

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7852>



War in Ukraine

No, the West Didn't Halt Ukraine's Peace Talks With Russia

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV573 - October 2022 -

Publication date: Tuesday 18 October 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

In his article for *Novara Media* titled '[Liz Truss Doesn't Care About Stopping the War in Ukraine](#)', Oliver Eagleton blames the UK and other western governments for their unwillingness to “end the war” in Ukraine. Intent on revitalising British foreign policy and NATO more broadly, argues Eagleton, Boris Johnson “halted” early peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. Truss has continued Johnson’s “inflexible approach”, prolonging the war and risking a “spiralling escalation”. The left, Eagleton urges, must develop a progressive vision to end the war and avoid being outflanked by rightwing mobilisations in response to its global economic fallout.

It's hard to disagree with Eagleton about the importance of a progressive vision for ending the Russian invasion. Any such vision, moreover, should follow the example of Eagleton's article in being critical of both the reasons for and the forms of western support to Ukraine. But his vision is based on faulty assumptions about Ukraine and Russia, and takes a narrow if not tendentious interpretation of the evidence of British influence on Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky. This would be of little interest had these assumptions and the shaky arguments they lead to not been reverberating across the British, European and American left for some time now. At best, they don't help the task of developing a leftwing policy on Russia's aggression in Ukraine. At worst, they ultimately reinforce the ultra-conservative division of the world into 'spheres of influence', shoring up the legitimacy of the use of force in international disputes and increasing the danger of global inter-imperialist warring down the road. So what precisely is wrong with these takes?

Eagleton is among many leftwing commentators to assume that since before the invasion, Russia's leadership has preferred to achieve its goals in Ukraine through diplomacy (and is thus willing to reach compromises preserving the core interests of the parties involved) rather than force. If peace was possible in the war in Donbas, so the argument goes, it's possible in the battle for Ukraine; if diplomacy had been pursued more vigorously, the war could have been averted. Eagleton [follows others](#) when pointing to Russia's insistence on implementing the Minsk II Accords in Donbas, and the Russian proposal of western security in December 2021, as proof of this preference for diplomacy. But in doing so, he takes the Kremlin's statements at face value, ignoring that [the logic of Russia's behaviour](#) regarding Ukraine and the 'collective West' more broadly is driven by [territorial expansion](#) and [the opportunistic use of violence](#).

First, the Minsk Accords, concluded at gunpoint after Russia's military interventions in Ukraine in summer 2014 and winter 2015, weren't a magic recipe for peace, but a tool of Russian military-diplomatic pressure whose meaning and use changed over time. While in 2014-2017 the implementation of the Minsk Accords could have led to a negotiated reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine under international supervision, [the international situation and Russia's intentions](#) have changed. In fact, by late 2021 Russian authorities had [all but integrated the breakaway republics](#) into the Russian political, military and economic space, precluding any meaningful possibility of the region's peaceful reintegration into Ukraine. Whilst the [Ukrainian leadership pursued a ceasefire](#) in Donbas from the summer of 2020, the Kremlin used it as a [bargaining chip](#) to put pressure on Zelensky's government and to create [a flimsy pretext for an invasion](#). Zelensky's last-ditch attempts to return to the negotiations in late 2021 were rejected by Putin, who [tore up the Minsk Accords](#) by recognising the independence of the breakaway regions. Thus, instead of a roadmap to future peace, the Minsk Accords had largely become [a military-diplomatic tool](#) in the hands of Russian leadership to legitimise regime change and the dismemberment of Ukraine.

Even more so, Russia's 'security guarantees' proposals published in December 2021 were little more than a diplomatic and ideological smokescreen. Even [moderate Russian commentators admit](#) this was an ultimatum meant to justify the invasion rather than honest diplomacy. Russia's foreign minister [insisted all provisions](#), including the rolling back of NATO infrastructure to the 1997 borders, should have been met “as a package” within an impossible

No, the West Didn't Halt Ukraine's Peace Talks With Russia

timeframe of weeks not months, and that the Kremlin might decide not to trust even the “written guarantees”. Given that NATO didn't have a mechanism for such written guarantees – and even if it had had it, it would have been impossible to adopt it within weeks – Russia's proposal didn't sound like a bonafide negotiating position. Nevertheless, the US and Europe made efforts to take Russia's security preoccupations seriously, [agreeing to make concessions](#) in the areas of arms control and limitations on military exercises. Additionally, Joe Biden promised Putin that [no missiles would be placed in Ukraine](#) – the concern cited by Putin months before the invasion. Moreover, [Putin's aide reached an agreement](#) about Ukraine's non-accession to NATO with Zelensky before the invasion, but the Russian leader rejected this deal. Finally, [numerous analysts](#) and [moderate politicians](#) claimed the Kremlin started preparing for a regime change and dismemberment of Ukraine in early 2021, which corroborates our thesis that Russia's proposals couldn't have been made in good faith, although they were taken seriously by western governments.

Eagleton moves smoothly from the Kremlin's putative willingness to negotiate prior to the invasion to the negotiations that began after Russian troops invaded Ukraine. These peace negotiations opened in Belarus in late February 2022 with a Russian demand of Ukraine's total capitulation. By early April, with the parties now meeting in Istanbul, they reached a compromise: a framework agreement that envisioned that in return for Russia's retreat to its 23 February positions, Ukraine would abandon its territorial claim over Donbas and Crimea and commit to not joining NATO. Ukraine would also receive security guarantees from western states. This agreement set out broad principles rather than specifics about the exact territories Ukraine would be giving up on in Donbas. This would have been decided at a meeting of Zelensky and Putin. The deal, however, collapsed, and we might never know what would have happened had it not. But was it ever feasible, and did it collapse due to British interference, as Eagleton claims?

