

## HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE PATHWAY TO PEACE IN UKRAINE

PREPARED BY THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE  
COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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## I. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

1. In March 2025, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (the Commissioner) [called](#) for human rights to be recognised as the guiding principle for all current and future efforts towards peace for Ukraine.
2. Taking his subsequent July 2025 [Memorandum](#) as a starting point, the Commissioner convened 35 high-level officials and experts from the fields of diplomacy, human rights, and peacemaking, for a closed-door discussion in Warsaw on turning analysis into action. The participants came from Ukraine and across wider Europe and beyond, representing governments, international organisations, and civil society.
3. The urgency of peace was underscored by a large-scale attack on Kyiv and across Ukraine carried out by Russia that took place during the meeting. This was the latest in a pattern of escalation. Civilian casualties are significantly higher than in 2024 and the destruction of the majority of Ukraine's energy capacity led to long blackouts and fears of the harshest winter since February 2022.
4. At the time of the meeting, up to 20% of Ukraine's territory remained under occupation (with a population of 6.37 million, including 1.6 million children), 3.67 million people were internally displaced, and 6.9 million people had fled to other countries. But the numbers only tell a small part of the story, with the tragic and cataclysmic impact of the war on people's lives every day. Human rights are essential not only for shaping an eventual peace but also for saving lives today. The priority must be to silence the weapons of war and provide humanitarian relief.
5. This report provides a non-exhaustive overview of the meeting's main points and conclusions in the form of a chairperson's summary. The discussion was structured around three themes: the most affected groups of people, key peace actors, and processes to engage. This report distils five key directions from these interrelated discussions:
  1. Contextualising the peace and human rights agenda
  2. Securing a people-centred peace
  3. Pursuing accountability for a just peace
  4. Ensuring fair reparations
  5. Building coordination and confidence

## II. KEY DIRECTIONS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEACE IN UKRAINE

### 1. CONTEXTUALISING THE PEACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

6. Russia's invasion of Ukraine took place in the context of a severely degraded international response to aggression and resulting international crimes and human rights violations. There is a global lack of political will to uphold the post-1945 international order and to defend universal human rights. Polarising social media has also fuelled dehumanisation and weakened guardrails. The current international institutions and legal mechanisms have not been effective in stopping Russia's aggression. While Russia blatantly violates international law and causes immense human suffering, recent attempts at peacemaking have been mainly transactional and paid far too little attention to human beings. Yet, the kind of peace that is eventually secured in Ukraine will have major implications for the present and future of international cooperation and human rights.
7. Several practical responses are necessary. The first is to learn and apply lessons from the past, leveraging the vast peacemaking experience of the UN and remembering what has worked in other contexts. The second is to defend existing mechanisms and institutions which are essential for accountability, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) which is under extreme pressure. The third is to engage in creative diplomacy that seeks to build alliances across different regions. This should include focusing on elements and angles that are of wider concern and communicating human rights violations caused by the Russian aggression to a wider range of actors.

### 2. SECURING A PEOPLE-CENTRED PEACE

8. Much of the rhetoric around peace in Ukraine has focused on land, minerals, and resources. We need a vision for a peace agreement that puts people at the centre. There are four key elements to consider.
9. Firstly, the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia call for particular attention. The challenges here are immense, including profound physical insecurity and seriously damaged vital infrastructure; systematic human rights violations including killings, torture, rape, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and unfair trials; forced conscription to the Russian military; forcible changing of national identity through pervasive propaganda; and the alienation of a generation of children from the Ukrainian language and culture through reorienting and militarising the education system.
10. Humanitarian corridors are crucial to enable the restoration of ties with Ukrainian society and to allow Ukrainians who have refused Russian citizenship to move. As ties are restored and territories are liberated by Ukraine, it will also be necessary to plan for countering the effects of Russian propaganda in these territories.
11. Secondly, a people-centred peace will call for attention to the situation of particular groups. These include, non-exhaustively:
  - Prisoners of war (POWs) and civilian detainees. There is no access for international humanitarian and human rights organisations to POWs held by Russia, and no recognition

of POWs as a category as they face regular trials charged with terrorism or other accusations. The overwhelming majority are believed to have been tortured. While Ukraine has set up special camps for POWs with access for international organisations, Russia has refused to do the same. Access to civilian Ukrainians illegally detained in Russia is also denied, despite the growing evidence of their torture and other ill-treatment.

