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Vicente Ferraro, Felipe Freller

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The moderation of this preprint received the endorsement of:

- Angelo de Oliveira Segrillo (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5450-8588>)
- Eunice Ostrensky (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9527-2735>)
- Gabriela Lotta (ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2801-1628>)

Beyond Just and Unjust Peace: Moral Criteria for Evaluating War Outcomes in Ukraine

Vicente Ferraro¹

PhD in Political Science, Researcher at the Centre for Bureaucracy Studies (NEB)/ Getulio Vargas Foundation, the Centre for Ukrainian Studies (NEU) and the Centre for Asian Studies (LEA), Russia & Eurasia section / University of São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8444-7739>

Felipe Freller²

PhD in Political Science, Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of São Paulo (USP), Coordinator of the Study Group “The Political in Political Theory” and Member of the Centre for Ukrainian Studies (NEU), São Paulo, SP, Brazil. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2402-5742>

Abstract

Russia’s invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 constitute one of the most significant ruptures in the post–Cold War international order. This article develops a normative framework to evaluate possible war outcomes, addressing a central problem in contemporary conflict analysis: how to assess war outcomes when ideals of justice collide with severe material constraints. Drawing on recent developments in Just War Theory—particularly the concepts of *jus ex bello* (justice in war termination) and *jus post bellum* (justice after war)—we argue that plausible outcomes are structured by complex trade-offs between four dimensions: peace, justice, stability, and feasibility. To analyze these trade-offs, we construct a typology of nine possible outcomes and evaluate them through a structured normative-comparative approach. Each scenario is assessed along these four dimensions, informed by historical analogies from interstate wars. We show that the binary distinction between “just” and “unjust” outcomes is insufficient to capture the moral complexity of contemporary wars. Instead, we propose a relational conception of justice for non-ideal conditions, distinguishing between “just,” “fully unjust,” and “unjust but justifiable” outcomes. In contexts of strategic stalemate, intermediate outcomes become central, and their value must be assessed relationally—namely, in comparison to fully unjust alternatives such as an aggressor decisive victory. Our findings suggest that conflict freezing through armistice and negotiated settlements involving reciprocal concessions emerge as relatively feasible and morally justifiable—albeit imperfect and still unjust—alternatives. More broadly, the article contributes to debates on war termination by offering an analytical framework to evaluate peace under non-ideal conditions.

Keywords: War in Ukraine; Just War Theory; Just Peace; *Jus Post Bellum*; *Jus Ex Bello*; Peace Negotiations.

¹ Vicente Ferraro, vicentee.ferraro@gmail.com. São Paulo School of Business Administration, Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV). Av. 9 de julho, 2029, São Paulo - SP/ São Paulo, Zip-Code: 01313-902, Brazil.

² Felipe Freller, felipe.freller@usp.br. Department of Political Science, University of São Paulo (USP), Office 2039, Av. Professor Luciano Gualberto, 315, São Paulo - SP, Zip-Code: 05508-010, Brazil.

Entre Paz e Justiça:

Critérios morais para avaliar diferentes desfechos da Guerra na Ucrânia

Vicente Ferraro e Felipe Freller

Resumo

As invasões da Ucrânia pela Rússia em 2014 e 2022 constituem uma das rupturas mais significativas da ordem internacional pós-Guerra Fria. Este artigo desenvolve um arcabouço normativo para avaliar possíveis desfechos da guerra, abordando um problema central na análise contemporânea de conflitos: como avaliar resultados quando ideais de justiça colidem com restrições materiais severas? Com base em desenvolvimentos recentes na Teoria da Guerra Justa — particularmente os conceitos de *jus ex bello* (justiça no encerramento da guerra) e *jus post bellum* (justiça após a guerra) — argumentamos que os desfechos plausíveis são estruturados por trade-offs entre quatro dimensões: paz, justiça, estabilidade e viabilidade. Para analisá-los, construímos uma tipologia de nove desfechos e os avaliamos por meio de uma abordagem normativo-comparativa estruturada, com base em analogias históricas de guerras interestatais. Mostramos que a distinção binária entre desfechos “justos” e “injustos” é insuficiente para capturar a complexidade moral das guerras contemporâneas. Em vez disso, propomos uma concepção relacional de justiça em condições não ideais, distinguindo entre desfechos “justos”, “plenamente injustos” e “injustos, mas justificáveis”. Em contextos de impasse estratégico, os desfechos intermediários tornam-se centrais, e seu valor deve ser avaliado relacionalmente — isto é, em comparação com alternativas plenamente injustas, como uma vitória decisiva do agressor. Nossos achados sugerem que o congelamento do conflito por meio de um armistício e acordos negociados com concessões recíprocas emergem como alternativas relativamente viáveis e moralmente justificáveis — ainda que imperfeitas. De forma mais ampla, o artigo contribui para os debates sobre resolução de conflitos ao oferecer um arcabouço analítico para avaliar a paz em condições não ideais.

Palavras-chave: Guerra na Ucrânia; Teoria da Guerra Justa; Paz Justa; *Jus Post Bellum*; *Jus Ex Bello*; Negociações de Paz

Beyond Just and Unjust Peace: Moral Criteria for Evaluating War Outcomes in Ukraine

Vicente Ferraro and Felipe Freller

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, initiated in 2014 with a localized invasion and expanded in 2022 into a full-scale offensive, has become the largest conflict on European soil since World War II and one of the most significant ruptures in the post–Cold War international order. Given its magnitude and potential systemic implications, a growing body of scholarship has examined its possible outcomes (Davis & Thomas, 2025; Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025; Malkasian, 2023). The war’s trajectory is likely to have far-reaching consequences for the global order and the European security architecture (Fischer, 2025; Hynek & Šenk, 2025). Yet, the question of how to evaluate these outcomes normatively—under conditions in which ideals of justice collide with severe material constraints—remains underexplored.

Ukrainian political elites, academics, and civil society actors have consistently emphasized that the country seeks not only peace, but also justice (Dzhyhora, 2024; Kyselova & Landau, 2025; Yosypenko, 2024). In multiple public statements, President Volodymyr Zelensky has stressed the need to achieve a “just peace,” arguing that major concessions to Russia—absent justice and credible security guarantees—would not produce a durable settlement but instead incentivize further aggression (Zelensky, 2024, 2025). The pursuit of justice is also central to the ten-point Ukraine Peace Formula (Zelensky, 2022), Kyiv’s main diplomatic framework for ending the war. More broadly, the relationship between peace and justice has long been debated in the literature, with competing perspectives emphasizing either an inherent trade-off, the necessity of justice for durable peace, or a more complex and contingent relationship (Obel Hansen, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this article examines possible war outcomes in Ukraine, addressing a central problem in contemporary conflict analysis: how war outcomes can be normatively evaluated when ideals of justice collide with severe material constraints. We argue that, in contexts such as the current one, normative evaluation cannot be reduced to a binary distinction between “just” and “unjust” outcomes. Instead, it requires a relational and graduated conception of justice that is sensitive to battlefield constraints, bargaining dynamics, and the comparative consequences of alternative scenarios. In this

perspective, war outcomes are best understood as involving trade-offs across four key dimensions: peace, justice, stability, and feasibility.

Methodologically, the article draws on Just War Theory to identify normative criteria for evaluating war termination, while grounding these criteria in empirical debates on conflict dynamics and war outcomes. Two concepts are particularly central: *jus post bellum* (justice after war) and *jus ex bello* (justice in war termination). In addition, we mobilize historical analogies from twentieth- and twenty-first-century interstate wars as heuristic devices to identify recurring patterns and plausible implications for Ukraine, particularly regarding political elites, armed forces, and civil society.

We identify nine possible outcomes, organized into three categories: “just,” “fully unjust,” and “unjust but justifiable.” The article’s main contribution is to show that evaluating peace in contemporary wars requires a relational logic of justice, one that allows for movement toward the ideal of *jus post bellum* while acknowledging structural constraints, the need to end violence, and the imperative to avoid fully unjust outcomes. We further assess the stability of peace associated with each outcome, as well as their relative feasibility. Building on these criteria, we examine which outcomes appear more plausible and normatively defensible under current conditions. While existing studies have explored war outcomes through historical analogies (Hynek & Šenk, 2025) and the peace–justice nexus (Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025), this article advances the debate by integrating these elements into a systematic and normatively grounded typology.

The article is structured as follows. Section I reviews the theoretical debate on just peace. Section II presents the theoretical framework and methodological strategy. Section III analyzes possible war outcomes. Section IV concludes.

I. Just War Theory and the Debate on Just Peace

The theoretical foundation of this article builds on the Just War tradition, particularly the framework developed by Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars* (Walzer, 2015 [1977]). Walzer established a set of moral criteria that remain central—though widely debated—for assessing both the justification for war (*jus ad bellum*) and conduct in war (*jus in bello*). A key insight in his framework is the analytical independence of these dimensions: a war may be just in its cause yet unjust in its conduct, and vice versa. The rules of *jus in bello* apply equally to all belligerents, regardless of the justice of their cause.

Walzer³ also raises a question central to this article: when should a just war end, and what kind of peace should it aim to produce? This question can be reformulated as follows: if war is ultimately oriented toward a condition of peace (Aron, 1976), what constitutes a “just peace”?

Recent developments in Just War Theory have expanded this framework by introducing the concept of *jus post bellum*, which concerns justice after war. Brian Orend (2006) provides a systematic account, arguing that a just peace requires not only victory over aggression but also the restoration of the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of the victim state, proportional reparations, accountability for war crimes, and, where necessary, the transformation of the aggressor’s capacity for future violence. Crucially, even a just victor may violate *jus post bellum* by imposing a punitive and disproportionate “victor’s justice.”

