

# Geographical storylines and the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Narrative power and narrative taboos, a (difficult) conversation

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## Abstract

How does the Russo-Ukrainian war end? On what territorial terms? Who – and where – has the right to decide on negotiations towards a settlement? These are all deeply geographical questions, and geographical storylines have been powerfully deployed in analyses of the conflict since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In this conversation forum, we bring together a provocative article by Gerard Toal identifying what he terms a ‘territorial taboo’ espoused by discursive communities in both the US and Europe: a set of geographical storylines that, Toal suggests, render impossible any negotiated end to the war. To respond to Toal’s argument, we have reached out to three expert commentators on the topic: international relations scholar Kseniya Oksamytna, historian Michael Kimmage, and political scientist Veronica Anghel.

## Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, war, peace, territory

How does the Russo-Ukrainian war end? On what territorial terms? Who – and where – has the right to decide on negotiations towards a settlement? These are all deeply geographical questions, and geographical storylines have been powerfully deployed in analyses of the conflict since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

With Ukraine’s August 2024 cross-border offensive, the question of this brutal conflict’s possible end has again taken centre-stage in political discussions in both Europe and the United States. Already the European Parliament elections in June 2024 brought the question of continuing EU military support to Ukraine to the forefront, highlighting still-profound political and national divides within the collective European defense effort. And while the July 2024 NATO Summit in Washington offered a show of European unity, underlining the ‘vital’ role of a sovereign Ukraine to

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broader Euro-Atlantic security (NATO, 2024), just a week later EU leaders found themselves accused by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of being ‘pro-war’. Orbán’s ‘peace tour’ to Moscow and Beijing aimed at ‘opening lines of diplomatic communication’ was immediately and summarily dismissed by EU Council President Charles Michel, noting that the Hungarian leader had no mandate to speak for the Union (Hungary currently holds the rotating 6-month Presidency of the EU). The Hungarian Presidency is indeed being boycotted by a significant portion of EU Member State Foreign Ministries (Rettmann, 2024), but the break insinuated by Orbán will continue to trouble discussions of continued EU military support to Ukraine in the months to come. The spectre of a second Donald Trump Presidency in the United States and the stated intentions of both Trump and his Vice-Presidential running mate J.D. Vance to rapidly push Ukraine into a ‘negotiated settlement’ with Russia (‘within 24 hours’ as Trump has repeatedly boasted) make the question even more pressing.

It is therefore extremely timely to turn a critical political-geographic eye to the arguments and justifications being wielded in this moment by politicians, pundits as well as academic commentators debating the opening of negotiations with Russia, a possible territorial settlement of the conflict, and a ‘just peace’. In this conversation forum, we bring together a provocative article by Gerard Toal identifying what he terms a ‘territorial taboo’ espoused by discursive communities in both the US and Europe: a set of geographical storylines that, Toal suggests, render impossible any negotiated end to the war. To respond to Toal’s argument, we have reached out to three expert commentators on the topic: international relations scholar Kseniya Oksamytna, historian Michael Kimmage, and political scientist Veronica Anghel. Over the past 2 years, they have contributed in important ways to the academic as well as policy debates on the war, and we are thankful to them for having taken up our invitation to be part of this conversation.

With this short forum we also hope to add to existing work on the spatial politics of the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>1</sup> Building on such scholarship, the focus of this conversation lies with the possibility of the war’s end – and even more specifically with the power of geographical storylines in determining Ukraine’s future as a sovereign state.

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### Note

1. Among others, the Forum on ‘Geopolitics and the Invasion of Ukraine’ on *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, [https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1475-5661.geopolitics-and-invasion-of-ukraine](https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1111/(ISSN)1475-5661.geopolitics-and-invasion-of-ukraine); the ‘Virtual Forum on the War in Ukraine’ on *Political Geography*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/10DC9TF2XV>; the Forum on ‘The Intimate and Everyday Geopolitics of the Russian War Against Ukraine’ on *Geopolitics*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650045.2023.2222936#abstract>; and the Forum on ‘The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for politics, territory and governance’ on *Territory, Politics and Governance*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21622671.2023.2256119>

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Luiza Bialasiewicz is Professor of European Governance at the University of Amsterdam, and one of the editors of *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*.