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UKRAINE REPORT

On the Peace Negotiations Between Russia and Ukraine: Prioritising the Human Dimension

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With a preface by Oleksandra Matviichuk and an anonymous Russian human rights activist

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Preface

"Peace, progress, human rights -- these three goals are indissolubly linked: it is impossible to achieve one of them if the others are ignored."

Andrey Sakharov, Soviet physicist and dissident, 1975 Nobel Peace Prize Lecture

"It is painfully clear that security cannot be achieved through force or statecraft alone… Ignoring the human dimension of security leads not to order, but to catastrophe. Sustainable security must rest on inclusive governance, protection of civic actors, and mechanisms for accountability and trust-building."

Helsinki+50 Reflection Process Outcome Document[1]

When the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975, its "human dimension" was treated by many as secondary to questions of military balance and geopolitical stability. Yet over time, it proved transformative. The human dimension reframed security to include human rights, democracy, and the rule of law as essential components of peace. This shift altered the dynamics of the Cold War, contributed to the peaceful transformation of Eastern Europe, and demonstrated that respect for human dignity can be a driver of international security rather than an afterthought.

This year, on 1 August 2025, we marked the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act – a moment for both reflection and renewal. Half a century later, the world again faces a defining choice between the logic of Yalta – dividing spheres of influence between great powers—and the spirit of Helsinki: placing individuals, communities, and their rights at the centre of security arrangements. In the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, this choice could not be more urgent. Negotiations aimed at ending the war risk becoming limited to territorial bargains, military deployments, and power arrangements between states. Such an approach would ignore the daily reality of millions of civilians: the displaced, the detained, the tortured, the bereaved, and those struggling to rebuild their lives under conditions of violence and occupation.

The arguments and points of focus set out in this report articulate a different approach – one that is firmly rooted in the human dimension. Developed through a participatory process bringing together civil society actors from Ukraine, Russia, and the wider international community, these proposals address five interlinked thematic areas: safety and security; justice and accountability; participation and inclusion; socioeconomic recovery; and culture and identity. They translate the long-standing human dimension commitments, framed notably within the OSCE, but also in a broader human rights architecture, into concrete demands for the present war-to-peace transition.

They call for, among other things, the release of all civilian captives and deported children, guaranteed humanitarian access to occupied areas, robust international human rights monitoring, protection of cultural heritage, support for inclusive local governance, and measures to address the socioeconomic impacts of war on the most vulnerable. They also stress the need for accountability mechanisms – from transitional justice processes to international prosecutions – to deter further atrocities and to ensure that any settlement is durable. These are not abstract principles but actionable steps that could be integrated into negotiations at multiple levels through the multimediation formats that have emerged in today's fragmented diplomatic environment.

However, only a genuinely common process – bringing together diplomats from various countries, representatives of international organisations, and civil society experts, alongside human rights defenders and peace activists from diverse movements, including environmental, feminist, and grassroots peace initiatives – can ensure this vision is realised. Our hope is that such an approach would help overcome narrow state-centric agendas, build bridges across political divides, and root agreements in the lived realities and aspirations of people most affected by war.

Experience from past conflicts show that agreements which ignore the rights and needs of people are unlikely to last. Sustainable peace in Ukraine will require more than lines on a map; it demands commitments that restore dignity, protect rights, and rebuild trust. Embedding the human dimension points into the negotiation process is therefore not just morally imperative – it is one of the few viable pathways to a human-centred, and thus sustainable, peace.

The preface was written by Oleksandra Matviichuk, Centre for Civil Liberties (Kiyv), Nobel Laureate, and an anonymous Russian human rights activist.

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Introduction

This report highlights the importance of raising the "human dimension" in the talks aimed at ending the Russo-Ukrainian War. It identifies 31 key proposals on the human dimension and places them in the context of the fragmented global order. The report develops the argument that the multilayered and polycentric nature of this order, for all its tendencies to breakdown and violence, does provide avenues for civil society interventions in negotiations, which are crucial to mitigating harm.

The 31 points proposed were formulated through a participatory workshop discussion process. In December 2024, the PeaceRep-Ukraine programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science, together with the Symi Symposium,[2] organised a gathering of civil society representatives from Russia, Ukraine and the broader international community. The workshop discussed the current conjuncture in the war and formulated priority issues for the human rights community in the then-forthcoming talks. These proposals constitute efforts to prioritise the human dimension in negotiations, building on the existing use of this concept from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to the discourse around this idea in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

This report identifies how human-orientated civic interventions can interact with the trend in peace negotiations towards multimediation – itself a feature of a more fragmented and contentious global order. Today's global order is marked by a myriad of interlocking "complex conflict systems" involving numerous actors and states.[3] This, almost by necessity, gives a multimediation dynamic to negotiations as talks have to engage a range of stakeholders through different forums and spaces.

These arguments are developed in the report through several steps. Firstly, we discuss the history of the concept of the "human dimension" and the conceptual frameworks of civic intervention and multimediation in peace making; secondly, we highlight the tension between the "great power" thinking animating much of the United States' discourse around peace negotiation in 2025 and the complex, mediated character of the talks, arguably illustrating some of the constraints and limits on US power; and, lastly, we move to the 31 points, situating them in five thematic areas: safety and security; justice and accountability; participation and inclusion; socioeconomic recovery; and culture and identity.

It should be noted that that the 31 points do not purport to represent any kind of outline final agreement. Instead, they constitute a set of issues to be addressed as a basic minimum. In this sense, they are not a proposal for a comprehensive peace settlement. Instead, this report reflects demands emanating from civil society, which could be taken up individually or in small groups to mitigate the harms of the war.

