

Trends in International Politics 2024

From “as long as it takes” to
“as long as we can”: will the
West abandon Ukraine?

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From “*as long as it takes*” to “*as long as we can*”:
will the West abandon Ukraine?¹

*'No battle takes place as those who
planned it anticipated. This is the essential
condition'.*

Leo Tolstoy

War and Peace

¹ I borrowed the second part of this title from Liana Fix & Michael Kimmage (2023 a).

Ukraine enters the third year of the war on the defensive. The Ukrainian army, which has been engaged in operations to break through Russian lines since 4 June 2023, is no longer making any headway. In five months of much-anticipated counteroffensive, between June and October, the Ukrainians only reclaimed around 400 square kilometers of their territory, while the Russians still occupy over 17% of it (about 100,000 square kilometers, compared with about a quarter at the height of their advance in March 2022). The Ukrainian forces are still more than 100 kilometers away from the Azov Sea. Ukraine's arms industry is up and running, but is struggling to get up to speed (Grynszpan, 2023). Projected production will not meet Ukraine's needs until the second half of 2024 or 2025. The new weapon systems received by the Ukrainian forces failed to alter the course of the 24-month-old war. The fragmented nature of arms deliveries by Ukraine's allies highlights the disconnect with the military realities on the field, as Moscow manages to improve its defense systems to make new Ukrainian equipment irrelevant.

Ukraine's counter-offensive has stopped well short of its stated minimum goals. Disappointments on the battlefield have dispelled the hopes for quick success.

Is it “a stalemate”, as General Valery Zaluzhny, Ukraine's commander-in-chief, called it in an interview that caused quite a stir (*The Economist*, 2023 a)? The truth is that Ukraine's counter-offensive has stopped well short of its stated minimum goals. Disappointments on the battlefield have dispelled the hopes for quick success. Although 66 per cent of the Ukrainian population still express trust in President Zelensky, his popularity experienced a significant decline since December 2022 (84%) – an unsurprising development given the protracted war (Hird *et al.*, 2023). The envisaged mobilization of another 500,000 Ukrainians for war (Polityuk & Balmforth, 2023) might further endanger the fragile “covenant” between the society and the elites (Wolff & Malyarenko, 2023). The Russians have proved their resilience, demonstrated their ability to adapt technically and put their armaments industry in fighting order. Their support for Putin's “special operation” has not collapsed, not even during Prigozhin's mutiny last June (NORC, 2023). President Putin's unwillingness so far to commit Russia fully to this war (Kagan, 2023) gives his country plenty of room to manoeuvre. He gave his official approval to a

significant increase in military spending, which is set to increase by almost 70% in 2024, forcing its economy into the snare of perpetual war (Luzin & Prokopenko, 2023).

By early 2024, all possibilities for managing armament stocks have been

exhausted, and the war will now become “a purely industrial production duel”, Stéphane

Audran, a French expert in war history, assesses (Audran, 2024). Sustaining Ukraine’s war effort therefore depends critically on increasing allies’ – especially Europe – manufacturing capacity.

Without continued Western aid, especially for increasing its airpower, Ukraine cannot win this war.

There is one problem, though. The United States and Europe seem to be willing to give Kyiv the means to survive, but not to win.

On 8 June 2023, in a joint press conference with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, U.S. President Joe Biden said he believes the United States has the funds to “support Ukraine as long as it takes” (The White House, 2023 a). Six months later, at his joint press conference with V. Zelensky, Biden’s tone had a worrying

nuance: “We’ll continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment as long as we can” (White House, 2023 b). The fact is that, in the meantime, aid for Ukraine has become a partisan issue, which makes its prospects ever less certain. Signs of

growing Republican resistance to the enthusiastic support offered to Ukraine by the Biden administration have multiplied. Neither Zelensky’s visit to

Capitol Hill mid-December, nor Biden’s warning that Putin would be celebrating the division of his enemies, were enough to stop the filibuster of a \$106.5 billion foreign aid package that included \$50 billion more in security aid for Ukraine, amid demands from Republicans — including many supportive of assistance for Ukraine — that it encompasses strict new border security provisions and changes to U.S. immigration policy. Mike Johnson, the new Speaker of the House, has voted repeatedly against Ukraine support, before becoming an unexpected champion of more Ukraine aid (Wise, 2023): will he remain firm in this new conviction? Surely, some degree of irritation on the Republican side does not prevent a still solid majority from wanting Ukraine to win (Heinrichs,

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2023); the credibility of the United States is at stake. However, this congressional nonsense could well cut off funding for the Ukrainian resistance, just as it brings the world's supposed leading power to the brink of a 'shutdown' every year.

