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The moral and strategic clarity of supporting Ukraine's self-defense: Why accepting Russian colonialism should remain a taboo

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Abstract

In response to Toal's article "The Territorial Taboo: Explaining the Public Aversion to Negotiations in the Ukraine War Support Coalition", I argue that the alleged silencing of those who push for Ukraine's territorial concessions to Russia is an exaggerated problem. The reason why such voices are not gaining traction is because, as of summer 2024, neither Ukraine nor key European states had a majority in favor of territorial concessions. This is reassuring: it means that there is little appetite for endorsing Russian colonialism and abandoning Ukrainians on the occupied territories to Russian terror in the hope of an illusory "peace". In contrast to the majority opinion, Toal calls for sacrificing (a part of) Ukraine in order to freeze the conflict and reduce great power tensions. To make such a colonial proposition seem palatable, Toal tries to shift the blame for the continuation of the war from Russia, the aggressor, to Ukraine, the victim. In reality, Ukrainians want peace, just not on Russia's terms. Any settlement that does not involve the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity is unjust and likely unsustainable. It would give Russia an opportunity to re-arm, extracting resources from the newly occupied Ukrainian territories. Russian officials showed no intention of abiding by any potential agreements with Ukraine, reiterating their goal of destroying the Ukrainian nation and state. Since aggression against Ukraine did not attract widespread opposition within Russia and garnered quite a few enthusiastic supporters, a change in Russian policy seemed improbable as of summer 2024. The continuation of armed resistance against the Russian invasion is Ukraine's only choice.

Keywords

Ukraine, Colonialism, Russia, war, peace

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Toal's article "The Territorial Taboo: Explaining the Public Aversion to Negotiations in the Ukraine War Support Coalition" finds it problematic that Ukraine is not pushed into conceding territory to Russia. I argue, on the contrary, that it is reassuring that there is little appetite for abandoning Ukrainians on the occupied territories to the Russian terror in the hope of an illusory "peace". If Ukraine is unable to regain all its territories occupied by Russia, it would signify a (partial) defeat for Ukraine and a victory for Russian colonialism.

No one wants peace more than Ukrainians who have resisted the Russian invasion for more than 10 years. Yet the majority remain adamant about their vision of future peace: the restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognized borders, accountability for the crimes Russia has committed, and reliable security guarantees.¹ A recent poll also shows that majorities in 10 European countries disagree that their governments should urge Ukraine to cede territory. In five of them, less than 20% support pressuring Ukraine into territorial concessions (Thomson et al., 2023).

Only those unfamiliar with the brutality of the Russian occupation and Russia's unreliability as a negotiating partner can equate territorial concessions with "giving peace a chance". To describe such views, Hendl, Burlyuk, O'Sullivan, and Arystanbek coined the term "geopolitically privileged pacifism of...[those] whose lives are not affected by Russian imperial violence" (Hendl et al., 2024: 185). Those who have the misfortune of living in what Russia wants to make into its "sphere of influence" appreciate the need for armed resistance. An undefeated Russia would be unlikely to stop its attempts to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and destroy the Ukrainian nation even if it is granted territorial concessions.

Territorial concessions are unlikely to lead to a sustainable peace with Russia for several reasons. First, as Toal himself acknowledges, Russia has violated numerous agreements it had previously signed with Ukraine. Second, after any respite provided by a hypothetical ceasefire, Russia could renew its attacks against Ukraine. A pause in the fighting would enable Russia to regroup, rearm, and grow its army through economic and human resources extracted from the occupied Ukrainian territories. Attempts to occupy Ukraine are likely to remain popular with, or at least accepted by, the Russian population, making it a consistently attractive option for Putin's (or a Putin-like) regime. The genocidal rhetoric towards Ukrainians in Russia has only hardened over time (Apt, 2024), as pre-existing supremacist views towards Ukrainians (Oksamytna, 2023b) have been coupled with the bitterness stemming from Russia's losses on the battlefield.

Toal claims that for Ukraine, "[p]erpetual war is rational from its perspective", thus shifting the blame for the continuation of violence from Russia, the aggressor, to Ukraine, the victim. In reality, only Russia can decide whether this war ends tomorrow or continues indefinitely (or at least until Russia's resources allow). Russia's desire for perpetual war is evident in the statement by Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council, who declared that Russia would not honor any negotiated peace settlements with Ukraine that fell short of Russia's goal of "destruction of the entire Ukrainian state, and the full occupation of Ukraine" (Newsweek, 2024b). This means that the only way to avoid "perpetual war" is to thwart Russia's objectives in Ukraine and help Ukraine reestablish its territorial integrity, coupled with credible security guarantees if not (yet) NATO membership.