Some scholars further propose a fourth category: *jus ex bello* (or *jus terminatio*), which addresses the moral conditions under which a war should end. Darrel Moellendorf (2008) argues that neither *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, nor *jus post bellum* adequately captures this dimension. *Jus ex bello* focuses on morally constrained decisions taken during war, including situations in which continuing to fight becomes unjustifiable due to declining prospects of success or excessive human costs. When are the parties morally obligated to end a war, and what are the appropriate procedures for doing so? These are the questions addressed by *jus ex bello*.

In practice, *jus ex bello* and *jus post bellum* are deeply intertwined. Decisions about ending a war depend on the kinds of peace they are likely to produce, while the evaluation of peace outcomes depends on the conditions under which the war was terminated and the assessment of the urgency of ending the war. This interdependence is particularly salient in contexts of strategic constraint, where ideal outcomes are unattainable.

Idealized conceptions of *jus post bellum*, such as Orend’s (2006), provide important benchmarks but offer limited guidance for evaluating non-ideal outcomes. As David Rodin (2015) argues, decisions about war termination often involve tragic dilemmas—situations in which all available options entail moral costs. For example, both unconditional surrender and negotiated settlement may be morally problematic, with

³ Walzer (2015 [1977]). Chapter 7: “War’s Ends, and the Importance of Winning”.

negotiation potentially generating moral hazard by granting legal recognition to what was acquired by force.

These dilemmas highlight the limits of ideal theory. While ideal models clarify what a fully just peace would entail, they are less suited to evaluating realistic scenarios shaped by military, political, and strategic constraints. This critique resonates with broader debates in political theory. Amartya Sen (2011), for instance, challenges “transcendental institutionalism” and argues for a comparative approach focused on evaluating feasible alternatives rather than ideal institutions. Similarly, Charles Mills (2005) criticizes ideal theory for obscuring structural injustices.⁴

These critiques intersect with the so-called “realist revival” in contemporary political theory, driven by the reception of Bernard Williams’s (2005) and Raymond Geuss’s (2008) critiques of the excesses of moralism and idealism in mainstream normative political philosophy. Rather than applying external moral principles to politics, the approaches associated with the realist revival seek to derive normativity from political practice itself, emphasizing power, coercion, and responsibility. In this perspective, moral judgment must be grounded in the constraints and consequences of political action. As Greta Favara (2023) highlights, realist approaches in normative political theory are not necessarily characterized by the rejection of ideal theory, but rather by an insistence on the type of morality that Max Weber (2004) characterized as an ethic of responsibility. As Weber suggests, political action requires taking responsibility for morally imperfect outcomes that arise from the use of power.

In a recent article, the Ukrainian philosopher Serhii Yosypenko (2024) presents Michael Walzer’s just war theory and Avishai Margalit’s discussion of compromises as reflections grounded in an ethics of responsibility, which provide important theoretical resources for assessing ongoing peace negotiations aimed at ending the war in Ukraine. From Walzer’s account of the legitimate ends of war, Yosypenko draws in particular on the conception of just war as a limited war, which allows for political compromises that end the conflict short of total victory. He also discusses Margalit’s (2009) distinction between permissible compromises and “rotten compromises,” which sustain regimes of cruelty and humiliation and are therefore unacceptable under any circumstances. Between these extremes lies a wide range of “justifiable” but imperfect agreements that sacrifice

⁴ For a useful conceptual map of the debate on ideal and non-ideal theory, see Valentini (2012).

elements of justice in order to secure peace. Certain compromises would not establish a just peace, but rather a “justifiable peace”—“just a peace,” rather than “a just peace.”

Yosypenko incorporates Margalit’s notion of a “justifiable peace” and the argument that “radical evil” sets a limit to morally permissible compromises. As the author notes, both Walzer and Margalit conceive of justifiable war and peace within the paradigm of an ethic of responsibility, insofar as they admit the possibility of compromising with a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one. Responsibility must, however, be assumed for both the consequences and the moral character of the choices involved.⁵

In line with the “realist revival” in contemporary political theory and with the contributions of Walzer, Margalit, and Yosypenko, this article adopts an ethic of responsibility as the moral paradigm for thinking through the trade-off between peace and justice involved in the possible scenarios for ending the Russo-Ukrainian war. An ethic of responsibility implies recognizing that the moral dilemmas at stake can only be decided by those who will bear moral responsibility for these choices: the Ukrainian people and government. The theoretical and methodological orientation we adopt prevents us from presenting any particular scenario for ending the war in Ukraine as the uniquely morally required outcome on the basis of an ideal theory of *jus post bellum*. On the contrary, our aim is to provide criteria to normatively organize these choices, outlining their benefits, risks, and moral and strategic constraints, without suggesting that there is a single correct path for the Ukrainian authorities to follow. Our démarche goes no further than the conceptual and normative organization of the options on the table, reiterating that all of them involve insurmountable moral dilemmas.

Finally, these insurmountable moral dilemmas are not reducible to a trade-off between peace and justice, because the stability of peace is also a critical dimension. As D’Anieri (2025) argues, short-term settlements may produce fragile peace, while more demanding outcomes may offer greater durability. Davis and Thomas (2025, p. 80) warn that a premature and incomplete peace can significantly increase the risk of a renewed conflict. This connects to the literature on commitment problems, which highlights the difficulty of ensuring that parties adhere to agreements rather than using them to prepare for renewed conflict (Fearon, 1995, 2004; Powell, 2006). More broadly, research on peace

⁵ More precisely, for Margalit (2009), it is a matter of choosing between evil and radical evil, where the difference between the two is one of kind rather than degree. The paradigmatic case of such a choice is Winston Churchill’s decision to support Joseph Stalin against Adolf Hitler from 1941 onward.

emphasizes its multidimensional character (Galtung, 2011; Höglund & Kovács, 2010), though this article focuses on more limited notions, such as “negative peace”—understood as the absence of direct violence (Galtung, 1969).

Despite advances in Just War Theory, the literature still lacks analytical tools for evaluating non-ideal outcomes under conditions of strategic stalemate, particularly in interstate conflicts. This article addresses this gap by proposing a relational conception of justice under conditions of severe constraint.

II. Theoretical Framework and Methodological Strategy

As outlined in the previous section, this article develops a theoretical framework for evaluating war outcomes under conditions of strategic constraint by integrating insights from Just War Theory with empirical research on war termination. This framework conceptualizes likely war outcomes as morally constrained choices that involve sacrificing certain demands of justice under conditions shaped by feasibility, bargaining dynamics, and the risks of continued violence and an aggressor decisive victory.

Unlike Yosypenko’s primarily theoretical approach, our goal is to operationalize these normative principles in a systematic evaluation of plausible war outcomes. In doing so, the article contributes to the literature on *jus ex bello* (Mollendorf, 2008; Rodin, 2015) by treating war termination not as a purely retrospective assessment of end states, but as a set of morally and strategically situated decisions unfolding during the conflict. At the same time, the framework is grounded in empirical debates on war termination, including bargaining constraints and commitment problems (Fearon, 1995, 2004; Powell, 2006), thereby linking normative evaluation to observed conflict dynamics.

Methodologically, we adopt a structured normative-comparative approach, organized in three steps.

First, we identify a comprehensive set of possible war outcomes, ranging from the most unjust scenario—decisive victory by the aggressor—to the most just—full restoration of the victim state’s sovereignty. In total, we identify nine outcomes, organized into an analytical typology designed to capture meaningful variation in modes of war termination. This exercise is not predictive; rather, it delineates a space of normatively relevant possibilities under observable empirical constraints.

Second, we evaluate each outcome along four core dimensions: (i) peace, understood as the cessation of aggression and direct violence; (ii) justice—the proximity to the normative ideal of *jus post bellum*; (iii) the stability of the resulting peace in the long term; and (iv) its feasibility given current conflict dynamics. Based on these criteria, we classify outcomes into three categories of justice (“just,” “fully unjust,” and “unjust but justifiable”) and three categories of stability (“low,” “medium,” and “high”). Table 1 (below) summarizes these core conceptual dimensions.

We acknowledge that both classification and feasibility assessments involve interpretive judgment. To mitigate arbitrariness, we combine three strategies: (a) the use of historical analogies drawn from comparable cases of interstate wars; (b) systematic grounding in the theoretical framework outlined above; and (c) analysis of expected impacts on political elites, armed forces, and civil society. The historical analogies are not intended as causal inference, but as heuristic tools to identify recurring patterns and plausible consequences.

Third, we analyze outcomes in a comparative and relational perspective, including through graphical representations, in order to identify configurations that offer more favorable combinations of peace, justice, stability, and feasibility. The typology is explicitly heuristic and does not aim to exhaust all empirical possibilities. Rather, it provides an analytical tool for ordering and comparing imperfect alternatives under conditions of strategic constraint. Accordingly, our objective is not to prescribe a single normatively optimal outcome, but to systematize criteria that can guide the evaluation of such choices in light of the peace–justice trade-off.

Although the analysis is situated in March 2026, with the war still ongoing, we argue that its relevance extends beyond this specific case. The framework developed here is intended to be applicable to other wars of aggression, offering a generalizable approach to evaluating war outcomes under non-ideal conditions and in contexts of “mutually hurting stalemate.” At the same time, we recognize that shifts in the balance of power, levels of international support, or domestic political conditions may significantly affect both the feasibility and the normative evaluation of the outcomes considered. We note that AI tools were used exclusively for translation purposes.