Key Findings

- **Put "people first" in the peace negotiations.** The Russo-Ukrainian war has inflicted grave harm on civilians, including mass deportations, arbitrary detentions, and the forced displacement of children. A credible peace process must prioritise concrete, rights-based outcomes – not just ceasefire lines and territorial bargains.

- **Integrate the "human dimension".** Build on the OSCE's established frameworks (e.g. Vienna and Moscow Mechanisms) to embed human rights and humanitarian protections into all stages of the talks. By emphasising a human centric approach, we can move beyond "great power politics".

- **Leverage multimediation for civic outcomes.** Fragmentation in global diplomacy has opened up space for multiple actors. This allows civil society, international institutions, and smaller states to press for measurable gains such as prisoner releases, humanitarian access, and human rights monitoring.

- **Use negotiations to secure "islands of agreement".** Even amid strategic deadlock, narrow and focused agreements (e.g. prisoner of war exchanges, nuclear safety, food security corridors) can relieve suffering. The exchange of prisoners that was agreed in the Istanbul talks of 16 May 2025 represents a significant achievement for the human dimension. Talks should be used tactically to secure such wins, which may help build momentum for broader progress.

- **Beware the negotiation of attrition.** Recognising the mistakes of Minsk I/II where talks were used to entrench Russian occupation, a credible negotiation process must counter propaganda, challenge authoritarian narratives, and prioritise democratic legitimacy and accountability.

- **Advance monitoring and accountability mechanisms.** Proposals such as international human rights monitors, ombudsperson access, and transitional justice initiatives should be institutionalised early to deter future violations and ensure enforceability of any commitments.

- **Coordinate multilevel engagement.** The 31 proposals can be activated at multiple levels: local and national (Ukraine/Russia), regional (Europe, Black Sea), and international (e.g., the United Nations, International Atomic Energy Agency, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, etc.), allowing different actors to champion specific elements and maintain sustained pressure on Russia.

The Human Dimension: Usage and History

The terminology of the "human dimension" has its origins in the development of European transnational society efforts to end the Cold War and deliver peace and democracy for all the peoples of Europe in the 1980s. The wave of peace and human rights activists emerging in the 1980s took up the human rights dimension of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. The latter had been divided into three different frameworks or clusters: Basket 1 on security in Europe and European borders and territory, which contained the controversial agreement to recognise the borders of Europe as they existed – and therefore as they had been redrawn after the Second World War under the dominance of the Red Army; Basket 2 that outlined a framework for cooperation around education, science and technology; and Basket 3 on human rights, which particularly focused on rights to movement, family reunion and cultural exchange, i.e., the very issues that would drive the political transformation from late 1988 to spring 1990. While the terminology of the "human dimension" was not explicitly used in the original Helsinki Accords, it emerged in the late 1980s as new civil society movements demanded the communist regimes of Eastern Europe adhered to the commitments they had made under "Basket 3" in 1975. Somewhat ironically, given this role in the subsequent Eastern European spring, when signed by President Ford in 1975, the Helsinki Accords had been highly controversial because of the Pillar 1 provisions.[4] However, although as a candidate he had criticised the accords, President Carter would later describe them as playing a "useful role", highlighting the Pillar 3 basket of human rights commitments.[5]

Above all, the Helsinki Accords had created a new organisation, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), as a regional security architecture to support the implementation and monitoring of the three pillars. And it was in the context of the transformation in Eastern Europe in the later 1980s that the concept of the "human dimension" became formally incorporated into OSCE mechanisms. This relates to two specific instruments: the Vienna Mechanism (1989) and the Moscow Mechanism (1991). The former allows member states to raise questions about the democracy and human rights situations in other member countries; the latter "builds on this and provides for the additional possibility for participating States to establish ad hoc missions of independent experts to assist in the resolution of a specific human dimension problem – either on their own territory or in other OSCE participating States".[6] In February 2024, 45 OSCE states invoked the Moscow Mechanism in relation to human rights violations by Russia in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

The aim was to:

> "… build upon previous findings and establish the facts and circumstances surrounding possible contraventions of relevant OSCE commitments, violations and abuses of human rights, and violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as well as possible cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity, associated with or resulting from the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian Federation; and to collect, consolidate, and analyze this information with a view to offer recommendations, as well as provide the information to relevant accountability mechanisms, as well as national, regional, or international courts or tribunals that have, or may in future have, jurisdiction".[7]

In this usage, the language of the "human dimension" concerns the need to monitor violations of democracy and human rights by OSCE members. The subsequent OSCE expert report, in April 2024, highlighted the issue of the arbitrary detention of Ukrainian civilians by the Russian occupying authorities, and their mistreatment including issues such as sexual violence, extrajudicial killing, and torture, as a central dimension of Russia's violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.[8] The treatment of Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories and the ongoing captivity of thousands upon thousands of such individuals within Russian prisons, as well as the abduction of around 20,000 Ukrainian children from their families, has therefore been a central Ukrainian concern in negotiations.

Point 4 of the 10-Point Ukrainian Peace formula proposed in October 2022 also called for the:

> "… [r]elease of all prisoners and deportees. Today, thousands of Ukrainian people, both military and civilians, are in Russian captivity. Many have been forcefully deported, including at least 20,000 children. Many are subjected to brutal torture and abuse right now. Ukraine proposes the release of prisoners – "all for all", and the release of all children and adults who were illegally deported to Russia".[9]

In August 2023, Canada and Norway announced the establishment of a working group on point 4 of the peace formula, and broader issues related to the "human dimension" in peace negotiations.

