

THE U.S. POSITION ON RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE AND SCENARIOS OF TRANSFORMATION OF U.S.-RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Authors:

Myroslav Stanishevskyi,
Yaroslav Suprun

This year's mid-term elections to the U.S. Congress are critical for Ukraine, as our chances of victory depend on the political unity of the U.S. politicians in supporting our state in the Russian-Ukrainian war. And although the President and his administration always have a decisive influence on the formation of the U.S. foreign policy, the control of the Congress over the U.S. budget makes the legislative branch of our most powerful donor and partner extremely important, and sometimes decisive, in the issue of military and financial support to Ukraine.

It is hard to overestimate the value of the U.S. military assistance, because as of November 10, when the Pentagon [announced](#) the latest aid package, its total value after the full-scale invasion of Russia amounted to \$18.6 billion. No other partner has even come close to this level. Therefore, the loss or significant reduction of this level of support from the United States could be fatal for Ukraine. In addition, the United States [has already provided](#) \$13 billion in direct budget support in the form of grants in 2022, which is also a record among all our partners. The funds are allocated through Congress, so the possibility of effectively countering Russian aggression depends on who controls it and how it approaches foreign policy, including Ukraine.

Election results

As of November 24, the counting of votes in the U.S. Congressional elections has not yet been completed, but it is already known who will control the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as the approximate distribution of members of both chambers into groups of influence.

The Democrats retained control of the Senate, and even managed to take away one seat from the Republicans — in Pennsylvania, where the candidate supported by former President Donald Trump, Mehmet Oz, [lost](#) to Democrat John Fetterman, who was weakened by a stroke this year. If Trump had backed a less odious candidate than Oz in the GOP primaries, he would have had a good chance of defeating Democrat Fetterman, who was seriously slipping in the polls before the election, for the Senate seat. A similar situation [occurred](#) in a number of other states where Trumpist candidates lost to Democrats.

As of the end of November, the Democrats can count on 50 seats in the Senate, while the Republican Party representatives have 49. In Georgia, due to the peculiarities of the state's electoral legislation, a second round [will be held](#) on December 6, as none of the candidates received more than 50% of the vote. In the first round, Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock (49%) won a slight advantage, and his rival Republican Herschel Walker (48%) received only 35 thousand votes less. That is, the Republicans are in danger of worsening their position in the Senate from 50 to 49 seats, and even if they win in Georgia, the upper house of Congress will be controlled by the Democrats in case of 50-50 split, because the decisive vote in such a situation will belong to the Speaker, who is automatically the vice president. This position is currently held by a member of the Democratic Party Kamala Harris.

In turn, the Republicans managed to win over the House of Representatives. As of November 23, [it is known](#) that they can count on 219 out of 435 seats, while the Democrats — on 212. Counts in 4 districts are still ongoing, but are no longer decisive. Thus, the Republican Party [will have](#) one of the slightest majorities in the last 100 years. This result can be considered a failure, because the opposition party to the president usually prevails in several dozen seats in the House of Representatives and increases its representation in the Senate. [The highest inflation in 40 years](#), [the prospects of a recession](#) and president Biden's [approval rating](#) at just above 40% gave the Republican Party all the conditions not only to confirm historical trends, but also to obtain a solid advantage over its opponent in both houses of Congress and to confidently approach the 2024 presidential election.

This did not happen, inter alia, because of Trump, who backed many weak candidates in the primaries, preventing the more classic Republicans from reaching the final stage of the election, where they would probably do better against Democratic candidates. Because of this, the former president has faced criticism from many influential [members of the party](#), a number of [prominent conservative media outlets](#) owned by News Corp, as well as two of the Republican Party's [largest donors](#). Thus, his influence on the party and its agenda has seriously eroded. Despite the fact that Donald Trump [has announced](#) the start of his presidential election campaign, his potential main rival in the fight for the nomination from the Republican Party — Florida Governor Ron DeSantis — [is well ahead](#) of the ex-president in the polls, something that was not observed even before the midterm elections.

Risks for Ukraine associated with the new composition of the Congress

Much safer for Ukraine is the situation in the Senate, where the majority of representatives of both parties support the provision of financial and military assistance to our country in the fight against Russian aggression. The situation in the House of Representatives is more ambiguous.

Ukraine-skeptical Freedom Caucus faction

For Ukraine, the most dangerous group of deputies in the lower house is the Republican [Freedom Caucus](#), which [can count on](#) about 45 congressmen after the elections. Its members profess an isolationist approach to foreign policy, believing that the United States should concentrate on domestic policy, avoiding the allocation of large sums of money to foreign governments, especially funding certain parties to military conflicts. Representatives of this group [are behind](#) the bill on the audit of funds transferred by Congress to Ukraine, according to which all documents related to the financing of Ukraine should be provided to Congress no later than 14 days after the adoption of the law. The request covers all military, civilian and financial assistance provided to Ukraine under President Biden.