Table 1. Conceptual Framework

Concepts	Categories	Definition
Peace	Absent	Low likelihood of cessation of hostilities or high probability of continued or escalating violence.
	Present	High likelihood of cessation of hostilities, whether through military victory, armistice, or negotiated settlement.
Justice	Just	Close approximation to the principles of <i>jus post bellum</i> , including restoration of sovereignty, accountability, proportionality, and non-repetition.
	Fully unjust	Complete deviation from <i>jus post bellum</i> principles, typically involving the consolidation of aggression and denial of sovereignty.
	Unjust but justifiable	Outcomes that fall short of <i>jus post bellum</i> but partially realize its principles and are normatively preferable to fully unjust alternatives under conditions of constraint.
Stability	Low	High risk of conflict recurrence due to unresolved grievances, incompatible preferences, or weak enforcement mechanisms.
	Medium	Partial stabilization through deterrence, mutual concessions, or external guarantees, but with persistent risks from grievances, spoilers, or commitment problems.
	High	Strong prospects of durable peace, supported by institutional arrangements, credible commitments, and conditions approximating <i>jus post bellum</i> .
Feasibility	Low	Outcome is unlikely given current military balance, strategic constraints, and political conditions.
	Medium	Outcome is plausible under certain shifts in military dynamics, external support, or domestic political developments.
	High	Outcome is facilitated by current military trends, strategic incentives, and political conditions, making it relatively likely.

Source: Authors (2026).

III. Possible Outcomes of the War in Ukraine

This section identifies and systematizes possible outcomes of the war in Ukraine, drawing on analogies with interstate conflicts and wars from the twentieth century and recent decades. The aim is to delineate a space of outcomes that are both empirically plausible and normatively relevant for analyzing the ongoing conflict.

In total, we identify nine types of outcomes, organized into three analytical categories: “just,” “fully unjust,” and “unjust but justifiable.” This typology operationalizes a relational conception of justice, in which the normative value of each outcome is assessed comparatively, particularly under conditions of strategic stalemate and constrained bargaining.

Just Outcomes

Given the nature of a war of aggression, *jus post bellum* can only be fully realized in scenarios where the aggressor is defeated by the victim state or by a coalition of allies. Accordingly, the “just” outcomes identified here correspond to those that most closely

approximate the normative ideal of *jus post bellum*, even though their realization depends on demanding strategic conditions.

Following Brian Orend (2006), the normative debate surrounding such outcomes can be structured around two main possibilities. The first advocates a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, that is, the situation prior to the outbreak of hostilities. The second, more demanding position holds that the pre-war status quo itself contained the conditions that enabled aggression; therefore, achieving a just and durable peace requires going beyond it, establishing institutional and strategic arrangements capable of deterring future aggression. This perspective combines normative considerations—centered on justice for the victim—with pragmatic concerns about deterrence.

As Kyselova and Landau (2025) note, within Ukraine there is a widespread perception that “peace through victory”—understood as the defeat of the aggressor—is the only truly just and durable outcome. This view incorporates elements such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, security, and guarantees of non-repetition, as reflected in the Ukraine Peace Formula (Zelensky, 2022). Ukraine’s successful resistance to the initial assault on Kyiv and its subsequent territorial gains have reinforced expectations that Russia can be defeated militarily (Fischer, 2022). By contrast, “peace through concessions” is widely regarded as unjust, insofar as it consolidates the gains of aggression without eliminating the risk of future attacks. Within this framework, continued military support to Ukraine and effective sanctions against Russia are seen as necessary conditions for achieving a just outcome. In a similar vein, D’Anieri (2025) argues that outcomes that merely produce a short-term cessation of hostilities are unlikely to be sustainable due to commitment problems, whereas more demanding outcomes—such as the defeat of the aggressor—are harder to achieve but offer stronger prospects for stable peace. In this sense, Volodymyr Zelensky’s emphasis on victory reflects not only a political stance but also a strategic and normative position consistent with *jus post bellum*.

We distinguish two types of “just” outcomes: (a) defeat of the aggressor with comprehensive consequences and (b) defeat of the aggressor with limited consequences.

(a) Defeat of the aggressor with comprehensive consequences

This scenario most closely approximates the ideal type of a just peace. According to Orend (2006), it involves five key conditions. First, the fundamental injustice of

aggression—such as territorial occupation—must be reversed through the full withdrawal of the aggressor’s forces. Second, compensation must be provided for damages, both at the individual level (to victims and their families) and at the collective level (through reconstruction of civilian infrastructure). Orend emphasizes that such compensation must respect proportionality: the civilian population of the aggressor state should not be excessively burdened. Accordingly, generalized punitive reparations are inappropriate; costs should fall primarily on political and economic elites, without undermining national development. Historical experiences marked by disproportionate settlements—such as the Treaty of Versailles (1919)—contributed to revanchist dynamics and renewed conflict.

Third, accountability is required for both the crime of aggression (*jus ad bellum*) and violations committed during the war (*jus in bello*), including potential abuses by the victim state. Fourth, the political and military rehabilitation of the aggressor must be considered: if its regime poses an ongoing threat, institutional transformation may be necessary to reduce its capacity for future aggression. Military defeat itself may trigger domestic political change, as illustrated by the Russo-Japanese War (Hynek & Šenk, 2025). Finally, some degree of demilitarization is required, including limits on personnel and armaments.

Importantly, Kyselova and Landau (2025) argue that “peace through victory” should not be understood as a punitive, disproportionate “victor’s peace”. Rather, it involves constructing an order that is both more stable and more just than the pre-war status quo, capable of averting new aggressions. Historically, few conflicts have resulted in such comprehensive outcomes. The paradigmatic case is post–World War II Germany, which involved territorial losses, reparations, criminal accountability (notably the Nuremberg Trials), regime change, and demilitarization, followed by gradual reintegration. Similar, though less extensive, elements were present in postwar Japan.

From a normative perspective, this represents the most desirable outcome for Ukraine. It maximizes justice and offers the strongest prospects for a stable and durable peace, with broadly positive effects for political elites, armed forces, and, above all, the civilian population. These include the full restoration of sovereignty over occupied territories, the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the reestablishment of citizenship rights. Nonetheless, difficult dilemmas would remain, such as the punishment of collaborators and the possible use of amnesties—issues that deeply affected European societies after World War II. Strict adherence to proportionality and

the discrimination of responsibility would be essential to avoid revanchist dynamics within the aggressor state.

In terms of feasibility, however, this scenario is highly unlikely under current conditions. Unlike Nazi Germany or imperial Japan, Russia is a nuclear power, which significantly constrains the possibility of unconditional defeat. Nuclear threats have been present throughout the conflict, particularly as a deterrent against Western military support and Ukrainian efforts to reclaim occupied territories.

Table 2 summarizes the assessment of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions.

Table 2. Assessment of “Defeat of the Aggressor with Comprehensive Consequences”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	At least negative peace is achieved, with strong potential to evolve into a more stable and positive peace.
Justice	Just	Closest approximation to <i>jus post bellum</i> principles, including restoration of sovereignty, accountability, and proportionality.
Stability	High	Strong prospects of durable peace, supported by deterrence and institutional arrangements that reduce the risk of renewed conflict.
Feasibility	Low	Limited feasibility under current conditions due to strategic stalemate and the constraints imposed by a nuclear-armed aggressor.

Source: Authors (2026).

(b) Defeat of the aggressor with limited consequences

In this scenario, the core injustice of aggression—territorial occupation and violation of sovereignty—is reversed, but other elements of *jus post bellum* are only partially fulfilled. This outcome approximates a return to the *status quo ante bellum*, albeit with important normative deficits, such as limited accountability, incomplete reparations, and the absence of regime transformation or demilitarization.

Two frequently cited precedents in similar contexts are the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam (1973) and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (1989). In both cases, there was no decisive military defeat in the battlefield; rather, withdrawal resulted from rising costs, prolonged conflict, and domestic political pressures.

In terms of the analytical dimensions employed in this article, this outcome produces meaningful gains in justice—particularly through the reversal of territorial occupation—and may support a relatively stable peace, albeit an incomplete one from a normative standpoint. Its effects would likely be broadly positive for Ukraine’s political elites, armed forces, and society, including the restoration of sovereignty and the potential return of displaced populations. However, significant gaps would remain, especially regarding accountability and full compensation. Partial arrangements—such as financial compensation mechanisms—might mitigate some of these limitations.

One relevant precedent is the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC), established after Iraq’s expulsion from Kuwait (1991), which enabled reparations through oil revenues. Similar mechanisms could be considered in the Russian case, for instance using frozen reserves or energy revenues. However, as Orend (2006) warns, such arrangements may have regressive distributive effects, disproportionately burdening civilian populations. This underscores the importance of proportionality and discrimination of responsibility.

In terms of feasibility, this outcome is unlikely but not impossible. Its realization would depend not only on Ukraine’s capacity to sustain resistance, but also on domestic political developments within Russia, potentially exacerbated by the social and economic costs of war. Economic sanctions may function both as instruments of containment and as attempts to induce internal change, although they may also produce counterproductive effects by reinforcing nationalist mobilization. To date, there is no clear evidence of instability sufficient to threaten Vladimir Putin’s regime, although episodes such as the Wagner Group rebellion in 2023 suggest potential fissures.

It is also important to note that leadership change in Russia would not necessarily produce a more conciliatory stance and could instead result in more hawkish leadership (Bramsen & Svensson, 2025). Unlike Vietnam or Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine involves formalized territorial claims embedded in the aggressor’s legal framework, increasing the costs of reversal and limiting future leaders’ room for maneuver. Should a new leadership choose to preserve part of these territorial gains, the outcome would no longer qualify as “just”.

Table 3 summarizes the evaluation of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions.

Table 3. Assessment of “Defeat of the Aggressor with Limited Consequences”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	Negative peace is achieved through the cessation of hostilities, with potential—though more limited—to evolve into a stable and positive peace.
Justice	Just	Core elements of <i>jus post bellum</i> are realized, particularly the restoration of sovereignty, but important deficits remain in accountability, reparations, and long-term guarantees.
Stability	High	Prospects of stability are significant but more uncertain than in comprehensive defeat, due to unresolved grievances and limited enforcement mechanisms.
Feasibility	Low	More plausible than comprehensive defeat, but still constrained by battlefield dynamics, domestic political conditions in Russia, and the costs of sustained war.

