



UNDERSTANDING AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEACE, A POTENTIAL PEACE AGREEMENT, AND POSSIBLE SECURITY GUARANTEES

Understanding and attitudes towards peace, a potential peace agreement, and possible security guarantees: oblast-level aspects. Cohesion Dialogue Findings Report / The National Platform for Resilience and Social Cohesion; Ukrainian Center for Independent Political Research. Kyiv. June 2026. 28 p.

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The National Platform's activities are geared towards strengthening Ukraine's national resilience. This could be achieved by establishing dialogue practices in society, providing authorities with proposals for developing relevant policies, particularly those on resilience and social cohesion, and ensuring public awareness of these processes. The initiative has been implemented with financial support from the European Union as part of the Sustaining Ukrainian Resilience and European Security through Dialogue project.

The report is based on findings from facilitated cohesion dialogues held in Donetsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Chernivtsi and Zaporizhzhia oblasts in March 2026. It outlines general trends and contentious issues in the context of potential options for a peace settlement, and identifies the conditions under which a possible settlement might become socially acceptable, politically legitimate, and capable of contributing to stabilisation.

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METHODOLOGY

Prepared on the basis of closed-door oblast-level dialogues	Data from closed-door facilitated ‘dialogues’ titled ‘Cohesion Clubs’ held in various frontline and rear oblasts of Ukraine. The composition of participants varied across the dialogues and was not intended to be statistically representative. Their value instead lay in their analytical depth: the conversations involved veterans, representatives of local self-government bodies and military administrations, IDPs, activists, journalists, academics, young people, pensioners, entrepreneurs, social workers, media professionals, and leaders of local initiatives. This composition made it possible to capture not an ‘average public opinion’ but the interplay of different social and moral perspectives in discussions about peace. The report does not contain any quotations from participants in the dialogues. It describes general trends and contentious issues in the context of potential options for a ‘peace agreement’.
Focus of the report	The understanding of peace; perceptions of a potential peace agreement(s) concerning the Russian–Ukrainian war, including its 2014 and 2022 phases; trends in Ukrainian society’s understanding of ‘security guarantees’ in such an agreement; the situation in the temporarily occupied areas (TOAs); and risks to cohesion, development, security, and stability in the event of a possible ‘declarative agreement’, potentially controversial compromises for Ukraine, or ‘external pressure’ to accept such compromises.
Key stakeholders	The EU, the Ukrainian authorities, expert communities, think tanks, donor organisations, and civil society organisations.
Type of document	An analytical report that compares and brings together the views expressed by participants from different oblasts during closed-door facilitated dialogues on the themes, formats, approaches, and instruments of a potential ‘peace agreement’. The report shows key trends in perceptions of the social and security situation, as well as the challenges of possible destabilisation in the event of the adoption of an agreement that Ukrainian society would view as controversial and would not accept in full. The report is not a quantitative sociological measurement of support for particular scenarios. It presents a qualitative picture of meanings, apprehensions, expectations, conflict triggers, and trends. The dialogues unfolded through the expression of views, discussion, and group dynamics in the process of aligning positions. Closed-door facilitated oblast-level dialogues provide access to arguments, moral attitudes, and expectations that cannot always be captured in surveys with fixed response options.
Aim and objectives	Aim: to analyse how peace, a potential peace agreement, effective international security guarantees, and policy issues concerning the TOAs are understood in different oblast-level contexts in Ukraine, and to identify the conditions under which a possible conflict settlement could become socially acceptable, politically legitimate, and capable of stabilising the situation, without creating new lines of social conflict. Objectives: • to summarise common trends and oblast-level differences in perceptions of peace, a potential peace agreement, and effective security guarantees. • to identify the key conditions for the acceptability of a possible conflict settlement, and to analyse how closed-door facilitated oblast-level dialogues conceptualise the issue of temporarily occupied areas; people who live in the TOAs or have left them, and the right to return, security, and justice. • to assess risks to social cohesion, internal stabilisation, and trust in state institutions in the event of a potential agreement. • to provide the Ukrainian authorities, international partners, and the expert community with analytical conclusions and practical guidance.

1. General context

Data from facilitated oblast-level dialogues did not primarily capture a breakdown of Pros and Cons of a potential 'peace' or 'agreement'. Rather, they showed a shared shift in the meaning of the word 'peace' itself in contemporary public perception. Peace emerged as a multi-layered concept. A potential peace agreement was assessed less by its diplomatic form than by its substance: whether it reduced the security threat; avoided legitimising the consequences of aggression or rewarding the aggressor; avoided pushing the question of justice into the background; and left Ukraine room to strengthen itself strategically, maintain its armed forces, integrate into the European security system, and pursue EU accession. This framing indicated a high level of public distrust of abstract political formulas and a demand for specificity about consequences, mechanisms, and the limits of acceptable compromise.

A common trend across all oblasts was the coexistence of two attitudes that may appear contradictory at first glance: 1) *the desire to reduce losses and preserve lives, and, at the same time, 2) distrust of any settlement that could become a deferred defeat or a pause before a new cycle of war and Russian aggression, while also weakening Ukraine's security position.* The key criteria for the acceptability of any arrangements were not the symbolic 'end of the war' or the mere fact of negotiations, but defence capability, state sovereignty, legal certainty, the future of people in temporarily occupied areas, the internal resilience of the state, and society's ability to withstand the consequences of compromise without undermining trust and cohesion.

Differences in how the situation was interpreted across oblasts were visible mainly in the different ways communities entered this shared framework. Frontline communities interpreted peace through the lens of immediate physical security, survival, and the risk of another attack even after a formal ceasefire. Oblasts with experience of prolonged occupation or displacement placed greater emphasis on the right to return, the socio-political visibility of people in the TOAs, the danger of turning losses into legal facts, and the moral unacceptability of 'normalising' occupation. Rear communities more often brought into the peace framework issues regarding the quality of domestic governance: justice, language and cultural policy, social endurance, human resources, and trust in institutions. The difference between oblasts, therefore, lay not in opposing goals but in different hierarchies of threats through which a potential agreement was assessed.

In this form, the report was relevant to different audiences working on peace and post-war stabilisation. For European institutions, it showed that any negotiating framework for Ukraine would be judged publicly acceptable not by the mere existence of a political, declarative agreement, but by the extent to which it included meaningful security, legal, and humanitarian provisions. For the Ukrainian authorities, it identified the boundaries of decisions that could be perceived as acceptable or, conversely, as destabilising. For the expert community, it provided grounds for treating peace not as a one-dimensional issue of ending hostilities, but as a complex nexus of security, justice, reintegration, resilience, and public communication.

2. Key findings

- ▶ There was no evidence of a broad public demand for an abstract, vague, or declarative 'peace' as a value in itself. Across all oblasts, a settlement was seen as acceptable only if it combined several core elements: a genuine reduction in the security threat, the preservation of Ukraine's capacity to act independently, and the absence of decisions that could be read as normalising the consequences of Russian aggression, the occupation of Ukrainian territory, or the weakening of the AFU.
- ▶ In general terms, attitudes towards Russia can be described **as consistently distrustful and grounded in security realism, with no expectation that the Russian Federation (RF) would implement any agreements in good faith.** Participants in different oblasts repeatedly voiced several shared views: Russia would not stop at

partial gains; it would use any pause to regroup; it would not comply with agreements; and a weak agreement would only create the basis for a new cycle of aggression.

