



## Supporting Ukraine while Looking toward Europe's Future

*Now entering its third year, Russia's war in Ukraine is at an impasse, with victory in view for neither side. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024, Crisis Group explains how the EU can keep supporting Ukraine despite the risk of U.S. aid ending.*

**R**ussia's war in Ukraine grinds on with no resolution on the horizon. The high-stakes counteroffensive Ukrainian forces commenced in the summer of 2023 – which raised hopes both at home and among Western supporters – has ended with the battle lines largely unchanged. Finger-pointing in Kyiv, which had long been going on behind the scenes, is now public. Russian President Vladimir Putin seems increasingly confident that Russia has the upper hand.

But while Ukraine's fortunes have not improved over the last twelve months, Kyiv shows no sign of bending under Russian pressure. Their bickering notwithstanding, Ukrainian politicians and ordinary citizens overwhelmingly agree on the basics: they want to fight rather than entertain Kremlin terms that would not only require surrendering territory but also, in effect, turn Ukraine into a Russian vassal state. They continue to look to the West for the support they need to fend off Moscow, while pursuing long-term protection through membership in the European Union and NATO, which would come with security guarantees.

Western states, however, are engaged in growing internal debate when it comes to supporting the war effort. Since Russia's all-out invasion in 2022, these countries have backed

Kyiv with substantial armaments and funds, seeing it not just as the right thing to do but also as a way to stymie an aggressive Russia that might otherwise start looking for its next conquest. But the forthcoming presidential election in the United States might return Donald Trump, who has already made clear that he is not in Ukraine's corner, to the White House. Meanwhile, Trump's supporters in Congress are now blocking further appropriations for Kyiv. In Europe, political support is stronger among most states, but Hungary has been a vocal outlier and could play the spoiler when a major aid package comes up for a vote in February.

Given that Western aid remains vital for helping Ukraine hold the line against Russian aggression today, and for maintaining European peace and security over the long haul, the EU and member states must face the reality that U.S. political support for the war is on increasingly shaky ground. Should Trump regain the presidency in November, it could disappear completely. To compensate, Ukraine's European partners will need to ramp up production of ammunition and air defence systems. Ukraine will also require European assistance with rebuilding its own industrial and military capacity in the tumultuous months to come. These steps are crucial not just for the war now

but also for Europe's capacity to ensure its own security. To that same end, European states should remain on the lookout for any sincere diplomatic overture from Moscow that suggests the conflict could be resolved through negotiations on terms compatible with long-term Ukrainian and European security.

**As they begin to construct a more stable European security architecture for the future, the EU and member states should:**

- Help Ukraine rebuild and keep its economy afloat by approving the €50 billion aid package that will come before the bloc on 1 February, which includes funding to support institutional reforms needed to bolster the country's EU candidacy, and investment guarantees intended to help attract more funding for Kyiv.
- With an eye both to supporting Ukraine's war effort and to making provision for a post-war European security architecture to deter further Russian aggression, take the steps necessary to commit to and provide long-term funding for military supply to Ukraine and revive European weapons manufacturing. The EU and member states should ensure that EU-based industry gets the

commitments it needs to increase production now and into the future. Ideally, they should also invest in Ukraine's own defence sector through joint projects, though Ukrainian factories will also need better air defences to protect them from Russian attacks.

- Adapt the training programs provided through the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine to battlefield realities by making it more responsive to Ukrainian feedback and tactical innovations and incorporating more non-military support for veterans.
- Support the revitalisation of the Ukraine export economy through measures to promote trust and good-will between Ukrainian farmers and haulers and their competitors in EU border states, including through funding for customs officers and infrastructure improvements to mitigate border congestion.
- Keep open the possibility of talks, both between Ukraine and Russia on a peace deal and among themselves, Washington and Moscow on European security. In the meantime, economic and security support for Ukraine can make viable diplomacy more likely and any resulting deal more sustainable.

## A Battle of Wills

As the second anniversary of Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine approaches, the fighting in Ukraine could be headed into a long standoff. Ukraine's counteroffensive, which began in June 2023, struggled to make progress against Russian troops with superior firepower dug in behind heavily mined terrain. Kyiv also faced challenges in combining the assortment of Western-made weapons it has received and in attracting and training enough soldiers to keep the ranks replenished. It scored successes, including the improved use of air defences and remote strikes on Russian forces in Crimea and the Black Sea. But it failed in its primary goal

– to sever the Russian-controlled land corridor in southern Ukraine that links Russian-held areas in eastern and southern Ukraine. Kyiv and Western partners were disappointed: they had hoped for an echo of the spectacular territorial gains the Ukrainian army made in late 2022, when it retook most of the occupied Kharkiv region in the east and a large part of the southern Kherson region, including the eponymous capital.

