

## **IMPACT OF THE MIDTERM ELECTION RESULTS ON THE US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD UKRAINE IN CONTEXT OF RUSSIA’S ARMED AGGRESSION: FORECASTS AND RISKS**

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American political circles are fully immersed in preparation for the November 8 midterm elections. The fact that this preparation is taking place amid the news about a successful counteroffensive by the Ukrainian Armed Forces is an undeniable argument for the continued high level of support for Ukraine on the part of Washington. The positions of those who advocate giving Ukraine whatever it needs for victory will only grow stronger as the offensive proceeds. Evidently, this will not change the result of the midterm elections, in which a third of the U.S. Senate seats and all of the House of Representatives seats will be contested. Yet this might somewhat tweak the rhetoric of the opponents of large-scale aid to Ukraine as such, which, as they say, cannot change the course of the war in Ukraine’s favor anyway, and make their voices—primarily in the Republican Party—not so loud. Likewise, it would help neutralize doubts that Ukraine does not deserve this level of American aid. While in Washington over the past week, I did not encounter a single politician or expert who believed that Ukraine should not be concerned at all about the results of the next midterm elections, but if the successful counteroffensive goes on, there will be fewer reasons to be concerned, according to American interlocutors.

### **BIPARTISAN SUPPORT IN THE CONTEXT OF A FULL-SCALE WAR**

Both Democrats and Republicans have taken their own paths since the war began. In the first month of the war, many Ukrainians may have thought that Republicans were the real allies, since they put greater public pressure on the Administration, demanding more decisive action and stronger support. Of course, there were also quite a few Democrats who endorsed this position, but they could not publicly challenge their “own” Democratic Administration and tried to synchronize with it in conceptual approaches to responding to Russia’s war in Ukraine. The concern for unity in the Democratic Party did not always go to the disadvantage of Ukraine. For example, it was clearly positive that the left wing of the party, which is also called progressive and has a popular vision that more weapons mean higher death toll and further suffering, and that peace is more important than victory, voted unanimously for all key aid packages for Ukraine, which included more arms. This gives reason to hope that the Democratic Party will continue to show similar solidarity in supporting initiatives that are vital to Ukraine. At the same time, the Republican Party, despite its representatives’ greater determination to stand by Ukraine and punish Russia in the first months of the war, was unable to ensure such unity: each new aid package generated more and more opponents, which resulted in growing negative votes.

What the two parties have in common is not merely a renewed focus on the course of hostilities in Ukraine, but also an undisguised interest in how events will unfold next. When our delegation of experts and public leaders urges them to seize the moment and provide Ukraine with the weapons necessary to win the war, not just a local counteroffensive, American politicians usually respond with their own list of questions. The most popular and, to my mind, the most revealing are as follows:

- Is the current counteroffensive a turning point in the war?
- How exactly will Putin react to the successful liberation of Ukrainian lands, especially further major cities?
- How much territory will the Ukrainian Armed Forces be able to retake by the beginning of winter and when, exactly, is the beginning of winter in terms of active combat operations in Ukraine?
- At what point can Ukraine be ready for negotiations with Russia?

These questions can be interpreted in different ways. Both as a serious beginning of the understanding that today it is crucial to speed up the U.S. support and not postpone for the spring what can be done as early as the fall, and the fear of Putin's possible reaction.

Above all, however, these questions suggest that the United States is becoming increasingly confident that Ukraine is capable not just of surviving, but has a chance to win, even if the very notion of "victory" is a rather viscous substance, constantly changing shape under various external factors. Yet it should be noted that a consensus on the victory of Ukraine at the political level has not yet been formed. There is gradually forming majority, which is attracted to the idea that Ukraine should be given everything it needs to win and not just to contain the enemy, although the problem is that the decision is made by the minority thinking in somewhat different categories—we deliver, we look at Putin's reaction and then decide what to do next. And if one tries to summarize the approach in this camp, it can be formulated as follows, "to ensure that Ukraine does not win too much, and Russia does not lose too much."

Arguments that it is not the duration of support for Ukraine that matters, but its scale, are a priori not properly considered among representatives of this camp, since the long game allows them to continually adjust the level of support to the extent that would prevent the United States from being "dragged" into World War III. The lack of a clear perspective on Russia's future makes it difficult to determine a concrete vision of Ukraine's victory. Elements of the policy according to which Russia can be useful for the U.S. in addressing certain global issues (so the U.S. government should always keep the window, if not the door, at least slightly opened for a future dialogue) proved to be quite tenacious and have a direct impact on the formation of Washington's positions on certain requests of Kyiv (for example, on unwillingness to recognize Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism). Moreover, Russia is still not perceived as a credible threat to what Americans call U.S. vital interests. And this is a reason behind constant emphasis that this war in Europe threatens Europe in

the first place, and it is Europe that must care about it primarily. The problem is that it is not just individual Trumpist Republicans who think this way, but many of those who directly influence the development and decision-making in Washington.