Source: Authors (2026).

Fully Unjust Outcomes

Fully unjust outcomes correspond to scenarios in which the aggressor achieves decisive victory over the victim state, typically accompanied by capitulation or unconditional surrender. In such cases, the aggressor is able to impose its will entirely on the defeated party, such that a war initiated in violation of *jus ad bellum* culminates in the negation of *jus post bellum*.

We identify three possible outcomes within this category, closely linked to the evolving objectives of the aggressor. In the Russian case, these objectives have been ambiguous and shifting over time, including NATO containment, “denazification,” and the “protection” of Russian-speaking populations in eastern Ukraine (Ferraro, 2023). At various stages, Russian officials have also signaled regime change—particularly during the initial phase of the full-scale invasion—as well as, in some instances, the denial of Ukraine’s status as a sovereign state (Fischer, 2022). Recurrent statements by Vladimir Putin and other officials portraying Ukraine as an “artificial” entity suggest broader ambitions of domination or territorial absorption (Putin, 2021; TASS, 2023). However, identifying the aggressor’s true objectives remains difficult, as they evolve in response to battlefield dynamics and shifting power balances (Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025).

Although the following outcomes are unlikely under current conditions, they remain analytically plausible and are essential for delineating the full spectrum of possibilities considered in this article. Recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy (Fischer, 2025)—particularly under Donald Trump, including signals of reduced military support to Ukraine—have also renewed concerns about such scenarios.

(a) Aggressor victory with limited demands

In this scenario, the aggressor imposes substantial costs on the victim state—primarily territorial—without fully eliminating its sovereignty or imposing comprehensive regime transformation. This constitutes a form of partial domination, in which sovereignty is severely constrained but not entirely extinguished.

A relevant precedent is the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, in which Moscow maintained indirect control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. After defeating Georgian forces, Russia withdrew from territories under *de facto* Georgian control while sustaining political, military, and economic influence over the “separatist” regions.

In the Ukrainian case, such an outcome could involve formal or *de facto* recognition of Russian control over Crimea, the Donbas, and parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, as well as potential additional territories in the south and east. It could also include restrictions on Ukraine’s military capabilities and political concessions, such as renouncing NATO membership or expanding legal recognition of the Russian language. Ukraine would continue to exist as a sovereign state, albeit territorially reduced and politically constrained, and might still pursue European integration, contingent on the aggressor’s acceptance.

In terms of the analytical dimensions used in this article, this outcome scores low on justice and entails significant costs for political elites, armed forces, and especially civilians—particularly in occupied territories. However, because it preserves some degree of sovereignty, it represents an intermediate position within the category of fully unjust outcomes, being less severe than total domination. In terms of stability, it may produce short-term peace, but one grounded in fragile and normatively problematic foundations, with a high risk of future conflict.

From a feasibility perspective, this scenario is possible but unlikely. In the event of decisive victory, it is plausible that Russia would pursue more extensive outcomes, such as those discussed below.

The table below highlights the main implications of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions.

Table 4. Assessment of “Aggressor victory with limited demands”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	A form of negative peace may emerge through the cessation of hostilities, but under coercive and unstable conditions.
Justice	Fully unjust	Significant deviation from <i>jus post bellum</i> , as aggression is partially consolidated through territorial losses and political constraints on the victim state.
Stability	Low	Short-term stability may be achieved, but with a high risk of future conflict due to unresolved grievances and coercive arrangements.
Feasibility	Low	In the event of a decisive victory by the aggressor, stronger demands would be expected.

Source: Authors (2026).

(b) Aggressor victory with regime imposition

This scenario entails a profound erosion of the victim state’s sovereignty. The aggressor imposes substantial transformations on the political regime, including replacing elites and establishing institutions aligned with its interests. The autonomy of these new elites becomes heavily constrained by the aggressor, resulting in a situation approaching *de facto* occupation. There is evidence that regime change was among Russia’s initial objectives in 2022, later adjusted in response to Ukrainian resistance.

Historical precedents include collaborationist regimes under Nazi occupation—such as Vichy France—as well as U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and Iraq (2003–2011). Such externally imposed regimes tend to suffer from low domestic legitimacy, high instability, and a strong propensity for resistance, often armed. In recent cases, the withdrawal of occupying forces has been followed by rapid institutional collapse (Afghanistan) or prolonged insurgency (Iraq).

For Ukraine, this would represent a highly detrimental outcome. It would entail minimal justice, with a high likelihood of persistent instability. Political elites would be removed and persecuted; the armed forces would be demobilized or subordinated to the

aggressor; and civil society would be constrained under a regime widely perceived as illegitimate. This would likely be accompanied by territorial losses and a transformation into a subordinate state—similar to Belarus—with political and economic dependence on Moscow and systematic policies of Russification. Survey evidence suggests that Russian control over Ukraine’s government constitutes a red line that Ukrainians are unwilling to accept (Dill et al., 2026).

Such an arrangement would likely generate prolonged resistance—both civil and potentially armed (including guerrilla warfare)—requiring sustained repression by the occupying power. It could also lead to a government-in-exile and a shift toward asymmetric conflict, including insurgency and political violence. Comparatively, it could resemble dynamics observed in anti-colonial wars, such as Algeria (1954–1962). The stability of such a system would also depend heavily on domestic conditions within the aggressor state.

In terms of feasibility, this scenario is unlikely under current conditions but cannot be entirely ruled out in the event of decisive Russian victory. Even if it produces a formal cessation of hostilities, the resulting peace would be both deeply unjust and structurally fragile.

The table below summarizes the implications of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions, emphasizing its coercive nature and structural instability.

Table 5. Assessment of “Aggressor victory with regime imposition”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Absent	The formal end of large-scale hostilities may occur, but is likely to be replaced by persistent resistance, repression, and potential insurgency rather than genuine peace.
Justice	Fully unjust	Profound violation of <i>jus post bellum</i> , including denial of sovereignty, imposition of a dependent regime, and suppression of political autonomy.
Stability	Low	Highly unstable outcome, with strong incentives for resistance, low regime legitimacy, and high likelihood of prolonged conflict or insurgency.
Feasibility	Low	Requires decisive military victory and sustained capacity to impose and maintain a compliant regime, making it unlikely under current conditions.

Source: Authors (2026).

(c) Aggressor victory with full annexation

This represents the most extreme and normatively severe outcome. Sovereignty is not merely constrained but entirely extinguished, with the territory formally incorporated into the aggressor state. The aggressor's political, legal, and administrative institutions are imposed, while existing elites are removed and persecuted. Beyond territorial control, the aggressor is likely to implement strategies of forced integration and ideological indoctrination, including practices that may be characterized as forms of cultural genocide (Ferraro, 2026)—such as restrictions on language, religion, and education—aimed at consolidating control and securing population loyalty.

Few recent cases approximate this scenario, including the *Anschluss* of Austria (1938), the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states (1940), the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China (1951), and, more briefly, Iraq's annexation of Kuwait (1990). Although resistance has occurred in such contexts, systematic repression, surveillance, and elite co-optation have often limited its effectiveness over time, even if symbolic forms of opposition—such as governments-in-exile—persisted.⁶

For Ukraine, this would constitute the worst possible outcome across all analytical dimensions, implying the total absence of justice and the imposition of a peace based on domination. The consequences would be profoundly negative for political elites, armed forces, and especially civilians. Given recurrent claims by Russian officials that Ukraine is an “artificial” state and should disappear (Putin, 2021; TASS, 2023), the possibility of full dissolution cannot be excluded, potentially accompanied by administrative fragmentation under historical labels such as “Malorossiya” or “Novorossiya.”

Although resistance—particularly in the form of insurgency—would likely emerge, the administrative and coercive capacities of the occupying state could significantly limit its effectiveness in the short to medium term. Nonetheless, conflict would likely persist in asymmetric forms, resembling anti-colonial struggles.

In terms of feasibility, this scenario remains unlikely under current conditions but cannot be entirely ruled out. Even if it produces a formal end to hostilities, it represents the extreme limit of injustice and serves as a negative benchmark against which other outcomes must be evaluated.

⁶ The territories currently under occupation (both since 2014 and following the 2022 invasion) have faced these dilemmas.

The table below summarizes the implications of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions, representing the most extreme form of injustice in our typology.

Table 6. Assessment of “Aggressor victory with full annexation”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Absent	The end of conventional hostilities would likely give way to repression, resistance, and potential insurgency, rather than a meaningful or sustainable peace.
Justice	Fully unjust	Complete negation of <i>jus post bellum</i> , including the elimination of sovereignty, territorial absorption, and suppression of national identity and political autonomy.
Stability	Low	Stability would rely primarily on coercion and repression, with persistent risks of resistance, insurgency, and long-term instability.
Feasibility	Low	Requires total military collapse of the victim state and sustained capacity for territorial integration and control, making it highly unlikely under current conditions.

Source: Authors (2026).

Unjust but Justifiable Outcomes

As Brian Orend (2006) emphasizes, in wars of aggression any outcome that does not involve the defeat of the aggressor is, in principle, unjust. At the same time, we argue that such unjust outcomes vary in degree. As discussed above, “fully unjust” outcomes correspond to scenarios in which the aggressor achieves decisive victory and imposes capitulation. There are, however, outcomes in which the aggressor is not defeated but also fails to fully achieve its maximal objectives—namely, total victory and complete domination of the victim state.

