The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

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Motion: a bad peace in Ukraine is better than a long war.

Contents:

1. Analysis of the outcome

2. Detailed transcript

1. Analysis of the outcome

The room went in against the motion by six to 13 and came out against it by seven to 17. The result was never in much doubt, but the debate still did real work. It settled what the motion's central phrase meant. The proposer defined a bad peace as an arrangement between great powers, a line drawn to keep Russia out of NATO territory. The opposer defined it from inside Ukraine, as a settlement without sovereignty or guarantees. By the end, most of the room had adopted the second definition, and on that definition the motion could not win.

The proposition's case: attrition, escalation, containment

The proposer's opening was a realist argument about European risk. Its strength was that it named the outcome everyone in the room wanted to avoid: NATO at war with Russia under Article Five. Its weakness was that it rested on a contested picture of the battlefield. Claims that Russia controlled Odesa and the Black Sea gave the opposer an easy target, and the reply that Odesa was a stronghold went unanswered.

The definition offered at the start, Europe accepting de facto Russian control of Ukraine, was also the bleakest available. It asked the room to accept the outcome the opposer described as the source of Ukraine's fear. The closing improved on it. Recasting a bad peace as containment, the old British policy from the Great Game onwards, gave the motion a respectable lineage and a clearer shape. It came after the floor had already done its defining, however, and placed the grey line inside Ukraine at the moment the room was weighing what that meant.

The opposition's case: agency, guarantees, history

The opposer's most effective move came in the first minute. Pointing out that the proposer had barely mentioned Ukrainians reframed the debate from a question about Europe's safety into a question about Ukraine's future. Every later speaker had to choose a side of that frame.

The poll figure did the second job. By claiming that most Ukrainians were open to negotiation and territorial concessions, the opposer separated Ukraine from the charge of intransigence. The objection was not to a deal; it was to a deal without guarantees. That distinction was the most useful thing either opener supplied, because it gave the floor a test it could apply.

The record of the Budapest Memorandum and the two Minsk agreements supplied the evidence that written promises had failed before. The closing then answered the strongest floor arguments on their own ground, offering a counter-account of 2013 and of the Istanbul talks rather than simply rejecting them.

The ebb and flow of the Ukraine peace deal floor

Four battlegrounds formed during the floor speeches. The opposition took three of them.

What a bad peace means. The opposer asked for a definition and the floor provided two. An undecided speaker's version drew a line the whole room could use: territory for guarantees was acceptable, capitulation was not. The history enthusiast then filled in what capitulation would look like, from the Donbas to war indemnities. Once those definitions were on the table, the motion's phrase meant something close to surrender, and a later speaker said so outright.

What history teaches. Versailles, Chamberlain, the Punic Wars, the Balkan and Tigray wars and the Holodomor were all cited, and all but one pointed against the motion. The only historical argument for it came in the proposer's closing, through the Great Game. The weight of analogy was heavily one-sided, and the floor supplied almost all of it.

Whose interests the war serves. This was the proposition's ground. Two speakers argued that Western involvement before 2022, NATO expansion and profits from arms and diesel complicated the story of a defensive war. A third claimed the Istanbul talks had been sabotaged. These were the most direct challenges to the opposition, and the opposer's closing spent most of its time answering them.

Whether the war can be won. Here the room was evenly split. One speaker claimed a casualty ratio that made victory impossible, while another argued that Russia's demography made time an ally. The newcomer who worried about falling morale offered the proposition's most human argument. It was not developed further.

What the floor added to the Ukraine peace deal debate

This was a rapid debate, and the clearest sign of the format at work was the definition. The opener asked for one, and the floor built it in stages. An undecided speaker set the test, the history enthusiast supplied the content, and a later opponent of the motion named the result. None of the three was an opener, and between them they did more to decide the vote than either opening speech.

The floor also supplied the motion's best case. It was a volunteer, not the proposer, whose speech on 2014 and Istanbul posed the most direct challenge the opposition faced all evening. Most of the opposer's closing went on answering that speech rather than the opening proposition.

A floor speaker also questioned the frame of the whole evening. The abstaining speaker's point about other wars did not change the vote, but it was the only contribution to ask why the room was debating Ukraine at all.

Two readings of a bad peace

The motion could be heard in two ways. Read from London, it asks whether Europe should accept an unsatisfactory settlement to avoid a wider war. Read from Kyiv, it asks whether Ukraine should accept terms that leave it exposed to a second invasion. The proposer argued from the first reading throughout. From the second came the opposer's case, with an invitation to the room to join them.

Both readings could be satisfied at once. A settlement that trades territory for credible guarantees could satisfy both, and the undecided floor speaker said as much. But the motion's word 'bad' pushed every speaker towards the version without guarantees, and on that version the room's sympathy lay with Ukraine. The proposer's closing tried to recover the first reading by talking about containment and drone warfare. By then the room had settled on the second.