They [accompany](#) the announcement of the registration of this bill with the rhetoric that 5 million people illegally crossed the U.S. border during Biden's cadence, and the number of Russians who invaded Ukraine is allegedly only 82 thousand, [hinting](#) that the money given to Ukraine could have returned to the Democrats through the FTX crypto exchange, which recently went bankrupt. The aforementioned bill has no chance of passing in this session of the House of Representatives, but the Freedom Caucus will try to push for its adoption in January, when the new composition of the lower house of Congress with a Republican majority begins its meetings.

In addition, the Freedom Caucus [will press](#) the next Speaker of the lower house of Congress to introduce a [number of changes](#) to the rules of decision-making in the House of Representatives that would reduce the Speaker's influence on the House and provide more power to individual congressmen and factions. In particular, it is about the "majority of the majority" rule, according to which any draft law must pass through an internal vote of Republicans in the House of Representatives before getting to the general vote, which will already make it possible to adopt it. Additionally, the Caucus wants to reinstate the rule that allows any lawmaker to bring up a vote to remove the Speaker, and also intends to ensure that any amendment can be voted on if at least 10% of the House GOP members support it.

The candidacy of the new Speaker and new voting procedures in the House of Representatives

The Freedom Caucus will likely demand the adoption of all or at least part of these rules in

exchange for supporting Kevin McCarthy's candidacy for Speaker of the House. McCarthy himself is not an aggressive opponent of giving money to Ukraine, but he is in favor of [not granting](#) a "blank check", i.e. not providing "unlimited aid", and of [increasing](#) control over the spending of the funds provided. He [has already received](#) the Republican nomination for Speaker of the lower house of Congress. 188 members of the House supported him, 31 voted against. The voting took place in a closed session, so the names of those who were against are unknown. However, it is likely that the negative vote was taken by the Freedom Caucus congressmen to emphasize McCarthy's precarious position and force him to make concessions. If they fail to reach an agreement on changes to the congressional decision-making process, the Caucus may demand that the Speaker directly block certain bills from being brought to the floor in exchange for support of other bills that would be important to the party leadership in the House.

Among those bills that this radical group of Republicans would like to block is very likely to be the one on funding for Ukraine. After all, a number of Freedom Caucus congressmen, such as [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) and [Matt Gaetz](#), promised their voters that the U.S. would not give our country any money. This group is actively advocating such rhetoric. The theoretically positive aspect of the Freedom Caucus blackmailing McCarthy is that if the various Republican groups cannot agree among themselves on the Speaker position, then there is the hypothetical possibility that moderate Republicans will have to negotiate with moderate Democrats for a compromise figure to fill the position. The co-chairman of the moderate Republicans, Don Bacon, [has already indicated](#) such a possibility.

If it happens, the likelihood of such a person blocking the vote on assistance to Ukraine is extremely low. Instead, one should understand that such a scenario is unlikely, because according to the internal party charter, congressmen from both Democrats and Republicans, at the inaugural meeting of the newly elected House, must support the nominee of their party for the post of Speaker. And although there have been cases in the past when certain members of the ruling party abstained from voting for their nominee for Speaker, a situation in which congressmen from the opposition party would vote for the representative of the ruling party has never happened in the history of American parliamentarism.

Therefore, McCarthy is more likely to make concessions to the radical faction of the Republicans than to reach a situation where moderate representatives of both parties jointly elect the speaker. Among the main faces of the Freedom Caucus are the leader of the faction [Scott Perry](#), former leader of the faction [Andy Biggs](#), media active [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#) and [Matt Gaetz](#), as well as Jim Jordan, who is the vice-chairman and first leader of the faction.

On the other hand, [moderate Republicans](#) performed quite well in the midterm elections. They [estimate](#) their number in the new Congress at about 70 persons. In their election platform, the moderate Republicans [identified](#) the preservation of the dominant position of the United

States in the international arena as one of their priorities. Such views mean further support for Ukraine, because without a victory over Russia it is difficult to imagine “preserving the dominant position of the United States in the international arena”. In addition, members of this group mostly speak positively about the support of our state and usually vote for the next aid packages. One of the main faces of the faction — [Brian Fitzpatrick](#) — is a co-chair of the [group supporting Ukraine in the House of Representatives](#), he [has demonstrated](#) one of the most active pro-Ukrainian positions among the congressmen of both parties during the last 9 months. Co-chairs of the group [Donald Bacon](#), [Mike Bost](#) and [Pete Stauber](#) also demonstrate an open position in support of Ukraine.

