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Not Yet Time for Diplomacy. Lessons from Italy's Ill-Conceived Peace Plan for Ukraine

by Riccardo Alcaro and Nona Mikhelidze

Few may have noticed, but Italy recently advanced its own diplomatic proposal for a resolution of the war in Ukraine.

Rome's ambitious peace plan[1] received little international recognition, although it was reportedly shared with the Quint – an informal consultation group comprising the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy – and formally presented to UN Secretary General António Guterres on 18 May 2022.[2] Crucially, the plan failed to impress the leaderships in both Ukraine[3] and Russia,[4] leading Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio to put it aside on the grounds that circumstances are not "ripe" for such an initiative.[5]

A domestic policy plan with a foreign policy lesson

Italian diplomats must have known in advance that the plan had little or no chances of success. In fact, it is not unreasonable to assume that the main target of the initiative were not decision-makers in Kyiv or Moscow but Italian public opinion.

[1] Eric Sylvers, "Italy Circulates 4-Point Peace Plan", in *The Wall Steet Journal*, 20 May 2022, https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/russia-ukraine-latest-news-2022-05-20/card/italy-circulates-4-point-peace-plan-h2o9EfwULf6P1mwDbjdn.

[2] Giorgio Del Gallo, "Di Maio Meets Guterres at UN Headquarters, Offers Peace Plan for Ukraine", in *OnuItalia*, 18 May 2022, https://bit.ly/3wFgR0n.

[3] "Ukraine Savages Idea of Concessions to End War, Evokes Appeasement of Nazis", in *Reuters*, 26 May 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-official-calls-italian-peace-plan-ukraine-fantasy-2022-05-25.

[4] "Ukraine: Italian Peace Plan 'Not Serious' Says Lavrov", in *Ansa*, 26 May 2022, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2022/05/26/ukraine-italian-peace-plan-not-serious-says-lavrov_c663ace1-bbce-41e7-b017-edc0814787d7.html.

[5] Ygnazia Cigna, "Di Maio sul piano italiano per l'Ucraina: «Oggi non ci sono le condizioni, ci vorrà tempo. Medvedev lo boccia? Così non vuole la pace»", in *Open*, 24 maggio 2022, https://open.online?p=999063.

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While broadly sympathetic with Ukraine, most Italians are not keen on all-out military support for Kyiv and would rather see an immediate end to hostilities, even at the cost of concessions to Russia.[6] These sentiments are particularly strong amongst voters of the populist and traditionally anti-establishment Five Star Movement, Di Maio's party, and Matteo Salvini's right-wing League party, which are both members of the large governing coalition that backs Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

Considered in this light, the peace plan may have been an attempt to signal that Italy is not simply toeing the line of the United States or the EU – a common refrain among those critical of Prime Minister Draghi's support for arms deliveries to Ukraine and sanctions on Russia.[7] Domestic expediency would explain why Draghi did not oppose the plan. Critically, however, the prime minister has never mentioned the initiative in public either.

It would be unwise to dismiss the Italian plan as a matter of merely domestic – and somewhat petty – concerns. In its pursuit for a quick end to hostilities, the peace plan echoed – in fact, anticipated – arguments that are increasingly debated by policymakers and opinion-shapers alike.[8] Therefore, the Italian plan is worth analysing to assess whether formulas centred on an initial demand for a ceasefire may succeed in reconciling the interests of Russia and Ukraine as well as the latter's supporters in Europe and the United States.

A ceasefire now would not bring peace

The Italian plan was structured around four points: a ceasefire; an agreement on Ukraine's neutrality and EU accession; autonomy agreements for the Donbass and Crimea; and finally, a treaty on European security, in the framework of which Russia would bring its troops back to the pre-invasion line of 23 February 2022 while the United States and the EU would provide Moscow with sanctions relief.

Clearly ambitious, the plan ostensibly pursued not just a cessation of hostilities but a durable peace and eventually a normalisation of relations with Russia. However, it suffered from structural weaknesses that made it hardly conducive to security or strategic benefits.

The plan's main flaw is the call for a ceasefire without a preliminary agreement on Russia's military disengagement from Ukraine. Recent experience in the Donbass shows

[6] "EU Cracks over Ukraine Widen Ahead of Summit as Italy, Hungary Urge Truce", in *Euractiv*, 25 May 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1763724.

[7] Leading foreign policy analyst Marta Dassù ironically but correctly quipped that the main reason for the failure of the peace plan was that it was less a foreign policy initiative than a domestic one: Marta Dassù, "Odio dirlo.", Twitter @martadassu, 26 May 2022, https://twitter.com/martadassu/status/1529719406842060800.

[8] Daniel DePetris, "Italy's Peace Plan for Ukraine Is Dormant. But Only for Now", in *Washington Examiner*, 31 May 2022, https://washex.am/3904BzF; Christopher Caldwell, "The War in Ukraine May Be Impossible to Stop. And the U.S. Deserves Much of the Blame", in *The New York Times*, 31 May 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/31/opinion/us-ukraine-putin-war.html.