As part of the programme activity undertaken by the working group, the Canadian Government hosted a two-day conference in October 2024 that heard "harrowing survivor testimonies — from a detained Ukrainian military medic, the wife of an imprisoned journalist and a former prisoner of war — … [serving] as powerful reminders of the human cost of Russia's war against Ukraine".[10]

The People First coalition (the formation of which is discussed in the section below, "The Outcomes of the Istanbul Workshop") brings further attention to the need for the negotiations with Russia to prioritise the release of those held captive. This terminology was taken up by President Zelensky, who has called for the talks to put "people first, human rights first".[11]

These interrelated conceptions of the "human dimension" share a justice-orientated approach to peace with two common thematic elements. First, rather than a focus on borders and territory, they highlight the rights of individuals and groups within and across territories to live with freedom and dignity; and, second, prioritising the goal of relieving suffering and addressing injustices through the peace talks.

The Challenges of Mediation and Peace-making

International peace-making increased after the end of the Cold War. The PA-X Peace Agreements Database details 1,777 inter- and intrastate peace agreements, found in more than 150 peace processes between 1990 and 2024, though since 2015 the numbers have declined precipitously.[12] The significance of these efforts is that they provide an 'agenda for change' and international frameworks for conflict management. While many of these agreements lead to reductions in the level of violence, they rarely lead to a stable political outcome. This is because the focus has been reaching a compromise among warring parties, many of whom are driven by predatory or sectarian logics.[13] With the fragmentation and growing complexity of situations of intractable violence, or 'new wars',[14] not only has it proved increasingly difficult to reach agreement but these processes often tend to build in disagreement through some form of power-sharing, whether it is the division of territory, or electoral power-sharing where the warring parties are granted a certain number of seats in a national parliament or allocated control of certain ministries. The consequence is what Christine Bell and Jan Pospisil have called 'formalised political unsettlement';[15] at best the agreement leads to the freezing of conflict and continued polarisation and predation and, at worst, the renewal of violence.

While some of the features of intractable violence are present in the Russo-Ukrainian War, especially in the form of the combination of authoritarianism and kleptocracy underpinning the Russian war machine, Ukraine has notably avoided the breakdown of state authority characteristic of new war environments with a multiplicity of different armed actors. Even though Russia emphasises territorial control and ethnic claim-making (up to and including the outright denial of the existence of a Ukrainian national identity separate from Russian and Russia), the issue for Ukraine is not just about political control of territory, it is about how power is exercised; in other words, democracy and human rights.

In the context of the growing difficulties of peace-making and mediation, combined with processes of fragmentation and polyarchy in global order, negotiation strategies have given rise to what Bell has called multimediation. For Bell, this concept of how negotiations occur reflects the complex conflict systems found in the 21st century:

> Multimediation is the accidental and deliberate use of multiple overlapping mediation processes directed towards the discrete problems and actors that make up a complex conflict system, with a view to unwinding key elements of that system, but with an uncertain final destination point in terms of 'peace'.[16]

In other words, multimediation is partly a consequence of growing fragmentation, including the fragmentation of armed groups, states and geopolitical actors and partly a consequence of the shortcomings of classic peace-making and the need to seek other methods, such as local mediation for example, to address complex conflict systems. Global fragmentation has involved a rise of new geopolitical actors involved in mediation, for example Qatar or Turkey, who tend to still focus on top-down territorial and transactional issues.[17] At the same time, multimediation does offer an opening for civic concerns and actors. This is because multimediation as an overall framing can include mediation at different levels (local, national, regional and global) on different topics (not just political outcomes, but a range of concrete human and civic issues) and with a range of different actors (not just the armed groups but also civilians, multilateral agencies, civic activists and so on).

Utilising the Talks to Advance Concrete Humanitarian and Rights-based Goals

The concept of the "human dimension" can help to mitigate the problem of negotiations becoming a means for the Russian regime to conduct information warfare and manoeuvre to prosecute its demands. This has been a significant problem in previous rounds of talks aimed at ending the war. Insisting on a discussion of the 'human dimension" can shift the conversation away from the Russian narrative about territory and ethnicity and towards an alternative understanding of the war. The Russian regime is very unlikely to revise its self-understanding of the war – as a supposedly "defensive" response to western aggression. Nevertheless, applying pressure around concrete humanitarian demands can, above all, create gains. It can also draw attention to the issues of human rights – something that is important in the court of global public opinion, especially among those states in the Global South with justified concerns that Ukraine's western allies have not been consistent in how they've exercised support for international law and human rights in other conflicts.

Between 2014 and 2022, peace talks were common between Russia and Ukraine. These are often looked upon negatively within Ukraine and the wider international community because of the opportunity they provided for the prosecution of Russian demands. This is seen by many as the lesson of the Minsk I and Minsk II processes, whereby efforts to achieve conflict management and stability reinforce and legitimise Russian demands, while entrenching its position in the territories that it currently occupies. As Cindy Wittke puts it, this history shows the ways in which a "war of attrition" may develop into a "negotiation of attrition",[18] where the negotiations inadvertently become an arena favourable to authoritarian expansional, transactional diplomacy and the use of information warfare.

