is far from the Union's position of not recognising any results of the Russian conquest of Ukrainian territories. Moreover, it is much closer to Putin's possible expectations for the war to stop and for talks about the situation on the ground as soon as truce begins. Kiev, of course, does not want such talks, and as a precondition sets a complete Russian withdrawal from the occupied territories, including Crimea.

Any consideration of a truce, on terms that Ukraine does not want, is directly helping a groggy Putin find a way out of a storm of his own making for which he sees no solution. Why would anyone, especially the West, help him in this?

There will come a time for negotiations, Timothy Garton Ash is convinced, in a recent piece in *The Guardian*, but not about the concessions expected by Putin, and referred to indirectly or directly by certain European leaders. "Ukraine has an absolute legal and moral right to regain every inch of its sovereign territory, including Crimea. Any compromises it might make at the end of the day – for example, some special arrangements for Crimea – can only be the sovereign decision of Ukraine. Self-evidently, a peace along these lines would be unacceptable to