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that this kind of arrangements are structurally unstable. Exchanges of fire continued unabated for years even after the Franco-German brokered Minsk II agreement ostensibly put an end to the war that Russia had fomented in Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014–15.[9]

Most importantly, a ceasefire would turn today's line of contact into a de facto border, as it would leave Russia in control of the areas of Ukrainian territory that it occupies now. If this were to happen, there is little chance that anything needed to get to the durable peace the plan was ostensibly after would follow.

Putin has no interest in legitimising a Western-oriented Ukraine

Think of Ukraine's neutrality. The United States and other countries could extend the security guarantees Kyiv craves in return for its neutral status only if Russia first recognises Ukraine's territorial integrity (after all, the purpose of security guarantees is to prevent a war, not trigger a bigger one).[10] Stable and secure borders are also a preliminary condition to set Ukraine on the path towards EU membership, which can only happen if the country recovers economically and gets closer to the Union's standards on democracy and the rule of law.[11]

However, it is hard to see why President Vladimir Putin should like a neutral Ukraine with strong security ties with the United States and Europe more than the severely weakened and territorially mutilated one of now. Nor does Putin have any interest in facilitating Ukraine's EU membership bid, which would ratify Kyiv's irreversible exit from Moscow's orbit while consolidating Ukraine's democratic transition. These could be fatal blows to the legitimacy of an authoritarian regime as imbued with imperialist ideology as the one Putin presides is.

A "Minsk III" agreement would fail like its predecessors

Equally problematic is the proposition that the autonomy of occupied regions should be made a matter of negotiation. Russia will never agree to compromise over Crimea, which it considers part of its own territory. However, it could see an advantage in exchanging a ceasefire with a negotiated autonomy of the other regions. Assuming that Moscow returns Kherson and Melitopol to Ukraine voluntarily (a highly unlikely scenario as of now), it would most definitely clinch to the whole Donbass region, including the two thirds of it that it did not control before the invasion. Defining which area should be negotiated over would be extremely difficult, if not impossible altogether.

[9] Data is accessible on the website of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission tasked with monitoring the ceasefire in the Donbass: https://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/reports.

[10] Dan Bilefsky, "Ukraine Has Asked for 'Security Guarantees' to Make Peace with Russia. What Does that Mean?", in *The New York Times*, 31 March 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/world/europe/ukraine-security-guarantees.html.

[11] Andrew Duff, "Ukraine Isn't Ready for EU Membership — the EU Isn't Ready for It Either", in *Politico*, 12 May 2022, https://www.politico.eu/?p=2093731.

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In addition, giving Russia the right to negotiate the status of Ukraine's occupied regions with its troops still on the ground is a recipe for failure. Russia has no interest in accepting solutions that would jeopardise its capacity to interfere – indirectly, through the "autonomous" regions – in Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy. Moscow would thus use the negotiation as leverage over Kyiv, blaming it for lack of progress. This is what happened with Minsk II, which applied this formula to no avail. There is no reason to assume this would not happen again and therefore no reason to seek to replicate this arrangement.

Against this backdrop, conditions for a broad agreement on European security are simply non-existent. If Putin had been interested in inserting Russian security into a European framework, he would have considered the diplomatic opening that the Biden Administration,[12] later reinforced by France,[13] made in the weeks prior to the invasion. The reality is that since 2011-2012 systemic antagonism to the United States and the EU has become increasingly essential to the legitimacy of Putin's rule in Russia. This war is a consequence of that, not its cause.

[12] Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "With or Without War, Ukraine Gives Biden a New Lease on Leadership", in *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/20/ukraine-biden-putin.

[13] Victor Mallet and Anne-Sylvaine Chassany, "France Urges Revamp of Europe's Security Order in Face of Russia Threat", in *Financial Times*, 16 February 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/49a53ff8-f154-4e1f-8141-ed6ee8b6d6cc.

The normalisation of relations with Russia is conditional on its defeat in Ukraine

In conclusion, any peace initiative – like the Italian one – that is based on some form of crystallisation of the situation on the ground and devolves the resolution to the occupation to diplomacy can hardly work. The first reason is that it contrasts with fundamental interests of Putin's regime. The second is that, even if military setbacks led the Russian president to change his mind, an arrangement along these lines would still be contrary to Ukraine's interests. Kyiv could only agree to that if hard-pressed by its Western backers. But neither the United States nor Europe have any advantage in an agreement that would give Russia room to obtain through diplomacy territorial or political gains that it could not achieve militarily.

Those who seek long-term peace and eventually a normalisation of political-economic relations with Russia should know that these intrinsically valuable objectives can realistically be achieved not with an iteration of the failed Minsk II agreement but through Russia's defeat in Ukraine. This would imply that Russian troops are pushed back to the 23 February 2022 line and Moscow's ability to influence Ukraine's public policies through self-styled separatist regions or direct military occupation is severely curtailed or eliminated altogether.

For sure, there is no guarantee that Russia can in fact be beaten. Ukraine may lose further territory or be drawn into a prolonged stalemate along

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today's line of contact. But for as long as there is hope that Western arms and assistance can help Ukrainian forces push back the invaders, the pursuit of a ceasefire should be subordinated to the defence of Ukraine. Only then can negotiations begin.

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