Because these outcomes are preferable to fully unjust scenarios and may help contain violence and halt aggression, we classify them as “unjust but justifiable,” building on Avishai Margalit’s (2009) notion of a “justifiable peace” and reflecting an ethic of responsibility that prioritizes feasible harm reduction under conditions of constraint. This approach reflects a relational conception of justice under non-ideal conditions: outcomes remain unjust but are less unjust relative to more extreme alternatives and may

incorporate limited elements of *jus post bellum*. In this sense, certain arrangements may approximate the normative ideal incrementally—not a perfect peace, but a “less imperfect” or “least bad” option (Malkasian, 2023; Davis & Thomas, 2025). Such outcomes typically emerge through complex processes of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise, often under continued hostilities.

Negotiations are more likely when conflicts reach a “mutually hurting stalemate,” that is, when neither side can secure decisive gains and the costs of war exceed expected benefits (Zartman, 2001). Timing and ripeness are therefore critical. As Malkasian (2023) notes, such recognition may occur after substantial losses. External actors may also play a role by exerting pressure on the parties to negotiate and offering more credible guarantees (Fortna, 2023; Walter, 2002). Under current conditions, the war in Ukraine approximates elements of such a stalemate: Russian advances have been limited and costly, while the overall burden of war remains high for both sides. Ukraine, for its part, expects that time will improve its bargaining position or even generate conditions for Russian withdrawal linked to domestic pressures—a more just outcome. At the same time, a diplomatic settlement is unlikely as long as Russia maintains expectations of decisive victory; in this context, continued military support to Ukraine may be necessary to create a “window of opportunity” for negotiations (Fischer, 2022, 2025).

The reluctance to discuss possible settlements, however, entails significant risks. Shifts in external support—such as changes in U.S. foreign policy and its prioritization of other geopolitical theaters—and adverse military developments could place Ukraine in a weaker position, potentially increasing the likelihood of fully unjust outcomes. The election of Donald Trump and the reorientation of U.S. policy, including pressure for concessions and signals of reduced support, have raised such concerns (Fischer, 2025). At the same time, Russia is not immune to adverse trajectories, including outcomes resembling Vietnam or Afghanistan.

Although prolonged stalemates make negotiated settlements increasingly rational in cost–benefit terms (Zartman, 2001, 2022), several factors complicate this process. Belligerents often rely on optimistic expectations about future gains rather than current realities (Blainey, 1988); the measurement of costs and benefits is inherently uncertain (Connable, 2012); the absence of existential threats for at least one party may reduce incentives to compromise (Sanders & Tuck, 2020); incompatible preferences may limit the bargaining space (Goemans, 2020); and commitment problems—rooted in mutual distrust—undermine agreements (Fearon, 1995, 2004; Powell, 2006; D’Anieri, 2025). In

addition, prolonged conflicts increase the costs of negotiation—shifts from issue-based to value-based conflicts, with stronger ideological and identity dimensions, tend to harden positions and increase domestic constraints on compromise (Tuck, 2016; Sanders & Tuck, 2020).

As Bramsen and Svensson (2025) argue, three factors are central to negotiations: timing (“when”), including the identification of a ripe moment; actors (“who”), involving strategic decisions about mediators and participants; and procedures (“how”), including formats such as direct talks, mediation, or shuttle diplomacy. These dimensions can significantly shape outcomes.

Importantly, negotiations and military pressure should not be seen as mutually exclusive strategies but as complementary ones (Bramsen & Svensson, 2025; Malkasian, 2023). Continued resistance on the battlefield, combined with political and economic pressure, may alter the aggressor’s strategic calculus. Moreover, agreements are more likely to be sustainable when preceded by some stabilization of the front line; otherwise, they risk producing fragile and asymmetric arrangements, as illustrated by the Minsk agreements (Kyselova & Potomkina, 2025). From a pragmatic perspective, peace and justice may also be pursued sequentially, with justice taking longer to materialize, as seen in cases such as Yugoslavia and Liberia (Kyselova & Landau, 2025; Hynek & Šenk, 2025).

Unjust but justifiable outcomes involve profound moral dilemmas, as they require the partial acceptance and consolidation of injustice. As Kyselova and Landau (2025) note, concessions to Russia are widely viewed as unacceptable within Ukraine and represent a departure from the ideal of “peace through victory.” D’Anieri (2025) further argues that negotiated peace—including ceasefires—may be unstable in the long term due to persistent commitment problems: parties do not trust that peace will endure and fear being disadvantaged by any pause; a failed agreement may be worse than continued conflict.

We argue, however, that robust mechanisms of deterrence, monitoring, and dispute resolution can mitigate these risks. Without such guarantees, ceasefires may function merely as strategic pauses that enable rearmament and renewed hostilities. As D’Anieri (2025) highlights, the security assurances of the Budapest Memorandum (1994) lacked credible enforcement mechanisms; stronger deterrence arrangements could be central to preventing renewed aggression.

Finally, there is growing concern—particularly among European allies—that territorial or political concessions (and broader appeasement strategies) may generate incentives for future aggression, echoing the dynamics of the Munich Agreement (1938). The experience after 2014 reinforces such concerns, as relatively moderate responses failed to prevent the escalation of 2022. Any agreement involving territorial concessions therefore risks legitimizing aggression and reinforcing the perception that it pays (Rodin, 2015), thereby undermining long-term peace and stability. Ukrainian elites have repeatedly warned that the current war may be only one stage of a broader expansionist project (Zelensky, 2024, 2025). Credible deterrence mechanisms are thus indispensable.

We now turn to four possible outcomes within the category of unjust but justifiable results.

(a) Conflict freezing through armistice

One of the most common mechanisms for ending armed conflict is the formal establishment of a ceasefire while postponing the resolution of core incompatibilities indefinitely (Wallensteen, 2002). In such cases, the conflict becomes effectively “frozen.” Typically, this involves the creation of a demilitarized or partially demilitarized zone monitored by international actors, including UN peacekeeping missions or third-party forces acceptable to both sides. The resulting peace is generally negative (Galtung, 1969, 2011)—marked by residual tension—but may achieve relative stability in the medium term.

The paradigmatic case is the 1953 Korean armistice, which established the Demilitarized Zone along the 38th parallel (Malkasian, 2023). Despite high levels of militarization in practice, the arrangement has been effective in preventing large-scale direct conflict. Other examples include the division of Cyprus since 1974 (monitored by UNFICYP), the Israel–Syria disengagement agreement (UNDOF), and several post-Soviet conflicts—such as Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

In Ukraine, such an outcome could involve an armistice combined with a monitored ceasefire line, ideally under a UN mandate and involving a group of states acceptable to the parties. In terms of the analytical dimensions used in this article, this scenario scores low on justice—given the persistence of territorial occupation—but offers significant gains in terms of peace and immediate reduction of violence, as well as relatively high feasibility under conditions of stalemate. Its “justifiability” lies precisely

in this relational dimension: by halting hostilities (in line with an ethic of responsibility), preventing Ukraine from formally conceding territory, and reducing the risk of escalation toward fully unjust outcomes, it may constitute a preferable alternative.

Its advantages include the cessation of violence, preservation of the Ukrainian state, and the possibility of treating territorial losses as provisional and subject to future revision. Its disadvantages include the *de facto* consolidation of injustice, the deprivation of rights for populations under occupation (Ferraro, 2026), and the risk of a tense and incomplete peace. In terms of actors, this scenario may be relatively favorable to political elites—by avoiding formal concessions to the aggressor—and to the armed forces, due to the cessation of combat, as well as to civilians outside occupied areas.

In terms of feasibility, this scenario is plausible, though dependent on shifts in the aggressor’s strategic calculus. To date, Russia has shown a preference for continued military operations and has repeatedly violated ceasefires. Nonetheless, a prolonged and costly stalemate may eventually create conditions for such an arrangement. As Malkasian (2023) argues, drawing on the Korean case, an armistice may represent the “least bad option” in conflicts involving nuclear powers and deeply incompatible interests.

However, the sustainability of such an arrangement would depend on robust mechanisms of monitoring and deterrence. Comparative experience highlights both the potential and the limits of this solution: for instance, Azerbaijan’s recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrates the fragility of some frozen conflicts in the long term. Moreover, unlike the Korean case, the deployment of U.S. troops in Ukraine is currently inconceivable (D’Anieri, 2025), meaning that such an arrangement would lack enforcement by a major power capable of deterring renewed aggression.

The table below highlights the main trade-offs associated with this outcome across the four analytical dimensions.

Table 7. Assessment of “Conflict freezing through armistice”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	Negative peace is achieved through the cessation of large-scale hostilities, although underlying tensions and the risk of renewed conflict persist.
Justice	Unjust but justifiable	Falls short of <i>jus post bellum</i> , as territorial occupation and injustice are partially consolidated, but may be justified as a means to halt violence and avoid worse outcomes.
Stability	Medium	Provides short- to medium-term stabilization, but remains vulnerable to escalation due to unresolved grievances and commitment problems.
Feasibility	Medium–High	Relatively plausible under current conditions of strategic stalemate, as it requires limited concessions and aligns with incentives to reduce the costs of war.

Source: Authors (2026).

(b) Peace agreement with reciprocal concessions

In this scenario, the aggressor makes concessions—such as partial territorial withdrawal or compensation—while receiving political or territorial concessions in return, formalized through a negotiated agreement. Such arrangements generally offer greater potential for stability than other intermediate solutions, although they tend to preserve residual tensions and social grievances.

A paradigmatic case is the 1979 Egypt–Israel Peace Treaty. Israel returned the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for formal recognition by Egypt and its withdrawal as a principal regional adversary. The agreement included demilitarization provisions and monitoring mechanisms (such as the Multinational Force and Observers), contributing to the absence of direct conflict since then (Wallensteen, 2002). Mediators, particularly the United States, provided economic and political incentives to sustain the agreement—an approach that could, in principle, be replicated in the Ukrainian case (Hynek & Šenk, 2025).