- ▶ In the oblast-level perceptions captured by the closed-door dialogues, a peace agreement was almost nowhere seen as bringing the war to an end. The prevailing understanding was of peace as a dangerous transitional state, a temporary pause, or a tool for gaining time. This points to a key analytical pattern: public support for potential arrangements would depend not on the symbolic name of the formula, but on whether it was seen as a means of strengthening Ukraine rather than as a deferred defeat.
- ▶ The main criterion for assessing any agreement was its ability to change the everyday threat environment. For frontline oblasts, this was above all a matter of the physical survival of communities, protection from shelling, and prevention of a new offensive. For rear and border oblasts, it was a matter of the state's long-term resilience, restoring human resources, preserving trust in institutions, and preventing internal destabilisation after a possible pause, for example, over issues concerning the Russian language or the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).
- ▶ Across all oblasts, security guarantees were understood primarily not in legal or declarative terms, but in military and institutional ones. Trust arose only where guarantees involved a strong and well-armed Ukrainian army, effective external deterrence mechanisms rather than declarative ones, sanctions-related and military-political consequences for violations, and clearly defined procedures for an international response. Any formula without such substance was perceived as leaving a persistent risk of another war and further Russian aggression.
- ▶ In the dialogue data, the issue of the TOAs appeared not only as a territorial problem, but also as a test of the legal and moral quality of a future settlement. This was especially clear in the data from Donetsk oblast but was also present in other oblasts. Scenarios were seen as unacceptable if they excluded people under occupation, including those who had not committed crimes against Ukrainian statehood, from Ukraine's political, social, and legal future; postponed their situation indefinitely; or *de facto* legitimised the long-term separation of these territories and continued violations of the rights of Ukrainian citizens in the TOAs.
- ▶ Rather than opposing basic positions, oblast-level differences were reflected in the different ways oblasts approached the same shared framework. Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts focused on immediate security and the boundary between a pause and capitulation; Kharkiv oblast focused on the combination of security, governance, and veteran-related perspectives; Donetsk oblast focused on the right to return, the political visibility of the TOAs, and sensitivity to wording; and Chernivtsi oblast focused on the quality of domestic governance and human capital, as well as on the language, identity-related, and humanitarian consequences of the peace framework.
- ▶ The greatest risks associated with a potential settlement were linked not only to renewed aggression by the RF, but also to post-agreement internal destabilisation if the resulting peace proved dangerous. This concerned conflicts over the 'price of peace', competing experiences of trauma among different groups, a crisis of trust in state institutions, the possible political instrumentalisation of the issue of peace, and sharper disputes over the TOAs, veterans, IDPs, language, justice, and the rules of political representation during the transition period.
- ▶ For key international partners within the European security system, this meant that peace for Ukraine could not be treated merely as a technical matter of reaching an agreement, or solely as a tool for temporary de-escalation, without guarantees of a response to security violations by the RF. What was at stake was the formation of a settlement framework that would be publicly acceptable and convincing in security terms. For the EU, the issue was not only mediation or support for the negotiating process, but also the language of security, law, responsibility, and security guarantees that did not contradict the principles of Ukraine's sovereignty or create the impression that the RF was being rewarded for aggression.

- ▶ For the Ukrainian authorities, the architecture of potential peace arrangements should not be interpreted as a purely negotiating or technical task of ending hostilities. Their viability would be determined by whether a potential arrangement was perceived by Ukrainian society as convincing in security terms, politically just, and socially legitimate, with proper security guarantees and a response to security violations by the RF. This concerned the broader architecture for making a potential agreement acceptable: a language of security, law, responsibility, and guarantees that did not normalise the consequences of aggression, undermine Ukraine's sovereignty, exclude the TOAs and their residents from Ukraine's national future, or create the preconditions for new internal polarisation. This required clear government communication, a separate policy on temporarily occupied areas, and a package of policies for internal stabilisation and resilience.
- ▶ For civil society and the expert community, it could be relevant to shift the focus from abstract support for peace to examining the specific conditions for its public acceptability and fairness, oblast-level differences, risks to cohesion, and the factors that would determine whether agreements could be reached and whether they would be politically sustainable, secure, and compatible with recovery.

3. How potential peace or an agreement is understood: content, instruments, and consequences

For participants in the closed-door oblast-level facilitated dialogues, 'peace' did not appear solely as a positive category in itself, whether in the context of the negotiating process at the time, potential terms of an agreement, or responses from partner countries. Almost nowhere was it understood as a return to pre-war life, guaranteed security, or the end of the conflict in its political and historical dimensions. It was defined in far more restrained ways: as a ceasefire, temporary de-escalation, a pause to restore resources, a way to gain time, a deferred resolution of the territorial issue, or a transition to a less intense but still unresolved phase of confrontation.

In this sense, what the different oblasts had in common was less a positive vision of peace than a conditional and instrumental understanding of peace as a prospect that remained deeply problematic: it was acceptable only if it did not mask new forms of danger, entrench injustice, or create the preconditions for a recurrence of war, and if it included effective guarantees in the event that the RF violated potential agreements.

Oblast	Context of perception	How participants effectively defined peace	Key criterion of acceptability	Oblast-level analytical emphasis
General definition	A shared framework across all dialogues	Peace was not understood as a return to a nominal pre-war situation, or as the war's conclusion at the current stage. Rather, it was seen as a ceasefire, de-escalation, a pause to restore resources, support the defence forces, enable recovery and modernisation, or as an interim settlement with an uncertain future.	Potential settlement arrangements were considered acceptable only if they genuinely reduced the level of violence, avoided any appearance of 'capitulation' or deferred defeat, did not in any way legitimise the Russian occupation of the TOAs, and did not merely postpone a new war without safeguards. They also had to preserve Ukraine's social and humanitarian policy, state sovereignty, and European integration course.	The most persistent shared theme was the gap between the word 'peace' and its everyday positive meaning. Across the dialogues, the concept of peace required specification through mechanisms, the cost of violations by the RF, consequences and responsibility, effective responses to violations, and support for Ukraine's defence capability.
Kherson	A frontline city under constant shelling, with experience of occupation and de-occupation, and high everyday vulnerability.	Peace was above all a test of whether it would become physically safer to live in the city. For some participants, it meant a ceasefire or a pause, but not 'real peace'.	Whether shelling stopped, whether the everyday threat environment changed, and whether the source of danger was pushed away from the city.	The most 'localised' definition of peace: if Kherson remained under fire after a formal agreement, such an agreement would not have full peace-related meaning for the community.
Kharkiv oblast	A frontline oblast with experience of a nearby front line, occupation and de-occupation, evacuations, and infrastructure losses.	Peace was seen more as a pause or interim stage that would make it possible to reduce losses, gain time, and restore the resources of the state, communities, and the defence forces.	Whether the arrangement changed the actual threat environment and enabled Ukraine to strengthen itself, rather than merely postponing a new cycle of aggression by the RF.	The key emphasis was on the temporal dimension of peace: its value lay in the time it could provide for Ukraine to strengthen itself, rather than in any trust in a final settlement.
Zaporizhzhia	A frontline community with experience of constant danger, losses, displacement, prolonged uncertainty, and part of its territory occupied by the RF.	Peace was not merely a pause in hostilities, but an acceptable architecture of security, justice, and preservation of statehood.	Whether the agreement included effective security guarantees, oversight of implementation, and protection for people in the TOAs, and whether it was not perceived as any form of 'legitimation of the Russian occupation of the TOAs', moral capitulation, or deferred defeat.	Zaporizhzhia most clearly emphasised the boundary between a tactical compromise and an unacceptable concession: peace was acceptable only if it did not undermine internal cohesion or normalise aggression.