What the Ukraine peace deal debate left unexamined

Nobody described what a credible security guarantee would look like. The opposer named guarantees as a condition, and the history enthusiast's definition of a bad peace turned on their absence, yet the room never discussed whether they could be delivered without American support. That gap ran under both cases. The proposer's argument depended on American withdrawal; the opposer's depended on guarantees that, on the proposer's own account, Europe might not be able to give.

The abstaining speaker's challenge also went unanswered. Their case was that attention to Ukraine reflects Western interests rather than the scale of suffering. No speaker addressed it, perhaps because it questioned the premise of the evening rather than either side of the motion. A first-time speaker's nuclear question received the same silence.

What drove the result

To win, the proposition needed to persuade a room that arrived sceptical, and its case depended on accepting a pessimistic military picture and a bleak definition at the same time. All the opposition had to

show was that a bad peace had been tried before and had failed. Budapest, Minsk and Versailles did that job, and the floor's definition made the motion's central phrase mean something close to surrender.

Europe, the proposer argued, could not afford a long war. The room decided that Ukraine could not afford a bad peace.

2. Detailed transcript

The Ukraine peace deal motion, and the opening show of hands

The motion is: a bad peace in Ukraine is better than a long war. We're going to do a vote just to see what our opinions are at the moment. So, who is voting for the motion, a bad peace in Ukraine is better than a long war? And against? And any abstainers? So for the motion, a bad peace in Ukraine is better than a long war.

The proposition opens: where the war stands

Good evening. So where are we with the Ukraine war? It looks like Russia is winning and going to win. The Americans are helping the Russians. Trump is helping Putin; we've heard that over the last few days. The Russians have taken, we know, Crimea and large chunks of eastern Ukraine, and it's unlikely that that's ever going to be returned. The Russians have de facto control of Odesa and the Black Sea, and can block Ukraine, landlock Ukraine, which isn't going to help. That's only going to deflate Ukrainian morale.

The Russians allegedly have lost more than a million men. I'm not sure exactly of the numbers, but last year I think it was 600,000. I think they've lost a million. If we compare that to the American losses in Vietnam and Korea, and I think also if I include Iraq, the Americans didn't lose more than 100,000-ish military personnel. So the Russians are able to absorb multiples of the losses that we are able to absorb, and that's assuming the Americans decide to battle with the Europeans. It's difficult for me, as the proposition, to imagine that the Europeans would be able to absorb that level of loss, even the hundreds of thousands, let alone the million that the Russians have absorbed.

So that is roughly the situation. When we say a bad peace, that means that Europe accepts that Ukraine is going to be de facto controlled by Russia, and a bad peace is to accept that, and to further limit losses. Otherwise that would mean the Russians coming into eastern Europe, the Baltic states and so on, which would trigger Article Five, and NATO would then have to get involved, so NATO would be at war with Russia. Considering all of that, a bad peace is better than escalating and going to war with Russia.

What else? The Americans are no longer on our side. Contextually, we have to remember that throughout the 20th century we have been attempting to contain Russia, and we've needed the Americans to do that. Without the Americans, it's unlikely that the Europeans will be able to do it. We certainly don't want to take on the Russians now. There is a narrative, or some rhetoric, that if we delay while we build up our forces, European forces, then in a few years we'll be ready to take them on. That is not a strategy that the Russians are unaware of.

And there is the very aggressive rhetoric that the Europeans are pushing at the Russians. Part of it is defensive: the narrative that we will take you on, we are ready for you, to try to deter further attacks. Part of it is to prepare our own populations to go to war with Russia. So this would be Europe at war for the first time since the Second World War. It would be the end of our way of life as we know it. That's the rough context. Ukraine has been the proxy battleground, Ukrainian lives have been lost, and de facto Europe is at war with Russia through Ukraine. So I'll stop there. If it escalates, it would be tragic. So a bad peace, as we describe it, is better than escalation. Thank you.

The opposition opens: what Ukrainians want from any peace

I'm slightly sorry to the proposition, because I did prepare for this topic, since it's very personal to me. Throughout the whole speech, the proposition barely mentions Ukrainians, and I think that's where we should start, with defining what that peace is. There is an assumption, and the proposition did not say it, but I assume there is going to be one from the floor, that Ukrainians don't want to negotiate, or that

Ukrainians are really strict on territorial losses. But a recent poll showed that 72 per cent of Ukrainians are open to negotiations. Ukrainians are open to territorial concessions if that means bringing peace.

