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Commentary III-1

Did Boris Johnson Prevent an Early End to the War in Ukraine?

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Winston Churchill was his hero and becoming British prime minister himself was Boris Johnson's ultimate dream.¹ Yet once he became prime minister in July 2019, Johnson's performance was rather disappointing. Relations with the European Union (EU) over Brexit became ever more poisonous and Johnson's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic was highly inept, eventually leading to his downfall in September 2022.

There was one area, however, where Boris Johnson showed real leadership potential, or so it seemed at the time. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, during the last six months of his controversial premiership, Johnson was one of the staunchest supporters of Ukraine's fierce resistance to the Russian onslaught, and one of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's strongest advocates, making several highly publicized surprise visits to Kyiv, with steadfast promises of massive military aid.

As the world grapples with the escalating tensions resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a complex and contentious narrative has unfolded concerning the first few months of the war and the role of Western leadership in the peace talks between Ukraine and Russia which began soon after the invasion. In this context, Johnson's first visit to Kyiv after Russia's attack has become highly controversial.²

Johnson's visit occurred in "utmost secrecy" on 10 April 2022, when he flew from London to Warsaw and then traveled to Kyiv by train.³ For weeks the British prime minister had been "desperate" to visit Kyiv, yet once in the Ukrainian capital, he had to share some of the limelight with Austrian Chancellor Karl

¹ Steven Fielding, "Boris's Attempt to Become a Second Churchill," *The Spectator*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/boris-s-attempt-to-become-a-second-churchill/>. See also Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell, *Johnson at 10* (London: Atlantic, 2023). Boris Johnson's memoir *Unleashed* will be published in October 2024.

² "British PM Makes Surprise Visit to Kyiv, Meets Zelenskyy," *AlJazeera*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/9/british-pm-boris-johnson-makes-surprise-visit-to-zelenskyy>.

³ Rowena Mason, "A Wink and a Walk: Boris Johnson's Warm Welcome on Secret Kyiv Visit," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/10/johnsons-trip-to-kyiv-was-planned-in-secret-blindsiding-the-worlds-media>.

Nehammer, who arrived on the same day, and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who had visited the previous day.⁴ While in Kyiv, Johnson went on a walkabout with Zelensky, including a visit to Independence Square, and held a bilateral meeting with the Ukrainian president, which at the time received little prolonged attention.

The two men sat across a massive desk with Johnson promising armored vehicles and anti-ship missile systems to Ukraine as well as the ratcheting up of Western sanctions on Russia. Harking back to the rhetoric of Churchill, Johnson later said in a video message “that the Ukrainians have shown the courage of a lion, and you Volodymyr, have given the roar of that lion.”⁵

In other less public ways, Johnson’s meeting with Zelensky on 10 April 2022, proved to be rather important. During their bilateral meeting, Johnson apparently advised Zelensky not to entertain a compromise peace nor to offer Russia Ukrainian neutrality to end the war. Instead, Johnson encouraged Zelensky to continue fighting to decisively defeat Russia. Subsequently, Johnson was blamed for having encouraged Zelensky to ignore the opportunity to end the war within two months of Moscow’s invasion.⁶

On the surface, it is difficult to dismiss the notion that Boris Johnson’s visit significantly impacted the peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia. Multiple insider accounts and published interviews suggest that during his trip to Kyiv on 10 April 2022, Johnson may have actively dissuaded Zelensky from pursuing negotiations with Russia at that critical time. With Russia’s initial blitzkrieg attempt to seize Kyiv thwarted by March 2022, Johnson’s stance likely mirrored a shift in the West’s outlook from February, when Western leaders initially advised Zelensky to surrender and flee.⁷ Western countries viewed Russian President Vladimir Putin as less formidable at that time than they had during the first few weeks of the war, offering a strategic opportunity to apply pressure and perhaps decisively defeat Russia by pushing the Russian forces out of Ukraine.

⁴ Sam Blewett, “Boris Johnson Is ‘desperate’ to Visit Ukraine, Says Oliver Dowden,” *Yahoo! News*, 21 March 2022, <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/boris-johnson-desperate-visit-ukraine-205926216.html>.

⁵ “PM’s remarks during joint clip with President Zelenskyy: 9 April 2022,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-remarks-during-joint-clip-with-president-zelenskyy-9-april-2022>; “How the world reported Boris Johnson’s trip to Ukraine,” *The Week* (11 April 2022): <https://theweek.com/news/politics/955607/what-the-world-is-saying-about-boris-johnson-as-he-heads-to-ukraine>.