In the period since 2022, there have been agreements that focussed on the human dimension. These include the deal to end the grain blockade,[19] an agreement that was broken by Russia but, in the end, proved unnecessary because of Ukrainian military successes in the Black Sea; the agreement on nuclear safety in the case of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, both of these brokered by the United Nations; and a number of humanitarian agreements on exchanges of prisoners and the evacuation of civilians, many of these negotiated at local levels. Cindy Wittke calls these islands of agreement or civility.[20] They have received less attention than the proposed national negotiations, but arguably they do represent more of an opening for an alternative approach informed by the human dimension.

Formulating agenda items for the talks, i.e., how precisely they are structured and around what issues, is important to avoid a situation where the issues discussed reflect Russian talking points and provide a platform for propaganda and disinformation. There are examples of this occurring in the 2025 talks initiated by the Trump administration. Remarks from the American Special Envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the Tucker Carlson Show, in an interview following Russia's rejection of the 30-day ceasefire proposal, illustrate this agenda setting and discursive power of influence in the peace talks. Witkoff suggested that the five regions of Ukraine, which have been formally claimed by Russia, actually wish to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation, and that this is the ultimate cause of the conflict.[21] By moving the thinking of the United States government onto this discursive terrain, the Russian regime has utilised talks to shape the thinking of the administration and its sense of the desirable and possible. And insofar as there is ideological heterogeneity in the Trump administration on this and other issues, the discursive intervention aims at consolidating the political position of its most pro-Russia elements.

This negative example illustrates the importance of shaping the agenda and topics that are addressed in the peace negotiations. While there is a clear affinity in the worldview of the present American and Russian governments, the forums through which negotiations are occurring can still be utilised to maximise pressure on the Russian aggressor – rather than the other way round, i.e., coercing Ukraine into concessions. So, the talks can be a site of democratic and civic intervention, as well as authoritarian. They could even be seen in this sense as a "front" in the conflict between these forces.

The question is whether they can be moved onto issues that are less comfortable for the Kremlin, by for example focusing on the injustices arising from its occupation. This would aim to address the multiple harms arising from the war and make concrete gains around humanitarian and rights-based demands.

Discussions around negotiations have often focused on the "peace through victory" and "peace through compromise" dichotomy.[22] Indeed, a critical problem in the Russo-Ukrainian War lies in the irreconcilable nature of the differences between the two sides; one of which is fighting for its democracy and sovereign self-determination; the other for colonial expansion and the creation of a puppet government in Kyiv. Given this irreconcilability, both sides are highly sceptical that the other would be genuinely committed to a peace (the "commitment problem"[23]). Both sides instead see a risk in any pause in fighting allowing the other side to prepare for the eventual resumption of hostilities.

The analysis presented here is not counterposed to a "peace through victory" approach but seeks to bring in a different perspective by highlighting the opportunity the talks offer to maximise pressure on the Russian regime on specific issues. First and foremost, this is for human reasons – to help those who are experiencing unacceptable suffering. This sees the talks as a chance to make humanitarian and rights-based gains, capitalising as far as possible on the weaknesses of the Russian position in the war.[24] This aims at striking "islands of agreement",[25] which are backed up by appropriate institutional and monitoring arrangements. The aim of the latter is to raise the costs of subsequent violations for the Russian side, e.g., through sanctions policy, thereby disincentivising such actions. And secondly it is a way to shift the narrative of the war away from the preoccupation with ethnicity and territory and thereby seeking to cultivate an environment favourable to the "big change" required to restore stability in Russia's relationship to Ukraine and the wider international order. Ultimately, this means a political transition in Russia in which forces favouring normalisation of external relations are able to take and hold power. While this would ultimately require the formation of a democratically accountable government, a lower order level of change if sustained would be sufficient for a peace settlement.

For example, freedom of movement across any enduring line of control, allowing for movement of citizens from occupied and unoccupied territories, is preferable to a militarised and highly securitised border, where the mechanisms to control movement are part of a wider authoritarian governance system. There is a diversity of cases in Russia's existing client states on this question; for example, movement is restricted but normalised between Transnistria and government-controlled Moldova but far harder between the highly fortified security border separating Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia.[26]

The Fragmentation of Global Order and the 2025 US-initiated Negotiation Round to End the War

An interesting feature of the 2025 negotiation round of talks is the disjuncture between the "great power" thinking that has animated the Russian and American position, on the one hand, and the many-sided nature of the negotiations that actually transpired, which are indicative of the trend towards multimediation. The governments of the United States and Russia share a view of international affairs that is premised on the idea that the strong dominate the weak. Negotiations are seen as an opportunity to leverage power and bargain over territory and assets. In this conception of international order, there are a handful of states that dominate the rest. These states maintain spheres of influence where they enjoy special rights of interference and control over subordinate states – what we may call "great power politics".[27] "Peace", in this concept, is simply a bargain to balance the interests of the already powerful.[28]

In this conception of international order, any power which weaker states appear to have over those with formally stronger capacities, must be due to assistance that they have received from another "great power" acting as patron. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio expressed this when he argued that the conflict is "a proxy war between nuclear powers – the United States, helping Ukraine, and Russia – and it needs to come to an end".[29] By asserting its agency, not only in resisting Russian aggression but also insisting that it has a right to substantively shape any deal to end the war, Ukraine has challenged this conception of international order. Ukraine has pursued an alternative normative position in the talks.

This alternative framework was expressed in President Zelensky's 10-Point Peace Plan announced in October 2022, which is fundamentally about the human dimension including nuclear safety, energy and food security, protection of the environment as well as human rights and justice.[30] And this has been, to some extent, echoed in the Ukraine-Europe peace proposal, which are more in line with a conception of a rules-based international order. Table 1 contrasts the different peace proposals as of the end of April 2025.