Oblast	Context of perception	How participants effectively defined peace	Key criterion of acceptability	Oblast-level analytical emphasis
Chernivtsi	A rear and border oblast where the war was felt through mobilisation, losses, the presence of IDPs and wounded people, migration, and anxiety about the future of the state.	Peace was seen as a complex process that had to combine security, justice, dignity, the state's internal resilience, and the country's ability to strengthen itself after a pause.	Whether the agreement avoided any appearance of deferred defeat, the entrenchment of an unjust status quo, or the triggering of destructive internal processes within the state.	This rear oblast most clearly articulated the domestic cost of peace: the fight against corruption, institutional quality, human resources, and Ukraine's capacity to act independently were part of the very definition of acceptable peace.
Donetsk oblast	An oblast with extensive experience of occupation since 2014, loss of home, initial and repeated displacement, incomplete reintegration, and constant uncertainty over the future of the TOAs.	Peace was above all a decision about people and territories, specifically the TOAs: their legal status, the right to return, the preservation of a socio-political connection with Ukraine, and preventing their exclusion from the country's future.	Whether the arrangement avoided closing off the right to de-occupation and return, legitimising occupation as a new norm, or leaving people in the TOAs outside Ukraine's legal, social, and political space.	The socio-political and legal dimension of peace was most strongly expressed here: for Donetsk oblast, its acceptability was determined not only by security, but also by the state's responsibility towards people who remained under occupation.

The table synthesises oblast-level emphases in how peace is defined.

4. Factors in society shaping attitudes towards a potential peace agreement: trends

Despite different oblast-level contexts, attitudes towards possible arrangements were shaped by five shared factors.

➔ THE FIRST FACTOR WAS THE CREDIBILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF SECURITY GUARANTEES.

This was the primary filter through which any potential agreement was assessed. In frontline oblasts, the issue had the literal dimension of physical survival: whether the intensity of shelling would decrease, whether everyday life would become safer, and whether a pause would merely create the conditions for another strike. In rear oblasts too, however, security was not understood in abstract terms. It was linked to the ability of the state and its partners to prevent another major cycle of violence. Accordingly, even those participants who accepted the possibility of a negotiating format or a prolonged ceasefire supported it not out of trust in Russia, but out of a desire to reduce current losses, gain time to strengthen Ukraine and its defence capability, and build a more reliable system of external support. Positive attitudes towards a potential agreement therefore depended not on the mere existence of such an agreement but on whether it contained real mechanisms for deterrence, response, and long-term security support.

➔ THE SECOND FACTOR WAS THE EXPERIENCE OF LOSSES, EXHAUSTION, AND SOCIAL EROSION.

War fatigue, demographic losses, the destruction of infrastructure, forced displacement, economic instability, and prolonged psychological strain created a clear public demand for stabilisation. However, this demand did not automatically translate into consent to any peace formula. Exhaustion coexisted with a firm rejection of scenarios that could devalue the sacrifices already made, reward the aggressor, or create the impression that the losses endured had no political meaning. This meant that the demand for a reduction in violence was not the same as readiness to accept an agreement without conditions. The higher the cost of the war for communities, the more acute the issue of the content, fairness, and consequences of a potential conflict settlement often became.

➔ THE THIRD FACTOR WAS THE LEVEL OF TRUST IN HOW A POSSIBLE SETTLEMENT WOULD BE FRAMED AND IMPLEMENTED.

This concerned both the distrust of Russia as a party that systematically violated agreements and scepticism towards declarative international guarantees, opaque negotiating frameworks, and the quality of government decisions. This was where oblast-level differences were most visible. In Kharkiv oblast, criticism focused particularly on corruption, inequality in the mobilisation burden, distrust of the state's institutional capacity, and the opacity of possible political decisions. In Chernivtsi oblast, this theme took the form of a demand for integrity in state decision-making, honest communication, and a clear explanation of the limits and content of a potential agreement. In Donetsk oblast, distrust centred around the lack of a clear government position on the future of people under occupation, including the right to return, property status, accountability for collaboration, and the rules for a post-agreement settlement. In Kherson, distrust took the form of deep scepticism towards any external promises not backed by the capacity to stop violence and respond to violations. Public attitudes towards a potential agreement were therefore shaped not only by its content but also by the level of trust in those responsible for framing, explaining, and implementing it.

➔ THE FOURTH FACTOR WAS THE ISSUE OF TEMPORARILY OCCUPIED AREAS, THE PEOPLE WHO REMAINED THERE, AND THE RIGHT TO RETURN.

Even where the TOAs were not a focus of attention, they emerged as one of the main moral and political boundaries in assessing a potential agreement. Almost nowhere was the territorial issue reduced solely to a map or a line of demarcation. It was understood through the circumstances of specific people, continued ties with them, their future legal status, the prospect of return, and the risk that they could be effectively excluded from Ukraine's political and social space. For this reason, attitudes towards a potential settlement depended largely on whether it could be perceived as tacit consent to the removal of the TOAs from the national agenda. In this sense, the issue of territories was not only geopolitical, but also a deeply social, humanitarian, and legal factor in whether an agreement would be publicly acceptable.

➔ THE FIFTH FACTOR WAS PERCEPTIONS OF THE QUALITY OF THE STATE IN THE POST-AGREEMENT PERIOD.

This view was clearly visible in a number of oblasts, especially Chernivtsi and Kharkiv oblasts and, to some extent, Zaporizhzhia oblast: even a potentially acceptable foreign policy formula would not bring stabilisation if the country entered a new stage with the same practices of closed governance, corruption risks, weak communication between the state and society, and a formalistic attitude towards male and female veterans, IDPs, and affected communities. This meant that attitudes towards a potential peace agreement were determined not only by external security considerations, but also by expectations of the state's internal transformation. For some participants, peace or a pause in the war made sense only if it opened space for strengthening institutions, restoring justice, strengthening the state's capacity, and building a fairer social contract.

Public attitudes towards a potential peace agreement were shaped at the intersection of security, moral-political, legal, and socio-institutional factors. The key trend was that support for, or rejection of, a potential settlement depended

not on attitudes towards peace in the abstract, but on how its consequences were assessed. These included whether the agreement would increase security, protect people, preserve Ukraine's capacity to act independently, and address the issue of the TOAs, as well as whether the state would be able to ensure a fair and stabilising order after its possible adoption.

5. Map of positions: from a pragmatic pause to the rejection of concessions

The data did not show a simple divide between 'supporters of peace' and 'supporters of continuing the war'. Instead, they revealed a complex configuration of positions combining at least four lines of reasoning.

The first line of reasoning was pragmatic. Those who held this position accepted the possibility of a ceasefire or interim arrangements as a way to reduce current losses, give the army and society a pause, build up resources, and strengthen defence capability. For this position, what mattered was not the symbolic purity of the formula, but its practical value for Ukraine's resilience.

The second line of reasoning was security-based. This position recognised negotiations as legitimate but rejected any arrangements that could be perceived as territorial or political capitulation. In Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, this position was closely linked to frontline experience and to the sense that a weak agreement would merely postpone the war rather than end it.

The third line of reasoning was legal and humanitarian and was most clearly visible in the data from Donetsk oblast. For this position, the core issue was not the front line itself, but the unacceptability of excluding people in the TOAs from Ukraine's future. This position was especially sensitive to wording, legal consequences, property status, collaboration, post-war elections, and representation.

The fourth line of reasoning was critical. Its supporters in different oblasts emphasised that a weak agreement could have domestic political consequences as well as external ones. Without governance based on integrity and fair policies for military personnel, IDPs, wounded people, and affected communities, no peace format would become sustainable. Instead, it could create new sources of internal destabilisation.