⁶ Marc Bennetts, “Johnson Embroiled in War of Words over ‘sabotaged’ Ukraine Peace Deal,” *The Times & The Sunday Times*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/article/boris-johnson-ukraine-peace-talks-russia-war-k220zcrvf>.

⁷ Sharon Braithwaite, “Zelensky Refuses Us Offer to Evacuate, Saying ‘I Need Ammunition, Not a Ride,’” *CNN*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>.

Boris Johnson's role

The first notable account emerged from the Ukrainian news outlet *Ukrayinska Pravda* in May 2022, just a month after Johnson's unexpected trip to Kyiv.⁸ According to the report, Johnson delivered two clear messages: first, that Putin, viewed as a war criminal, should face pressure rather than negotiation; and second, that even if Ukraine considered making agreements with Putin, Western powers were not prepared to support this development. Just three days later, Putin declared that peace talks with Ukraine had hit a dead end.⁹

Subsequent revelations confirmed the initial accounts. In a November 2022 interview, retired US Colonel Douglas MacGregor contended that Zelensky had been prepared to accept neutrality for Ukraine in late March, but that this position had ignited indignation in both Washington and London.¹⁰ Representing these sentiments during his April visit to Kyiv, Johnson was responsible for thwarting the peace negotiations, MacGregor maintained.

A few months later, in February 2023, Naftali Bennett, Israel's former prime minister, stated that the US and its Western allies obstructed his attempts to mediate a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia during the war's initial months.¹¹ In a nearly five-hour interview with Israeli journalist Hanoch Daum on his YouTube channel, Bennett recounted his mediation efforts, at Zelensky's request, when the conflict began.¹² He highlighted the fact that a ceasefire seemed possible before Western powers intervened, undermining his peace efforts.

Then, in November 2023, David Arakhamia, Ukraine's parliamentary leader, insisted that peace talks with Russia in early 2022 had broken down partly due to Johnson's opposition to a settlement.¹³ Arakhamia noted that although Russia showed a willingness to end the conflict if Ukraine agreed to neutrality, credible security guarantees from NATO states were essential for a lasting peace. However, Western allies were not prepared to offer any such guarantees to Ukraine, instead advocating for continued resistance.

⁸ РОМАН, "Від 'Капітуляції' Зеленського До Капітуляції Путіна. Як Ідуть Переговори з Росією," *Українська правда*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/05/5/7344096/>.

⁹ "Путін Заявив, Що Переговори з Україною Зайшли в Глухий Кут," *Українська правда*, 12 April 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/04/12/7339088/>.

¹⁰ "Zelensky Was Ready for Neutrality – Pentagon Ex-Adviser," *AZƏRBAYCAN24*, 11 December 2022, <https://www.azerbaycan24.com/en/zelensky-was-ready-for-neutrality-pentagon-ex-adviser/>.

¹¹ Robert Semonsen, "Former Israeli PM: West Blocked Russo-Ukraine Peace Deal," *The European Conservative*, 7 February 2023, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/former-israeli-pm-west-blocked-russo-ukraine-peace-deal/>.

¹² Michael Bachner, "Breaking Silence, Bennett Admits Mistakes, Urges Government Not to Act 'power-Drunk' | The Times of Israel," *The Times of Israel*, 5 February 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/breaking-silence-bennett-admits-mistakes-urges-government-not-to-act-power-drunk/>.

¹³ Tamás Orbán, "Official: Johnson Forced Kyiv to Refuse Russian Peace Deal," *The European Conservative*, 27 November 2023, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/official-johnson-forced-kyiv-to-refuse-russian-peace-deal/>.

On the second anniversary of the invasion, Putin entered the debate. In a February 2024 interview, Putin claimed that Johnson had convinced Zelensky to abandon peace agreements and urged Ukraine to continue fighting Russia.¹⁴

Thus, a significant number of sources and commentators seemingly paint a clear picture that Johnson and his Western allies were at least indirectly responsible for halting the ceasefire negotiations in April 2022. Yet, this picture could well be inaccurate, or at the very least overly simplistic. Perhaps the situation was more complex than it appears.

The counter-narrative

In an October 2022 analysis, Taras Fedirko, a Ukrainian academic at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, contended that the West didn't "halt" Ukraine's peace negotiations with Russia.¹⁵ Instead, Russia's fundamental unreliability to honor its security commitments made such talks futile in the first place. Moscow, after all, had been reluctant to uphold its commitments to peace agreements since the Minsk Accords, a series of international treaties designed to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014.¹⁶ These accords, which were originally intended to cease hostilities and promote political reconciliation between Ukraine and its separatist regions, were exploited by Russia. Instead of fostering peace, they served as a diplomatic pretext for Russia's control over parts of the Donbas, setting the stage for a full-scale invasion eight years later.