Advocating for Ukraine's territorial concessions as a way towards "peace" sidesteps many difficult questions. What will happen to Ukrainians in the occupied territories who face torture, sexual violence, dispossession, and denial of political and cultural rights? Will the children kidnapped by Russia and indoctrinated into Russian militarism be returned?² Will Russia face prosecution for the crimes it has committed and compensate Ukraine? Finally, how can one ensure that Russia does not re-launch its invasion of Ukraine? Instead of answers, privileged pacifists offer nice-sounding platitudes. An example is using the term "peace negotiations" instead of a more accurate one, "Ukraine's (partial) surrender".

Toal also employs language that presents Ukrainians and their supporters – not Russians – as “warmongers”. Phrases like “Ukraine war support discourse” and “Ukraine war support coalition” suggest that networks and narratives sustain the war as if it is Ukraine’s choice and fault. This is not the first time that Ukrainians have faced accusations “of being ‘warmongers’ when they expressed support for their country’s resistance to the Russian aggression” (Oksamytna, 2023a: 678) or of having “‘militaristic’ political agendas” (Kurylo, 2023: 687). It is crucial to remember that Ukrainians did not choose to militarize but were left with no other choice in the face of Russia’s persistent aggression.

Toal also mentions authoritative international figures, such as Pope Francis. However, the Pope’s suggestion that Ukrainians should show “the courage of the white flag” has predictably been interpreted as a call for Ukraine’s capitulation. The Pope’s credibility had already been tarnished by his repetition of the Kremlin narrative that NATO “provoked” Russia, his racist comments blaming Russian minority soldiers and not “ethnic Russians” for the atrocities in Ukraine, and his glorification of Russia’s imperial past (Associated Press, 2023). Elsnér (2023) explores the reasons behind the Pope’s pro-Russian leanings, ranging from having difficulty recognizing non-US imperialisms to seeing the Russian Orthodox Church as a partner in the Vatican’s conservative agenda.

Reputational consequences have also materialized for some think tankers, such as Samuel Charap, whom Toal presents as one of “[s]trategic analysts calling for negotiations [who] receive significant public criticism”. Charap’s analysis of Russia and Ukraine has been consistently wrong, starting with his (in)famous prediction that Western weapons “won’t make any difference to Ukraine” (Charap and Boston, 2022) months before US-made Stingers and Javelins helped Ukraine win the Battle for Kyiv. So perhaps it is unsurprising that the research and policy community does due diligence on Charap’s claims, including on his allegations that Russia and Ukraine were about to reach a deal in 2022 (Charap and Radchenko, 2024). The speculations about such a deal being “within reach” have been denied by Ukraine’s foreign minister (The Kyiv Independent, 2024).³

While Charap and Radchenko claim that the continuation of the Ukraine-Russia talks after Bucha and Irpin meant that those atrocities were “a secondary factor in Kyiv’s decision-making”, Ukrainian leadership updated their beliefs about Russia’s intentions in the spring of 2022. For Kyiv, it became evident that the war was not about Ukraine’s neutrality but rather an effort to subjugate or eliminate Ukraine as a nation (Oksamytna, 2023b). When Russian soldiers committed sexual violence in Bucha, they told Ukrainian women that “they would rape them to the point where they wouldn’t want sexual contact with any man, to prevent them from having Ukrainian children” (BBC News, 2022). Quite a few “ordinary Russians” cheered the atrocities on social media (Garner, 2023). At that point, Ukrainian leaders and citizens realized the nature of the war that Russia was waging and the importance of resisting it. As Leader Maynard (2022) notes, “[i]n almost all cases of mass atrocities, the only truly effective tool to prevent or halt the violence is to defeat the perpetrators and/or push them out of their victims’ territory”.

It is perplexing that Toal mentions Israel and Palestine as it does little to advance his argument. Toal notes that some people compare Ukraine to Palestine and others to Israel. Both comparisons are incorrect. Toal attempts to use the tragedy in the Middle East to suggest that the cause of Ukrainians, who are battling a powerful aggressor committing numerous atrocities, is somehow “privileged”. Yet as Labuda (2023) argues, Ukrainians (and other Eastern Europeans) are hardly privileged in European hierarchies (while being relatively privileged in the global ones), and the West’s response to the beginning of the Russian aggression in 2014 – the annexation of Crimea and the intervention in Donbas – was largely an abandonment of Ukraine.⁴ It was only when Russia violated the fundamental norm of territorial integrity so blatantly in 2022 that the world took significant action (Labuda, 2023). Also, despite being aware of the critiques around epistemic imperialism (Dutkiewicz and Smolenski, 2023; see also Hendl et al., 2024; Kurylo, 2023), Toal cites only one

academic work by a Ukrainian scholar: Serhii Plokyh's 2010 book, which has little to do with the post-2014 situation.