As Stedman (1997) and Wallensteen (2002) note, such agreements face the risk of spoilers—actors who reject concessions as unjust and seek to undermine implementation. Historical examples include the assassinations of Anwar Sadat (1981) and Yitzhak Rabin (1995), illustrating the domestic political costs of compromise.

Moreover, broader political shifts may be required for such agreements to become feasible, as suggested by the timing of the Korean armistice following Stalin's death (Malkasian, 2023).

In the Ukrainian context, such scenarios have been discussed, involving costly concessions by Kyiv—such as the formal recognition of occupied territories, the concession of new territories, the renunciation of NATO membership, or adjustments to the sanctions regime—in exchange for uncertain Russian concessions, such as partial territorial withdrawal. Hynek and Šenk (2025) draw parallels with the 1955 Austrian State Treaty, in which Soviet withdrawal was exchanged for Austrian neutrality. However, the violation of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum significantly undermines the credibility of third-party diplomatic assurances for Ukraine (D'Anieri, 2025). Effective security guarantees would therefore be essential, potentially including arrangements analogous to NATO's Article 5 or membership itself (Fischer, 2022, 2025).

In terms of the analytical dimensions, this outcome offers significant gains in peace and potential stability but entails substantial losses in justice, as it partially consolidates the results of aggression. Its “justifiability” lies in its ability to end hostilities, preserve residual sovereignty, and avoid more severe outcomes, in line with an ethic of responsibility. Its effects are mixed: political elites may benefit from the end of war but face domestic backlash; armed forces and civil society may experience immediate relief combined with frustration and perceptions of irreversible loss.

An intermediate variant would involve agreements that defer the final status of contested territories while establishing mechanisms of containment and long-term negotiation. Instruments such as EU accession could serve as bargaining leverage in this context.

The sustainability of such agreements is heavily constrained by commitment problems (Fearon, 1995, 2004; Powell, 2006; D'Anieri, 2025). Without robust deterrence, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms, agreements risk becoming temporary pauses. Although Russia has not yet clearly signaled interest in such outcomes, developments such as prisoner exchanges and renewed ceasefire talks in 2025–2026 suggest that negotiated solutions remain plausible.

Table 8 summarizes the main trade-offs associated with this outcome across the four analytical dimensions.

Table 8. Assessment of “Peace agreement with reciprocal concessions”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	Negative peace is achieved through a negotiated settlement, with greater potential than an armistice to evolve into a more stable and institutionalized peace.
Justice	Unjust but justifiable	Falls short of <i>jus post bellum</i> , as concessions legitimize part of the aggression, but reciprocity may enhance its normative acceptability compared to unilateral arrangements.
Stability	Medium–High	More stable than a simple armistice, as mutual concessions and negotiated terms may reduce incentives for renewed conflict, though risks remain.
Feasibility	Medium	Requires convergence of preferences and willingness to compromise, which may be difficult under current political and strategic conditions.

Source: Authors (2026).

(c) Peace agreement with unilateral concessions

This scenario, marked by “land-for-peace” arrangements, combines elements of the previous case and of an “aggressor victory with limited demands.” The victim state makes substantial territorial and political concessions without receiving meaningful reciprocal benefits beyond the cessation of hostilities. Such asymmetric agreements are typically accepted when the victim faces severe military disadvantage and seeks to avoid a fully unjust outcome.

A paradigmatic example is the 1940 Moscow Peace Treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union. After months of resistance, Finland ceded approximately 11% of its territory—including Karelia—in order to preserve its sovereignty and avoid total collapse. Subsequently, Finland faced renewed aggression (Hynek & Šenk, 2025), but the main terms of the settlement remained in place after the Second World War.

In the Ukrainian context, this outcome could involve Kyiv accepting territorial and political concessions in exchange for the mere continuation of statehood. Russia might also demand neutrality guarantees, as in the cases of Finland and Austria during the Cold War. However, given the low credibility of Russian commitments (D’Anieri, 2025), Ukraine would likely require substantial domestic militarization and external security guarantees (Allison, 2022).

In terms of the analytical dimensions, this scenario yields low justice and limited gains in peace, though it may prevent more severe outcomes. Its “justifiability” is therefore strictly relational and marginal: it derives not from intrinsic merits, but from comparison with worse alternatives.

The effects on actors would be largely negative. Political elites would face legitimacy crises; armed forces would incur material and symbolic losses; and civilians—especially in occupied territories—would remain deprived of rights. Compared to reciprocal agreements, this scenario is more likely to generate internal instability and contestation by spoilers.

As Davis and Thomas (2025) note, simple “land-for-peace” arrangements may incentivize future aggression. Robust security guarantees would therefore be essential to mitigate commitment problems. Even so, the asymmetry of the agreement would likely undermine its credibility.

In terms of feasibility, this scenario remains plausible, given power asymmetries and shifting U.S. positions. Paradoxically, it is also among the most problematic outcomes normatively and strategically, occupying the lower bound of “unjust but justifiable” outcomes.

The table below summarizes the implications of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions, highlighting its asymmetric nature.

Table 9. Assessment of “Peace agreement with unilateral concessions”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Present	Negative peace is achieved through a negotiated settlement, but under asymmetric conditions that may undermine its durability.
Justice	Unjust but justifiable	Falls significantly short of <i>jus post bellum</i> , as concessions by the victim state partially legitimize aggression without reciprocity, though it may be justified to halt violence or avoid worse outcomes.
Stability	Medium	More fragile than reciprocal agreements, as asymmetric concessions may generate grievances, weaken deterrence, and increase the risk of future conflict.
Feasibility	Medium–High	More feasible than reciprocal agreements, as it requires fewer concessions from the aggressor and may result from shifts in battlefield dynamics or external pressure.

Source: Authors (2026).

(d) Protracted conflict with cycles of freezing and escalation

This final scenario involves no durable resolution. The conflict becomes prolonged and recurrent, alternating between low-intensity phases resembling frozen conflict and episodes of renewed violence. As William Zartman (2022) argues, negotiations require at least minimal convergence in conceptions of justice; in its absence, such divergences act as a veto, preventing progress toward agreement.

The most extreme example is the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, characterized by prolonged occupation and recurrent violence. Another case is the India–Pakistan rivalry, marked by alternating phases of relative stability and acute confrontation. In Ukraine, parts of the front line—extending over 900 km—already display similar dynamics, as did the Donbas war prior to 2022.

In terms of the analytical dimensions, this scenario scores low on peace and stability, and offers limited gains in justice in the short term. Yet it may be morally justifiable under certain conditions, particularly when available alternatives involve concessions perceived as unacceptable. As David Rodin (2015) argues, it may be morally permissible—or even obligatory—to continue fighting despite severe costs. Even if Ukraine cannot achieve a fully just outcome, continued resistance may be justified to avoid legitimizing gains obtained through force. Such decisions fall within the tragic moral dilemmas of *jus ex bello* and ultimately rest with those who bear their consequences. For many Ukrainians, especially after the Bucha massacre in 2022 and numerous other crimes, Russian aggression has come to be framed as a genocide against the Ukrainian people (Fischer, 2022, p. 4). Any agreement with Russia would therefore fall under Margalit’s (2009) concept of a “rotten compromise,” while “peace through victory” would be seen as the only acceptable outcome (Kyselova and Landau, 2025).

From this perspective, Ukrainian resistance is not only strategic but also ethically required, grounded in the restoration of rights, punishment of aggression, and prevention of recurrence (Dzhyhora, 2024). This aligns with the “no peace without justice” perspective (Obel Hansen, 2019), which rejects settlements that sacrifice fundamental principles. Public opinion also reflects this stance: although support for territorial concessions has increased since 2022, a majority of Ukrainians remains opposed⁷ (Dill et al., 2026; Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 2026).

⁷ See Figure 3 below.

The main advantage of continued conflict lies in avoiding the formal consolidation of injustice and preserving the possibility of more favorable outcomes, including shifts in the balance of power. However, the costs are substantial: ongoing violence, destruction, institutional strain, and risks of escalation or deterioration into fully unjust outcomes.

The effects on actors are profound. Political elites may face increasing pressures and risks of autocratization—through the concentration of executive power, the erosion of institutional checks and balances, and the growing influence of security actors; armed forces experience both exhaustion and centrality; and civil society remains exposed to prolonged trauma and deteriorating living conditions, alongside the diversion of public resources toward the war effort.

Although few conflicts persist indefinitely, this scenario cannot be excluded in the Ukrainian case, given the combination of military stalemate, deep incompatibilities, and the absence of conditions for a stable agreement.

The table below summarizes the implications of this outcome across the four analytical dimensions, reflecting a persistent condition of unresolved conflict.

Table 10. Assessment of “Protracted conflict with cycles of freezing and escalation”

Dimension	Assessment	Rationale
Peace	Absent	No stable cessation of hostilities is achieved, with recurring cycles of escalation and temporary freezing rather than sustained peace.
Justice	Unjust but justifiable	Limited realization of <i>jus post bellum</i> , as neither full aggression nor full sovereignty is consolidated, but violence persists without resolution.
Stability	Low	Structurally unstable, characterized by repeated cycles of conflict, shifting frontlines, and persistent insecurity.
Feasibility	High	Highly plausible under conditions of strategic stalemate, given ongoing military capacity, external support dynamics, and lack of decisive victory.

Source: Authors (2026).

