

Even after the Russian attack: peace is the only option

Ten points on Ukraine from a peace policy perspective

Werner Wintersteiner

1 We peace researchers were wrong. We thought Putin wanted to permanently secure the insurgent-occupied territories in eastern Ukraine and perhaps officially annex them, with threats and war cries. However, apparently he wants more. He denies Ukraine's right to be an independent state and calls the military invasion an act of demilitarisation and denazification of the country, that is, he wants to destroy the entire military infrastructure and overthrow the government.

2 The Western peace movement has warned against the disastrous war logic of the Ukraine crisis and pointed out that the West also has its share in the escalation. However, it has probably focused too much on its own side's mistakes, especially on the massive expansion of NATO after 1989, which broke a de facto promise to the disintegrating Soviet Union and which Russia had to perceive as a threat. Without making it clear, we thought that if this policy was corrected, Russia would be satisfied and tensions would ease. The well-founded demand for Ukraine's neutrality was also based on this line of reasoning, but it was never taken up by Western policy. Apparently, this line of reasoning of ours was also only partially correct. Now we have to conclude: Putin would then have had one less substantial pretext for his invasion, but it is by no means certain that the invasion would not have been justified with other arguments.

3 It looks as if Putin, the chess player, had discovered a gap in the enemy's defences, which he exploited ice-cold. He knew that no one would defend Ukraine militarily and he knew the relative ineffectiveness of sanctions after the annexation of Crimea. So political realism as an explanatory model unfortunately proves its worth, at least at first glance and if one looks at the conflict in the short term. Nevertheless, the conflict has several dimensions and cannot be reduced to a chess game.

4 It is striking how little the media and political experts have included the historical dimension, especially not the events of the Second World War and the immediate post-war period with the bloody battles between the Soviet Union and the Ukrainian UPA (1943-1947). In doing so, Putin constantly speaks of historical events, imagines himself as a new tsar correcting the "mistakes of the communists", and legitimises his aggression as anti-fascism, in the tradition of the fight against the UPA. Here it becomes visible how little help a formal conflict resolution strategy is, which ultimately assumes a common interest of the actors to resolve the conflict and refrains from taking into account the complex psycho-historical wounds, claims, interests, desires and, so to speak, compensatory wishes. Instead of puzzling over Putin's psychology, we should rather study the history he constantly invokes. More specifically, we need to look at both how much historical events shape the collective feelings and worldviews of the present, but also how much power-hungry politicians are willing to manipulate these feelings and instrumentalise these worldviews to lend the appearance of legitimacy to their political goals.

5 Every war creates new facts. One of these facts is that the voice of European pacifism will become quieter, that civil conflict management will be considered discredited, that those who have long been calling for a European rearmament will be heard much more. We are seeing that this blind reflex to fight back has already seized even people who counted themselves among the peace faction. Putin's argument that he had no alternative – a typical statement of all warmongers – must not be used in reverse. On the contrary, we believe that *the end of peace must not be the end of peace policy*, as a statement by the German peace research community puts it. The first thing that should be made clear is that there are meaningful peaceful options, even if they cannot be expected to end violence in the short term and undo the wrongs that have been done.

6 The Russian invasion must be outlawed in all international bodies, starting with the UN. An emergency session of the UN General Assembly is an important moral authority, but there are a multitude of international institutions. This conflict is also not only a conflict between state leaders, but also between societies. It is important how public opinion thinks – also in Russia. Political parties and civil society organisations should reject the invasion, but at the same time maintain contact with organisations and institutions in Russia, even if it is known how little room for manoeuvre they have.

7 Every conflict that escalates, and war in particular, leads to the abandonment of complex thinking in favour of simplifications and clear images of friends and enemies. In contrast, we must insist on illuminating the entire history and dynamics of this conflict, which often means focusing not on an either-or, but on a both-and. One must therefore condemn the Russian invasion and at the same time concede Russia “legitimate security interests”, which, however, can only be concretised in dialogue with the counterpart and realised by peaceful means. One must support the (Western) front of diplomatic condemnation and economic sanctions against Russia and at the same time criticise the fact that the West has also allowed the conflict to escalate.

8 The conflict is often compared to the Cold War. However, it was precisely during the Cold War that instruments such as arms limitations and the collective security system were developed to take into account the needs of all sides and thus reduce tensions. Now the situation is much more complicated – but there will be no other way in the long run than to use these instruments again.

9 We must not believe that Putin's military successes will permanently secure his power. It is true that the economic sanctions, despite their moral function, will have little effect in realpolitik terms, especially since Russia's war chest is much better filled than it was when it conquered Crimea in 2014, and the alliance with China has also become much closer. Nevertheless, the injustice of this new war is a moral declaration of bankruptcy, which in the long term undermines the legitimacy of Putin's power in the eyes of the Russian population as well. This is what we must work towards.

10 Therefore, instead of Western weapons, a Western peace initiative is needed. This should best come from the neutral states of Austria, Finland, Sweden and Ireland. It must offer both sides a perspective, in security, economic and "moral" terms. The dignity of all parties must be respected. This is, of course, a very difficult task in view of the fierce fighting. A pan-European peace and security architecture including Russia must be striven for - something that was criminally neglected after 1989. Here, the West must also practise self-criticism. Security and prosperity cannot be achieved against each other, only with each other. Instead

of a new arms race, there should be joint efforts to stop the climate catastrophe and to master the pandemic. We have common problems, we can only overcome them together.

Professor (ret.) Werner Wintersteiner, Ph.D., is an Austrian peace researcher and peace educator.

A version of this text was published in German in: Wiener Zeitung, February 26, 2022.
<https://www.wienerzeitung.at/meinung/gastkommentare/2139002-Frieden-ist-die-einzige-Option.html>