Importantly, these positions were not mutually exclusive. The same person could simultaneously want a ceasefire, distrust declarative guarantees, reject any legal renunciation of the TOAs, and demand honest communication from the state. It was precisely this overlap of positions and meanings that made peace a politically complex issue.

6. Arrangements: pros and cons

In the oblast-level dialogue data, arguments in favour of arrangements were not grounded in a forward-looking peacebuilding vision; they were primarily instrumental. Interim solutions were supported on the grounds that they could reduce losses, gain time, preserve lives, stabilise the front line, support economic recovery, and give society and the military respite.

Arguments against arrangements were much more emotionally charged, but also conceptually clear. The following objections recurred across different oblasts: Russia would use a pause to launch another strike; a weak agreement would legitimise the seizure of territories by force; society would not be given a clear explanation of the price of compromise; the arrangements would trigger internal conflict over justice; external influence over language, the church, and political processes would increase; and people in the TOAs and those affected by the war would find themselves treated as 'second-class' citizens.

Hence, the dispute was not between peace and war as such, but between different ideas of the acceptable price of a pause. For most dialogue participants, the critical question was whether an agreement would become a tool for strengthening Ukraine or, conversely, a way to normalise its vulnerability.

Oblast / level of analysis	Pros	Cons	Oblast-level feature / analytical emphasis
General level	Arrangements could be supported if they reduced human losses, helped gain time, stabilised the front line, gave society and the military a pause, supported economic recovery, and preserved resources for the further strengthening of the state.	The risk that Russia would use a pause to launch another strike; legitimisation of the seizure of territories by force; the lack of an honest explanation of the price of compromise; the threat of internal conflict over justice; increased external pressure on language, the church, and political processes; and the marginalisation of people in the TOAs and those affected by the war.	The dispute was not between peace and war as such, but between different ideas of the acceptable price of a pause: whether an agreement would become a tool for strengthening Ukraine, or a mechanism for normalising its vulnerability.
Kherson	Arrangements could be acceptable if they directly reduced the intensity of everyday violence, gave people a chance of physical survival, and made life in the city at least partly more predictable.	If the city remained under shelling after a formal agreement, such an arrangement would show no signs of peace. Any pause without a real reduction in the threat of fire was perceived as politically hollow.	The criterion for assessment was as practical as possible: whether shelling stopped and whether the everyday danger environment for civilians changed.
Kharkiv oblast	An interim solution could make sense as a pause that reduced current losses, stabilised the situation, and gave the state, the military, and communities time to regroup and strengthen.	The main fear was that a pause would merely postpone a new cycle of aggression. A weak agreement without convincing guarantees could entrench the oblast's vulnerability and leave the actual danger environment unchanged.	The oblast-level emphasis was on the temporal dimension of peace: the value of a pause depended on whether it helped strengthen Ukraine, rather than merely postpone the crisis.
Chernivtsi	Arrangements could be justified as a way to gain time for a stronger Ukraine, preserve human resources, stabilise the domestic situation, and build up capacity.	An agreement was unacceptable if it looked like a deferred defeat, undermined dignity, justice, or the internal resilience of the state, or triggered destructive processes within the country.	This rear oblast focused less on immediate physical security than on the domestic cost of peace, including whether Ukraine could continue to act independently, preserve social endurance, and retain human capital.

Oblast / level of analysis	Pros	Cons	Oblast-level feature / analytical emphasis
Donetsk oblast	A short pause could be acceptable if it did not close off the future option of de-occupation, preserved political and legal ties with people in the TOAs, and improved the longer-term outlook.	The strongest objections concerned the risk of 'normalising occupation', closing off the right to return, the uncertain status of people who had lived under occupation, and the effective exclusion of the TOAs from Ukraine's future.	Peace was understood as a decision about people and territories, not only about the front line. The acceptability of an agreement depended on whether it avoided turning a pause into a deferred defeat and political neglect of the TOAs.

Across all oblasts, support for arrangements was primarily instrumental, while objections to them were not only emotionally charged but also conceptually structured around issues of security, justice, state sovereignty, the status of people in the TOAs, and the future of those areas.

7. Security guarantees: what is seen as real and controversial in Ukrainian society

All the data showed a level of scepticism close to consensus towards purely declarative international guarantees and political statements. The reasons for this scepticism differed in tone but were close in substance: previous international arrangements had not protected Ukraine; oversight without force did not deter Russia; and a diplomatic commitment without enforcement mechanisms – including sanctions, security measures, and Ukraine's inclusion in a new European security architecture – was not regarded as a guarantee that potential peace arrangements would be upheld.

The following three interrelated elements were most often identified as real guarantees:

- ▶ First, a strong and well-armed Ukrainian army.
- ▶ Second, an external deterrence mechanism with practical rather than symbolic content: sanctions triggers, military-political consequences for violations, partners' readiness to respond firmly, and long-term weapons deliveries.
- ▶ Third, domestic political stability and clarity: society had to understand exactly what was being guaranteed, by whom, how, and what would happen if the agreement broke down.

Participants in the closed-door dialogues almost unanimously considered declarative international guarantees insufficient. Trust arose only where a guarantee had a coercive, material, and institutionally defined basis that was clear to society.

Analytical dimension	What is considered a real guarantee	What is not considered a real guarantee	Oblast-level emphases / interpretation
Basic perception of guarantees	A strong and well-armed Ukrainian army; long-term provision of weapons; a real ability to impose an unacceptable cost on the aggressor.	Political statements without an enforcement mechanism; general assurances from partners; formulas without resource backing.	Across all oblasts, a guarantee was understood not as the text of an agreement, but as a changed cost of a new attack for Russia.
External deterrence dimension	Sanctions triggers, automatic consequences for violations, a military-political response by partners, and Ukraine's inclusion in a new European security architecture.	Monitoring without force, mediation without sanctions or military component, and oversight incapable of stopping escalation.	Scepticism in different oblasts had a shared source: previous international arrangements had failed to protect Ukraine.
Internal clarity	A clear explanation to society of what exactly was being guaranteed, by whom, how, for how long, and what would happen if the agreement broke down.	The abstract formula of 'international security guarantees' without a publicly understandable architecture for implementation.	A guarantee had to be legitimate not only externally, but also internally: society needed to understand its limits, procedures, and consequences.
Donetsk oblast	The clearest demand for coercive and material guarantees: an external presence, buffer models under partner control, and strictly defined mechanisms for protecting people and territories.	Vague or deferred formulas that did not answer who exactly would guarantee security after the arrangements.	Security here was linked to the right to return, the status of people in the TOAs, legal certainty, and preventing the normalisation of occupation.
Kherson	A guarantee meant force capable of actually stopping shelling, pushing back the immediate threat, and making another attack too costly.	Any document that did not change the city's everyday danger environment.	Radical security realism prevailed: if people did not live more safely after an agreement, it was not perceived as a guarantee.
Kharkiv oblast	A combination of external guarantees and internal trust: defence capability, partner support, the institutional capacity of the state, and clear rules.	Formal arrangements that society did not trust because of weak government communication or politically imposed conditions.	A governance dimension was added to the security dimension: guarantees had to be convincing for communities, institutions, and people with experience of occupation, de-occupation, and displacement.
Chernivtsi	Even alliance-based or monitoring formats could be acceptable only if Ukraine retained the material means to deter the aggressor.	Alliance-based models that existed only on paper and did not strengthen Ukraine's actual power.	The rear-area perspective emphasised that a security guarantee did not work without the state's internal resilience, human resources, and capacity for long-term mobilisation of resources.