Table 1: Contrasting the US peace proposal to the Europe-Ukraine one (April 2025)
Key differences are underlined

	Ukraine-Europe Proposal [31]	US Proposal [32]
Ceasefire	- "Full and unconditional ceasefire on land, sea, and air" - Immediate technical negotiations with US and Europe - Monitored by US and third countries	- "Full and unconditional ceasefire on land, sea, and air" - Immediate technical negotiations with US and Europe - Monitored by US and third countries
Humanitarian	- "Russia must unconditionally return all deported and illegally displaced children" - Exchange all POWs ("all for all") - Russia to release all civilian prisoners	No specific provisions on civilians, POWs, or deported children mentioned
Security for Ukraine	- "Robust" (Article 5-like) guarantees, including from US - No restrictions on Ukrainian armed forces - Guarantor group "of the willing" led by Europe but not only European states - No restrictions on allied foreign forces in Ukraine - Ukraine may pursue EU accession	- "Robust security guarantee" - Similar guarantor structure (coalition of willing) but without a commitment to US participation - "Ukraine will not seek to join NATO" - "Ukraine may pursue the EU"

	Ukraine-Europe Proposal [31]	US Proposal [32]
Territorial Issues	- Territorial issues postponed until after full ceasefire - Negotiations start from current line of control - Ukraine regains control of Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant with "US involvement" and Kakhovka Dam - Ukraine controls Kinburn Spit and gains "unhindered passage" on Dnipro River	- US recognises Russian control of Crimea (de jure) - US recognises Russian control (de facto) of those parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson which it controls - Ukraine regains Kharkiv territory - Ukraine regains Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (under US administration) and Kakhovka Dam - Ukraine "enjoys unhindered passage" on Dnieper River and control of Kinburn Spit
Economic Provisions	- US-Ukraine economic/mineral cooperation agreement - Full reconstruction and compensation for Ukraine - Use of frozen Russian sovereign assets for recovery and reconstruction - Sanctions to ease only after sustainable peace and with "snapback" clauses if agreement is violated	- US-Ukraine economic/mineral agreement - Full reconstruction and compensation - All Russia-related sanctions since 2014 to be lifted - US-Russia economic cooperation to resume

We can see that there are a number of key differences between the US and Ukraine-Europe proposal:

- NATO Membership: Explicitly allowed in Ukraine-Europe proposal; forbidden in US version.
- Territorial Concessions: Ukraine-Europe defers the issue; US version grants recognition to Russia de jure in Crimea and de facto in the rest of Russian occupied Ukraine.
- Humanitarian Commitments: Only the Ukraine-Europe plan includes firm requirements for POWs, civilian prisoners, and deported children.
- Sanctions: Ukraine-Europe proposes conditional easing with snapback; US proposes lifting all sanctions since 2014 and restoring America-Russia economic relationship per se.

These differences – among states that were until recently united in their support for Ukraine – is of course itself an illustration of the trends to authoritarianism, polarisation and geopolitical fragmentation in the international order. The talks have reflected this complexity. Indeed, mapping a timeline of the negotiations to date (Table 2),[33] we can observe that the power relations at work within this complex conflict system are multisided and multidirectional. While Ukraine has moved away from a "peace through victory" paradigm – instead seeking security guarantees, including some form of allied military presence, and a freezing of the conflict at the present line of control – it has held out against any outright surrender to Russian positions of the type implied by the remarks of Steve Witkoff cited above. Through the formation of a "Coalition of the Willing", which in its broadest formation included a range of non-European states such as Australia, New Zealand and Japan, as well as a core European pole, Ukraine and its allies effectively leveraged a spectrum of geopolitical support to sustain their position.

The ideological heterogeneity of the Trump administration, the haphazard nature of its policymaking and the still democratic, albeit regressing, domestic political context, also place a constraint on the government's ability to adopt an outright pro-Russian position, and contrasts with Russia's much more fixed and established autocracy.

Consider for example how the Congressional Republican Party, which remains conventionally conservative, indeed, hawkish on Russia, has quietly intervened to influence Washington's position. Led by figures such as Senator Lindsay Graham, they tend to favour the further toughening of US sanctions on Russia. But the peculiar way that Trump exercises a highly personalised form of power, demanding total public loyalty and justification for actions that are often incoherent and ideologically eclectic (aside from touchstone issues like anti-immigration) makes anticipating where US strategic policy will land and the scenarios at play subject to a high level of uncertainty. The resulting fluidity of the United States' external alignments and the influence that its allies can wield in its domestic politics add further layers to geopolitical fragmentation.

Table 2: Timeline of the 2025 talks and thematic focus, February – May 2025

Date	Event	Location	Thematic focus (based on public reporting)
12 Feb 2025	Trump-Putin phone call	NA	RU-USA reopen diplomatic channels, outline contours of peace settlement
18 Feb 2025	US-Russia bilateral talks	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	RU-USA normalisation of relations, structure for Ukraine negotiations
2 Mar 2025	London Summit on Ukraine	London, UK	Coalition of Ukraine supporters, including UK, Canada, and a number of EU states discuss outline ceasefire plan and security guarantees
11 Mar 2025	US-Ukraine bilateral talks	Jeddah, Saudi Arabia	USA-UKR 30-day interim ceasefire proposal
15 Mar 2025	Coalition of the Willing – virtual meeting	NA	Broader than London Summit, includes Australia, NZ, Japan, establishes "Coalition of the Willing". Coordination among Ukraine's supporters, ceasefire implementation framework
7 Mar 2025	Élysée Palace Summit	Paris, France	Support for Ukraine from European partners, discussion of 'assurance forces' for Ukraine