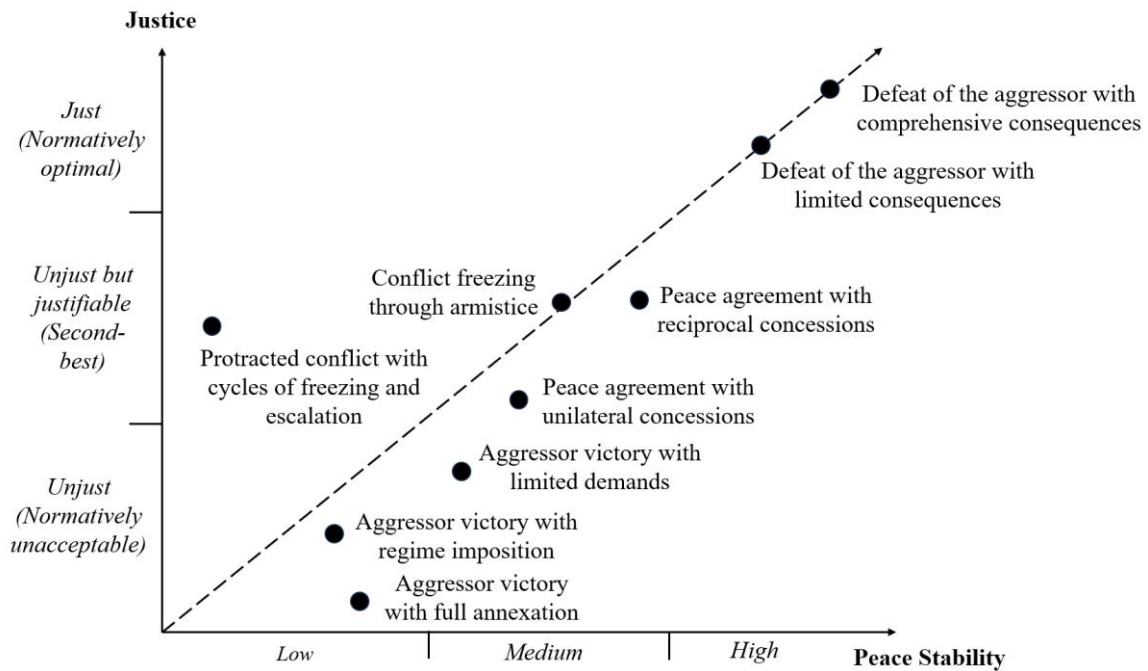
IV. Discussion

Building on the nine outcomes analyzed in the previous section, we provide a comparative assessment of their implications for peace and justice, as well as their relative feasibility under current war dynamics (March 2026). While such an exercise inevitably involves interpretive judgment, the assessments presented here are grounded in the analytical framework developed throughout the article.

Figure 1 synthesizes these findings by indicating which outcomes tend to produce just, fully unjust, or ambiguous effects. Only two scenarios approximate the ideal of a just peace (*jus post bellum*)—those involving the defeat of the aggressor. By contrast, fully unjust outcomes are consistently associated with negative effects: aggressor victory, beyond being normatively unjust, tends to produce low-quality peace, as imposed injustices increase the likelihood of insurgency, instability, and renewed conflict. Even in cases of limited aggressor victory, relative stability does not offset the fundamentally problematic normative character of the outcome.

Four outcomes display an inherently ambiguous character and are best understood in relational terms as second-best alternatives that avoid fully unjust outcomes without fully satisfying the demands of ideal justice. Peace agreements involving reciprocal or unilateral concessions may generate greater short-term stability but tend to reduce the prospects of reversing territorial losses in the long term, partly crystallizing injustices and rewarding the aggressor. By contrast, conflict freezing through armistice preserves the possibility of future revision but may result in a more fragile and tension-prone peace. All three scenarios depend critically on robust mechanisms of security, monitoring, and dispute resolution. A protracted conflict with cycles of low-intensity violence and escalation avoids the formal consolidation of injustice but entails substantial human, political, and economic costs—a critical concern from the perspective of an ethic of responsibility.

Figure 1. Justice-Peace-Stability trade-off, War in Ukraine (March 2026)

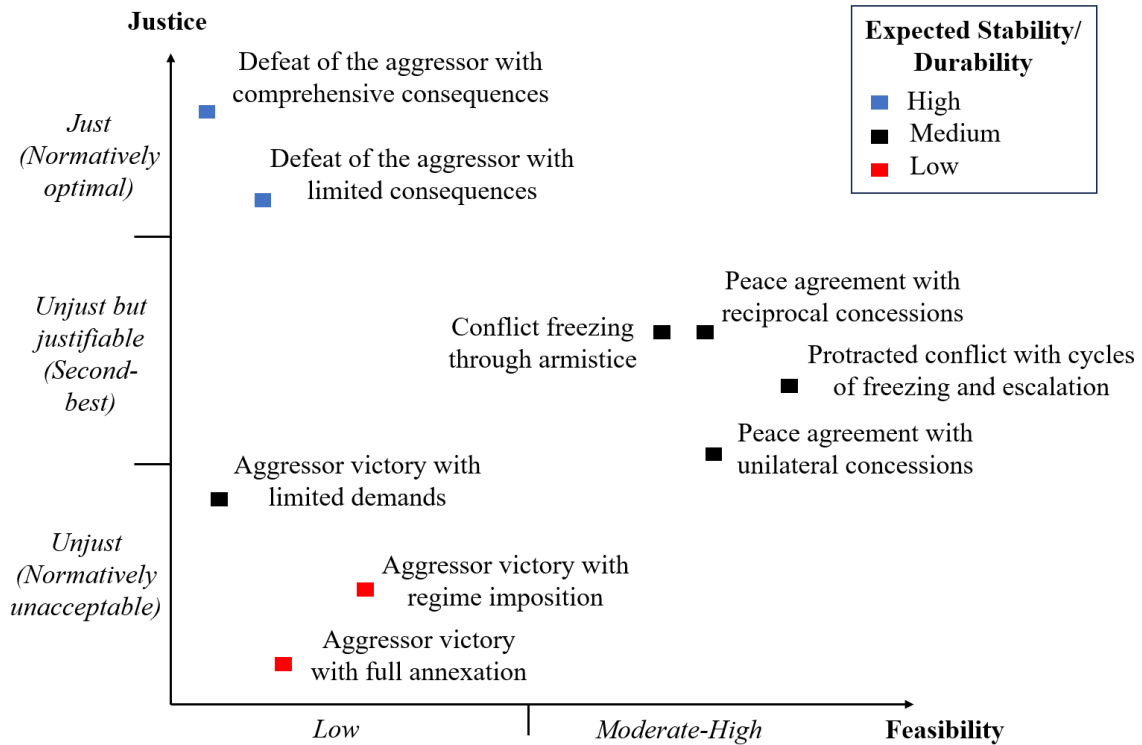


Source: Authors (2026).

The positioning of outcomes is heuristic and based on theoretical expectations derived from the literature on war termination and just war theory.

With regard to feasibility, current battlefield dynamics—particularly the relative stabilization of the front line—suggest that both fully just and fully unjust outcomes are unlikely. As illustrated in Figure 2, four scenarios concentrate moderate to high probabilities: conflict freezing through armistice, peace agreements with reciprocal or unilateral concessions, and protracted conflict with alternating phases of escalation and stagnation. All fall within the category of “unjust but justifiable” outcomes.

Figure 2. Justice-Peace-Feasibility trade-off, War in Ukraine (March 2026)



Source: Authors (2026).

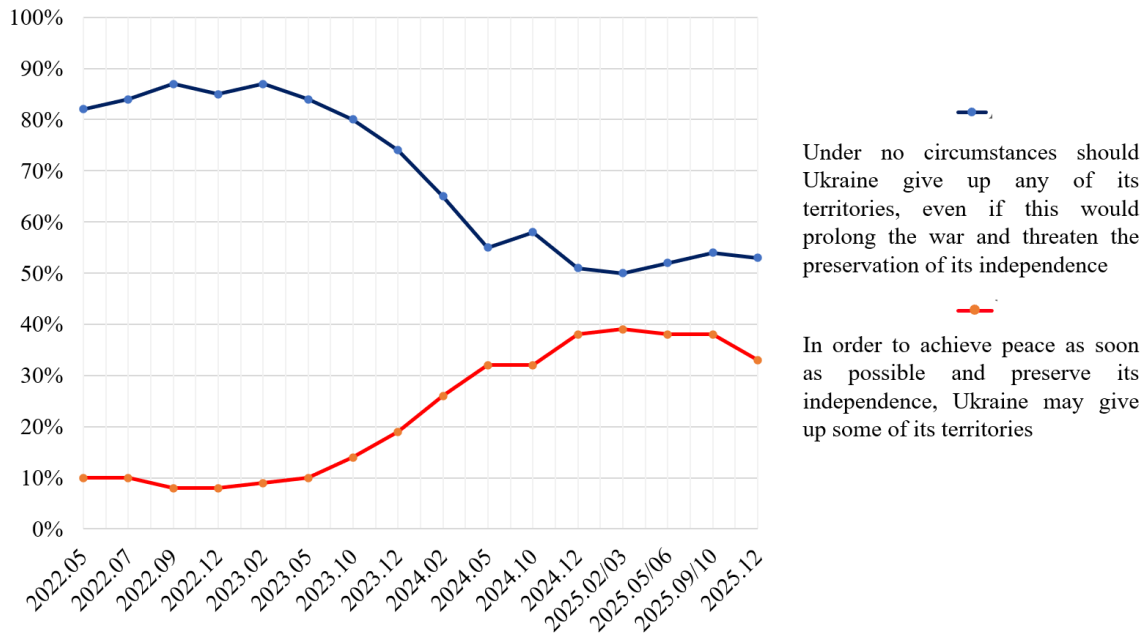
As discussed earlier, the ideal of *jus post bellum* was developed in historically specific contexts that differ significantly from the war in Ukraine (Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025). This requires the adoption of normative criteria capable of addressing non-ideal conditions. The concept of relational justice—operationalized through the category of “unjust but justifiable” outcomes—represents a step in this direction, enabling the comparative evaluation of imperfect alternatives under conditions of strategic constraint. Such outcomes may be understood as “more just” or “less unjust” forms of peace, or as “least bad” options (Malkasian, 2023; Davis & Thomas, 2025), rather than fully just settlements.

