The Future of Congressional Support for Ukraine

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A decisive defeat of the Russian military is in the interest of the United States. Therefore, Congress should act quickly to provide Ukraine with the needed support to accomplish this goal. The longer assistance is delayed, the harder it will be to secure a Ukrainian victory and the more money and lives will be lost in the long run.

On February 24, 2022, millions watched in disbelief as Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Within two weeks, the U.S. Congress passed legislation allocating nearly $14 billion in support of Ukraine. Nearly two years later, the urgency in Washington seems to have evaporated. Meanwhile, Ukrainians continue to die on the front lines. Sirens continue to wail, warning citizens of incoming missiles, and mothers continue to search for their children abducted by Russian forces. Ukrainians are left to wonder, Will the world’s most powerful democracy abandon us in our darkest hour? Each passing day that Congress fails to approve additional assistance weakens the position of the Ukrainians, both militarily and politically.

Despite waning urgency, bipartisan support in Congress for continued U.S. assistance to Ukraine remains strong. Looking at the voting patterns in the House of Representatives, where support for assistance to Ukraine is more fragile, opposition has grown slightly, but not significantly, over the past two years. Parsing out members’ positions on Ukraine can be challenging since aid has often been part of broader packages. However, three key votes can help inform the trends on support for Ukraine.

The first stand-alone vote on assistance to Ukraine occurred in May 2022 when Congress took up a $39.4 billion package. Prior votes on assistance were part of larger legislative packages that garnered opposition for reasons notwithstanding assistance to Ukraine. This bill passed the House overwhelmingly by a vote of 368–57 and the Senate by a vote of 86–11. The next stand-alone votes on assistance to Ukraine did not occur until the House took up the fiscal year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). During consideration of the NDAA, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene offered an amendment to eliminate $300 million in assistance to Ukraine. The amendment failed by a vote of 341–89. Representative Matt Gaetz offered an amendment to prohibit all U.S. security assistance to Ukraine, which failed by an even wider margin, 358–70. Using the Greene and Gaetz amendment votes as a marker, a solid majority
of the 221 members that make up the House Republican Conference continue to support U.S. assistance to Ukraine.

While these vote trends tell a more positive story than what is often portrayed in the media, worries over declining support are not misplaced, particularly as the United States embarks on a hotly contested and emotionally fraught presidential campaign cycle. While U.S. president Joseph Biden is a strong supporter of continued assistance to Ukraine, many congressional Republicans feel the administration has failed to lay out a clear strategy to support victory. According to a November 2023 Gallup poll, a plurality—41 percent—of Americans feel the United States is doing too much to support Ukraine, with 33 percent saying the United States is doing the right amount and 25 percent stating the United States is not doing enough. After February 24, 2022, President Biden did not formally address the nation again on the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine until October 2023. The president and other supporters of continued assistance to Ukraine should continue to make the case to voters about why supporting a decisive Ukrainian victory is in the interest of the United States.

Their argument should be one of principles and self-interest. On principles, the case is straightforward: Russian president Vladimir Putin—an unelected dictator—invaded a sovereign nation in an attempt to overthrow Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who was elected by the citizens of Ukraine in a free and fair election. During the course of this invasion, Russian soldiers brutally and systematically massacred noncombatant civilians. One need only stand in front of the memorial marking the mass grave in Bucha to learn of children as young as four years old being killed by the Russians. Ukrainian authorities have identified at least 16,000 children abducted by Russia since the start of the war, though they worry the true number may be far greater. The extensive documentation leaves little room to doubt Russia has committed and continues to commit crimes against humanity. Furthermore, should Putin seize control of broad swaths of Ukrainian territory, this sends the message to other dictators with expansionist ideologies—such as Xi Jinping in China—that one need only to outlast the short attention span of the world’s democracies to achieve their goals.

However, the reasons to support Ukraine go beyond the moral imperative of the conflict. Analysis of the $113 billion appropriated to support Ukraine shows much of that money has gone to modernize U.S. weapons stockpiles, reinvigorate the U.S. defense industrial base, and invest in U.S. military personnel. Aid appropriated in the supplemental spending bills for Ukraine provided nearly half a billion dollars for Lockheed Martin to surge production of the High-Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) in the town of Camden, Arkansas—a welcome economic boost. Similar infusions of spending have benefited towns across the United States, including Lima, Ohio, where Abrams tanks are produced, and Ocala, Florida, and Troy, Alabama, which are home to Javelin missile factories.

In addition to the economic boon for the defense industrial base, U.S. business stands to benefit from the transformation and reconstruction of Ukraine. A World Bank estimate from March 2023 places the cost of rebuilding Ukraine at $411 billion. Continued U.S. support for Ukraine will ensure U.S. companies and businesses are welcomed to participate in the effort. Emphasizing pocketbook issues such as job creation and economic growth potential is especially important in a consequential election year.

Absent leadership in the White House, it is up to members of Congress to clearly articulate to their constituents why it is imperative to continue to support Ukraine’s victory. The moral argument is clear. However, politicians need to appeal to the self-interest of the American public as well. A decisive defeat of the Russian military is in the interest of the United States. Therefore, Congress should act quickly to provide Ukraine with the needed support to accomplish this goal. The longer assistance is delayed, the harder it will be to secure a Ukrainian victory and the more money and lives will be lost in the long run.

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