Date	Event	Location	Thematic focus (based on public reporting)
4 Apr 2025	Coalition of the Willing meeting in Kyiv	Kyiv, Ukraine	RU-USA reopen diplomatic channels, outline contours of peace settlement
18 Feb 2025	US-Russia bilateral talks	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	Military chiefs from UKR-FRA-UK discuss security guarantees, implementation plans for future agreement
11 Apr 2025	Witkoff-Putin Meeting	St. Petersburg, Russia	"More than four hours" bilateral summit, focused on developing a Russia backed ceasefire proposal
15–16 Apr 2025	Russia-Ukraine Talks	Ankara, Turkey	TU-UKR-FR-UK summit on security in the Black Sea and the naval dimension of a security guarantee
18 Apr 2025	Rubio Statement on Mediation	Public/Press	US warning over stalled talks, ceasefire violations, energy infrastructure attacks
23 Apr 2025	London Talks	London, UK	Ministerial-level talks postponed; officials met to discuss US peace proposal
25 Apr 2025	Counter-proposals Presented	London, UK	Ukraine and European nations presented counterproposals to US peace plan

Date	Event	Location	Thematic focus (based on public reporting)
30 Apr 2025	US-Ukraine Minerals Deal Signed	Washington, US	Commercial minerals extraction agreement, terms favour US, potentially could include military aid
16 May 2025	First Direct Russia-Ukraine talks since 2022	Istanbul, Turkey	Agreement on prisoner exchange (one thousand PoWs), no agreement on ceasefire and sides remain far apart on critical issues
19 May 2025	Trump-Putin-Zelensky-Euro states phone calls	NA	Trump to speak directly to Putin by phone; then to Zelensky and European states, leading the "coalition of the willing"
2 Jun 2025	Exchange of memorandum	Istanbul	Presentation of memorandum outlining the respective position of the two sides on any conclusion to the war
23 Jul 2025	High level peace talks on PoW and ceasefire	Istanbul	Very brief meeting between Russia and Ukraine high level teams, no agreement or outcomes
15 Aug 2025	Major Russia-US bilateral summit	Anchorage, Alaska	Apparent shift of Washington to Russian positions, drops push for ceasefire, urges Ukraine to make final agreement

Date	Event	Location	Thematic focus (based on public reporting)
18 Aug 2025	Europe-Ukraine-US White House meeting	Washington, US	Emergency delegation of European leaders, apparent shift of US towards provision of security guarantees for Ukraine

The 2025 talks did, however, succeed in striking an agreement on a prisoner exchange, illustrating their utility as a forum to achieve concrete measures to alleviate the many hardships produced by the Russian invasion. The fact that a human dimension issue was the only achievement during the talks illustrates the opportunity they provide to press further on these issues, which can secure concrete "wins".

The US government has also attempted to leverage its position to secure US control of Ukrainian critical raw materials, culminating in the signing of the mineral agreement at the end of April 2025. However, despite these various Washington overtures to Moscow, at the time of writing, it has little to show for it in terms of diplomatic movement from Russia. Notably, its cornerstone proposal for an initial 30-day ceasefire was accepted by Ukraine[34] only to then be immediately rejected by Russia.

On 16 May 2025, the US-initiated process did, however, lead to the first formal bilateral peace talks between Russia and Ukraine since February 2022. President's Trump statement in advance, that without a conversation between himself and the Russian President, the talks would not come to anything, illustrated the tensions between the reality of the peace process – as a multidimensional and complex exercise, involving a range of conflicting parties – and the "great power" reasoning he is attached to. His statement effectively lifted any pressure from the Russian side to strike a deal.

The Russian Position in the Talks: Moscow Maintains Its Highly Maximalist Position After Anchorage Summit

After a lull in diplomatic activity in June and July 2025, Washington undertook another push to secure an agreement with the Russian side. In a major symbolic victory for the Putin regime, the Russian president was given all the trappings of a state visit and warm welcome in the Anchorage summit in Alaska on 15 August 2025 (see Table 2). The initial outcome of the talks also appeared to suggest a movement of Washington towards Moscow's positions. President Trump left the talks suggesting that they would now bypass the idea of a ceasefire – a goal reflected in both US and Ukraine-Europe peace proposals as of late April 2025 (see Table 1) – and move directly towards a comprehensive settlement, a language that is widely seen as reflecting Russian positions.[35] European leaders, in turn, rushed to Washington to meet with President Trump on 18 August 2025 (see Table 2). The extremely high-powered nature of the delegation, with the heads of state of Europe's most powerful geopolitical players joined by the President of the European Union, NATO's Secretary General and President Zelensky himself, in an emergency meeting, implied considerable panic at the Anchorage summit.

President Trump's subsequent statements suggested some level of US participation in a post-conflict security guarantee for Ukraine. This position departed from its stated proposal of late April 2025, thereby moving closer to the Ukraine-Europe position (see Table 2). So, the outcome of the summit was widely viewed as a win for the Ukraine-Europe side.

Less attention has been given in the media to the Russian negotiating position, as it was put forward in its memorandum of 2 June 2025. The text of the document was published by the Russian news agency TASS and subsequently discussed in the Ukrainian media. At the centre of the Russian proposal was a full Ukrainian withdrawal from the entire territory of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – much of which is still controlled by the Ukrainian government. This was packaged up in two different "options", though they appear perhaps better seen as different stages of the same position. In Option A, Ukraine would withdraw from these territories followed by a ceasefire arrangement; in Option B, a more comprehensive package involving not only Ukrainian withdrawal but international recognition of its annexation was proposed. We present these highly maximalist Russian positions in Table 3.