There are three items, though, that stand out from all others that Ukrainians believe should be in the peace deal. First of all, the sovereignty of the nation. We believe that we have fought for our freedom since 2014, or even from 1991. It's something that Ukrainians really want, and we will fight for it. And believe me, if Europe agrees to give up the sovereignty, Ukraine would not agree. The second piece is security guarantees. It can be the Ukrainian army supplied with new weapons. It can be international guarantees. But the fact is that Ukraine needs a promise that this will not happen again. The third item is just very human, very understandable: bringing prisoners back, bringing all our people back.

What I want to highlight is that Ukrainians are tired; they want this peace. It's not that we are stubborn and we just don't want to give up an inch of our land. We don't care about land at the end of the day. What we want is a promise that two years from now, five years from now, Russia will not come back. I think we can all agree that 2022 was a great moment of unity across the US and Europe.

Countries joined together. They supplied Ukraine. There was a sense of unity. Now look at Europe. In France we'll probably get Mélenchon or Le Pen winning. In Germany the AfD is on the rise. In the UK, the Greens or Reform. Europe is fractured. NATO is fractured. If in five years Russia finds a moment, I'm not sure we will have the same support as we did in 2022.

Budapest, Minsk and why Ukrainians distrust written promises

And I think Ukrainians just don't trust written promises anymore. We were there with Budapest in 1996, when we gave up our nuclear weapons. We were there in 2014, when we were told: give up Crimea, Russia will not go further. Putin said that he would not go further. He said throughout the years that it would never happen, but somehow we keep getting back into the same position. It happened with both Minsk agreements. Those were bad peaces with no real promises, where we made territorial concessions, and look where we are now.

I think this is the key thing to understand. It's not that we don't want to stop the suffering; it's that we are afraid that stopping the suffering now will mean much more suffering in the future. When Russia occupied Bucha, they killed people just for being in the army. When they occupied Kherson, they moved a lot of people in from Russia and basically pushed people away from their real lives, from their regular lives. People lost everything, and that's what we're trying to prevent.

Bringing it back to Europe: it was mentioned that the situation is really bad. It actually was improving. The change of the head of the army has significantly improved coordination. We recently had a really successful counteroffensive. Odesa is nowhere close to being occupied; it is a stronghold of Ukraine, which Putin desperately wants. And if we freeze the front line as it is now, he will come back for it, because he has said many times that this is a Russian city.

I think there's a misconception that Putin just wants a specific part, like the Donbas. He has said multiple times that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people. For him this is an existential question, and for Ukrainians as well. He believes that we all should be Belarusians, Ukrainians, Russians, one great empire. This is his life project. We strongly disagree with this, and we're going to fight for it.

Sovereignty, and promises that this will not happen again, are the core things that we believe. My time is actually running out. One of the things I will ask of the floor speeches is to try to define, when you argue for or against, what a bad peace is, because I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about what that peace implies. I just think that would help the discussion further. Thank you.

Floor: hold the line, and the case against Western meddling

If we allowed or let Ukraine have a bad peace, however that is defined, I think Russia would regard this as a sign of weakness. That's why we have to hold the line and support them in resisting Russia as long as possible. Now, this issue might be decided sooner than we think, because if Russia is actually losing the war, and I know you're saying they're winning, but if they're losing the war, which there are signs that they are, I think it would make sense from Putin's point of view to expand the war westwards and challenge NATO.

He would basically test our support for Ukraine, in the hope that we would become divided, and in our fright and fear lean on Ukraine to settle for peace. I think it's very important that NATO doesn't do that, the ambiguous US support notwithstanding, which of course is an issue in itself. Even taking that into account, it is really important that we draw a line, if necessary before there is peace in Ukraine. Putin has to get the message that we will actually stand and fight if necessary.

This war has been a disaster for Ukraine, for Russia and for Europe. I think we can probably all agree on that. It's already gone on too long; it's overtaken the First World War in length. What would be a bad peace? It would mean different things for Ukrainians and for Russians. But if there's going to be an end to the war that is agreed, as the fruit of a peace agreement, it's going to be a bad peace by necessity. Nobody's going to get all that they want.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, but the hostilities began before, and we forget that. We forget also Western meddling in Ukrainian affairs well before 2022. So I think this narrative of good ones and bad ones, which we are sold in every conflict, is again a simplification. We have to remember that just before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russians demanded that Ukraine commit not to join NATO. They had seen NATO expand right to their door since the end of the Cold War, and they asked that. Zelensky said no, and then, some time after the war started, he said yes. We remember Liz Truss, foreign secretary at the time, who mistook the Black Sea for the Baltic Sea in a BBC interview.

So I think this war could have been avoided. At the moment the situation is that President Trump made a deal with Russia last week to get diesel. So we have the Americans selling the weapons that are targeting Russia and at the same time profiting from Russian oil. I think there are a lot of interests in this war continuing. There are people who are making big money. Having said this, I have no sympathy whatsoever for President Putin. He's a murderous dictator. But again, this is not about good ones and bad ones. Thank you.