- Children. At least 20,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia, where they are placed in an education system designed to forcibly change their national identity. The number is likely to be higher and there are calls for a single official register of such children. Only 1,797 children have been returned to Ukraine so far. The multilateral response to the abduction of Ukrainian children has been insufficient, despite 44 states having now joined International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. It is estimated that over 43,000 Ukrainian children in the occupied territories have been forced to join Russian military training network 'YunArmia'.
  - Returning servicepersons. Almost a million people, mostly men, are serving in the Ukrainian armed forces. An increasing number of wounded servicepersons return to their homes in urgent need of medical and social support. The future reintegration of servicepersons into society will be a major challenge and should be treated as a priority, including by addressing physical and mental health needs.
  - Internally displaced persons (IDPs). Following the abolition in December 2024 of the Ministry of Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, there is no single government ministry or body in Ukraine with overall responsibility for matters related to the situation of IDPs. In practice, it has caused a lack of centralised responsibility and coordination to ensure a comprehensive support for IDPs. As the harsh winter approaches, the dire living conditions may force people to flee, creating another wave of IDPs and refugees.
  - Victims of gender-based violence. There are significant numbers of victims of sexual violence. In addition, experience of demobilisation in other countries shows that there is often a heightened risk of domestic violence after the conflict ends.
13. Thirdly, any future process towards peace must be inclusive. The full and equal participation of women is essential. Victim and other civil society organisations, including those operating at the grass roots, need to have a role in all peace efforts and processes. People with pre-existing disabilities and those with disabilities caused by the war will need measures to ensure their participation, as will minorities such as Roma (many of whom live in informal settlements with no documents).
  14. Fourthly, the protection of refugees should be part of a people-centred approach. Of 6.9 million refugees, 4.3 million are in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive which is due to expire in March 2027. Key issues to address include the risk of declining protection standards and social support for Ukrainian refugees, the need to extend the EU temporary protection if the war is not over and explore ways of their transferring onto statuses other than temporary protection thereafter. This is the right time to consider steps for when the temporary protection ends to uphold Ukrainians' right to respect for private and family life, taking into account their individual family and integration circumstances, and prioritising those most vulnerable such as women and children. One in three Ukrainians have indicated through polling that they would prefer to stay permanently in their country of destination.

### 3. PURSUING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR A JUST AND LASTING PEACE

15. Peace for Ukraine must be anchored in justice. Accountability is essential for a just and lasting peace.
16. The priority is to build leverage and diversify avenues for accountability, especially given the heavy pressure on the ICC which has issued six arrest warrants against high-level Russian officials for alleged crimes in Ukraine. It is important to continue preparing for eventual criminal prosecutions (including through meticulous documentation of international crimes and human rights violations), consider the potential of sanctions with specific human rights conditions attached, and explore other available avenues for accountability.
17. Crucially, these options include the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine and the International Claims Commission for Ukraine, which are currently being established within the framework of the Council of Europe. Universal jurisdiction offers another pathway. Though small in scale, it can have an important impact if well-targeted and will remain a long-term option since international crimes have no statute of limitation.
18. The framework of transitional justice does not yet map onto the context of Russian aggression. However, it is still appropriate to use its lens of justice that rebuilds. In addition to accountability, this may include strengthening support for victims, addressing the issue of collaboration in a sustainable way, and building capacity and confidence in the justice system.
19. Around 3,000 verdicts have been reached in collaboration trials and a further 12,000 trials are underway, many in absentia. These are mainly for working in state-funded institutions under occupation, including schools, paying taxes to Russia or any other action deemed to facilitate Russian aggression, despite the pressure under which people in occupied territories live. There have been initiatives to change the Criminal Code of Ukraine to avoid overcriminalisation of collaboration due to the broad definition, but they have not been successful. Collaboration goes to the heart of societal trust and should not be lightly dismissed, but a transitional justice approach might point towards alternatives to criminalisation, such as vetting and other scrutiny.
20. At the national level, the Office of the Prosecutor General is investigating over 180,000 cases linked to war crimes. As most war crimes are expected to be prosecuted at the national level, significant capacity is needed to address their large scale in the context of an international armed conflict. As public expectations of war crimes prosecutions increase and as a growing number of trials in absentia carry fair trial risks, Ukraine's prosecution authorities and judiciary will need continued international support.