In addition, there is a desire not to burn all the bridges in the context of possible negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, although the American capital stresses: Ukraine itself should decide when and on what terms to start these negotiations. But given our dependence on Western weapons, it is also crucial that Washington realizes another thing: all attempts not to supply weapons in the quantity, speed and quality that the Ukrainian armed forces currently need will be perceived in Ukrainian society exclusively as an attempt to coerce Ukraine into the negotiation process. We were quite frank about this in the U.S. capital.

Today, representatives from both parties in Washington insist that giving Ukraine everything it requires to make further impressive gains on the battlefield is not a matter of political decision, but of technical considerations: the inability of American production facilities to keep up with the Ukrainian intensity of weapons use. Conventionally speaking, if Ukraine utilizes in a day of active combat what U.S. factories are used to produce in a month, then the issue is really there. In the same way, the U.S. calls the issues of not supplying Ukraine with tanks and aircraft rather technical than political ones, although the provision of long-range ATACAMS is openly political here. To what extent is it really due to objective technical constraints rather than self-imposed political ones? It's not always clear. Although in fairness it should be noted that some close partners and allies have been waiting for more than 5 years for the ordered and prepaid Stingers or F-16s from the United States.

One thing we can definitely agree on with U.S. officials is the exaggeration of the role of lend-lease that is present in Ukraine. The U.S. genuinely wonders why Ukraine is trying to jumpstart the lend-lease instrument, which itself is more complicated and more expensive than the current three programs, which provide aid at no cost, without a sophisticated payment or loan scheme. The assumption that the lend-lease will deliver specifically those weapons and military equipment that cannot be received under other programs is also false, since Ukraine's core needs will in any case be negotiated at a high political level, especially when it comes to unblocking deliveries of certain types of weapons in general.

### **POSSIBLE CHALLENGES AFTER THE ELECTIONS**

Given these trends, how will support for Ukraine evolve, depending on the upcoming elections?

Traditionally, midterm elections in the U.S. are referred to as the “midterm curse”<sup>1</sup> for the presidential party, which usually loses a majority in at least one chamber of Congress. The

<sup>1</sup> Why Trump's presence in the midterms is risky for the GOP, Nate Silver, FIVETHIRTYEIGHT, Sep. 2, 2022, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-trumps-presence-in-the-midterms-is-risky-for-the-gop/>

exceptions are elections that took place amid powerful shocks for the U.S.: during the “Great Depression,” the Cuban Missile Crisis or in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. How shocking Russia’s war in Ukraine has been for the U.S. is an open question, but recent polls show that the Democrats have a chance of retaining at least a majority in the Senate.

One can also argue today that American voters will be driven by domestic factors. In particular, they may be influenced by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to repeal the constitutional right to abortion and the further actions of individual states and party representatives on this issue, as well as the matter of inflation, the growth of which has been slowed down in recent months, resulting in an immediate positive effect on Biden’s rating (plus 5 since July).

While foreign policy issues and Russia’s war in Ukraine alone will not have the deciding influence at the polls, the attempts by certain politicians—particularly the so-called Trumpist wing of the Republican Party—to conflate economic issues with foreign policy ones should be considered. For example, when the funds allocated to Ukraine are positioned as money that should go into the pockets or at least for the needs of average Americans, and the price increases are presented as a consequence of the war in Ukraine (namely the war in Ukraine, not particularly Putin, who started it).

It is the Trumpist Republicans who should also be seen as the biggest threat to future support for Ukraine. Events could be particularly dramatic in the U.S. House of Representatives, where the chances of the Republican Party gaining a majority are much higher than in the Senate. It is projected that the Trumpists could take a third of the party’s votes in this case—that is, 60 to 80 seats<sup>2</sup>. Right now, the Republican leadership and those categorized as the Reagan wing of the political force are conveying the view through various channels that they can tackle such a number of Trumpists, but political observers have many doubts about this.

First, this group, though small in number, could be quite loud and disruptive under the influence of its ideological mastermind, Donald Trump. The involvement of a particular former U.S. president in the midterm elections is one of the most important features—if not the key one—of the 2022 election. However, an even greater feature may be the influence of a former U.S. president on congressional policymaking after the election. The majority of well-informed experts in the U.S. capital have doubts that future potential congressional majority leader Kevin McCarthy will be able to offer proper resistance to Trump. And the latter, naturally, will want to convert his support for specific congressmen, who will take the seats, into a strengthening of his position as a potential presidential candidate as well as revenge on Biden personally for his past campaign for the presidency being a failure. In the first place, there may be initiated investigations into various fragments of Biden’s activities, including the infamous case of Hunter Biden in Ukraine, which would backfire on Ukraine as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Interviews with U.S. experts and politicians in Washington, D.C., during an advocacy visit with the support of the International Centre for Ukrainian Victory, September 12-17, 2022

In all likelihood, this is after the midterm elections that Trump will also announce his intention to run in the upcoming presidential election. If he remains the most popular candidate of the Republicans, they will not be able to marginalize his influence and position. And Trump’s stance on the reasons for a full-scale invasion is well-known, and he clearly articulated it in one of his recent interviews—the 45th U.S. president believes that Ukraine could have prevented a full-scale invasion if it had given Crimea to Russia and refused to join NATO<sup>3</sup>.