Floor: the Holodomor, Bucha and Russia's imperial past

Chair, ladies and gentlemen, we should perhaps think back into history. Ukraine is a breadbasket for Europe. It grows enormous quantities of grain, and that is exported not just to Europe but to Africa as well. But in 1932, when Ukraine had multiple gentlemen farmers called kulaks, who basically owned the farms, Stalin decreed that it should all be collectivised, that all the kulaks should go, and all of the farms should come under state control. This was carried out by the army without mercy.

Everything was taken from the farms, even animals, pets, and the kulaks perished. Nobody knows the exact figure, but something like 4 million people starved to death, and that is known as the Holodomor. It's death by starvation, and it was deliberate. It was a policy by Stalin, and that happened in 1932. And of course, because so many people starved, literally dropping in the streets, Russians moved in, particularly into the east. We shouldn't forget that.

Also, of course, when Russia came to take Kyiv at the beginning of this war, and they got stopped in Bucha, as you mentioned, there were the appalling war crimes that were committed in Bucha. So I don't think there's such a thing as a bad peace. I think it would be catastrophic for Ukraine, because if the Russians simply took over Ukraine, I think there would be carnage. I don't think there would be any

mercy whatsoever.

What Putin wants, I think, is this: he sees himself as Peter the Great, or a successor to Peter the Great, and the great Russian Empire, which stretched over to the Baltic: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine in the underbelly, and then you've got Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the other Stans, which I can't remember. So he wants, I think, to recreate something of Russia's imperial past. And of course the tipping point with Ukraine was when the EU made overtures: maybe you can join the European Union, and maybe even join NATO.

That was far too much for Putin, because he believed that NATO would not expand eastwards, but NATO did, and I think that was a tipping point for him. So where it leaves us, frankly, I don't know. But I don't think a bad peace is on the cards. I think it would be a mistake. Thank you.

Floor: Versailles, Hannibal and why a peace must be good

My fellow Sylvans, my family actually took in some Ukrainians when the war began, so they definitely would have some opinions if they could be here tonight. I do have to disagree at the outset with one thing that was said at the beginning, which was that Russia could absorb the losses better than we could. I go by that splendid, ultra-reliable podcast, the Joe Rogan Experience, from a guest who made a very interesting point: that this is the last chance Putin had to start a war with the level of soldiers that he has, because Russia's birth rates have been plummeting for a couple of decades now.

In a few decades, maybe even the next decade, Russia is not actually going to have enough young men to fight the war. So in a way it was almost now or never, with the possibility of NATO being on its doorstep.

We're not going to sort out the war's problems here tonight. We are but a humble debating society of 20 people. But to give the motion some food for thought, let me take you back to another really bad peace, as it was defined: a bad peace, not any peace. Let's talk about the bad peace of 1918, in which Germany did lose the war fair and square, but the Allies did make things a little worse with that wonderful Treaty of Versailles, which actually led to the rise of another murderous dictator. The minute I heard the motion, that was the first thing that came to my mind. Sometimes a bad peace is not worth it, because of what's going to happen in 20 years. There are wars which seem to go on forever, but you have to have clear military objectives. Focus on them, fight it out.

Don't compromise on what you can't compromise on. Be willing to come to the peace table. History is full of examples of wars that went on forever, like the Roman war against Hannibal: 20 years of chasing this guy through Italy. Was a bad peace better? No. The Romans fought it out and eventually won, brutally, but they won. And the Second World War probably seemed to go on forever. But would they have settled for a bad peace, a bad peace with Adolf Hitler's promise not to break the rules?

We don't think so. I'm not saying we can do the same with Vladimir Putin. I'm saying that if you're going to come to the peace table, it has to be a good peace, not a bad one, whatever that may be. I'm no geopolitical expert, but if it takes a long war to do it, unfortunately that is sometimes the way the world works, and I see the card.

Floor: what counts as a bad peace in a Ukraine peace deal?

I admit I don't know what I will be supporting yet. I started on the proposer's side. Now I'm a bit confused. I think we should establish some facts. One side has invaded and presently occupies certain areas of Ukraine; that side is Russia, and it is losing a lot of soldiers. But at the end of the day, it seems to me the situation shifts based on whether the support on each side shifts. So it's not clear to me whether one side is winning and one side is losing, the same way that in the Second World War one side

was ahead and then later the other side was clearly ahead.

So I would be very wary of taking a stand of "let's decide something, because we have lost and therefore there's no other way". I don't believe that's necessarily the case. Powers are shifting, and shifting in either direction can shift the balance of the war.

Another thing is the way this was formulated: bad peace, long war. It's a bit difficult to debate. Bad for whom? Is peace ever bad at the end of the day? Long: what's long? Long enough? Not long enough? It makes it a bit confusing, doesn't it? But that's the beauty of debating. So I totally agree: trying to understand what a bad peace would be is probably the fulcrum of this whole discussion, and it's incredibly difficult to do that. I don't think I'm going to make a good try, but here is some food for thought.