“Undecided” Republicans and the shift in public opinion

In addition to the so-called radicals from the Freedom Caucus and moderate Republicans, there are still about half of the representatives of this party in the House of Representatives. Most of them voted for all packages of assistance to our country, except for the [last one](#), which was combined with other issues on temporary funding of the U.S. government agencies. But then the majority of moderate Republicans [voted](#) against it, because they believed that this package did not have enough funds to fight inflation, crime, and border security. More than 110 Republicans “undecided” over the Ukrainian issue could be key to voting for subsequent support packages. If the Freedom Caucus succeeds in passing the “majority of the majority” rule, it is these more than 110 Republicans who will decide whether the issue of aid to Ukraine will be on the agenda. Of course, the decisions of these Republican representatives will particularly depend on the mood of their electorate.

In this regard, dangerous processes have been taking place in recent months. A poll [published](#) on November 3 by The Wall Street Journal showed that 48% of Republican voters believe that the U.S. is doing too much to help Ukraine, compared to 6% in a March poll. The share of GOP voters who said the U.S. is not doing enough to help Ukraine fell to 17%, down from 61% in March.

Dissemination of anti-Ukrainian narratives in the media

The formation of such views of pro-Republican voters is definitely influenced by the aggressive rhetoric of isolationists from the Freedom Caucus, as well as other Trumpists, including [representatives](#) of the former president’s family, and [anti-Ukrainian narratives](#) of conservative media representatives, the most notable of which is FoxNews host Tucker Carlson. He [fosters](#) the notion that Russia is actually winning its war against Ukraine. After the successful counteroffensive in Kharkiv region, Carlson switched his narrative, saying that Russia is actually at war with the West, not Kyiv. Moreover, he [labels](#) assistance to Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression as an ideological jihad waged by some leftists against Russia. Such ranting certainly resonates with part of the conservative electorate, as Carlson is one of the highest-rated FoxNews hosts.

Ukraine-skeptical position of Republican donors

Another factor that may negatively influence Republican congressmen and public opinion in the context of assistance to Ukraine is a number of conservative foundations. After the elections, more than 10 influential conservative groups in the United States [appealed](#) to the leaders of both parties in the House of Representatives not to approve decisions on assistance to Ukraine until the new Congress is sworn in in January. The greatest risk in this context is the presence in this list of [foundations](#) financed by one of the most authoritative [Republican donors](#) — the Koch brothers. Among them are [Americans for Prosperity](#), [Concerned Veterans for America](#) and [The Heritage Foundation](#). The position of these major donors can be a compelling argument for the “undecided” representatives of the Republican Party not to support assistance to Ukraine.

The left flank of the Democratic Party

There are far fewer skeptics of aid to Ukraine among Democratic congressmen, yet the threat still exists. In October, 30 [leftist Democrats](#) from the lower chamber of Congress [sent](#) a letter to President Biden urging him to reconsider the strategy for the war in Ukraine and to use more diplomatic tools to end the conflict, including direct talks with Russia. However, then the head of the left wing of the Democratic Party, Pramila Jayapal, [stated](#) that they withdrew their letter, because “it was drafted several months ago and was released by staff without vetting”. Most likely, this decision was made after recommendations from the White House or the party leadership in the face of electoral risks.

In the new House of Representatives, [according to](#) the leadership of the group of left-wing Democrats, the progressives will have more than 100 seats, which is more than in previous sessions. Also, according to preliminary results, the most radical part of the left wing of the Democrats [is to increase](#) its number from 6 to 10 representatives. Among the most famous faces of the progressives we should mention the leader of the faction [Pramila Jayapal](#), [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), Senator [Bernie Sanders](#), who works closely with the left wing of the Democrats of the lower chamber and is an authority for them, as well as the former leader of the faction [Mark Pocan](#).

While we see that progressives are not yet calling for blocking aid to Ukraine, and only some of them are asking Biden to “engage more diplomatic tools” to resolve the “conflict” between Ukraine and Russia, the danger may be that left-wing Democrats have held back their views on foreign policy in exchange for passing legislation important to them while Democrats controlled the legislative branch. Therefore, under pressure from far-left activists who [peddle the line](#) that aid to Ukraine means pushing the U.S. to nuclear war and supporting “Ukrainian Nazis”, some progressives may stop supporting the next aid packages with the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. No such risks are expected from [moderate Democrats](#), who, accordingly, will also have more than 100 seats in the lower house of Congress. The key

faces of the moderate Democratic caucus are chair [Suzan DelBene](#), vice chairs [Scott Peters](#), [Sharice Davids](#) and [Annie Kuster](#).