Analytical dimension	What is considered a real guarantee	What is not considered a real guarantee	Oblast-level emphases / interpretation
Political conclusion	Trust could be created only by specific guarantees: weapons, oversight, response to violations, a legal regime, the duration of commitments, and a link to the security of particular oblasts.	De-escalation rhetoric that did not answer the question of who would guarantee security, how, and with what resources.	The mere mention of 'international security guarantees' was not enough to create legitimacy; it needed to be operationalised through security, legal, and political parameters.

In the oblast-level data, a security guarantee was recognised as real only if it combined a coercive component, an external enforcement mechanism, and clarity for the public within Ukraine. Otherwise, it was perceived as political rhetoric rather than a tool for preventing a new cycle of aggression. This had an important policy implication: the mere mention of 'international security guarantees' did not create trust on its own. It required concrete measures: weapons deliveries, oversight, a response mechanism, the duration of the commitments, a legal regime, and a clear link to the security of particular oblasts.

8. The situation in the TOAs: territories as a matter of people, law, and the future

- ▶ Across all closed-door oblast-level dialogues, the issue of the TOAs went far beyond the territorial map. None of the oblasts supported a simple 'territories in exchange for peace' formula. The difference lay not in acceptance or rejection of giving up the TOAs, but in the arguments used: security and exhaustion in Kharkiv and Kherson, the ethical boundary and Russification in Zaporizhzhia, the right to return and unresolved displacement in Donetsk oblast, and a state-centred and values-based framework in Chernivtsi.
- ▶ The formula most likely to be publicly acceptable was not 'renunciation' but the **deferred resolution of the territorial issue as an interim, non-final arrangement**. This meant no legal recognition of territorial losses, no political abandonment of people in the TOAs, the preservation of the right to return and of Ukraine's capacity to act independently, and a clear understanding that a pause could not become a mechanism for normalising occupation. People in the TOAs remained part of Ukrainian society. The strongest rejection was triggered by scenarios in which people in the TOAs, and the TOAs themselves, were treated as already 'lost' or as a secondary object of negotiations.
- ▶ In government communication, it was critically important to distinguish between three things: temporarily deferring the issue of territories; legally renouncing territories; and abandoning people who remained there. It was the conflation of these three dimensions that triggered the greatest public anxiety and posed the risk of internal division.
- ▶ Renouncing territories, including in a quasi-legal form, and abandoning Ukrainian citizens in the TOAs, especially without a convincing security framework, could become a factor of serious internal destabilisation. It could deepen the crisis of trust in the state and its institutions, sharpen tensions between the front and the rear, complicate the rotation and reconstitution of the army, and create a precedent for Europe that the forcible change of borders and frozen forms of aggression remain effective tools of pressure.

Oblast	Attitudes towards people in the TOAs	Attitudes towards renouncing the TOAs	Key oblast-level logic
Kharkiv	A restrained, non-judgemental perspective prevailed: people in the TOAs were seen primarily as surviving under coercion, fear, and limited choice. The key emphasis was on avoiding collective suspicion towards them.	Renouncing the TOAs was not seen as an acceptable option; at most, it was understood as a forced temporary pause, without legal recognition of territorial losses and without abandoning people.	Proximity to the front line and experience of occupation and de-occupation shaped a practical perspective: the issue of the TOAs was assessed through security, survival, and the real consequences for communities.
Zaporizhzhia	People in the TOAs were seen as part of Ukrainian society, not as 'lost'. It was important to maintain ties and prevent a final rupture through Russification and isolation.	A deferred resolution could be discussed only as a technical interim format, not as writing off territories, legitimising occupation, or tacit consent to the loss of people.	The oblast-level logic combined the pragmatism of a frontline oblast with a strong ethical constraint: compromise was possible only where it did not undermine the principle that the TOAs are part of Ukraine.
Kherson	Sympathy towards people in the TOAs prevailed, but it was combined with anxiety about the divergence of experiences: those who stayed, those who left, and those who might not have a safe opportunity to return.	The issue was understood through a hard dilemma: the need to stop the daily threat to life collided with the fear that territorial concessions would merely postpone a new round of war.	For Kherson, the defining logic was one of immediate vulnerability: if even 'peace' did not guarantee physical security, a formula involving renunciation of the TOAs was perceived as strategically unreliable.
Donetsk oblast	The issue was personalised to the greatest extent: people in the TOAs meant one's own families, social ties, memory, home, and the right to return, not an abstract category.	Renouncing the TOAs was the most unacceptable option, because it was interpreted as betrayal of people, the final erasure of home and property, and the normalisation of years of occupation rather than a compromise.	The experience of prolonged occupation and repeated displacement made the territorial issue existential: compromise over the TOAs meant the loss of part of one's own biography and community.
Chernivtsi	People in the TOAs were understood primarily through the categories of dignity, civil rights, state responsibility, and the inadmissibility of morally excluding these citizens from Ukraine's political space.	Renouncing the TOAs was seen as unacceptable not only politically, but also symbolically: as a reward for aggression, legitimisation of force, and an undermining of the principle of justice.	Rear-area distance strengthened the normative dimension: the focus was on the state's capacity to act independently, the values-based limit of compromise, and the long-term consequences for the political order.

9. Threats to cohesion and stabilisation after potential arrangements or a negotiating process in the event of a declarative agreement

Data from the closed-door oblast-level dialogues indicated that the greatest risk was linked not so much to the mere fact of a potential agreement but to the nature of the socio-political transition that would follow it. If this transition were poorly defined, unfairly organised, weakly communicated, and poorly managed, it might not stabilise the country, but instead trigger a new cycle of internal destabilisation. At the centre of this risk were possible conflicts over support for IDPs, the reintegration of male and female veterans, assistance to affected communities, compensation, access to resources, and distrust of government decisions if they were seen as opaque or selective. Under such conditions, a potential settlement could be perceived by society not as a means of stabilising the situation, but as a period marked by deepening inequality, mutual grievances, and weaker internal cohesion.

THE FIRST GROUP OF THREATS CONCERNED SECURITY RISKS.

Was security-related and linked to the substantial risk that the RF could use any pause not as a step towards a sustainable settlement, but as a resource for regrouping, building up capacity, and preparing a new stage of aggression. For this reason, the oblast-level data showed that a formal ceasefire, or even a potential peace agreement, was almost nowhere perceived as a self-sufficient mechanism for stabilisation. Its viability was assessed only in combination with other elements of the security architecture: the strengthening of Ukraine's defence capability, the preservation and further build-up of military capabilities, external deterrence mechanisms, and a clearly defined international framework for responding to possible violations. In this context, the international dimension became particularly important: sanctions regimes against the RF, pre-defined consequences in the event of a breakdown of the arrangements, partners' long-term commitments in the security and defence sector, and effective security guarantees with practical rather than symbolic content. Without these elements, any pause was perceived as fragile, while stabilisation was seen as temporary and potentially misleading.

THE SECOND GROUP CONCERNED RISKS RELATED TO JUSTICE AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION.

The closed oblast-level dialogues clearly showed the risk that a potential agreement might not reduce internal tensions, but instead shift them into conflicts over justice, recognition of different groups, and the rights of victims. This concerned competing experiences of trauma among different groups, a sense that losses had been devalued, and possible lines of tension between the military and civilians; between those who stayed and those who left; between IDPs and receiving communities; and between residents of de-occupied areas and oblasts that had experienced the war from a greater distance. From this perspective, justice appeared not as an abstract ethical category, but as a practical condition for internal stability. If the state did not offer a convincing framework for recognising victims, supporting affected groups, and transparently explaining the logic of decisions, the post-agreement period could become a source of new frustration, mutual grievances, and deeper social divisions. In the international dimension, this also meant that partner support would be sustainable only if recovery and reintegration were fair and transparent, addressed socially sensitive issues, and included work with young people and engagement with different social groups.

