



By: Oleksandra Matviichuk

People must be central to any peace deal



Since the first days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the United States has played a key role in the war.

Its assistance, though often delayed and debated, has helped Ukraine withstand Russian aggression, and life-saving equipment continues to make a difference every day. Without it, many more Ukrainian lives would have been lost.

Since taking office, US President Donald Trump's administration has **pledged** to end the war and facilitate what it calls a "just and sustainable" peace.

Yet for all the talk about Ukrainian minerals, Russia's territorial claims, Russian President Vladimir Putin's interests, and Trump's whims, almost nothing has been said about the people involved.

The war has often been reduced to statistics – combat casualties, civilians killed and injured, women sexually assaulted, children abducted, towns destroyed – but what we are witnessing this year is no less dehumanizing.

The US' approach to "peace" talks has erased people entirely, treating their suffering as irrelevant.

This sets a dangerous precedent, paving the way for a future in which human lives are expendable, and dignity is negotiable.

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People must be central to any peace deal. In February, after six months of silence, Russia **returned** Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Roshchyna's body.

It bore signs of torture, and several internal organs were missing – including her eyeballs, brain, and part of her trachea. I knew Viktoria personally. She was talented, devoted to her work, and extraordinarily brave.

In the summer of 2023, she traveled to the occupied territories to report on the illegal arrests and torture of civilians. Then she vanished.

Russia continues to conceal the full truth of what it did to Viktoria Roshchyna

We now know she was kidnapped, tortured, secretly transferred to Russia, and held without charge in inhumane conditions.

She was denied medical care, and according to her former cellmates, her weight had dropped to about 30 kilograms (66 pounds) – though we still don't know exactly how she died. She was just weeks away from her 28th birthday.

For months, Russia refused to return her remains to her grieving parents, and it continues to conceal the full truth of what it did to her.

A brutally efficient system of terror

The Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine has been documenting war crimes since the very beginning of Russian aggression, when armed soldiers and unmarked military equipment appeared in Crimea in 2014.

While Putin and other Russian officials denied that Russian troops were on the peninsula, no one was fooled.

Russia uses a brutally efficient system of terror against people in the areas it occupies

Russia uses a brutally efficient system of terror against people in the areas it occupies. It targets and eliminates mayors, journalists, educators, businesspeople, artists, priests, and any other active voices in the community.

It has established an extensive network of illegal detention centers, where captives are denied contact with the outside world and subjected to daily torture. And it has banned the use of the Ukrainian language and all displays of Ukrainian culture.

Artifacts have been **looted**, schools and universities have been forced to follow the Russian curriculum, and Ukrainian textbooks have been burned.

Meanwhile, the houses and apartments of Ukrainians who fled the occupation are being given to Russian citizens – who are there to alter the demographic composition of the population artificially – and Ukrainian children are being **kidnapped** en masse, to be raised as Russians.

Occupation does not reduce human suffering

Some might think that occupation is better than war, because it reduces human suffering. But occupation does not reduce human suffering; it hides it.

We are not just talking about a change of one flag for another. Living under Russian occupation means enforced disappearances, torture, rape, denial of identity, forced adoption of children, filtration camps, and mass graves. It is war, only in a different form.

I have interviewed hundreds of people who survived Russian captivity. They describe being beaten, repeatedly raped, confined in wooden crates, having their knees shattered, limbs amputated, and electric shocks delivered to their genitals. One woman had her eye gouged out with a spoon. Russian soldiers are committing these war crimes simply because they can.

Children from the occupied territories are brought to camps where they wear military uniforms

Making matters worse, with about 1.6 million Ukrainian **children** under occupation, Russia is trying to raise a new generation of soldiers. Its military personnel regularly visit schools to give patriotic lectures.

Children from the occupied territories are **brought** to camps where they wear military uniforms, live in barracks, and learn to use weapons.

After the age of 14, they are issued Russian passports, and at 18, they are subject to compulsory conscription into the Russian army and sent to fight Russia's wars.

People are not numbers

Viktoria knowingly risked her life to tell the world what Russia is doing to the people in the occupied territories. She believed that the truth matters. She believed that it was her duty as a journalist to tell the human stories behind the statistics, to put people at the center. And she believed that doing so could save lives.

The same is true for peace negotiations. Rather than outline in concrete terms what the outcome of this process should look like, I want to pose the questions about human lives that have been completely absent from the current US-led perspective.



Any peace built on the erasure of human suffering would be neither just nor sustainable – Oleksandra Matviichuk

What will happen to the tens of thousands of Ukrainian children who were kidnapped and

illegally transferred to Russia?

What will happen to the tens of thousands of Ukrainian men and women in Russian prisons who are subjected to torture and sexual violence, and who may not live to see the end of peace negotiations?

And what will happen to the millions of people under Russian occupation who cannot protect their rights, property, lives, children, and other loved ones?

People are not numbers. Their lives are not negotiable. Their rights are not optional. Any peace built on the erasure of human suffering would be neither just nor sustainable.

In fact, it would not be peace at all. It would be an act of complicity – one that endangers the lives of many more people, in many more places, now and indefinitely.

Oleksandra Matviichuk is Chair of the Center for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, which received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022 for its efforts to document war crimes, human-rights abuses, and the abuse of power. She is a member of the Nobel Women's Initiative, together with seven other women Nobel Peace Prize laureates.