

The Belgrade Declaration – A peace proposal for Ukraine



by Isabelle Buhre

As two good friends, we, citizens of the Netherlands and Russia, came together in May 2023 in Belgrade, Serbia.

Belgrade is a meeting place for East and West, one of the few places to see each other in the midst of a conflict and escalating tensions between Russia and NATO.

Here we have attempted to write a draft peace agreement. The purpose of this draft is to make people think about a lasting solution to the conflict and to get closer to this solution. It provides a starting point for negotiations. We believe that the spirit and letter of the document we have written can form a good basis for a real comprehensive peace agreement. It also

serves as an example of citizen diplomacy.

Our common goal is to end the bloodshed; establish a lasting and just peace as soon as possible; ensure the security and freedom of Ukraine and Russia; address the just demands of Ukrainian and Russian inhabitants of the Donbas; and, ultimately, restore the relations between Europe and Russia.

Our proposal includes the following topics:

- Ceasefire and Peace Talks
- The Status of Crimea
- Eastern Ukraine
- Restoration
- Mutual Demilitarisation and Security Guarantees
- Ideology and Culture

Ceasefire and Peace Talks

1. First of all, a mutual ceasefire with immediate effect shall be declared.
2. After the signing of a peace agreement, all Russian troops are withdrawn from Ukraine. Until a peace agreement is signed, Russian and Ukrainian troops in the contested territories and near existing borders are monitored by international observers to rule out re-escalation.
3. All deliveries of Western arms to Ukraine will be immediately halted.
4. The start of peace negotiations. The international community provides a platform for these negotiations. Representatives from countries that have taken a more neutral stance on the conflict, such as Hungary, Serbia, China and India, are to take the lead. In addition, representatives from

Western and Eastern European countries, the US, UK and of course Ukraine and Russia will be present.

The Status of Crimea

1. Crimea remains Russian. This is justified by its history – it has been Russian since the 18th century – and by the will of its inhabitants. Crimea became part of Ukraine as a result of Khrushchev's authoritarian decision and democratically returned to Russia in the spring of 2014 by referendum with an overwhelming majority of 97%. It is also of major strategical importance for Russia, whereas Ukraine possesses other harbours in the Black Sea.
2. Russia, if Ukraine so wishes, could provide Ukraine with a piece of land in Crimea with a convenient bay to establish a Ukrainian naval base. Thus Ukraine is not completely withdrawing from Crimea and has the opportunity to deploy its navy there to ensure security and preserve the country's prestige. We do not particularly endorse this option; it should be the outcome of the negotiations of the officials and approved by Russian state law.

Eastern Ukraine

1. A solution to the territorial dispute may have several options to be negotiated. These could include:
 - (a) A UN protectorate, followed by one of the following options:
 - (b) A repeated referendum in the entire Luhansk (LPR), Donetsk (DPR), Kherson and Zaporozhye regions, or alternatively only in the last two mentioned regions, on joining Russia or being part of Ukraine
 - (c) Annexation to Russia of the de facto Russian-controlled territories, followed by a financial compensation to Ukraine for its lost territories
 - (d) Letting the negotiators decide where new border

lines should be drawn.

We do not endorse one of these options in particular; it should be the outcome of the negotiations of the officials.

2. If referendums are held, this should happen after the return of refugees and under the supervision of international observers so that no one would question their legitimacy. If Ukraine agrees to the 'alienation of territories in exchange for compensation' option, referendums are held only in the contested areas not controlled by Russia.
3. The UN and the Ukrainian and Russian authorities cooperate together in a voluntary exchange of people. Such an opportunity will be given to Ukrainians from the eastern regions who want to live in Ukraine. Russians in Ukraine who want to live in the eastern territories or in Russia will also be given this opportunity. Of course this is all and only done on a voluntary basis. The aim is to prevent new inter-ethnic conflicts and mutual territorial claims.
4. The parties agree that no discriminatory legislation may be applied against citizens of Ukraine or Russia in any of the territories.

Restoration

1. Western countries lift all economic sanctions against Russia. Trade, energy exports and imports will resume. This has a positive impact on the European economy (in particular the manufacturing industry and energy prices), on the Russian economy and on mutual relations, and furthermore provides an economic engine to help Ukraine.
2. An international fund is established to determine and oversee reparations. The management of this fund consists of representatives from countries that have taken a more neutral position in the conflict, such as

Hungary, China and India. It ensures that funds are spent on rebuilding destroyed settlements and infrastructure throughout the conflict-ridden territories in Ukraine, including those that may become part of Russia and of mainland Russia. It is responsible to Ukraine, Russia and the international community for how the funds are spent.