THE THIRD GROUP CONCERNED POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RISKS.

These were linked to the danger that a potential agreement could become a pretext for greater opacity, centralisation of power, and manipulation of post-war political rules, rather than a tool for structuring the political transition. Concerns were recorded about opaque negotiating procedures, rigged elections, controversial and politically instrumentalised referendums, the resurgence of pro-Russian or populist forces, and a further decline in trust in the state if decisions

were made without public explanation or clear procedures. These risks were articulated particularly strongly where there was greater sensitivity to post-war rules of representation, participation, and legitimacy. In the international dimension, this meant that what mattered was not only the mere fact of a possible settlement, but also whether it was accompanied by the maintenance of democratic procedures, accountability, and institutional integrity. Without this, the post-agreement period could lead to renewed political fragility rather than stabilisation.

THE FOURTH GROUP CONCERNED HUMANITARIAN AND LEGAL RISKS RELATED TO THE TOAS AND IDPS.

One of the most sensitive areas of risk was whether a potential peace framework would address issues relating to people, not only territories. If it did not include clear arrangements regarding property, compensation, collaboration, access to justice, the protection of pro-Ukrainian citizens in the TOAs, conditions for return, reintegration, and the future representation of de-occupied communities, it risked becoming a source of long-term social conflict. This was not just a matter of humanitarian policy but fundamental issues of the post-war legal order: who would return and under what conditions, how accountability would be established, how affected people would be protected, and how the state would restore legal certainty after prolonged occupation. In the international dimension, these risks were directly linked to the principles of international law, transitional justice, human rights, and Russia's responsibility for the consequences of occupation. Without alignment between external support and domestic expectations of justice and legal certainty, external support for the peace process could come into conflict with the domestic demand for justice and legal certainty.

THE FIFTH GROUP CONCERNED DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC RISKS.

Data from the closed-door dialogues showed that stabilisation after a potential agreement was understood not only as a security or political task, but also as the state's ability to preserve human capital and restore the viability of communities. This concerned the risk that people would not return, the loss of young people and skilled workers, labour shortages, the weakening of local economies, and the entrenchment of long-term demographic exhaustion. For some oblasts, a particularly important question was whether the active and mobile population would return after a possible agreement, or whether, on the contrary, the formal end of the active phase of the war would consolidate the outflow of people. In this context, stabilisation meant not simply ending hostilities but creating conditions in which people would have reasons to stay, return, work, and link their future to particular communities in Ukraine. The international component was also decisive here: without long-term reconstruction programmes, housing solutions, employment support, investment in local economies, and the restoration of social infrastructure, even a formally successful settlement would not guarantee real stabilisation.

Overall, these problems showed that the situation after a potential peace agreement could not be reduced to a ceasefire or the achievement of a formal political arrangement. Its sustainability would depend on whether justice, institutional legitimacy, legal certainty regarding the TOAs and IDPs, the demographic and economic viability of oblasts, adequate security guarantees, and responses to violations were ensured at the same time. For this reason, a potential agreement was understood not as the automatic beginning of peace, but as a critical moment that would either open a window for stabilisation or trigger a new cycle of internal fragility and persistent anticipation of renewed Russian aggression.

10. What could destabilise the social situation in Ukraine and cause conflicts?

The oblast-level data showed four main mechanisms of destabilisation in the event of a declarative agreement that lacked clear international instruments for responding to violations by the RF, failed to address Russian interference in the Ukrainian and European agendas, and did not counter the aggressor's use of hybrid methods of influence.

First, a deficit of trust in the agreement and the central government could arise if the decision were perceived as opaque or manipulative. Latent tensions could turn into open conflicts: between local residents and IDPs, veterans and civilians, different waves of IDPs, active and less active groups within a community, and communities and the authorities.

Second, the agreement could be perceived as entrenching injustice and devaluing sacrifice. This could become a factor of division between oblasts and population groups, because for some it would be a 'pragmatic compromise', while for others it would mean the final erasure of home, people's ties, and the right to return. Such a concession would be interpreted not as a path to stabilisation, but as a decision capable of undermining the internal legitimacy of peace and security. Some Ukrainian military personnel opposed such a decision.

Third, everyday humanitarian problems could accumulate: housing, medical care, rehabilitation, psychosocial support, documents, education, accessibility, and employment. Recovery policy could also fail: a pause without security did not create a planning horizon for people's return, investment, or long-term planning.

Fourth, a demand to surrender Ukrainian government-controlled parts of Donetsk or Luhansk oblasts was perceived not as a local territorial concession, but as a major trigger for destabilisation, including as a signal that the aggressor was being rewarded.

An unfair agreement or an agreement without meaningful security provisions would turn the risks of internal destabilisation into a broader European security problem, rather than keeping them confined to Ukraine. It could erode trust in European guarantees and the European security framework, entrench instability on the eastern flank, give the RF additional room to exert renewed pressure on the EU, expand its hybrid and political influence, and increase the risk of criminal spillovers. It could also increase the cost of supporting Ukraine for the EU. For Europe, this meant that Ukraine's stability should not be considered a Ukrainian issue in isolation, but rather an integral part, including in the context of European security.

Threat	Consequences
Delegitimisation of peace	The EU risked being associated with a model of peace that did not work, thereby weakening trust in European mediation and guarantees.
Chronic instability	Prolonged instability on the eastern flank, with a high cost of deterrence. The EU would face a long-term belt of instability near its borders, entailing constant security, political, and financial costs.
Strengthening of the RF	A greater risk of renewed escalation and hybrid pressure on Europe. For the EU, this would mean a growing risk of renewed war, hybrid pressure, and further erosion of the European security order.
Failure of recovery	An increase in EU costs for addressing the consequences of the crisis rather than transforming security. EU assistance would increasingly go towards containing the consequences of instability, rather than sustainable recovery, modernisation, and security transformation.

An unfair agreement or an agreement without meaningful security provisions could become a distinct trigger for conflict between the state and military constituencies. If the political outcome were perceived as devaluing sacrifice, as a concession without real guarantees, or as cementing an outcome for which military personnel had not, in effect,

agreed to fight, it could create a deep crisis of trust in state decisions. In that case, tensions would arise not only over the content of the agreement, but also over the feeling that the state had failed to fulfil its moral duty towards those who had fought. Another trigger for conflict would be withdrawal from Ukrainian government-controlled areas in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts at the demand of the RF.

The risk of conflict would increase if the agreement were not followed by robust policies on demobilisation, rehabilitation, veteran support, and public recognition of sacrifice. In that case, hidden resentment and alienation could turn into open socio-political conflict: between 'those who fought' and 'those who made decisions', and between military constituencies, the authorities, and parts of civil society. In a broader sense, this would pose not only a risk of discontent among veterans, but also a risk of undermining the state's internal legitimacy at the very moment when trust was most needed for recovery.

Frontline oblasts linked destabilisation risks more strongly to security vulnerability and renewed aggression. Rear oblasts articulated resource-related and social conflicts more sharply, as well as conflicts over language policy, including the imposition of the Russian language and branches of the ROC. Even there, however, an unfair agreement was perceived as a trigger for division, radicalisation, and the delegitimisation of decisions. In all cases, veterans and IDPs were not 'problem groups', but indicators of whether the state was capable of ensuring justice, explaining decisions, and providing at least minimally predictable access to assistance.

