

## **Transactional Diplomacy Cannot Bring Peace to Ukraine**

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*Although diplomacy to end Russia's war in Ukraine is intensifying, the goal cannot be limited to a cessation of hostilities. Unless a negotiated settlement is firmly anchored in existing international law and human-rights frameworks, it will not settle anything.*

KYIV – The world is holding its breath as diplomacy to end Russia’s brutal war of aggression against Ukraine intensifies. But while necessary and welcome, this latest diplomatic push carries enormous risks. Given the evident haste to secure a deal, there is every reason to worry that the resulting “peace” will be empty, unjust, and ultimately unsustainable.

Russia’s recent large-scale attacks on Kyiv and other Ukrainian civilian population centers underscore the urgency of the situation, because they are merely the latest episode in a larger pattern of escalation. The brutal reality is that Ukrainian civilian casualties have been significantly [higher](#) in 2025 than in 2024. Making matters worse, Russian strikes on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure have already caused widespread blackouts, leading many Ukrainians to fear that they are heading into the harshest winter since the full-scale invasion began.

We all have a duty to look beyond the statistics and acknowledge the enormous daily impact on people’s lives. The human toll is staggering. In addition to the casualties and physical suffering, around [six million](#) people, including [1.6 million](#) children, are living in the 20% of Ukraine’s territory that remains temporarily occupied by Russia. They are being subjected to severe abuse, having had their language, national and cultural identity, and dignity stripped away. Moreover, another [3.7 million](#) people have been internally displaced, and 6.9 million have fled abroad. Such large-scale displacements

– the largest in Europe in 80 years – have fractured families and driven up poverty rates.

All this devastation makes one thing clear: human rights are essential not only for setting the terms of an eventual peace but also for saving lives today. Stopping the fighting and providing humanitarian relief must be top priorities. But the recent peacemaking efforts have been largely transactional and bereft of any such values-based objectives. They focus on land, military capacity, and resources, while remaining largely silent about the fate of the millions affected by the war.

For Ukrainians, the criteria for peace are simple but profoundly important. Any agreement must end the war for good, rather than provide a mere pause, and it must ensure their current and future well-being. A peace that ignores the people is a blueprint for future aggression. Any plan that weakens the victim by imposing military restrictions or legitimizing illegal territorial gains would usher in a new reality of “might makes right.” Any plan that offers amnesty for the aggressor would be an affront to human decency and the principles that have underpinned the international order since World War II.

And make no mistake: this would not be a localized failure. Russia has waged its war of aggression at a time when the international system is already under severe strain, and the political will to uphold human rights is waning. Whatever is agreed in Ukraine will set a precedent for the future of international law.

Cherished principles and values are not the only issue. A wholly transactional approach is also simply impracticable and ineffective, because a peace without justice will not last. To secure a just, effective, and enduring peace, the entire process must be anchored in the existing international human-rights framework.

Specifically, a people-centered peace must rest on three core principles. The first is that justice is non-negotiable. We must ensure accountability, including criminal prosecutions for international crimes, and fair reparations that reach all the victims of Russian aggression since 2014.

Second, the peace process must actively champion protections for the most vulnerable by safeguarding the rights of refugees, internally displaced people, missing persons,

prisoners of war, civilian detainees, abducted children, and the millions currently trapped in temporarily occupied territories.

Lastly, the process must be inclusive. To succeed, it will need to draw on contributions from all stakeholders, including international organizations and civil society groups. It will also need to provide a meaningful place for women at the negotiating table, in keeping with the principles outlined in [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#), which “reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts,” as well as in “humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction, and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.”

To counter Russia’s aggression and fortify Ukraine’s security, we must unequivocally defend the values that are under attack. A just settlement must be firmly anchored in human rights. Otherwise, it will not settle anything. The goal is not merely to cease hostilities, but to safeguard a future in which Ukrainians’ rights and dignity are fully respected.