3. Russia, the EU, the UK and the US will contribute to the fund, with Russia's contribution being the largest. Other countries, especially China and India, can also contribute if they wish.
4. Russia pays out the funds in two instalments:
5. Contributions to the international fund for reconstruction of the devastation inflicted;
6. Compensation directly to the Ukrainian state for the loss of eastern territories, should they be annexed to Russia.

The purpose of this is not only to make amends and restore justice, but also to warn all the countries of the world that armed conflicts are a costly and dangerous affair and have a high price to pay. It sets an example for other nations who engage in conflicts all around the world, including the US. We want to stress that resources for reparations must be drawn from rich sources, corporations and the like, and may not cause harm or deprivations to poor people within Russia itself.

Mutual Demilitarisation and Security Guarantees

1. Ukraine pledges not to join NATO and will remain neutral. Russia and NATO recognise the importance of Ukraine as a neutral territory between them. Ukraine maintains its armed forces, but refrains from hosting foreign military bases on its territory.
Ukraine guarantees a nuclear-free status of the

country.

2. Here we discussed two options.
 - (a) Ukraine demilitarizes all regions bordering Russia and Belarus. The deployment of heavy weapons, missiles and aircraft in them is prohibited. OR:
 - (b) The Ukrainian army is limited in numbers. There are no restrictions on the navy. This is done to allay Russia's fears of Ukrainian revenge in the contested eastern regions, but at the same time to preserve the indispensable attribute of a sovereign state – the armed forces in the form of a navy. In the event of a lasting and just peace with a NATO security guarantee, Ukraine would not need a large land army, while a developed navy would enable it to maintain its prestige and participate in overseas anti-terrorist and anti-pirate missions with its partners without posing a threat to Russia.
3. Russia demilitarises all regions bordering Ukraine. The deployment of heavy weapons, missiles and aircraft in them is prohibited. This is a security guarantee for Ukraine that a Russian invasion from these territories is impossible in the future.
4. Belarus demilitarizes the regions bordering Ukraine, the Baltic States and Poland. Belarus' security and independence are guaranteed by Russia.
5. NATO provides security guarantees to Ukraine and Moldova to protect them from a possible Russian attack. In turn, Ukraine and Moldova give Russia a guarantee that there will be no possibility of a NATO attack on Russia from their territory. The way in which these assurances are given is further detailed in paragraph 6.
6. Russia and NATO enter into mutual demilitarisation

agreements. All border regions of Western Russia, the Baltic States, Finland, the border regions of Norway and Poland are demilitarised to the extent that only their navies, police and border guards may operate in close proximity to each other. Heavy weaponry, missiles and aircraft may not be deployed on either side. As a result, both Western Russia and NATO's Eastern Flank are demilitarised to the point where an invasion of Europe from Russia is impossible, and a NATO attack on Russia is impossible as well. Internationally monitored inspections are carried out to ensure that the agreements are respected by both sides. The aim is to guarantee security for both Europe and Russia and to restore trust in the long term.

Ideology and Culture

1. The West recognises that not everyone in the world shares a left-liberal, "globalist" worldview. Countries, power blocs, peoples, groups and individuals have and can have their own vision of the world and their vision of the good life and the future. Freedom of opinion, religion, association, assembly etc. are human rights, both individually and collectively
2. Russia guarantees non-interference in elections in the West, and the West gives reciprocal guarantees – not to actively propagate Western agendas in Russia, not to try to change power in Russia, not to encourage internal discord or ethnic conflicts in Russia and not to influence elections.
3. Russia does not interfere in the process of accepting any country into the EU.
4. Countries and power blocs respect each other's sovereignty in pursuit of the common goal of world peace and security. This is in everyone's interest.
5. Culture connects, brings people together and makes

people peaceful and friendly to one another. European countries and Russia reopen cultural, scientific and tourist exchanges. All mutual restrictions in these fields are lifted.

6. There may be voluntary ideological exchanges of people, making it easier for left-liberal Russians to move to ideologically closer Western Europe, and for conservative Europeans to move to Eastern Europe and Russia for a life in line with traditional values. This is, of course, never compulsory and is subject to open discussion, especially since cultural battles within Western Europe are fully ongoing.

In conclusion, we want to say that all parties have an interest in a lasting peace and in security guarantees.

Further escalation and prolongation of the conflict may threaten to escalate into a war with more parties involved or into a nuclear war, and obviously prolongates the suffering and losses of so many lives on both sides.

May all sides come to their senses and realise that only a negotiated compromised peace will allow the peoples of Ukraine and Russia to be saved and give them a chance for a good and prosperous future.

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Isabelle Buhre and her Russian friend.

Isabelle Buhre (1989) is a Dutch political scientist and Latinist.

For security reasons we do not mention the name of the Russian co-author.