The estimate of the number of seats of different factions in the Congress is approximate and often relies on the words of the representatives of these groups, but it reflects the general picture of the balance of power. A more accurate number of each faction will be known when the congressmen themselves declare their affiliation to them. Most likely, we will know the final composition of the factions at the beginning of the next cadence in January 2023.

No changes on the Washington-Moscow line are expected

The midterm elections in the U.S. will not have a major impact on U.S — Russian relations. If the issue of assistance to Ukraine is discussed in earnest and questioned primarily because of the financial factor and the so-called “corruption risks”, there are no strong voices for rapprochement with Russia. In addition, foreign policy is the prerogative of the president, and the legislative branch can only influence it by allocating or blocking funds or ratifying international agreements. All calls for a change of approach to Russia, which come from fringe figures on both sides of the political spectrum, are mostly related to its war against Ukraine and concern the reduction of military support to Ukraine in order to “avoid nuclear war”.

The midterm elections were actually a success for the Democrats and confirmed to Biden that he can continue to pursue his policies. That is why he declared after the elections that he [was not going](#) to change anything. Regarding relations with Russia, this means avoiding direct confrontation and further deterrence of Russia, which is enshrined in this year’s National Security Strategy. Russia is presented there as an immediate and ongoing threat to international peace and stability. While authoritative media [reports](#) suggest that the Biden administration considers encouraging Ukraine to engage in peace talks, the official [rhetoric](#) and aid packages indicate that the White House believes that the Ukrainian side should be supported so that it can achieve peace on its own terms. Therefore, we should not expect that the United States will persuade Ukraine to negotiate on unacceptable terms in order to end the war as soon as possible.

The weakening of Trump’s position among Republicans means that it is less likely that the party will nominate the politician who, if elected, would create more comfortable conditions for Russia in the international arena with his isolationist [approach](#). These risks were fully realized under Trump’s rule due to the high number of people in his administration who had hawkish views when it comes to relations with Russia. Now they are either [considered](#) potential presidential candidates themselves or have come into conflict with the former president. Therefore, if Trump wins in 2024, there will probably be fewer factors that would hinder the implementation of his current rhetoric in foreign policy than in 2017–2021.

CONCLUSIONS

The mid-term elections to the Congress raised the risk of a decline in military and financial support for Ukraine from the U.S. as our main donor, although the results were better for Kyiv than expected before the elections. The Senate retained its mostly pro-Ukrainian composition. A number of Trumpist isolationists were not elected to Congress, and moderate Republicans gained more seats. There was also no “red wave”, i.e., a Republican recapture of both houses of Congress with a serious dominance in the lower house. Such an outcome caused the former president Trump, who is loyal to Russia, to fall in ratings and lose support from a large segment of the party, conservative media and traditional sponsors of his election campaigns. This means higher chances that in two years the Republican nomination will go to someone more moderate and more committed to the fight against Russian aggression.

As of today, the most likely rival of Trump, having a chance to defeat him in the party primaries, is Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. His views on foreign policy are currently quite vague. Such rhetoric does not allow DeSantis to be definitively attributed to one of the groups of Republicans [who are divided](#) by the criterion of approach to foreign policy into isolationists, “priority managers” who believe that it is necessary to focus on the confrontation with China and not to disperse forces in various directions, and “primatists” who are convinced that Washington can and should maintain U.S. leadership and military presence around the world.

DeSantis’ [criticism](#) of Biden for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, which, according to the Florida governor, led to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as it revealed the weakness of the United States in the eyes of Putin, can be considered close to the rhetoric of “primatists”. Yet DeSantis rarely talks about foreign policy, so his approach to geopolitics may change.

The main risks for Ukraine are related to the fact that the Freedom Caucus is actively trying to block the adoption of the next aid packages. Also, there are more than 100 “undecided” Republicans who, if the “majority of the majority” rule is introduced, may vote against putting the aid packages for Ukraine to a general vote in the House of Representatives due to growing skepticism about the support of our country among the conservative electorate. Potentially, problems may arise with the progressive wing of the Democrats, who may succumb to the pressure of far-left activists, having no reason to restrain their views on foreign policy, as it will be impossible to pass the laws important for them in the new composition of the lower house of Congress.

If, despite unfavorable circumstances, Trump wins in 2024, his approach to foreign policy is likely to be more isolationist than in 2017–2021.

No changes in relations with Russia are expected for the next two years. The success of the Democrats will allow Biden to continue his line in foreign policy, which can only be limited by the Republicans' blocking of funding for certain initiatives.

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Authors:

Myroslav Stanishevskiy,
Yaroslav Suprun



ADAstra

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Think Tank ADAstra

Phone: +380954592954

E-mail: adastra@adastra.org.ua

<https://adastra.org.ua/>