Second, the Trumpian Republicans perceive Ukraine’s possible victory in the war as a triumph for Biden. Evidently, it is their natural reaction to do everything they can to ensure that Biden does not achieve such a win. Rather, to make sure that he loses in the worst possible way.

Third, many of the people elected to Congress will have zero knowledge of Ukraine. One of the peculiarities of this election is that not only are there many candidates running with pronounced Trumpist positions and direct support for Trump, but there are also a noticeable number of unprepared, unprofessional people from the Republican side, apparently further deeming that new faces, without political backgrounds, would be a plus (although the dynamics show that it is the ill-preparedness and incompetence of candidates that may be one reason that could cost Republicans the majority in the Senate). Hence it is natural that it will take time to “catch up” with those colleagues in Congress who already have some knowledge and experience. Here it will be very important whom they will turn to for expertise on Ukraine—either moderate colleagues, who, nevertheless, understand the urgency of supporting Ukraine, or those who profess clearly isolationist views.

The biggest questions—and thus the biggest challenges—may arise when serious discussions begin about contributing to Ukraine’s reconstruction, which means very large sums of money to be allocated to Ukraine. One Washington strategist even suggested that the U.S. is ambivalent about the need for a quick victory for Ukraine, as it would mean a transition to rebuilding the country, and providing arms and participating in the restoration are incommensurate in scale. And if one compares support for providing weapons to Ukraine with support for reconstruction, it appears that there is a real consensus in Washington on the supply of weapons against a commitment to invest in reconstruction.

Although a serious discussion about reconstruction has not yet begun in Washington, there is already a prevailing conviction among Trumpists that reconstruction—and Ukraine in general—should be primarily the responsibility of Europe, because “Ukraine is Europe’s backyard.” What policymakers are unequivocal about is that China should not be involved in the reconstruction process. China—beside Russia—is probably the last big topic on which there is a real bipartisan consensus in the United States. All statements from Ukraine that China might join the reconstruction process are taken visibly morbidly in the American

<sup>3</sup> Full interview: President Trump Talks with Clay and Buck, July 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1puD9LV3cDU>

capital and seriously undermine the arguments of “help to win” supporters. They say, why invest in Ukraine’s victory—so that China can enter it afterwards? It is possible that at one point we will have a paradoxical situation where the U.S. will not be ready to provide Ukraine with the necessary funds, but will also urge it not to accept those from China.

As the total amount of aid to Ukraine grows, questions from the same wing of the Republican Party about the accountability of using the allocated funds will also increase.

In addition, given the volume of weapons donated and sold, the U.S. begins to worry about its own security—whether, figuratively speaking, it has enough arms to meet its own defense needs both to deter potential enemies and to maintain domestic security (even though every aid package for Ukraine also includes an amount to replenish the U.S. stockpiles). It is not excluded that, to explain the reluctance to give Ukraine more of the weapons it needs, arguments about the U.S. inability to produce more weapons and threats to the American security —something we already hear from some European countries—will sound louder from Washington as well.

The good news for us is that while American society’s interest in the war has decreased, the request for support for Ukraine remains quite high—about 72% of Americans stand for supplying more weapons to Ukraine<sup>4</sup> and another 73% would like to see Ukraine in NATO. There are differences in support among voters in the two parties in favor of Democrats, but even among Republicans there is a majority on all key issues for Ukraine. This narrows the margin of maneuver even for the most ardent Trumpists, as their approaches are very often dictated by public sentiment.

## WHAT TO DO? CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The best way to retain U.S. support, regardless of the outcome of the election, is to create a lasting impression of who is winning and who is losing the war. Americans need to be sure that they support not just Ukraine, but the winners. So far there is no such clear-cut certainty, but polls on the subject taken in the U.S. as recently as last month show that more respondents believed Russia would win the war (33%) than Ukraine (16%)<sup>5</sup>. It is quite possible that polls conducted after the recent effective counteroffensives of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will show a different result. After all, the impression of victory is ensured primarily by tangible successes on the battlefield. Thus, the argument about the effectiveness of previous U.S. assistance and support automatically wins, which mutes the critics of such an approach. At the same time, it is essential for the Ukrainian side to actively communicate that any success on the battlefield is directly dependent on delivering the right weapons. Limited supplies lead to a limited counteroffensive.

