

War Fatigue Complicates West's Aid to Ukraine

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A pall of gloom descended on Europe as the long-feared uncertainty set in over the weekend as to how long would the collective West underwrite the proxy war in Ukraine. To lift their sagging spirit, some European foreign ministers impromptu took the train to Kiev to spend Monday with President Zelensky. It was an extraordinary sight of defiance of the call of destiny, as the war passed the 19-month mark.

A deal in Washington that averted government shutdown for now but cut funding for Kiev; the Polish election campaign in which the ruling Law and Justice party, until recently one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters, has toyed with various measures such as questioning more arms deliveries and blocking agri-products from its neighbour in order to court voters; and, the stunning parliamentary election results in Slovakia catapulting a pro-Russian left-wing political party to power and signalling the first true political embodiment of "Ukraine fatigue" — suddenly, the West's mantra of being by Ukraine's side "for as long as it takes" feels seriously open to question.

The CNN exaggerated, perhaps, while commenting that the above developments "appear to have thrown Ukraine and its war with Russia under the bus" — but only by a bit. The politics of Ukraine war has crossed an inflection point and is poised for bigger things in the critical months ahead.

The White House has vowed to seek quick passage of [a stand-alone Ukraine aid bill](#) totalling \$20.6 billion that the Biden administration has said is essential to fight Russia, but it will likely continue to face determined opposition, particularly from Republicans in Congress. At the root of it is the fierce polarisation in US politics, which now threatens to shake the balance of power in the Congress in a no-holds barred election year that looms ahead.

This does not mean stopping the US aid to Ukraine. The administration has enough resources to support Kiev over the next month and a half and, above all, it is too far-fetched

to expect any serious changes in the Ukrainian direction of US foreign policy before the 2024 election. But the salience lies somewhere else — namely, the topic of assistance to Ukraine is frothing in the cauldron of disputes between Republicans and Democrats and is becoming inseparable from the tendentious issues of social programmes that tear apart the American society and become fodder for its combative politicians.

The Ukraine war has become a political football in the Beltway just over a year from the US presidential election, with questions mounting over aid approved by Congress that totals \$100 billion so far, including \$43 billion in weaponry. Simply put, for right-wing Republicans, financing Kiev is becoming a tool of political manipulation of the Biden Administration through which they hope to seize advantages and concessions. And Donald Trump is waiting in the wings.

Meanwhile, there is a vicious sub-plot playing out within the Republican Party itself in a bid to unseat the Republican House Speaker Kevin McCarthy next week by hardline Republican Matt Gaetz, one of a core of hard-right members of the party implacably opposed to any more aid for Ukraine.

In order to survive, McCarthy has treated to link aid for Ukraine to funding to stop immigrants crossing the Mexican border, a key Republican demand.

“I’m going to make sure that the weapons are provided for Ukraine, but they’re not going to get some big package if the border is not secure,” McCarthy told CBS ominously.

Most important, the wider signal to the world is damaging. European capitals are already nervously eyeing the possibility of a return to the White House by Trump. Josep Borrell, the European Union’s foreign policy chief and a major US partner in delivering aid to Ukraine, expressed surprise and regretted the US decision “deeply, thoroughly.”

Borrell said, “I have a hope that this will not be a definitive decision and Ukraine will continue having the support of the US.” Indeed, there is a wider problem — war fatigue among inflation-hit American voters.

In many ways, the [victory of former Prime Minister Robert Fico’s left-wing populist Smer party](#) in this weekend’s parliamentary election in Slovakia is also to be attributed to war fatigue. Fico has said no more weapons will go to Ukraine; questioned the logic of the EU’s Russia sanctions; praised Moscow; and blamed the NATO for causing the war, which he says, began after “Ukrainian Nazis and fascists started to murder Russian citizens in Donbas and Luhansk.” Economic anxieties further compound the societal Ukraine fatigue and the dramatic turn in Slovakian politics, which is likely to impact the West’s relations with Kiev.

Within the EU, Hungary and Austria will now have an ally in Slovakia, a frontline state, advocating an immediate cessation of hostilities in Ukraine and peace negotiations. Fico himself is a close ally of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban — and they could be joined by Poland if the ruling Law and Justice Party secures a fresh mandate, which seems likely, in the parliamentary election on October 15.

All indications are that [Poland is veering away](#) from its long-standing pro-Ukraine position. Poland’s PM Mateusz Morawiecki said recently, “we are no longer transferring any weapons to Ukraine because we are now arming ourselves with the most advanced weapons.”

Then, as the CNN wrote,

“Beyond EU, within NATO there is an equivalent fear of the consequences of an expanding anti-Ukraine bloc... And both Hungary’s Orban and Slovakia’s Fico have declared themselves adamantly opposed to any move to welcome Ukraine into the alliance... The reality is the Ukraine counteroffensive, which will have to diminish with the advent of winter, has so far achieved little substantive progress on the battlefield. The arrival of newly-empowered anti-Ukraine parties in frontline states, together with waffling by leading Kremlin foes like the United States, all comprise a truly toxic mix.”

Looking ahead, further erosion of support for the Ukraine war can be expected and even a possible collapse of support for Ukraine across the collective West cannot be ruled out in the months ahead, especially if the Kremlin leadership finally decides to give a knockout punch to Ukraine’s military and/or orders the Russian forces to cross the Dnieper and take over Kiev and Odessa.

Even otherwise, the crunch time comes with the elections to the European Parliament on 6-9 June 2024. There is a clear possibility of anti-Ukraine parties winning a substantial bloc of votes in the elections. If and when that happens, the invidious conspiracy mooted by Germany and France to [abolish the rule of unanimity](#) required for taking major EU decisions (eg., Russia sanctions and their six-monthly renewal) will flounder.

Both Orban and Fico have declared their opposition to Russian sanctions. Suffice to say, the politics of Ukraine war and Russia sanctions is entering uncharted waters, as Hungary allied with Slovakia — and potentially with Poland — would be in a position to complicate pro-Ukraine, anti-Russian efforts by the rest of the EU.

In the art of politics, American politicians originally patented “filibuster”, a political procedure in which one or more members of a legislative body prolong debate on proposed legislation so as to delay or entirely prevent decision, and European politicians are now inventing their own variant of it.

Orban has been [practising it for a decade already](#), and with growing dexterity, to push through his nationalistic programme of “sovereign democracy” in Hungary. That is where the weekend’s Slovakian election and Fico’s return to power has the potential to become a defining moment in the politics of Ukraine war.

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