There is evidence to the contrary on both counts. After the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv and northern Ukraine in late March, Johnson made a surprise visit to Kyiv on 9 April. He reportedly told Zelensky that Britain and other western states weren't ready to provide security guarantees to Ukraine along the lines of the Istanbul framework agreement. The crucial evidence of Johnson's intervention comes from an article in the Ukrainian outlet [Ukrainska Pravda](#), which cites an anonymous source from Zelensky's immediate circle:

Johnson brought to Kyiv two simple messages: Putin is a war criminal, he needs to be pressured, not negotiated with. And second, even if you [i.e. Ukraine] are ready to sign agreements about [security] guarantees, we [the U.K.] are not. We can sign them with you, but not with him [Putin], he's anyway [not going to stick to it].

Because this article is almost the only source routinely cited as a proof of nefarious western interference, it's worth looking at the evidence more carefully. We spoke with its author, the political journalist Roman Romaniuk, to get a clearer picture of the political context navigated by the Ukrainian negotiating team.

Romaniuk disagrees with Eagleton's interpretation that Johnson halted the peace deal. “Johnson was one of the people whom Zelensky listened to – not because of a dependence on him, but because of relations of trust”, Romaniuk told us. Britain's prime minister hadn't come to Kyiv to order a termination of the peace deal; this was advice at best, and as such, his scepticism about Russia's trustworthiness wasn't unique. There were strong concerns within Zelensky's closest entourage that the Kremlin wouldn't stick to an agreement for any longer than it suited its interests. The risks of signing the Istanbul agreement were high for Ukraine: key provisions, to do with the status of Donbas and Crimea, couldn't be agreed until a later meeting between the presidents of the two states. Zelensky and his negotiators' most important worry about the Istanbul agreement was, Romaniuk said, that “Ukrainian society might not accept such a deal”. While we don't know what public opinion was regarding the possible deal in early April, in a [survey](#) conducted in mid-May, 82% said that “under no circumstance should Ukraine give up on any of its territory even if it leads to the continuation of the war and threatens its independence”. (A more

No, the West Didn't Halt Ukraine's Peace Talks With Russia

recent survey [shows Ukrainians continue to reject territorial concessions to Russia](#)). With Ukrainian officials and commentators speaking out against the deal at the time, Zelensky must have understood that he had no mandate for territorial concessions to Russia.

As Romaniuk's article makes clear, Russian terror in towns and villages in northern Ukraine compounded the Ukrainian side's scepticism about the viability of the deal. The extent of the Russian crimes near Kyiv wasn't revealed to the public until early to mid-April, but Zelensky had been briefed about them as early as mid-March. His negotiators were thus aware that if the Istanbul agreements were signed, Zelensky and Putin would be meeting in person at a time when Ukraine would be talking about the execution and torture of civilians in Bucha, Irpin, Borodyanka and other northern towns.

Zelensky, Romaniuk says, had been sceptical about Russia's willingness to stick to any peace agreements from the start. Evidence suggests this concern was justified. The very decision to start the war, the way in which it was fought and the Kremlin's assumptions that underlay its military planning – too often ignored in leftwing debate – are crucial to estimating the chances of diplomatic settlements and the behaviour of all parties. Since at least mid-2021, Russia's leadership has signalled that it has [stopped recognising Zelensky's government](#) as the legitimate leadership of Ukraine. The invasion only hardened this stance: Zelensky's administration was called a 'Nazi' government, Ukraine was denied statehood, and its borders were violated. This background was not conducive to successful talks.

While talks continued in Belarus and Istanbul, Russia's leadership kept repeating that it would reach the goals of its military campaign: 'denazification' (regime change) and 'demilitarisation' (the destruction of Ukraine's military potential). The reality on the ground showed Russian troops [wouldn't have withdrawn from the newly occupied territories](#) in the south and east of Ukraine, and were making preparations for lasting rule. Negotiators from the Russian side had been low-ranking politicians that had no power to sign any deals and [no direct line to Putin](#), which was a signal to the Ukrainian negotiating team. Like the Minsk agreements in the last years before the invasion and the December 'security guarantees', Russia's approach to the March negotiations likely wasn't genuine. Its [recent escalation](#) only proves the Kremlin prioritises territorial gains over diplomacy and [treats negotiations as a way to buy time to strengthen its armed forces](#).

The freezing of the March negotiations was a result of a complex interplay of different factors primarily related to Ukraine's and Russia's internal politics and the dynamics of the military operations. Focusing on a magic turning point when everything could have gone otherwise, commentators ignore that in Russia's repertoire, diplomacy has consistently been subordinated to the use of force. We therefore shouldn't fetishize peace talks, but ground a leftwing vision of the war and the opportunities for ending it in a realistic analysis of the interests, resources and strategies of the parties involved. With this vision, we need to ask: what kind of peace would be progressive and serve the interests of the people of Ukraine? As Ukrainian leftists have repeatedly emphasised, it isn't just any peace Ukrainians want – and they certainly don't want that which comes with occupation.

17 October 2022

Source [Novaramedia](#).

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.