11. Red lines: where acceptable compromise ends for the oblasts

The configuration of red lines appeared relatively stable: almost everywhere, this was not simply a set of prohibitions, but a set of boundaries beyond which a peace agreement ceased to be perceived as an instrument of protection and began to be interpreted as a form of deferred defeat.

The first red line concerning the TOAs was any legal, political, or even ambiguous formulation implying renunciation of the TOAs. This was not only about direct recognition of losses, but also about quasi-formulas that could entrench a new status quo, close off the future option of de-occupation, or create the impression that Ukraine agreed to legitimise the occupation by the RF. For this reason, in some of the data, particular weight was attached not only to the content of the arrangements, but also to their legal wording: wording was perceived as capable of preserving or foreclosing future political options. This legal sensitivity was articulated most clearly in Donetsk oblast, where red lines were directly linked to the risk of normalising the occupation, narrowing the right to return, and creating uncertainty over the future status of those who remained or survived under occupation. Here, the red line was not only about refusing to give up territories, but also about rejecting any peace format that would make occupation appear politically acceptable as a new norm.

The second red line was excluding people within or from the TOAs from Ukraine's future in terms of politics, society and the law. In all oblasts, the territorial issue was linked not only to the map, but also to people who remained under occupation, lost their homes, experienced displacement, expected to return or at least maintain a connection with Ukraine. Here too, however, there were oblast-level differences. For Donetsk oblast, this was the central axis of the entire discussion: a peace settlement was assessed by whether residents of the TOAs would be excluded from Ukraine's national future, whether they would lose their right to return, legal protection, political visibility, and a clear perspective on property, compensation, collaboration, and representation. For Chernivtsi, the TOA issue was also highly sensitive, but with a somewhat different emphasis: it was understood through the moral responsibility of the state, the risk of Russification of people under occupation, and the unacceptability of scenarios that looked like the 'sale of territories' or moral acceptance of an unjust end to the war. In other words, a legal and humanitarian framework prevailed in Donetsk oblast, while Chernivtsi was characterised by a moral-political framework centred around the state's capacity to act independently.

The third red line concerned real, not declarative, security guarantees. On this point, the data showed near-complete consensus: purely political promises, international monitoring without force, general statements of support, or vague diplomatic assurances were not perceived as mechanisms capable of guaranteeing peace. The pattern of distrust, however, had oblast-level features. In Kherson, it took on a highly practical and even radically realist character: only force capable of actually stopping shelling and making a new attack too costly was considered a guarantee; otherwise, any agreement would have no real political meaning for the city. In the Kharkiv data, in addition to external deterrence, the internal dimension was also clearly present: for the oblast, what mattered was not only what partners would promise, but also whether society would trust the state, whether it would be clear what exactly was being guaranteed, at what cost, and with what consequences in the event of a breakdown. In Donetsk oblast, the demand for guarantees was even stricter and more materially grounded: more strongly than in other oblasts, participants voiced the need for coercion, enforcement mechanisms, and oversight, up to and including an external presence or buffer models under partner control.

The fourth red line concerned politically imposed conditions that would narrow Ukraine's sovereignty or embed Russian influence in the post-agreement order. These included restrictions on the right to self-defence, Ukraine's foreign policy choice, imposed formulas concerning language, the church, and special statuses, as well as political mechanisms that could enable a resurgence of pro-Russian actors. This was where oblast-level configurations became most distinct. In Chernivtsi, the most sensitive issues explicitly included language, the church, security sovereignty, restrictions on international alliances, and impunity for war crimes. A peace formula became unacceptable not only at the point of territorial concession, but already when it began to morally delegitimise resistance and normalise what was unacceptable. In Kharkiv oblast, specific red-line markers included granting Russian the status of a second state language, surrendering Ukrainian government-controlled areas, and political formats that could restrict the rights of military personnel in a future electoral process or open the way to manipulation and political resurgence. For Kherson, language and church issues also remained red lines, but they were woven into the broader framework of survival: cultural and identity-related concessions were perceived here as Russian influence continuing in another form, not as secondary symbolism, but as an element of post-war security.

The fifth red line concerned unfair internal rules after a possible agreement. This set of issues was less pronounced in public discourse but analytically very important, because it showed that the unacceptability of peace was linked not only to the state and the external enemy, but also to the internal order after the arrangements. In Donetsk oblast, this concerned above all collaboration, property, compensation, the status of people who had lived under occupation, and the rules for their return to the legal framework. Uncertainty here was itself a red line because it created the risk of new injustice. In the Kharkiv data, this was compounded by concerns over the rights of military personnel in a future political process, rigged elections, and the demographic erosion of the oblast if IDPs did not receive fair mechanisms for compensation and recovery. In Kherson, post-agreement injustice was linked to the risk of internal destabilisation, mutual accusations, distrust of the central authorities, the non-return of people, and the transformation of the city into a space for the most vulnerable groups. Thus, the red line was not only the text of the agreement, but also the type of post-war order it would set in motion.

In summary, the difference between oblasts lay not so much in the list of red lines, but rather in how those red lines were configured. In Kherson, they had the strongest focus on security and physical survival: anything that failed to remove the direct threat to the city, weakened the army, or turned Kherson into a 'sacrificial space' after peace was unacceptable. In Kharkiv oblast, red lines were structured more institutionally: alongside security boundaries, there was distrust of imposed political conditions, as well as concerns over decentralisation, electoral rules, the rights of military personnel, and the risks of socio-demographic weakening of the oblast. Donetsk oblast articulated red lines most clearly from legal, humanitarian, and post-occupation perspectives: the key issues were wording, the right to return, the status of people under occupation, compensation, collaboration, and preventing the final displacement of the TOAs from the national agenda. Chernivtsi, by contrast, brought moral-political boundaries and the state's capacity to act independently to the fore: language, the church, punishment for crimes, security sovereignty, and the unacceptability of a peace formula that would look like the state's internal degradation under the guise of de-escalation.

Red line	How it is understood in the oblasts	What this means for policy
Renouncing the TOAs	Both direct and hidden formulas that could be read as legitimising occupation or closing off de-occupation are unacceptable	Any peace framework must preserve Ukraine's right to restore its territorial integrity
Excluding people in the TOAs	Territories cannot be separated from people; political visibility, humanitarian connection, the right to return, and protection are needed	Separate policies are needed for citizens under occupation, IDPs, reintegration, property, and justice
Weak security guarantees	Symbolic statements and monitoring without force do not create trust	Guarantees need to be specified through weapon deliveries, deterrence, sanctions triggers, and rules for responding to violations
Imposed internal concessions	The language, church, special statuses, and restrictions on self-defence or foreign policy choice	Communication is needed to explain the limits of compromise and the inadmissibility of decisions that narrow sovereignty
Unjust post-war order	Rigged elections, opaque procedures, and the neglect of veterans, IDPs, and affected communities	A package of internal stabilisation and justice measures is needed alongside any agreement

Red lines should be understood not as a fixed set of dogmas, but as a map of the boundaries within which a peace agreement could be perceived as legitimate by society. They show where different groups stopped seeing arrangements as a path to stabilisation and began to interpret them as a mechanism for legitimising weakness, injustice, future conflict, or social fragility. In frontline communities, red lines were expressed primarily through security and survival; in post-occupation contexts, through law, return, and the status of people; and in rear oblasts, through the state's capacity to act independently, the moral boundary of compromise, and the risk of internal breakdown.

12. Responses to security scenarios: with or without security guarantees and international responses to violations

At least two typical scenarios were analysed: a prolonged ceasefire without legal recognition of territorial losses, but with international monitoring; and a 'deferred territorial issue' model with strong guarantees in the areas of security and reconstruction. Neither scenario received immediate support, but both could be viewed as relatively acceptable under very strict conditions.