In balancing peace, justice, stability, and feasibility, two outcomes stand out under current conditions: conflict freezing through armistice and peace agreements with reciprocal concessions. Both offer the potential to halt violence, reduce the risk of fully unjust outcomes, and preserve or enable elements of *jus post bellum*, such as compensation, accountability, and potential integration with the European Union.

The choice between these scenarios, however, involves significant moral trade-offs. A negotiated peace may facilitate the recovery of some territories but limit the prospects for a broader reversal of losses. Conflict freezing, by contrast, preserves the possibility of future revision but entails a more fragile and tension-prone peace. Despite

the high costs of the war, many Ukrainians prefer to fight for the most just outcomes, refusing any territorial concession to the aggressor state, as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3. Public support for territorial concessions in Ukraine



Source: Kyiv International Institute of Sociology/ KIIS (2026).

Regardless of the scenario, the viability of relational justice depends on the incorporation of robust mechanisms to contain aggression. These include: (1) demilitarized zones along the line of contact; (2) continuous monitoring by multiple international actors, preferably under multilateral peacekeeping mandates, such as those of the United Nations; and (3) effective mechanisms for dispute resolution, backed by credible third-party sanctions and enforcement. Comparative cases—such as Korea, Cyprus, Sinai, and the Golan Heights—illustrate both the potential and limits of such arrangements. At the same time, experiences such as UNIFIL in Lebanon highlight their fragility. For this reason, deterrence—through both domestic military capacity and credible external security guarantees—remains essential.

Finally, it is worth noting that the scenarios currently debated in diplomatic forums correspond precisely to the ambiguous outcomes classified here as “unjust but justifiable.” A central obstacle to their realization remains the reluctance of the aggressor to accept concessions (Malkasian, 2023). In this context, negotiations and battlefield dynamics should be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive strategies (Bramsen & Svensson, 2025; D’Anieri, 2025; Malkasian, 2023). Sustained

military pressure, combined with economic and political costs, is crucial to altering the aggressor's strategic calculus and making negotiated outcomes viable. Stabilization of the front line, in turn, is a key condition for enabling such negotiations (Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025).

Conclusion

This article has shown that the pursuit of a “just peace” in wars of aggression entails profound complexities and difficult moral trade-offs. The normative ideal associated with *jus post bellum* (Orend, 2006; Bass, 2004) is insufficient to fully capture contexts in which aggression is carried out by a nuclear power and the prospects of defeat, punishment, and accountability are limited (Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025).

We argue that justice in such conflicts cannot be meaningfully understood in binary terms—“just” versus “unjust.” Instead, it must be conceptualized as relational and graduated, assessed in light of feasible outcomes and their comparative consequences, in line with comparative approaches to justice (Sen, 2009). Drawing on Margalit (2009) and Yosypenko (2024), we develop an intermediate category—“unjust but justifiable” outcomes—whose meaning becomes intelligible only in relation to two poles: fully unjust outcomes, in which the aggressor imposes its will, and just outcomes, in which the aggressor is defeated and the principles of *jus post bellum* are broadly realized. Under conditions of strategic stalemate, such as those currently observed in the war in Ukraine, both poles become unlikely, rendering intermediate outcomes analytically central. These outcomes must, at once, prevent the realization of fully unjust scenarios while, as far as possible, approximating the normative standards of *jus post bellum*.

The idea of “unjust but justifiable” outcomes draws inspiration from Margalit's notion of a “justifiable peace.” As Yosypenko suggests, Margalit's reflection, like that of Walzer, is grounded in an ethic of responsibility, since peace is not understood as the realization of moral values external to politics. Rather, it is the inescapable dilemmas arising from the use of force and political power that make an imperfect peace “justifiable.”

Yosypenko (2024) stresses that the choices involved in justifying certain compromises are not merely pragmatic but moral, even when they endorse a lesser evil in order to avoid a greater one. This moral character of such choices entails the need to assume responsibility for the decision and for its consequences. Ultimately, it is the very

act of assuming this responsibility that provides the moral grounding for the decision, rather than the conformity of the action to moral principles derived from an ideal theory. In other words, a peace is not justifiable in general, but only for those who take responsibility for deciding in its favor. As we emphasize, this decision belongs solely to Ukrainian society.

Building on recent contributions (Davis & Thomas, 2025; Hynek & Šenk, 2025; Leveringhaus & Khvostova, 2025), we identified nine plausible outcomes organized across these three categories. We further argue, following D’Anieri (2025), that normative evaluation cannot be limited to justice alone but must also incorporate the durability of peace and the commitment problem. For this reason, we assessed each outcome across four dimensions—justice, peace, stability, and feasibility—while privileging, given the nature of the conflict, more restrictive conceptions of peace consistent with “negative peace” (Galtung, 1969, 2011).

Among the outcomes analyzed, two “unjust but justifiable” scenarios stand out under current conditions: conflict freezing through armistice and peace agreements with reciprocal concessions. Although neither fully reverses the injustices of aggression, both have the potential to halt violence, reduce the likelihood of fully unjust outcomes, and preserve or enable elements of *jus post bellum*, including reparations, compensation, accountability for war crimes, and potential institutional integration with the European Union.

Three qualifications are essential. First, as we have emphasized, decisions regarding concessions—especially territorial ones—ultimately belong to Ukrainian society and its political leadership. The refusal to negotiate, as in scenarios of prolonged conflict, remains morally defensible within Just War Theory, particularly in light of Rodin’s (2015) argument that it may be legitimate to resist granting rights to what has been obtained through force. Thus, pursuing “peace through victory” (Kyselova and Landau, 2025), the most just scenario, is a legitimate choice, especially insofar as Ukrainians may view negotiations with Putin as “rotten compromises” (Margalit, 2009). Of course, this choice entails the risk of reaching the most unjust scenario—a decisive victory by the aggressor—and therefore raises concerns from the perspective of an ethics of responsibility. While current dynamics favor intermediate outcomes, shifts in military or political conditions may still move the conflict toward either more just or fully unjust outcomes.

Second, the feasibility of the two most plausible outcomes depends significantly on the consent of the aggressor, which has so far shown limited willingness to engage in meaningful negotiations. In this context, negotiations should not substitute for military dynamics but rather complement them (Bramsen & Svensson, 2025; D’Anieri, 2025; Malkasian, 2023). Sustained military, economic, and political pressure remains essential to altering the aggressor’s strategic calculus and making negotiated outcomes viable.

Third, any settlement (whether an armistice or a peace agreement) must incorporate robust security guarantees; otherwise, it risks merely postponing the conflict. While external guarantees are highly important (Fortna, 2023; Walter, 2002), commitment problems may nonetheless persist (D’Anieri, 2025). Comparative experience suggests the importance of: (a) demilitarized zones; (b) effective international monitoring, preferably under multilateral peacekeeping mandates; (c) credible third-party dispute resolution mechanisms; and (d) military deterrence strategies that reduce incentives for renewed aggression.

This article is subject to some important caveats. Ultimately, judgments about what constitutes a “just” or “unjust” outcome belong to those directly affected by the conflict. Our aim is not to prescribe decisions but to provide a structured normative framework for evaluating them. The category of “unjust but justifiable” outcomes may be interpreted as a dilution of justice or as indirectly accommodating the aggressor’s gains. However, its analytical value lies precisely in its capacity to prevent fully unjust outcomes, halt violence, and approximate—albeit imperfectly—the standards of *jus post bellum* under adverse conditions and severe risks. We also acknowledge limitations in the operationalization of key dimensions. Concepts such as justice, stability, and feasibility inherently involve interpretive judgment and cannot be fully measured or compared objectively across cases.

Future research should further develop both the empirical and theoretical dimensions of the outcomes identified here, including comparative analyses of specific mechanisms—such as demilitarized zones and international guarantees—and their applicability to Ukraine. More broadly, the concept of relational justice may be extended to other contexts of pronounced power asymmetries and conflicts involving nuclear powers, contributing to the refinement of normative theory in light of contemporary transformations in warfare.

In sum, this article contributes to debates on war termination by offering a framework for evaluating peace under non-ideal conditions. Rather than abandoning the

ideal of a just peace, it shows how, under conditions of constraint, states facing aggression may pursue outcomes that, while imperfect, move them closer—pragmatically and incrementally—to that ideal.

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Felipe Freller: Conceitualização, Metodologia, Redação – revisão e edição, Validação.

Bibliographical statement

Vicente Ferraro holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of São Paulo. Since his undergraduate studies in International Relations, he has focused on identity and conflict in post-Soviet states. He earned a Master's degree in Politics from HSE Moscow in 2015. In 2021, as a visiting researcher at CERES (University of Toronto), he received a paper award at the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) World Convention. In 2025, he was a visiting researcher at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS-Berlin) and conducted fieldwork in Ukraine. His work has been published

in leading journals, including [International Political Science Review](#) and [Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory](#).

Felipe Freller is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of São Paulo (USP). He holds a PhD from the University of São Paulo and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), with a thesis on Benjamin Constant that received the CAPES Oscar Niemeyer Grand Prize in the Humanities in 2021. He works at the intersection of the history of political thought and contemporary political theory, and is currently researching the “realist revival” in political theory and its implications for international justice and the morality of war. He is the author of *Quand il faut décider. Benjamin Constant et le problème de l'arbitraire* (Classiques Garnier, 2023), among other publications on liberalism, totalitarianism, and human rights.

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