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<sup>4</sup> 7 in 10 Americans want to send more weapons to Ukraine, Poll finds, Defence One, August 23, <https://www.defenseone.com/policy/2022/08/7-10-americans-want-send-more-weapons-ukraine-poll-finds/376224/>

<sup>5</sup> Americans are more likely to believe Russia will eventually win the war than to believe Ukraine will, You GovAmerica, August 2, 2022, <https://today.yougov.com/topics/international/articles-reports/2022/08/04/more-believe-russia-will-win-war-than-ukraine-poll>

2. It is vital to identify and work with congressmen and senators in both parties who are willing to publicly demand to contribute more to Ukraine's victory. The premise should be that nothing influences their understanding of Russia's war more than their personal trips to Ukraine. So far, a very limited number of senators and congressmen have been in Ukraine since the war began. Notably, from the Senate the vast majority were Republican senators, and from the House of Representatives more were Democratic congressmen. Although Republicans played an instrumental role in the early months of the war, pressuring the Administration to support Ukraine more decisively and promptly, the greater effect on the White House is the public stance taken by representatives of the Democratic Party (such as Richard Blumenthal or Jason Crowe).

3. The U.S. House of Representatives, which is fully re-elected and more likely to have Republican majority than the Senate after the election, could be a more significant challenge for Ukraine. Accordingly, it is necessary to establish contact and work properly with future Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, realizing that both he and other Republicans, the so-called "Reaganites," will be under constant pressure from their fellow "Trumpists" and Trump personally, who remains the most popular Republican candidate for the 2024 presidential election. 41% of Republican Party voters believe Trump is more important than the party—we need to take this reality into account and also work with "Trumpists" who, by backing Trump, are willing to support Ukraine as well. A separate track is interacting with Trump voters, many of whom are evangelical Christians: we need to communicate to them the consequences of Russia's full-scale war from the perspective of Ukrainian evangelicals.

4. We should better engage European partners generally and better communicate their contribution to Ukraine's victory in the United States. One of the favorite arguments of the Trumpist wing of the Republican Party is that Europe does very little, the whole burden of support falls on America, although the war is taking place in Europe and Russia threatens European interests primarily. What is important to remember here is that EU countries also do their part, even if they often deliberately do not advertise their military assistance to Ukraine. In addition, they are now dealing with some 4 million Ukrainian refugees, unlike the United States. At the same time, it is worth working much more with EU countries on financial aid and armaments as well. By getting more from the U.S., we get more from Europe; by getting more from Europe, we will get more from the U.S. This is an interrelated process.

5. We must be prepared to hear ever more frequent arguments about the exhaustion of U.S. weapons stocks and the inability of production facilities there to meet the level of orders (allegedly, factories are already loaded for 5-10 years ahead). The point about threats to the U.S. own defense capabilities as a result of the active granting and selling of weapons to Ukraine and other partners and allies in the world will also be more and more clearly attached to this. That is why we must accurately prioritize which weapons we need from the United States of America and which from other countries of the world. We now actively emphasize in our dialogue with the Americans that we expect them to make decisions not only on American weapons, but also to facilitate the receipt of weapons from other allies and partners of the United States in the world (South Korea, Germany etc.). For example, in the issue of supply of Western tanks both European and American military experts agree that today

Ukraine more needs German Leopards-2, which are in service of 13 European countries, than American Abrams: both from the point of view of price and support and maintenance. The U.S. is needed here more as a political icebreaker, which, by providing Ukraine with at least one of its tanks, will remove the arguments from Berlin about the informal agreement on non-supply of Western tanks to Ukraine in principle.

6. To work with the next Congress, it is crucial to form an understanding that Ukraine is actually making progress in various spheres. The image of Ukraine as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, which has been formed in the U.S. for decades (and Ukraine has very often contributed to it) will arise every time a new financial aid package is discussed. The question that also particularly concerns different stakeholders in the U.S. capital is what happens to Ukrainian oligarchs: the extent to which they really lose not only their physical assets, but also their influence on decision-making in the state.

7. Perhaps the most acute reaction in the context of the topic of Ukraine's reconstruction is caused by the possibility of China's involvement into the process of reconstruction in Ukraine. All statements about such engagement, sounding from the Ukrainian capital, are closely monitored in Washington and seriously undermine the position of those who advocate providing Ukraine with all the necessary assistance in order to win, rather than to prolong the containment of Russia. This issue indirectly concerns which Ukraine the world will have to deal with after the war: a more authoritarian and China-influenced one, or Ukraine that is democratic and more integrated into Europe politically and economically. No doubt it is both in Ukraine's interest and in the interest of the democratic world to pursue the second option.

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