Fedirko maintains that it may well be correct that Johnson advised Zelensky that the West was not prepared to negotiate with Russia. Still, it was ultimately Russia's lack of credibility that led to the failure of any agreement on a cease fire. Johnson's advice, Fedirko is convinced, was simply not all that important.

In an article published in *The Guardian* this April, Emma Ashford, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center, a Washington, DC-based think tank, argued that blaming Johnson solely for the failure of peace talks between Russia and Ukraine oversimplifies a complex issue.¹⁷ She emphasized that the negotiations in 2022 faltered due to various factors, including unresolved territorial disputes, Ukraine's need for security guarantees, and internal political challenges. Ashford claimed that despite the influence of Johnson and other Western leaders, both Ukraine and Russia were willing to negotiate and make concessions, but the

¹⁴ "Putin Claims Boris Johnson Talked Ukraine out of Peace Deal," *The Independent*, 9 February 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/putin-interview-boris-johnson-ukraine-b2493400.html>.

¹⁵ Taras Fedirko and Volodymyr Artiukh, "No, the West Didn't Halt Ukraine's Peace Talks with Russia," *Novara Media*, 17 October 2022, <https://novaramedia.com/2022/10/17/no-the-west-didnt-halt-ukraines-peace-talks-with-russia/>.

¹⁶ "What Are the Minsk Agreements on the Ukraine Conflict?" *Reuters*, 21 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/what-are-minsk-agreements-ukraine-conflict-2022-02-21/>.

¹⁷ Emma Ashford, "Did Boris Johnson Really Sabotage Peace Talks between Russia and Ukraine? The Reality Is More Complicated," *The Guardian*, 22 April 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/22/boris-johnson-ukraine-2022-peace-talks-russia#:~:text=Johnson%20didn't%20directly%20sabotage,armaments%20permitted%20after%20the%20war>.

talks ultimately collapsed due to conflicting interests and mutual skepticism about their respective intentions and reliability.

A good part of Ashford's analysis was based on a recent *Foreign Affairs* article by Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko that highlighted a peace agreement negotiated in Istanbul between Ukraine and Russia.¹⁸ Consequently, Ashford argued that focusing on Johnson's trip to Kyiv as the central cause of the failed peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia oversimplifies the narrative.

Similarly, David Hendrickson posits that Johnson's visit to Ukraine in April 2022 was more about confirming the Ukrainian leader's thinking that any peace arrangement would be deeply unreliable rather than urging him to exercise restraint.¹⁹ According to Hendrickson, the Ukrainian government, in step with most Western governments, sought to avoid any negotiated settlement with Russia that could be perceived as advantageous to Russia. As a result, the Ukrainian politicians were not inclined to enter into any deal with Russia and were eager for assurances of continued unwavering Western support. They were happy that Johnson gave them these assurances during his April 10 visit.

These arguments presented by Fedirko, Ashford, and Hendrickson offer valuable perspectives to broaden the scope of the narratives around the failed peace talks. They do not conclusively prove that Johnson did not convey a "no peace deal" message to Ukraine. In fact, they tend to confirm that Johnson did deliver such a message but argue that his message was relatively inconsequential regarding the development that ultimately led to the breakdown of peace negotiations. While the counterarguments concede that the West played a role in the failure of peace negotiations, the main debate focuses on the extent of this involvement. Given that Western arms support has been Ukraine's lifeline in this war, and that the West would still be the primary security guarantor if a peace deal with Russia were reached, there is ample reason to suspect that Johnson's assurances of continued support for Ukraine, if Zelensky were to turn down a peace arrangement with Moscow, were welcomed with relief in Kyiv.

What we know so far

Recent revelations have shed additional light on the issue. The Russian-Ukrainian talks on Ukrainian territory by mid-level officials that had commenced almost immediately after Putin's invasion led to serious negotiations in Istanbul in late March 2022. These talks were chaired by Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Subsequently, by 15 April 2022, a provisional draft peace treaty which consisted of at least eighteen points was drawn up in Istanbul.²⁰ Article 1 (and its thirteen sub-points) of this draft treaty referred to Ukraine's

¹⁸ Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko, "The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 26 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>.

¹⁹ David Hendrickson, "No, the U.S. Did Not Sabotage Russia-Ukraine Peace," *The National Interest*, 12 December 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/no-us-did-not-sabotage-russia-ukraine-peace-207902>.

