Europe’s Surprisingly Resilient Support for Ukraine Will Be Tested in 2024

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Europe’s fierce response to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine surprised many. As Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, Europeans were shocked to see one of their capitals under attack. This prompted an unprecedented response, with Europe providing substantial military aid, welcoming millions of Ukrainian refugees, and establishing a robust sanctions regime. Perhaps just as remarkable, today, after nearly two years of war and a major energy shock, European support for Ukraine remains robust. Yet signs of strain are emerging that may prevent Europe from living up to its rhetoric to support Ukraine “as long as it takes.”

With the war becoming a protracted conflict and Russia looking to go back on the offensive, Europe will need to create new instruments and funding mechanisms to support Ukraine, especially if the United States stops sending aid. The sense of political urgency that existed in 2022 has faded. Now with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Hungary becoming a major difficulty, along with German-led demands for a European-wide return to tight fiscal policy, European support for Ukraine may be far below what is needed.

It is easy to forget how surprisingly strong Europe’s response to the war has been. Prior to the invasion, U.S. officials working on sanctions policy believed they would have to pull Europe along, as they did in response to Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014. Yet the EU sanctions response, such as pushing for an oil embargo and adopting sanctions against Russia’s central bank, often caught Washington by surprise. European countries, including the European Union itself, also took unprecedented steps to provide military support to Ukraine. Countries like Germany and Sweden provided lethal aid to a country in conflict for the first time, and the European Union used its European Peace Facility fund to provide Ukraine with lethal assistance. Europe is now collectively providing more support than the United States to Ukraine. The clear threat posed by Russia prompted historic steps from Sweden and Finland to join the NATO alliance. Defense spending also dramatically increased across

Thus, while Europe is stepping up, it will need to do considerably more for both Ukraine and its own defense forces in 2024. That will require Europe taking extraordinary measures at the EU and national levels to ensure Ukraine is able to hold back Russian forces.
the continent, with Germany leading the way with
the announcement of a new €100 billion Zeitenwende
defense fund.

European support for Ukraine remains high
despite the war causing significant economic hard-
ship in Europe. Russian president Vladimir Putin’s
throttling of gas deliveries into Europe and the
destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines caused
an energy crisis with Europeans seeing a dramatic
increase in prices. The situation led to significant
inflation and undermined European economic com-
petitiveness. Yet European leaders reacted with
remarkable speed, such as by buying liquefied nat-
ural gas and rapidly building new infrastructure.
Remarkably, European citizens also responded by
cutting their energy demand by 15–20 percent, turn-
ing down the thermostat and putting on sweaters.³
There is no clearer example of steadfast European
support than in Germany, where in the wake of a
German constitutional court ruling that prompted
German leaders to cut €17 billion from its budget,
funding for Ukraine was protected.⁴

But there are challenges ahead. First, the dynamic
of the war in Ukraine has changed. In 2022 and 2023,
European militaries were providing Ukraine with
older equipment from their militaries, but now that
equipment is mostly gone. Europe has little equip-
ment on hand to give, which is problematic because
it means if the United States stops providing military
aid, Europe will be unable to fill the gap. It also means
that for Europe to maintain support to Ukraine, it will
have to buy new equipment from its defense indus-
tries. Not only will this be more expensive, but it
also requires Europeans do more to coordinate their
efforts, something European defense ministries strug-
gle to do. As a result, production lines to aid Ukraine
and refill European warehouses are not yet running
at full speed.

Second, Prime Minister Orbán has demonstrated
a willingness to block EU support for Ukraine. At the
European Council summit in December 2023, Orbán
agreed to abstain on the decision to begin ascension
negotiations with Ukraine, the next step on Ukraine’s
road to EU membership.⁵ The European Union had
just released more than €10 billion in funds for Hun-
gary that it was holding for rule-of-law violations.⁶
However, despite receiving the funds, Orbán noted
that he still opposed Ukraine moving toward member-
ship and that there would be many opportunities to
block Ukraine’s membership in the future.⁷ The next
day, Orbán blocked the European Union from pro-
viding €50 billion in support for Ukraine.⁸ EU leaders
were ultimately successful in pressuring Orbán to sign
on to the €50 billion financial support to Ukraine at
a special February 1 European Council summit. But
with Ukraine still needing more military support
from the European Union, the European Union and
Ukraine’s Hungary problem has not gone away. The
need for unanimity for major policy and funding deci-
sions will continue to give Orbán significant leverage
and ability to hold Ukrainian funding hostage.

Third, and perhaps an even more acute chal-
lenge, is the return of austerity economics to the
European Union. Last year’s ruling of the German
constitutional court that the German government
was violating its constitutional requirement to have
a balanced budget has led to immediate budget cuts,
despite Germany suffering from a major deficit of
infrastructure investment.⁹ Moreover, the EU Stabil-
ity and Growth Pact, which sets rules for the national
budgets of eurozone countries, returned on January
1, 2024, after being suspended in response to the pan-
demic. While the pact was amended to give govern-
ments more flexibility, the reinstatement of the pact
will still put pressure on European governments to
cut spending, making additional outlays for defense
of Ukraine more difficult. Germany, for instance, has
kept its funding for Ukraine at the national level but is
now opposing increases to the European Peace Facil-
ity, which is used to support Ukraine.

Thus, while Europe is stepping up, it will need to
do considerably more for both Ukraine and its own
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