Clearly, if the opposition itself admits that territorial concessions for sovereignty and security guarantees are not a bad peace, then that is a peace worth pursuing. So we should be arguing about what a bad peace is, and if an argument can be made that the only bad peace in this situation is effectively capitulation, then we should ask ourselves whether Ukraine should just capitulate, and whether that would be good for us. I don't believe so. So everything rests on the definition of a bad peace. If it is one side basically saying, "I've had enough, just claim your price, I'll concede", then no, I don't think that's worth pursuing. But if it can be argued that a bad peace is effectively conceding territories for security guarantees, then yes, that is worth pursuing. Thank you.

Floor: a definition, and the echoes of Chamberlain

I'll apologise: I'm a bit of a history nerd, and that might come out. A lot of my inspiration comes from the Prisoners of Geography book by Tim Marshall; if anyone's read it, it's absolutely brilliant. And from my own work with Ukrainians, which I'm going to try not to go into too much. But I'm going to do what the opposition asked and define a bad peace for Ukraine, just in Ukrainian terms. For me, a bad peace is a large loss of territory, probably the whole region of the Donbas; demilitarisation of areas of Ukraine, probably from the Donbas to Kyiv; a ban on NATO or EU application; and potential war indemnities. That for me is a pretty bad peace in Ukrainian terms.

A lot of the proposers for me have had echoes of Chamberlain, for anyone that's familiar with the period before the Second World War: a lot of "wait, we'll bide our time, we'll build up our stocks, we'll be ready". There are so many historical instances of bad peaces for the losing side being terrible, and immediately leading to war afterwards. You've got the Second and Third Punic Wars: Rome and Carthage, Hannibal. Rome were then very insecure about them getting powerful again, and indeed wiped them out, salted the earth.

No more Carthage. The First World War to the Second World War, as was mentioned, for different reasons: the losing side being really insecure again, and trying to take back everything by force. The First and Second Balkan Wars from the early 1900s, and very recently the Tigray wars, for anyone following anything in Ethiopia. A very similar situation: a bad peace, neither side happy, war.

So if you were to make a bad peace, one of the questions you've got to ask is: is Putin trustworthy? Is it then going to lead to another war? I think from some of the giggles, we all have an idea of what the answer to that is. You've got Putin's track record in Crimea. Someone mentioned that Putin ties Russia to the Kievan Rus, and he is on record saying he wants the border of Russia to be the Carpathian Mountains. They run through Romania, Hungary and parts of Poland. It doesn't sound like he's going to stop, and it's not only bad for Ukraine; it's bad for Europe.

Even from a British-centric viewpoint, someone holding up and stopping the Russian advance is brilliant for us. It's incredibly cynical, and might not be an attitude that people want to take, but it is good for us. It does let us prepare. There have been a lot of articles in recent times saying we should expect war in three years. There are reasons for that, and our building up is possible because Ukrainians are allowing it by stopping the advance. I've got a bit more, but I'll stop there.

Floor: just war theory applied to Ukraine

I'm going to approach this from a slightly different side. Instead of looking at a bad peace, I'm going to ask you to consider what might constitute a just war. A key tenet of just war theory, for those that are unfamiliar, is jus ad bellum, which quite literally means the right to war. It's a theory which has its foundation in a lot of Christian philosophy, Thomas Aquinas and that kind of thing, but it essentially underpins the modern laws of armed conflict, and it seeks to set out whether war is morally and legally justifiable. There are six broad premises to it, and I'm going to do my best, very briefly, in the time I have, to apply them to the Ukrainian side of this conflict.

First of all, just cause: is your cause for fighting just? I would suggest that self-defence is traditionally seen as the main just cause, and that threshold has been met here. Legitimate authority: that's traditionally a war rooted in some kind of democratic mandate. Again, a lot of these points are subjective. These are not laws; these are philosophical underpinnings. But I would suggest a war led by a democratically elected leader, versus Putin, who even stretching the very fabric of things you could not reasonably call elected in a free and fair election. Again, that threshold has been met. Right intention: there should not be a seeking of vengeance or a narrow interest, but an interest in establishing what's referred to as a just peace. That could be, for example, reclaiming your land and defending your people. I would say again that threshold is met.

The probability of success. I have to say I don't agree with the gentleman here, but one thing that he did raise that was interesting was the probability of success. You shouldn't waste blood and treasure needlessly. However, in this particular case I don't think that is happening. I think there are legitimate military objectives that can be achieved. Proportionality: this is probably the one we could have the longest debate about, but I only have 60 seconds. I think the Ukrainian conduct in this war falls within that acceptable box of proportionality. And finally, last resort. The Ukrainians are being attacked, present tense, so I would say that this conflict falls within the bounds of last resort. There is a justifiable case for keeping that war going. I don't think the Russian side of this conflict passes those six premises, but I think the Ukrainian side does. Thank you.