The European Union, too, has promised to

“continue to provide strong financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people for as long as it takes” (EU Council, 2023 a, para. 2). Europe clearly overtook the U.S., with total commitments turning twice as large in Summer 2023 (Trebesch, 2023). But the momentum seems to be waning. In March 2023, the EU made the historic decision to deliver a million artillery shells to Ukraine within 12 months. The number that has actually been sent is closer to 300,000 (Reuters, 2023). In July, Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative, proposed the creation of a €20 billion Ukraine Assistance Fund for the period 2024-2027, embedded into the European Peace Facility, to pay for weapons, ammunition and military aid, as part of an effort to put EU's support for Kyiv on a longer-term

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footing and ensure its sustainability. His initiative was met with polite silence.

“For all the rhetorical commitments to support Ukraine's defence against Russia's invasion 'for as long as it takes', Europe has largely failed” (Watling, 2023).

There is more. The “geopolitical” Union that U. von der Leyen, the President of the Commission, has called for (von der Leyen, 2023 b), now faces divisions. Ukraine is not any longer the consensus factor it has been since 2022. The conclusions of the European Council on 14 December 2023 do not reveal any dissension and “reaffirm the European Union's unwavering support” (EU Council, 2023 b). And the start of EU membership talks has been pictured as a victory for Ukraine and his leader. But Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced his rejection of a proposal to revamp the EU budget to include financial aid to Kyiv. The recently elected prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, has suspended military aid to Ukraine and called for “an immediate halt to military operations” (Camut, 2023). Even the Polish government, hitherto Ukraine's staunchest ally, seemed to turn away from Kyiv due to the dispute over the export of Ukrainian grain to the EU (*Le Monde*, 2023). The *Visegrad Insight*

makes Central and Eastern Europe’s division over Ukraine “the top issue for the EU for 2024” (*Visegrad Insight*, 2023).

Although support for a range of actions taken in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine remains very high in Europe,² anti-war sentiment is on the rise. As the June European elections approach, EU leaders are wary of favoring Ukraine over the daily concerns of their own citizens. According to *Politico*, up to seven EU countries have stressed that the support to Kyiv must be linked to money for other European priorities such as tackling migration, precisely to avoid domestic criticism (Moens, 2023).

So “is Europe still committed to Ukraine?” (Dempsey, 2023). The fact is that the war does not seem a top priority in the day-to-day business of most EU leaders (Moens, 2023), especially since the deadliest conflict in decades has erupted in the Middle East, at Europe’s south-eastern neighborhood. The war between Israel and Hamas took Ukraine off the media screens in 24 hours.

Donald Trump’s possible return to the White House would leave the EU with a dizzying dilemma: either to establish a form of war economy to take, alongside Kyiv, the place left vacant by Washington, which presupposes a change of nature for the Union; or to lie down in the face of Putin’s appetites, gain a - temporary - respite and display weakness and insignificance in the eyes of the world and the aggressor. The next summit of EU leaders on 1 February will allow for an assessment of the surge, after recent “wake-up” calls such as German Chancellor Scholz’s warning that “we need higher contributions”, early January (Vela, 2024).

Although the war Russian President Vladimir Putin is waging on Ukraine could have been avoided, it is now our war. It will not be over any time soon, but we must give Ukraine the means to hold the ground. “Even a stalemate, as frustrating as it seems, represents a huge accomplishment.” (Fix & Kimmage, 2023 b). Instead of hoping for either a quick Ukrainian triumph or an imminent negotiated solution, which is not (yet) in Ukraine’s interest, a long-

² Almost nine in ten (89%) agree with providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war, and more than eight in ten (84%) agree with welcoming people fleeing the war into the EU. 72% agree with providing financial support to Ukraine. The same proportion (72%) support economic sanctions on the

Russian government, companies, and individuals. Around six in ten approve of the EU granting candidate status to Ukraine (61%) and of the EU financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine (60%) (Eurobarometer, 2023).

term, patient and steady containment of Russia seems the only option for now.

“The cost of helping Ukraine is high; the cost of not helping it will be higher”

(Bond, 2023, 11).

The most immediate costs of a Russian victory would be felt

by the Ukrainian population, of course. But Ukraine’s defeat would have far-reaching consequences. It would encourage the continuation of the Kremlin's imperialist project in the other republics of the former USSR, including the neighboring fragile Moldova. It would weaken the West, the favorite target of the Russian dictator (Simonet, 2023, 27), discredited by the alliance of autocracies led by Putin and Xi Jinping,

Ukraine's defeat would drive European countries into a state of perpetual tension and insecurity. It would be a millstone around Europe's neck, hampering its project and unity. That would be a high price for our procrastination and hesitation in 2024.

which model is gaining traction in the “Global South”. It would stimulate the

audacity of ‘revisionist’ regimes all around the world and might inspire China with regard to Taiwan. It would drive European countries –

especially the ones in Russia’s immediate neighborhood - into a state of perpetual tension and insecurity, in need to allocate billion euros to defense spending. It would be a millstone around Europe's neck, hampering its project and unity. That would be a high price for our procrastination and hesitation in 2024.

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