The proposals also contained a number of Russian propaganda talking points that have been utilised to justify its war of aggression. These include provisions for legal bans on "nationalist" and "Nazi" organisations, and immediate steps towards new presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine (reflecting the claim that Zelensky is a "dictator").

These proposals were quite clearly not a credible starting point for negotiation from the Ukrainian perspective. Most egregiously, the agreement would rule out western security guarantees for Ukraine in the form of troop deployments and involves an immediate and permanent end to military aid. Seen in tandem with the proposed withdrawal from existing Ukrainian Armed Forces positions, this would leave key cities – especially the major industrial city of Dnipro – extremely vulnerable to future acts of Russian aggression. The framework proposal was therefore strongly rejected by Ukraine.

According to some media reports in mid-August 2025, Russian negotiators walked back some of their territorial demands.[36] They are now reportedly willing to accept a full withdraw from Donbas (defined as the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk), a region that Russia presently only controls 88% of – a position that is still unacceptable to Ukraine, especially in combination with other Russian demands.

Table 3: Russian Memorandum negotiating position, as reported (Istanbul, June 2025)[37]

Proposed Russian framework for "final settlement"
• Demands international recognition of Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia as Russian territory, even areas not fully occupied. • Ukraine must adopt permanent neutrality, explicitly forbidding membership in any military alliances. • No foreign troops, military bases, or military infrastructure allowed on Ukrainian territory. • Ukraine must remain a non-nuclear state, with no transit or deployment of nuclear weapons. • Ukrainian armed forces to be limited in size and capability; "nationalist formations" in the army and National Guard to be disbanded. • Guarantees for the rights of Russian-speaking populations. Russian to become an official language. Legal bans on "nationalist" or "Nazi" organisations and glorification of such ideologies.
Ceasefire Options
Option A • Immediate full ceasefire, followed by Ukrainian withdrawal from specified regions within 30 days. **Option B ("Package Deal")** • Mutual halt to military redeployments and mobilisations. • End of foreign military aid, intelligence sharing, and satellite surveillance. • Repeal of martial law in Ukraine. • Ukraine to hold presidential and parliamentary elections within 100 days.

- Joint ceasefire monitoring mechanism to be established.
- Mutual amnesty for political prisoners.
- Signing of comprehensive peace agreement.

Roadmap and sequencing

- Ceasefire conditional upon implementation of withdrawal and legal/political measures.
- Timelines for elections, amnesty, and final peace treaty built into the deal.

The Outcomes of the Istanbul Workshop: 31 Points to Prioritise the Human Dimension in the Russia-Ukraine Peace Negotiations and the People First Coalition

The following 31 key issues for the talks were formulated at a workshop bringing together civil society representatives from Russia, Ukraine and the broader international community.

There were 13 present in-person and one online. Particular care was taken with regard to security considerations. Contact with even liberal and oppositional Russians in any form can be stigmatised in Ukraine, while Russia's highly autocratic system exposes civil society activists to significant repression.

The workshop was organised around several open discussion areas:

- Sharing information on political situations inside Russia and Ukraine
- The strategic geopolitical environment in the context of the US elections
- Strengthening cooperation between civil society in Russia and Ukraine
- Developing a common approach in light of the likely forthcoming talks

The organised of the workshop reflected the longstanding method of the LSE Conflict and Civicness Research Group and PeaceRep that works alongside civil society activists to develop knowledge about conflict settings. This methodology draws on the tradition of cooperative and action orientated research. The session can be understood in terms of what John Heron and Peter Reason call "cooperative inquiry" as research "with" rather than "on" people. Participants at the workshop shared a broad set of values-based assumptions that were grounded in principles of universal human rights.

As Heron and Reason put it:

> Co-operative inquiry is a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to (1) understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative way of looking at things; and (2) learn how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better... [This approach aims to move beyond a type of research that has] very little connection between the researcher's thinking and the concerns and experiences of people who are actually involved.[38]

Underpinning this approach, as it has been utilised across PeaceRep, is the simple premise that to develop high quality research about conflict-impacted societies it is necessary to draw on the skills, expertise and insights of those living through these conditions and attempting in various different ways to overcome and transform them.

Importantly, we would also emphasise, that although this can involve granular local knowledge about a specific geographical area or policy issue being discussed in national politics, we would want to avoid the implication that activists had narrowly local skills sets, while academics from the LSE brought in the "big picture". In relation to the December 2024 workshop, this would above all be, very concretely, incorrect. While some activists had been engaging in very contextual forms of humanitarian assistance on the ground in Russia and Ukraine, particularly in relations to supporting prisoners in Russia, for example, the activists at the workshop were generally highly internationally mobile, and some had considerable experience of high-level engagement with policymakers through a range of international forums. The knowledge exchange at the workshop was therefore reciprocal and multilayered.

As the group came together around a concrete task, how to develop civil society cooperation between Russia, Ukraine and the international community to support human rights-based goals, it could also be understood as an example of what Etienne Wenger calls a "community of practice", a grouping "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour".[39]

The 31 points were developed on the third day of the workshop through the course of brainstorming session about how to address the likely emergence of peace negotiations and what the key priorities should be. Here we have retrospectively (i.e., after the workshop) grouped them into five different thematic areas: (1) safety and security; (2) justice and accountability; (3) participation and inclusion; (4) socioeconomic recovery in global context; (5) culture, identity and media freedom. The numbering does not represent any hierarchy of perceived importance, but is purely a presentational matter.