The comparison showed that the key factor in public perception was not the mere fact of an agreement, but the presence of effective security instruments capable of mitigating the risk of renewed aggression by the RF.

Parameter	SCENARIO 1. Interim settlement with actual security guarantees	SCENARIO 2. Interim settlement without actual security guarantees
Main point of the scenario	A temporary or political settlement that does not legitimise the occupation of territories, particularly the TOAs, does not close off the issues of territories and people, but gives Ukraine time to recover and mitigates the risk of renewed Russia's aggression.	A ceasefire or political arrangement without effective deterrence of the RF, creating only a pause without real stabilisation, sharpening internal conflict points in Ukraine, and leaving the issue of the TOAs unresolved.
Guarantees implied	External monitoring with a mechanism for responding to new manifestations of aggression, sanctions, proper oversight of security violations, military support for Ukraine, preservation of defence capability, and keeping Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic path open.	Symbolic or paper guarantees, political promises without enforcement, monitoring without consequences, lack of confidence in partners' response to a new escalation, and the gradual lifting of sanctions on the RF, which would strengthen the Russian military industry.
Public perception	May be seen as a difficult but rational and temporarily acceptable format, as long as it is not perceived as capitulation.	Perceived as a dangerous pause, a hidden concession, or a deferred defeat.
Security consequences	Partial reduction of risks, greater predictability, and an opportunity to gain time to strengthen the state and the army.	High risk of renewed aggression, regrouping by the RF, and the persistence of constant danger for frontline and vulnerable oblasts.
Social consequences	Lower risk of sharp internal division, the emergence of a horizon for people's return, veteran rehabilitation, stabilisation of communities, and the launch of reconstruction.	Deficit of trust in the authorities, conflicts between groups, demoralisation of military personnel, veterans, and IDPs, stronger fear of renewed war, and the renewed relevance of Russian influence on issues of language and the status of the ROC in Ukraine.
Recovery consequences	This created a chance for long-term planning, investment, the partial return of the population, and reconstruction as a security project.	Recovery would slow down because security would remain uncertain; investment, people's return, and strategic planning would be postponed.
Political effect	The agreement may be perceived as a difficult compromise if it preserves Ukraine's capacity to act independently and does not close off future options or the issues of the TOAs and people in the TOAs.	The agreement would be delegitimised as unjust, imposed, or a reward for the aggressor.
Key risk	The risk was that the guarantees could prove weaker than expected.	The risk was that the war would not actually end but would instead be deferred on worse terms for Ukraine.

Oblast-level differences and trends were visible in attitudes towards possible scenarios for ending the war, including interim settlement formats, the role of security guarantees, the limits of acceptable compromise, and expected social consequences.

The key political task, therefore, was not to choose the rhetoric of peace, but to prepare the architecture of an acceptable peace: clear language, clearly defined boundaries, a separate policy on the TOAs, an understandable model of security guarantees, a package of internal stabilisation measures, and communication that recognises rather than erases different oblast-level experiences.

13. Conclusions

- ▶ In the oblasts studied, there was no demand for peace as an abstract political formula. Instead, there was a demand for a potential settlement that would simultaneously ensure security, uphold justice, and preserve Ukraine's capacity to act independently.
- ▶ The public acceptability of a potential agreement was determined not by declarative diplomatic rhetoric, but by its practical content: effective security guarantees, clear implications for the situation of the TOAs, convincing answers to questions of justice, and the state's ability to navigate the post-agreement period without internal destabilisation.
- ▶ All oblasts demonstrated a high level of distrust of purely declarative arrangements and symbolic guarantees. A formal ceasefire alone was not perceived as a sufficient basis for stabilisation if it was not accompanied by mechanisms for deterring Russia, external security support, sanctions mechanisms, and the preservation of a strong Ukrainian defence capability.
- ▶ Oblast-level differences did not undermine the shared framework; rather, they helped specify it. Kherson placed the strongest emphasis on immediate physical security; Kharkiv oblast emphasised institutional trust, the quality of the state, and fair rules; Donetsk oblast emphasised the centrality of the TOA issue, the right to return, and legal certainty; Chernivtsi emphasised the link between peace and the state's internal resilience, human capital, and the prevention of internal degradation; and Zaporizhzhia emphasised the unacceptability of scenarios that looked like legitimising occupation or capitulation.
- ▶ One of the key conclusions was that the greatest risk was linked not only to the parameters of a potential agreement, but to the nature of the socio-political transition that would follow it. If this transition were unjust, opaque, undemocratic, poorly explained, and poorly managed, it could become a source of new internal tensions.
- ▶ For the European Union and international partners, one conclusion from the analysis was that support for peace in the Ukrainian context could not be reduced to declarations or to de-escalation as ends in themselves. Such a framework could easily be interpreted as external pressure on Ukraine to make political concessions without proper security, legal, and humanitarian provisions. Accordingly, the EU's role should not be limited to supporting the diplomatic process but should also involve shaping a broader framework for sustainable peace that combined security, law, accountability, protection for affected groups, and long-term support for Ukrainian resilience and the defence forces.
- ▶ The EU could play a particularly important role where the gap concerned both resources and rules. This included long-term security commitments, sanction triggers in the event of violations of potential arrangements, monitoring mechanisms with real consequences, support for justice, protection of citizens' rights in the TOAs, policies for IDPs, and instruments for restoring human capital in the oblasts. In communication terms, it was essential for the EU to speak not about peace as a quick political solution, but about the conditions for a just and sustainable settlement: effective security guarantees, accountability for aggression, long-term support for Ukraine, its inclusion in the European security architecture, the prevention of renewed dependence or vulnerability, and progress towards European integration.
- ▶ For the Ukrainian authorities, the key task was to develop a separate government communication framework for a potential peace process. The oblast-level data showed that society did not accept abstract political formulas but was ready for a difficult and honest conversation about different scenarios, their limits, risks, and consequences. This meant systematically explaining the difference between a ceasefire, a potential agreement, security guarantees, the deferred resolution of territorial issues, and sustainable peace, without substituting one level for another.

- ▶ The issue of temporarily occupied areas should not remain peripheral; it should become a separate strategic direction. Policies needed to be developed in advance for citizens under occupation and be based on rules for return, humanitarian ties, transitional justice, property status, compensation, representation of de-occupied communities, and protection for those who had remained loyal to Ukraine under occupation. The absence of such a policy can create a legal gap and foster political distrust.
- ▶ Another conclusion concerned the risks of internal destabilisation. If a negotiating framework emerged, it had to be accompanied not only by foreign policy decisions but also by a coherent package of internal stabilisation policies. This included justice policies for military personnel and veterans, IDPs, residents of de-occupied areas, communities under shelling, and other groups that had borne a disproportionately high cost of the war; fair rules of representation; protection of decentralisation; mechanisms for social integration; and programmes to encourage people to return and stay. Without this, any potential agreement risked triggering new internal conflict rather than reducing tensions.

Security guarantees have to be translated into the language of oblast-level experience. For Kherson, this means above all proper protection from shelling and a reduction in everyday vulnerability. For Kharkiv oblast, it means reducing the risk of a new offensive, supporting community recovery, and strengthening trust between the state and society. For Donetsk oblast, it means preserving the right to return, protecting people in the TOAs, and preventing the political exclusion of occupied territories from Ukraine's future. For Chernivtsi, it means confidence that a potential pause will not turn into the state's internal degradation, the loss of human capital, or a weakening of the state's capacity to act independently. It is precisely this kind of oblast-sensitive language of security that can make government policy convincing and publicly understandable.

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