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Ukraine

“Ukraine’s Fate Raises the Issue of the Rights and Sovereignty of Small States”

- Features -

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Ilya Budraitskis, historian and author, professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and one of the most important voices of Russian left-wing intellectual thought, speaks to "Epochi" about the imperialist logic that governs the talks between the USA and Russia regarding the end of the war in Ukraine, the objectives of both sides, and the stance of the Russian Left towards a potential peace agreement. Dimitris Givisis Interviewed Ilya Budraitskis for [Epohi](#).

How can we view the issue of Ukraine's liberation today, within this adverse international environment created by the aggression of Trump and Putin, and with Europe finding itself without a compass?

During the three years of this terrible war, which has cost Ukraine enormous sacrifices, the country has been able to defend its independence against the vastly superior army of the imperialist aggressor. Of course, this would not have been possible without the supply of weapons from the West, but the main factor was the courage of the Ukrainians themselves and their high motivation. Today, the nation's resources are at their limits, and the Ukrainian government will have to agree to peace at the cost of territorial losses. Ukraine's fate matters to the entire world now, as it raises the issue of the rights and sovereignty of small states. If Trump's "deal" with Putin goes through regarding the division of Ukrainian territories and natural resources, it will create a precedent similar to the Munich Agreement of 1938 and will prove that small states are merely objects in the game of the great powers.

What does the progress of negotiations between the USA and Russia show so far?

Unlike Putin's Russia, which has a clear objective in this war—the elimination of Ukraine as an independent state and the incorporation of its territories in one form or another into its sphere of influence—Trump does not have a specific peace plan. Ukraine is on the periphery of his interests and represents rather an object of negotiation for achieving other geopolitical goals, primarily strengthening the position of the USA in the economic and political confrontation with China. The current course of negotiations thus far resembles a unilateral series of concessions to the Kremlin (so far at the level of rhetoric), which Trump most likely believes will allow him to restore relations of trust between Moscow and Washington. At the same time, one must understand the fundamental differences between the two countries: Russia is an oppressive dictatorship, with massive ideological indoctrination based on anti-Western, and primarily anti-American, sentiment. All official Kremlin foreign policy doctrines identify NATO and the United States as the main threats, and Russia, especially after 2022, is absolutely dependent on Chinese exports. It is very difficult to imagine that Trump's negotiating talent will make a radical change in Russian foreign policy. Simultaneously, Trump's domestic position in America may be seriously shaken in the coming years; already now, a series of his measures, such as drastic cuts to social programmes, are beginning to cause discontent. In the first month of his return to power, Trump has not yet managed to transform the American political system into a personal dictatorship, and for American elites, the idea of Putin's Russia as a strategic ally remains largely unacceptable. However, it is clear that the two leaders, despite their differences, share views on global politics as a matter of a few global players dividing the rest of the world into spheres of influence. Overall, I do not think the US-Russia talks will succeed. On the contrary, their very form shows the return of the logic of imperialism in its purest form, along the lines of the early 20th century. This logic, as we know, led to two world wars.

What are the characteristics of Putin's imperialist worldview? What do you think he seeks from the emerging normalisation of relations with Trump? Is it only the division of Ukraine?

A key role in Putin's worldview is played by the idea of a "historical Russia" that extends far beyond the borders of

today's Russian Federation. The "historical territories" include, at a minimum, all former Soviet republics, including the Baltic countries, and, at maximum, all territories that have ever been under Russian or Soviet influence. Therefore, Poland or Finland, for example, have something to truly fear. Putin is deeply convinced that the countries of Eastern Europe do not have real sovereignty and will inevitably be de facto colonies of one great power or another. I think that in general, Trump shares this neocolonial approach, as evidenced, for example, by his statements about Canada and Greenland. It is another thing that from Trump's perspective, Russia is a declining country, both economically and militarily. Therefore, he sees Putin not as an equal, but as a potential junior partner in the confrontation with China.

How does the Russian bourgeoisie view the end of the war? Are there conflicts of interest within it, or does it align fully behind Putin's plans?

The Russian bourgeoisie does not exist as a political actor; it has no parties or public representatives to express its independent views and interests. This situation relates to the very foundations of post-Soviet capitalism, when state property was distributed to private players under the control of the bureaucratic elite. Property in Russia is guaranteed exclusively by complete political loyalty to Putin and his government. Therefore, his decisions must be accepted by Russian businesses as given, non-negotiable. For example, it is clear that the start of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was not welcomed by any of the so-called "oligarchs" in Russia, who as a result were hit by sanctions and lost many assets outside the country. However, almost none of them openly criticised the invasion, as this would entail the loss of all property and possibly even personal freedom. Obviously, this does not mean that there are no hidden conflicts within Russia's bureaucracy, security services, and associated big businesses. But these interest groups cannot, according to the current design of the regime, exert serious influence on foreign policy decisions.

How does the Russian Left approach a potential peace agreement and issues related to the end of the war?

Within Russia today, a brutal dictatorship reigns that suppresses any view that differs from Putin's stance. Among the hundreds of political prisoners are many anarchists, such as Azat Miftakhov [1], and socialists, such as Boris Kagarlitsky [2], who openly opposed militarism and imperialism. Several leftist activists were forced to leave the country after 2022. None of them is enthusiastic about a potential agreement between Trump and Putin, as it will only lead to the strengthening of the Russian dictatorship and the development of its imperial ambitions.

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Translated by Jenny Katsaros for [ESSF](#)

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[1] Initially sentenced to six years in prison for an attack, according to the testimony of a secret agent, on the offices of United Russia, and subsequently to an additional four years in prison whilst incarcerated due to a conversation he allegedly had with fellow inmates.

[2] The eminent Russian Marxist sociologist is serving a five-year prison sentence on charges of "inciting terrorism" due to an article he published on his blog about the war in Ukraine.