The workshop also contributed to the development of a new and concrete civil society initiative: the formation of the People First advocacy coalition.[40] In the course of discussions at the workshop, the conditions faced by Ukrainians (both civilians and PoWs) held in Russian prisons, as well as Russian political prisoners, were discussed. The workshop heard how Russian prisons had been emptied of criminals with the military mobilisation drive of the regime, but this reduction in the prison population had been offset by the thousands upon thousands of captives of the Russian invasion. Although PoWs were subject to swaps with the Ukrainian authorities, this is not the case for illegally and arbitrarily detained civilians, making the predicament a particularly important and pressing human rights concern.

As a result of these discussions, activists present at the workshop set out to develop a new civil society initiative, highlighting the case of these captives and pushing for their release as a first step and central priority for the negotiations between Russia, Ukraine and the wider international community. The People First campaign was subsequently formed in the Spring of 2025 and led by the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Memorial Human Rights Defence Centre (Russia) and the Centre for Civil Liberties (Ukraine). The LSE-PeaceRep research ecosystem, through hosting the initial discussions around its formation, with the assistance and close cooperation of and Symi Symposium, therefore made a concrete and meaningful contribution to the strengthening of a democratic and international civic space. Given the stigma that can exist in Ukraine towards any cooperation with Russians, and the very high profile of some of the organisations involved in the People First advocacy coalition, this development marks an important achievement for internationalism and human right cooperation.

Table 4: 31 points to protect the "human dimension" in the negotiations to end the war in Ukraine

Security and safety		
Measures to address personal insecurity, environmental safety, threats to life and wellbeing, especially for those residing in occupied territories.	1	Release and repatriation of all prisoners of war by complete exchange
	2	Return of illegally displaced children to their families
	3	Freedom of movement for civilians in occupied territories
	4	No mandatory conscription of citizens in occupied territories into occupying armies
	5	Upholding nuclear and radioactive safety across the entire territory of Ukraine; IAEA access
	6	De-mining of territories, including international cooperation and monitoring
	7	No "demographic engineering", population displacement or colonial settlement in occupied territories
	8	Immediate release of all deported and illegally detained civilians

Justice and accountability		
Measures that seek to strengthening the rule of law, ensure redress for past abuses, and prevent impunity for abuses to and including war crimes and crimes against humanity.	10	Facilitating the identification and reinterring of the deceased
	10	Cooperation on searches for missing persons
	11	Release of political prisoners and rejection of political persecutions
	12	Lifting bans on so-called non-desirable and extremist organisations
	13	Monitoring of agreements, including access of Ukrainian ombudsman and international organisations
	14	Recognition of and compliance with the UDHR, ICCPR, ICESCR
	15	Transitional justice; investigation of war crimes, reparations for victims, including sexual and gender-based violence
	16	Guarantees for human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers
	17	International presence in occupied territories for monitoring human rights and guarantees

Participation and inclusion		
Measures ensuring diverse and meaningful representation in the peace negotiations process and post-conflict governance	18	Gender representation in negotiating teams; gender-sensitive analysis; civil society consultation
	19	Full compliance with the Women, Peace and Security agenda
	20	20 Guarantees for the rights of indigenous peoples in occupied territories
	21	Guarantees against discrimination (women, disabled people, LGBT+, ethnic/national minorities)

Socioeconomic recovery in global context		
Measures to address livelihoods, infrastructure, economic access, and global public goods such as food security and environmental protection	22	Protection of property rights in occupied territories
	23	No mandatory 'passportisation'; no denial of services
	24	Protection of social and trade union rights in line with ILO conventions
	25	Ensure global food security is not compromised; protect international trade/shipping routes
	26	Address environmental damage; uphold the Black Sea Convention
	27	Ensuring access to telecommunications, media, banks, and public infrastructure

Culture and identity and media freedom		
Recognition and protection of cultural, religious, and identity-based freedoms	28	Return of seized cultural artefacts and obligations to protect cultural heritage
	29	Recognition of the right to cultural identity and freedom
	30	Religious freedom
	31	Internet freedom and media access in occupied territories

Conclusion

Even if an agreement on a ceasefire presently seems unlikely, the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine have been important because they provide an international framework for conflict management. In this briefing, we have argued that a focus on the human dimension could:

- Contribute to the alleviation of suffering;
- Draw attention to an understanding of the war that is about democracy and human rights rather than ethnicity and territory; and
- Provide an opening for a civic intervention in the talks.

The exchange of prisoners that was agreed in the Istanbul talks of 16 May 2025 represents a significant achievement for the human dimension and it is to be hoped that continuing talks will result in further gains. The 31 points outlined here are a starting point for both diplomatic and public pressure. They are a key component of a multimediation approach in that they represent a multi-dimensional understanding of the issues above and beyond the political questions. They can also be introduced at different levels: including the national level (Ukraine and Russia), the global level (Europe and the US and the global South) and local levels (the Black Sea or the occupied territories). And they can be disseminated in different forums, not just formal talks but in broader public discussions.

What we are talking about therefore is an ongoing peace process rather than a discrete set of negotiations which ends up with a single final agreement. That process provides a platform to drawing attention to the plight of people caught up in the war; increasing public understanding and putting pressure on Russia.

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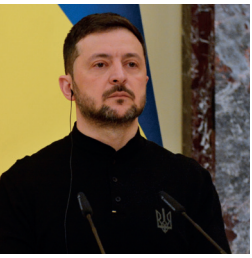

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