Floor: 2014, Istanbul and the case for negotiation

When I first heard this term, bad peace, it sounded a bit like an oxymoron, really, because how can peace be bad? That might sound very simplistic, but this is a military conflict where literally millions of people on both sides have been killed, and many more have been injured and maimed. But I can understand the premise of the motion, because at the end of the day Russia is occupying 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory in the east and south-east, and they also occupy Crimea.

But this conflict didn't just happen organically or spontaneously. You hear that Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, but this actually started before that. Ukraine was a neutral buffer state between Russia and NATO, and this actually started in February 2014, when there was the overthrow of the democratically elected President Yanukovych, overthrown with the help of the US and the EU, and replaced by a US coup regime, which led to a rebellion in the Donbas and a subsequent civil war. I know that's not what the motion is specifically about, so I want to talk specifically about the current situation.

If you're looking at what's going on at the moment, this is an unwinnable war for Ukraine, because you're seeing Russia continually advancing further and further, despite NATO support. I hear the commentary that we need to stand by Ukraine no matter what, but they don't actually say what the end game is. What are they actually hoping for? You want to continue this war? Fine. Do you think Russia is going to pull out of all the territories, the four regions and Crimea? When you look at the State Department figures, you have one Russian troop being killed for 13 Ukrainian troops being killed. You have one Russian casualty for 36 Ukrainian troop casualties, and you even see the footage of these Ukrainian men being press-ganged, thrown into vans, and then put into the meat grinder. Now, this doesn't sound like a winnable war to me.

I think the best way through this is talks and negotiations. I hear people saying, "But Putin can't be trusted; he's an authoritarian." Sure. But what happened after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022? A few weeks after, in April 2022, there were the Istanbul negotiations, which both Putin and Zelensky actually agreed to. It was going to end the conflict given certain conditions, and it was actually Boris Johnson that sabotaged these negotiations, and because of that this war has continued. So I think you have to ask who is continuing this conflict, and where the vested interests really lie. I think the only way to end this conflict is through diplomacy and talks. But it may not happen like that, because obviously there are vested interests in play, and lobbyists and so forth. Thank you very much.

Floor: an abstention over the hierarchy of grief

I had prepared a speech for the war, not peace, motion. I spent quite a bit of my afternoon preparing it, but it doesn't matter; it happens. I've tried to adapt that speech, but it's not going to work, so I've had to write a new one. Basically, I don't really care, and I know that sounds really awful. But there are 130 places having wars at this present moment, and the wars we're talking about are Ukraine and Gaza. We always seem to be talking about them, and I know one of the reasons we talk about Ukraine is because it's in the north. So here's my speech. Unfortunately this is AI, and I can't even see out of my glasses. I was actually going to go through the 130 places, but it would take up two minutes of the speech.

So I rise today to abstain from this motion. I'm not going to vote either way, because I refuse to validate the false binary it forces upon us. But more than that, I rise to challenge the fundamental premise of this entire debate. We are spending hours arguing, whether here or in other places, about a single conflict, and the same about the Gaza war, operating under the arrogant and unstated assumption that these are the most important wars in the world. They are not. As we sit in our comfortable chamber, there are over 130 armed conflicts in about 60 countries. There's a lot happening in the Middle East. We do hear about some of them, but we don't hear about us going in and actually holding them.

Why are we not holding emergency debates for catastrophic civil wars in Sudan, which have displaced millions? We do not do it for countries like Myanmar, or the cartels in Mexico. In fact I know more about that from watching it on Netflix. Sorry, but it's the truth. Or the Democratic Republic of Congo. The uncomfortable truth is that this is not the most important war. It is simply the most useful war for Western geopolitical interests. We have built a cynical hierarchy of grief.

Think about it. People fleeing from Ukraine were housed. People were offered 500 pounds; I don't know if it was per person or per family. They don't offer other people fleeing from war a place in people's homes. So that's another reason why I'm against this: the disparities and double standards. I'm not going to vote at the end. I'm going to abstain; I knew that right from the beginning. And until this chamber is ready to... no, I'm not going to say that bit. That's a bit horrible. This is not the world's only war, and this is not the most important war, and I urge those who see this to look through the rhetoric that we have to listen to all the time. Thank you.

Floor: concessions, deals and what war does to people

The real challenge will be for me to do it in less than three minutes. I'll try. So we're really talking about compromising here, and this is very important. There is an acceptable concession that we're ready to make, if and only if it allows us to get what we want. And you can see this in our everyday life. We want something, but is it really worth it? Is it worth the time or the energy I will put into it? Sometimes I fall asleep, I think about brushing my teeth, and I'd just rather stay in bed. But anyway, that was a little joke. You get my point.