²⁰ Samuel Charap and Sergey Radchenko, "The Talks That Could Have Ended the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, 26 April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/talks-could-have-ended-war-ukraine>; "Geheim-Dokument Hätte Ukraine-Krieg Beenden Können - Woran Es Scheiterte," *FOCUS online*, 27 April 2024,

“permanent neutrality,” which included the requirements that Ukraine should not enter into any military alliances or produce or possess nuclear weapons. Additionally, Kyiv was not permitted to allow foreign troops on its territory or accept weapons from a foreign power and could not participate in military maneuvers with any foreign countries or get involved in military conflicts. While Ukraine could thus not become a member of NATO, Article 3 of the draft treaty did allow Ukrainian membership in the EU.

In return, Russia promised not to attack Ukraine again and agreed that the five permanent members of the UN Security Council would provide extensive security guarantees to Kyiv.²¹ This was similar to Article 5 of the NATO treaty: in case of an armed attack on Ukraine, each of the five security guarantors committed themselves to come to the aid of Ukraine, jointly or separately, within three days. The five powers were expected to ratify this clause in order to make it a legal commitment under international law. Article 8 excluded the Crimean peninsula, including Sevastopol, from these security guarantees, indicating that Ukraine had essentially accepted the ceding to Russia of Crimea which Moscow had annexed in 2014.

Moreover, on the basis of the draft agreement between Moscow and Kyiv that was reached during the talks in Istanbul, the US, UK, France, and China were meant to conduct their own negotiations and give their formal consent to the required security guarantees in support of the Ukrainian-Russian agreement.²² Russia also wanted to get Belarus involved and Ukraine wished to see Turkey participate in these multilateral negotiations.

Thus, by April 2022 a provisional Russian-Ukrainian draft agreement on how to terminate the war had been drawn up. Only a few highly controversial points still needed to be resolved. No agreement had been reached, for instance, about what would happen to Donetsk and Luhansk, which Russia had largely controlled prior to its full-scale invasion. Also, the future size of the Ukrainian military remained unresolved (Russia agreed to a size of 80,000 troops while Ukraine pushed for 250,000 soldiers). Russia’s demand that in the case of an attack all of the guarantor nations had to agree to activate the security guarantee was unacceptable to Kyiv as it would have given Moscow a veto.

There were also other contentious issues such as Moscow’s demand that Ukraine make Russian its second formal language, lift all economic sanctions against Russia, and drop all pending cases before international courts.²³ Putin and Zelensky were meant to personally negotiate the outstanding issues at a summit conference and sign the document in the course of April 2022. Though both Ukraine and Russia were on

https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krise/geheim-dokument-haette-ukraine-krieg-beenden-koennen-woran-es-scheiterte_id_259892327.html.

²¹ “Geheim-Dokument Hätte Ukraine-Krieg Beenden Können - Woran Es Scheiterte,” *FOCUS online*, 27 April 2024, https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krise/geheim-dokument-haette-ukraine-krieg-beenden-koennen-woran-es-scheiterte_id_259892327.html.

²² “Geheim-Dokument Hätte Ukraine-Krieg Beenden Können - Woran Es Scheiterte,” *FOCUS online*, 27 April 2024, https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/ukraine-krise/geheim-dokument-haette-ukraine-krieg-beenden-koennen-woran-es-scheiterte_id_259892327.html.

²³ “Geheim-Dokument Hätte Ukraine-Krieg Beenden Können - Woran Es Scheiterte,” *FOCUS online*.

the verge of signing a peace treaty in early April, the anticipated peace summit between Putin and Zelensky never happened.

Conclusion

Various factors rendered the conclusion of a peace treaty unfeasible in April 2022, including not least the Ukrainian government's own significant skepticism about Russia's reliability. Western countries had and still have considerable influence on any major geostrategic decisions made by Ukraine, and the political reality was and is that any formal conclusion of the war and the establishment of a long-term peace arrangement could hardly succeed without the consent and commitment of the Western alliance.

Boris Johnson's visit to Kyiv on April 10, 2022, was therefore important. It may well have helped Zelensky to make up his mind. All circumstantial evidence in the public domain supports the notion that Johnson's intervention helped to confirm Zelensky's unwillingness to meet with Putin at a peace summit and finalize a peace arrangement with Moscow which would have ended the war less than two months after Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

We will have to wait for more information and documents to become available to be certain. But it appears that Zelensky wanted to be a Churchill rather than a Neville Chamberlain. He decided not to imitate Chamberlain and pursue peace at any price but to accept Johnson's advice that he could only reconstitute Ukraine's territorial integrity and full sovereignty by way of Churchill's unrelenting stubbornness in the face of great adversity.

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