Moscow, too, has been unable to advance. It still only controls part of the territory that it claims to have annexed in Ukraine's east and south. Front-line fighting has diminished amid

the winter cold, but it has not fully subsided as the two sides look to dent each other's morale. Russia has resumed its aerial attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure but so far has banged its head against a much stronger air defence. Ukraine is also launching drone and missile strikes on Russia, aiming to demonstrate reach and damage what capacity it can. Meanwhile, both countries are striving to prepare more soldiers, accumulate ammunition, fortify positions and communicate to their adversaries that they have the staying power to keep this battle of wills going in perpetuity.

On paper, Russia, with its larger reserves of arms and enlistees, is in the stronger position. Although inflation is high, Putin has seemingly reconfigured the economy to put military needs first. Despite Western sanctions, Moscow was able to reap vast profits from exporting oil and gas and to import enough technology to expand the production of precision weapons. It is also hammering Ukraine with ballistic missiles, including ones supplied by North Korea. The Kremlin appears sure that if Russia can keep up the pressure, Kyiv will eventually capitulate.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has the will to press on, but cannot do so indefinitely without continuing Western assistance. Ammunition and weaponry are top priorities. If Ukraine shelve immediate plans to recapture territory and shifts to fighting a primarily defensive war, then it will need less materiel than is required for a major counter-offensive, but it will still need to be well armed to ward off Russian assaults. For example, in large part thanks to Western aid, Ukraine has deployed effective air defences around the capital and critical sites like power plants. But to keep up the umbrella, and to broaden it to smaller towns including along the front line and the coast, Ukraine needs uninterrupted transfers of air defence interceptors.

Maintaining adequate troop strength is another concern, as volunteers have dwindled. Kyiv knows it must adapt its approach to recruiting, training and supporting its men and

women in uniform in order to send enough of them to the front. The government is revising a draft law it filed in late December that would bring in some people exempted thus far and is tougher on conscripts in hiding. The initiative would also make soldier rotation practices more transparent, a longstanding demand from fighters and their families.

Other challenges are political. A long-brewing conflict between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his top general Valeri Zaluzhnyy, the only figure who rivals the president in popularity, burst into the open in November 2023 after Zaluzhnyy was quoted in *The Economist* calling the war a "stalemate". But if political quarrels have become visible, elections are not on the cards. The decision to postpone them until Ukrainians can vote freely and fairly, which is based on cross-party consensus, is the right one, but increasing civil-military disagreements about strategy and spats between politicians about how to address the shortages of soldiers and arms and how to combat corruption sap public and global confidence. Public infighting is a sign that the decision-making process needs reform. Moreover, to the Kremlin, it can appear akin to wavering.

Ukraine's economy, meanwhile, returned to growth in 2023 but continues to be battered by war. With millions of mostly women still abroad as refugees, and hundreds of thousands of mostly men on the front lines, qualified workers are hard to find. If recruitment steps up, the unfilled jobs will become a greater problem, unless refugees can be lured back home. While Ukraine has resumed risky exports through Odesa's frequently bombed Black Sea ports and up the Danube, the volume of goods transiting via rail and road is still much greater than before the invasion. Not only does transport infrastructure groan under the additional load, but farmers and haulers in neighbouring countries, fearful of being undercut by Ukrainian competition, have repeatedly blocked border crossings.

## The Wobbly West

Add to this list of difficulties the growing dissonance in the West about supporting Ukraine. In the United States, support for Ukraine is imperilled by a mix of fatigue, distraction (with considerable attention now drawn to the war in Gaza) and election-year politics. While most mainstream politicians want to provide continuing support, former President Trump – the leading contender to be the Republican Party candidate for president – has made clear he does not. A clutch of his most ardent loyalists in Congress are working to stop any further appropriations for Ukraine. The Biden administration has not given up trying to push through a package that would bundle money for Ukraine with funding for Israel to prosecute the war in Gaza and measures intended to slow immigration across the southern border (an issue of particular importance to Republicans). But even if they can agree in principle on the terms of a deal – which would be no small feat – it is unclear if congressional Republicans would follow through, as it would give Biden what would be seen as a political win as the campaign season gets under way.

European backing for Ukraine is stronger but faces potential spoilers in Hungary and Slovakia, though Slovakia recently signalled it will not stand in the way of additional aid. The European Union sent a strong message of political support for Ukraine in its December 2023 decision to commence membership talks with Kyiv, though Hungary refused to take part in the decision. (President Viktor Orbán left the room so that he did not have to vote.) Of course, there is a big difference between entering talks and offering a country actual membership, which under the easiest circumstances tends

to take years. In Ukraine's case, the issues are particularly knotty. Among them is the reality that membership includes a security guarantee, which member states may be reluctant to extend to a country actively at war with Russia – lest they be drawn in as well. Even after the war is over, the question of how to integrate Ukraine and other countries in which Russia may be willing to use force will continue to challenge European policymakers.