When we're talking about a bad peace, concessions will have to be made no matter what, because in front of us we have someone, or an entire nation, that also wants something, and this is basically the purpose of any deal. I've got money, you have clothes. I want clothes, you want money. Let's make a deal. This is how it works. When it comes to war and peace, I had to list the benefits and the detriments of both of them. War is an extreme state of subjectivity.

In a deal, what I want and what you want, we don't have to aim for higher ideals. But in war it is a fight for survival, and it regresses us to primitive human traits. It is really related to our identity. It is communicated through propaganda. You have people hating each other just because they are from a different skin colour, or a different label of nationality. This is really what war does to humans.

There is a different kind of ethical value system when you're actually aiming for objectivity and an ideal. When it comes to peace, we have seen it in Europe after the Second World War. Business prevented war in Europe, which means that those exchanges can be done without having war. Peace allows the resources to detach from our primitive state through reason, because reason needs energy and time, and this is what we have in times of peace, in states of abundance. It allows us to act for a more universal good, which usually comes with a primitively perceived sacrifice: I'm not going to take this money from my neighbour; it is an opportunity cost, but I'm doing what is right.

It also raises consciousness. I'm referencing Hobbes here. When it comes to making a decision between war and peace, these benefits and detriments are context dependent, and it has to allow the sustainability of both parts. To finish: identifying the ideal and anticipating the outcomes helps us reach it and approach it. So this is really what we need to do before taking a decision. Thank you.

Floor: a first-time speaker's question about nuclear risk

Thank you all. This is my first time here, my first time at any debate club, so forgive me; it will be within three minutes. All the arguments thus far tonight have rightly focused on Ukraine's perspective on the war. I'd like to slightly reframe that to wider Europe, and specifically to the possibility of nuclear war. Putin recently issued a very thinly veiled threat about deploying the Russian nuclear arsenal, which, I don't know the exact facts, but I imagine would surpass all of Western Europe combined. And with the US being quite an ambiguous ally, I would be concerned as to where the nuclear power actually sits between Russia and western Europe. So my question is to think about the pros of a bad peace versus an extended war in terms of the possibility of nuclear conflict with western Europe.

Floor: a bad peace as a synonym for surrender

Hi, I'm opposing the motion. Let's start by defining what a bad peace is. A bad peace is basically a politically correct synonym for surrendering. We're having this debate, I'm sure, in the context of Donald Trump buying Russian diesel, which I can imagine is incredibly demoralising, and a bit of a poopy pants moment for Europe: oh my God, we're going to have to pay for this now. But we're proposing surrendering to the Russians. I'll just quote Donald Tusk quickly: why are 500 million Europeans asking 350 million Americans for support to defend ourselves against 140 million Russians? This might seem quite belligerent, in the spirit of the Dambusters, I guess.

We have to ask ourselves: should we surrender to the Russians? Do we need to surrender to the Russians? They can be annoyed into demoralisation. Look at the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. That didn't topple the Soviet Union on its own, but it helped. They do just walk away slowly from things. And should we surrender to the Russians? They are a nation state and civilisation that have produced some of the worst dictators over the past 200 years. They're particularly spiritually unhealthy people, and we just don't want Russianness spreading any further into Europe.

Ukraine have instinctively defended themselves. There are also the other satellite states of the Soviet Union, the Baltics, and even Poland. They're very healthy democracies now, and I think Europe needs to pay for their defence a bit more and show what it really believes in, other than just regulating things off the face of the earth and burying its own head in the sand.

So I absolutely think we should completely defend against Russia. If it was just a case of Russia 130 million, Ukraine 40 million, it's inevitable they're going to win. But it's not. Smaller nations can just be persistently annoying, and if they resist, they can make the bigger nations go away, like in Afghanistan. Bush and Blair had to pull out of Iraq eventually. It just became too difficult. So, last sentence: it's a case of making it too difficult for Russia for a little bit longer, while Europe pulls its finger out and defends itself properly. Right, that's me.

Floor: a newcomer weighs morale against a worse deal later

Hi everyone. As I mentioned, I'm new; I haven't been to a debating club before, so I'll try to keep it short. Basically, I don't know a lot about the Ukrainian war, to be honest. But from a high-level view, it reminds me of the Afghanistan war, the Vietnam war, or, as mentioned, the Iranians now. It seems like it's just going to get drawn out. The problem is it seems like Ukraine can't win their land back. But the good thing is that the Russians don't seem to have the resources to gain full control of Ukraine. So I think the question is: is it worth fighting if you can't win your land back? I think it's an important question, because if you can't win it now, maybe you could get peace now.