Furthermore, Toal argues that “[l]ongstanding essentialist conceptions of Russia as an implacable expansionist power” cloud the analysis. On the contrary, the West had for years failed to see Russia for what it has proven to be in 2022 – an implacable expansionist power, as captured on billboards reading “Russia’s borders do not end anywhere”.⁵ Prior to 2022, the views of Russia were indeed essentialist: the West saw Russia as a serious stakeholder for peace even as Russia kept violating it. There was, as Mälksoo (2024) puts it, “protracted erring on giving Russia’s political intent the benefit of the doubt”. Now policymakers in most Western countries have belatedly updated their beliefs about Russia, especially in light of increasingly brazen provocations against the territorial integrity of some NATO members (BBC News, 2024). NATO members that are understandably concerned about their security are characterized by Toal as “bellicose”, although none are planning to attack Russia but merely prepare to defend themselves if necessary.

An updating of beliefs does not seem to have happened, however, among those who share “concern...[about] the possibility of military escalation should Russia begin to suffer battlefield defeats”. Russia has suffered notable battlefield defeats already, including Ukraine’s liberation of Kherson or its success at damaging or sinking a third of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Russia responded not with escalation but with more of the same: continuing its aggression against Ukraine. Toal also uses “relative battlefield gains that Russian forces in Ukraine are making in 2024” as an argument in favor of territorial concessions, while in reality, Russia’s gains have been tactical. In July, Russian forces captured merely 6.6 square kilometres per day while suffering heavy losses. In early August, Ukraine started deploying the long-awaited F-16 jets and continued its successful campaign against military targets inside Russia, including the Kursk region.

Toal’s argument is inconsistent in several respects. First, he asserts that those who call for Ukraine’s partial surrender are silenced, yet simultaneously admits that the violators of the “taboo” on accepting Russian colonialism “have not suffered significant reputational damage”. Second, Toal laments the absence of “peace talks” that would formally endorse Russian colonialism, while also speculating that “the war seems likely to end in an unsatisfactory ‘frozen conflict’”, which would obviate the need for the formalization of the land grab. Third, Toal contends that both Ukraine and Russia are in a situation of losses, making both sides “pursue their goals even if these are increasingly out of reach”. From this account, Russia emerges as a “Schrödinger’s colonizer”: on the one hand, sufficiently rational to be a reliable negotiating partner, yet on the other, irrational enough to press on with its invasion of Ukraine despite the costs, and even though its goals are “out of reach”.⁶

Ultimately, Toal’s article leaves the reader with an obvious statement that peace is desirable, but no feasible way of getting there. A “frozen conflict” – a partial occupation of Ukraine’s territory by Russia – “is not justice but it can provide enough space to rebuild and to pursue it”, Toal argues. However, it is unclear how a prolonged (partial) occupation could create “space” for restoring justice. As demonstrated above, a (partial) occupation of Ukraine’s territory would leave Russia more capable of renewing its aggression. It would also provide additional legitimization of imperialism for the Russian elite and population. Justice for the Baltic countries that used to be occupied by the Soviet Union came as the USSR disintegrated in 1991. Yet Toal warns against even an academic discussion of Russia’s decolonization because this allegedly “amplified the already hyperbolic conspiracy theories of Russian hawks that [dismemberment] was the West’s ultimate desire for Russia”. But how can justice be achieved in the future if Ukraine’s de-occupation would require Russia’s decolonization, at least in the narrow sense of letting go of the occupied Ukrainian territories?

To make his conclusions palatable, Toal tries to make us believe that the distinction between the aggressor, Russia, and the victim, Ukraine, is a narrative construction rather than reality. The “good-

versus-evil” becomes not an actual description of the situation but a “storyline”. Few situations in international affairs can be analyzed with such moral and strategic clarity as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The invasion is illegal and unprovoked, and lasting peace can only be achieved once Ukraine’s territorial integrity is restored.

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Notes

1. In the summer of 2024, the number of Ukrainians willing to accept territorial concessions varied from 7.6% (15 July 2024 poll by the Razumkov Center commissioned by *Dzerkalo Tyzhnia*) to 32% (27 July 2024 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology).
2. See [Ioffe \(2023\)](#) for a discussion of militarization and identity erasure inflicted by the Russian authorities upon kidnapped Ukrainian children.
3. The “peacemaking” initiative by some US foreign policy has-beens who have traveled to Russia hardly means much either: all countries collect intelligence on their adversaries, and unofficial visits to Russia is one of the means for the US to do so.
4. Toal mentions that Crimea was “previously part of Soviet Russia, then given to Ukraine”. Such past imperial land transfers do not diminish the illegality of the 2014 annexation and should not relativize it.
5. One of them was installed on the Russian side of the country’s border with Estonia ([Newsweek, 2024a](#)).
6. See [Oksamytna \(2023b\)](#) on the irrationality of colonial wars.

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