Some commentators and politicians (including candidate Trump) insist that it is past time to strike a deal to end this brutal, costly war, but unfortunately there does not appear to be a viable way to do that. Some Russian officials have indicated that Moscow's war aims extend far beyond the acquisition of territory it has claimed. They also include Ukraine's demilitarisation and transformation into what would, in effect, be a vassal state, through some combination of occupation, declarations of neutrality and/or the installation of a pliant government in Kyiv. That is not a basis for negotiation as far as Ukraine or its backers are concerned. Not only is it hard to see how Zelenskyy would be able to survive politically should he come to the table with Russia proffering those terms, but European countries would also view such talks as a massive defeat, laying the groundwork for further Russian demands and aggression. While occasional whispers and even press reports suggest that Russia is willing to be more flexible than it has previously appeared – and leads to this effect deserve to be carefully explored for any sign of a true diplomatic opening – there is little hint as yet that Moscow is sincere in changing its parameters for talks.

## What the EU and Its Member States Can Do

Ukraine's chances of holding off Russia and putting itself in a position to negotiate a durable peace rest on Western support. EU and member state funding, materiel and training are likely

to be of increasing importance to Ukraine's war effort, particularly if the Biden administration fails to rally sufficient votes in Congress for a new aid package or if Trump regains the White House.

The first step will be for Brussels to approve the aid package that will be up for a vote on 1 February. Ukraine needs the funds to help cover an expected \$43 billion budget deficit in 2024 to keep its economy running and help reform and rebuild, including through guarantees to cover investors' risks. While Hungary's Orbán will not easily agree, other EU member states are working furiously to sway him, perhaps by splitting the aid package into four annual tranches, or at least to find a way around his objections by creating an inter-government fund among 26 instead of all 27 members of the bloc. While necessary, success here will be transient. Because disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences in threat perceptions, and because of the precedent set by Hungary in extracting concessions for compliance, the EU faces an uncomfortable future of constantly finding new offerings to keep its dissenters in line.

Secondly, there is the matter of military assistance. European countries have already sent Kyiv extensive weaponry and also embarked upon a rearmament of their own meant to deter Russia for the long term. Currently, internal disagreements are also holding back earlier plans to establish a dedicated military fund to meet Ukraine's defence needs over the next four years. Additionally, they have struggled to revive moribund defence industries, meaning that Kyiv has depended heavily on materiel from the U.S. One reason European defence firms have been slow to ramp up production is that they lack the long-term contracts to reassure them that the necessary restructuring is worth their while. Offering long-term development prospects is important, especially as these firms will be supporting Europe's own capacity in an environment transformed by Russia's aggression. But governments need to eliminate bureaucratic red tape, send clearer signals to industry on defence procurement and overcome protectionist instincts to cooperate in smoothing out inefficiencies across the continent. While the need may be clear to most member states, the process has proven thorny.

Thirdly, Kyiv needs to reduce its dependency

on foreign help by getting its own, once world-class defence sector back in shape. Here, the EU and member states can help with investment and joint projects (such as Rheinmetall's plans to build armoured vehicles in Ukraine). Ukraine and its European partners should also continue to capture wartime technological innovations (for example, Ukraine has taught itself to repurpose redundant air-to-air missiles as urgently needed surface-to-surface missiles) and integrate them into planning. Key to reinvigorating Ukraine's defence industry will be the capacity to defend it from Russian aerial attacks – something the EU can also help with.

Fourthly, the EU's Military Assistance Mission in Support of Ukraine can work to extend and improve its training program for Ukrainian troops. With high attrition rates, getting enough people trained fast enough has proven difficult. Better integration of Ukrainian feedback, including from low-level commanders with fresh combat experience, could adapt training programs for Ukraine's long-term needs. Western expertise in battlefield medicine and evacuating the wounded could be particularly useful in helping fill gaps in Ukrainian know-how. In addition, the EU should help Ukraine provide those who leave service with medical and social supports tailored to soldiers' age and gender-specific needs.

Fifthly, the EU and member states can help the Ukrainian economy recover by supporting Ukrainian exports while soothing fears and frustrations among farmers and truckers in neighbouring EU states. Improved systems are needed for tracking Ukrainian trucks as they transit Ukraine's EU neighbours. Better procedures to ensure that both the freight and the driver are just passing through can eventually convince the neighbours that cheaper Ukrainian agricultural products will not drive local farmers out of business and that Ukrainian lorry drivers are not outcompeting their local counterparts. To put an end to the bottlenecks that the necessary checks entail, the EU can fund programs to rapidly field more customs officers. Investments in the road and

rail infrastructure on both sides of the various borders, as well as storage facilities, can also help ease congestion.

Finally, the EU and member states will need to keep their expectations in check, while helping Ukraine manage its own as well. However well-armed Ukraine is, it is unlikely to take back all its territory by force. Negotiations remain the most likely endgame. EU military and

economic support can help ensure that Ukraine enters talks only after Russia signals recognition that the costs of aggression are greater than it wants to bear. Once in reach, an agreement should be embedded in a European security architecture that prevents, through a combination of deterrence and force limits, further attempts at conquest. Here, too, the EU and its members will play an important role. ■