### 4. ENSURING FAIR REPARATIONS

21. Providing reparations is crucial for a sustainable peace anchored in human rights. One of the main goals is to ensure that the Register of Damage for Ukraine leads to a process capable of delivering fair outcomes for all victims of Russian aggression.
22. Three questions are particularly important in this regard. The first is the scope of reparations, particularly the temporal scope. The Register has already received over 70,000 claims under its existing categories and is planning to launch more categories in due course. However, it

only covers the period since 2022 and excludes damage incurred between 2014 and the full-scale invasion. The current limitation is a source of discontent within Ukraine and is an issue that states need to consider carefully with a view to ensuring that all victims of Russia's aggression since 2014 can obtain compensation.

23. The second question relates to process. Ultimately the Register may have to process millions of claims and retain the confidence of claimants. Although the Register is generally user-friendly, alternative formats for submitting claims should be explored, including for people accessing it from the temporarily occupied territories. Victims also use the Register to tell their stories of harm and loss and often need psychological support in the process of submitting claims or thereafter. This also emphasises the need to create appropriate formats for truth-telling.
24. The third and most difficult question is around funding. There is a general expectation that the Russian Federation must pay, but there is still no agreement on the use of its frozen assets, which are likely to be far from sufficient. This calls for a serious international discussion and resolve to make sure that all victims obtain compensation. There is also the question of timing: victims of conflict-related sexual violence can currently access interim reparations, for example, but not victims of other forms of torture or other international crimes. There is a need for a mechanism of interim reparations for victims in situations that require urgent support, including healthcare and housing.
25. It is important to note that the discussion of reparations will reverberate in other parts of the world. An effective and fair reparation system of for victims is paramount. At the same time, this will raise expectations concerning compensation for victims of other conflicts which should be anticipated and addressed.

## 5. BUILDING COORDINATION AND CONFIDENCE

26. While a formal peace process remains uncertain, this is still a time to lay the foundations for an eventual peace based on human rights. Four procedural dimensions are particularly important.
27. The first is a need to maintain and strengthen coordination between the many actors engaged in efforts for a human rights-based peace and accountability. At a national level, there are Ukrainian investigative authorities, including the Office of the Prosecutor General, the Ombudsman, and the extensive work of civil society organisations. At the intergovernmental level, multiple processes are underway, including the Council of Europe's mechanisms such as the Special Tribunal and the Register of Damage, UN mechanisms such as the UN Monitoring Mission and the UN Commission of Inquiry, the International Court of Justice, the ICC, and the work of the OSCE through the Moscow Mechanism and ODIHR. Another mechanism is international sanctions. These processes will need to yield results, and ongoing alignment will be essential.
28. The second dimension is reinforcing the concept of holistic security across Europe in a time of remilitarisation and major investment in hard security. Defence is critical but should be part of a wider democratic security approach that integrates human rights. This perspective has implications for political messaging, institutional priorities, and budget allocations alike.

29. The third dimension is building broad support for a human rights-based peace agenda. There is work to do within Ukraine, including in cooperation with local authorities, young people, and religious organisations. Diplomatically, this should include engagement beyond Europe. It is also important to cooperate with appropriate civil society from the Russian Federation, who have in some cases supported Ukrainian POWs and abductees, with an estimated 1,285 people imprisoned for their anti-war stance.
30. The fourth is to explore some potential confidence-building measures across conflict lines, even in the absence of a ceasefire. These could include protection of civilians (such as by avoiding use of weapons on civilian areas and a moratorium on FPV drones); protection and repair of critical civilian infrastructure, including water and energy supplies; de-mining efforts; establishment of humanitarian corridors; and the restoration of Ukrainian online schooling in temporarily occupied territories.

### III. WHAT NEXT?

31. This meeting was an important step in bringing together diplomacy, human rights, and peacemaking in relation to Ukraine, and in beginning to sketch out the contours of a shared agenda. However, many more issues remain to be discussed. Critical topics including gender, reconstruction, and Ukraine's EU accession pathway require further attention, alongside other areas that will need deeper reflection and sustained dialogue.
32. This meeting should serve as the catalyst for a broader series of engagements aimed at building alignment and coordination between the many different actors involved. The Commissioner cannot and should not lead this alone but invites others to carry the work forward. The Commissioner stands ready to provide full and continued engagement as part of a collective effort to advance a peace rooted in human rights.

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Note:

*The meeting was held under the Commissioner's independent mandate on the basis of his memorandum on human rights elements for peace in Ukraine (July 2025) and as such does not aim to engage the policy of the Council of Europe as regards its Action Plan for Ukraine and the establishment of accountability mechanisms. This report does not constitute the official position of the Council of Europe, nor any of the governments, institutions, or organisations represented in the meeting.*