Obviously Putin is not the most trustworthy guy. But I have talked to a few Ukrainians at work, for example, and they are saying that the country is losing morale. So if you drag it out over 10 years, or however long, and eventually people just give up and you end up losing, you get people protesting and wanting the bombs to stop, even if it's irrational. I feel like that could be worse. You could have a worse bad deal in five to 10 years from now. But I guess we'll see. That's my point of view.

Closing for the opposition in the Ukraine peace deal debate

Thank you, everyone, for contributing to this topic. I'll start with some quick comments towards the proposition. Obviously I'm biased here, but a lot of the things that have been mentioned about meddling, NATO and so on make me sad, because they take away the agency both from Ukrainians and from the Baltic states, from all those countries that have suffered under Russian rule. NATO expansion happened because the Baltic states were independent countries in 1939. Russia came, occupied, deported a lot of people, killed a lot of people, and people still remember that.

When in 1990 the Baltic states tried to get out from Russia, Russia sent troops to try to take over. It didn't work, because the Soviet Union was collapsing, but they still remember that. The reason those countries want to join NATO is not because NATO is trying to expand. It's because those countries know what Russia is. They know these are imperialists who are trying to take away their freedom.

Western meddling in Ukraine: I was there when it all happened. The students got beaten up. That's how it started. It wasn't that we threw out Yanukovych. It's that Yanukovych decided that a peaceful protest could just be beaten up. It was the first time since the Mongol invasion that the church bells in Kyiv

rang. It didn't happen during the Nazis. It didn't happen at other moments. It happened then, because that's not how you can treat people in Ukraine. You can in Russia; you cannot in Ukraine. It did not start in February. It started in November 2013.

Istanbul was mentioned. It's a common misconception that Boris Johnson came and it fell apart. Boris Johnson came in late March. The negotiations continued until April. One of the points that was negotiated was the limit on the Ukrainian army, and then in the middle of April Russia sent the actual numbers, and Ukrainians said: that's just impossible. We would never agree to the numbers that Russia was negotiating. Russia also wanted a veto on any protections that Ukraine would get. Can you imagine: the country that attacks us?

The Holodomor was mentioned. I'm running out of time, and I'm getting slightly emotional. But the key thing that I'm trying to put across is that this is an existential threat. Ukrainians are afraid, and that's why we are afraid of a bad peace, and that's why there are those things that I mentioned: non-negotiable sovereignty, protection and prisoners, which we will want in any peace. We know that Russia will come back, because it did come back to us for hundreds of years, for centuries, trying to extend itself. That's why I ask you to reject the bad peace. Thank you.

Closing for the proposition: containment, not surrender

Thank you for the comments. And yes, of course, we have empathy for Ukraine. Somebody mentioned drawing a line. The proposition draws a hard red line: Russia should not attack Europe. Article Five of NATO should not be triggered; that's a war between Russia and NATO. That's a hard red line. We do not want to do that. The opposition asks for a definition of a bad peace. It will be some form of containment. We've been containing Russia since the Great Game. The British Empire was afraid that Russia would take India. We've been containing Russia since then. The guiding light of British foreign policy for 500 years has been to ensure that no other great power, no dominant power, rises in Europe: Portugal, Spain, Holland, France, Germany, Russia. So it will be some form of containment. That's what a bad peace will be.

The question is where the grey line will be, and it looks like it's going to be in Ukraine. Now, we can argue that it's going to be closer to Europe, if Russia is winning, depending on which media narrative you believe, or further away. But we are not going to defeat Russia. It's insane. So a bad peace will be trying to figure out where that grey line is, and I'm sorry to say it, with a lot of empathy, it's going to be somewhere in Ukraine. It is better than war: NATO going to war, Europe going to war.

Let us not forget that the nature of war has changed. We know what's going on in Iran. One of the reasons that's been suggested for why the US cannot protect Saudi Arabia is that it doesn't have the weapons to do it. If the US can't do it, and they're not with us anyway, the administration isn't with us, then what is being suggested? London being attacked by drone warfare. I'm not kidding here. I'm not exaggerating or being dramatic. Paris, Amsterdam.

A bad peace is going to involve some form of containment. What shape it will take, we don't know, but we want to ensure some sort of compromise, and it's not surrender. We've moved back before: Vietnam, Korea and so on; those things were mentioned. It's not surrender. It's realpolitik. We are not going to defeat Russia. A bad peace is better than Russia invading Europe and triggering Article Five of NATO. It's easy to sit here in our armchairs. Thank you.

The vote on the Ukraine peace deal motion

So the motion again: this house believes a bad peace in Ukraine is better than a long war. People who are for the motion, please raise your hands. And those against. And any abstentions? The opposition has

won the motion. For the motion, at the start, before we debated, it was six, and it was 13 against; and after, seven for the motion, 17 against and one abstention.