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**IS THE WESTERN SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE
BEGINNING TO FALTER? - CRACKS FROM
THE US AND EASTERN EUROPE**

WRITTEN BY: PIETRO MACCABELLI



WRITTEN BY

PIETRO MACCABELLI

EDITED BY

CHIARA NASONTE

SUPERVISED BY

GINEVRA BERTAMINI

Introduction

Some of the most consequential NATO member states (MSs) which have played a major role in providing financial, military, and humanitarian aid to Kyiv since the beginning of the Ukrainian war, are now reassessing their position in this conflict. Having been the leading forces in sustaining the Ukrainian military effort against the Russian military, they are now displaying a decreasing tendency to continue on the path followed until now. The reasons for this changed approach are multiple but essentially boil down to the fact that Ukraine has proved so far unable to achieve significant strategic results in its four-month long Western-financed counteroffensive. Consequently, on top of the financial cost that supporting the war implies, the progressive depletion of Western strategic stockpiles (Lendon & Gigova, 2023), and the disruptive global economic effects caused by the conflict, it is now becoming increasingly clear that providing to Ukraine additional war supplies will unlikely end the conflict anytime soon. With elections approaching in several Western countries and decreasing popular consensus for further military aid, therefore, a slow but steady change of the Western position toward the Ukrainian crisis is already underway and can be expected to continue in the future.

1. The United States At a Turning Point

The US has been so far the NATO member that more extensively committed to supporting Ukraine with approximately 113 billion \$ in military, humanitarian and economic aid (Saballa 2023) since Russia encroached on Ukraine in February 2022. Nevertheless, the political landscape in the country is rapidly changing as Presidential elections approach. Especially Republican representatives recently openly voiced the need to focus more on the strategic priorities of the US rather than Ukraine, a country that bears little strategic relevance for Washington. As insightfully noted by Bell (2023) the primary aim of the US, and of the majority of other Western nations in this war, was to avoid the Russian aggression to threaten the rest of Europe. Given that Russian resources have been already heftily diminished, with more than 2/3 of its most performing tanks destroyed (Axe, 2023), tens of thousands of casualties suffered, the progressive depletion of the strategic military stockpiles of the country, and a profound weakening of its economy, this goal may already be considered largely achieved.

Having already shored up the Russian land containment in Eastern Europe throughout the one year and eight months of this war; it is thus about time for the US to re-pivot on its primary strategic concern, the maritime containment of its main geopolitical competitor, China. Indeed, preventing the PRC from expanding its regional influence in the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific, and over Taiwan is a strategic imperative of much greater importance than supporting the Ukrainian effort to re-take every inch of their national territory. In other words, not only the International Relations and security experts but also the lawmakers in Washington are increasingly convinced of the need to stop being distracted by the Ukrainian theatre and focus more resources and military assets on the hegemonic competition with China. This awareness is leading the US to progressively decrease its indirect engagement in Ukraine. As pointed out by Trebesch (2023), indeed, when compared with the European Union, the US is now lagging behind in its military and financial support for Ukraine for the first time since the inception of the war.

One may also argue that after being the main proponent of the necessity to rump up the support for Ukraine since day one of the conflict, the revised US stance could potentially influence several other US allies and NATO members to do the same.

2. Poland and Slovakia Changing Posture.

The US is not the only Ukraine's supporter starting to openly voice reservations about providing limitless aid. Warsaw has also been one of Kyiv's staunchest allies throughout the entire war to date, but it recently stated its willingness to pull back its military support and to stop providing weapons aimed at sustaining Ukraine's war effort (Sheftalovick 2023). Moreover, after being among the countries which more largely contributed to welcoming Ukrainian refugees in the first year and a half of the war, Poland seems now less inclined to leave its borders open to refugees fleeing the conflict. Indeed, while in April and May 2022 roughly 50% of the Polish people interviewed stated that their country should engage more extensively in supporting Ukrainian refugees and the Ukraine's war effort, recently that percentage shrunk to just 28% (Krzysztozek, 2023). The sudden overhauled Polish stances over Ukraine may be largely traced back to two main issues. On the one hand the dispute between Warsaw and Kyiv over the Ukrainian export of grain; and on the other the Polish elections held on the 15th of October. After the EU Commission's decision to not extend the ban on Ukrainian grain imports which applied to Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria; Warsaw decided to protect its national farmers by unilaterally imposing its own bans (Gijs, 2023).

Following the growing tension between the two countries that the grain dispute fuelled, Poland's Prime Minister Morawiecki announced the end of arms shipments to Kyiv (Vinogradoff, 2023) Furthermore, it has been argued that the approaching Polish national elections influenced the ruling party, Law and Justice (PIS), to embrace a more nationalist rhetoric on the Ukraine issue and adopt a more confrontational posture vis-à-vis Ukraine and its president (Matthijs, 2023). PIS had to face the looming threat of losing the most extremist and conservative part of its electorate, whose consensus was disputed among far-right populist parties, such as Confederation Freedom and Independence (Higgins, 2023) (Pichete, 2023). Adopting an even more nationalistic rhetoric was the strategy adopted by PIS to prevent that from happening. Now, in the wake of the Polish elections, it is clear that, while remaining the single largest party of the country, PIS will not be able to form a new government. The prospect of a more Europeanist and less nationalist Tusk-led coalition ruling the country seems now encouraging for Ukraine. However, to keep the so-called Civic Coalition in power Tusk will have to mediate without its various component. The Polish People Party, the agrarian political party of Poland, is for instance a pivotal member of the Coalition and it may therefore be expected that the ban on Ukrainian grain is not going to be lifted. On top of that, Tusk will also have to navigate coalition partners that already have shown reservations about providing unconditioned military support to Ukraine. Consequently, Kyiv cannot take for granted that the same amount of support that Warsaw provided up until a few months ago will be maintained. Needless to say, even if it could prove to be only a pre-electoral phase, the perplexities shown by Polish lawmakers towards their country's military engagement in Ukraine bear a great symbolic importance regionally.

So far most of the weapons delivered to Kyiv had to pass through Poland and the country was the most fervent Eastern European supporter of Ukraine in its war against Russia. The consequence of Polish repositioning, if things will not change again in the next months with Tusks leading the government, may therefore have wide-ranging consequences and trigger a regional chain reaction. The result would eventually be an overall plummeting support for Ukraine.

Poland is not alone in Europe with its changing strategic attitude towards Ukraine. Slovakia too will most likely reduce its military and economic commitment towards Ukraine in the foreseeable future. In Bratislava, elections were held on the September 2023 and the leftist populist and pro-Russian party of Robert Fico, already President of the country in the past, won with a 23% majority and a five-point gap against its fiercer competitor, Progressive Slovakia (PS), a liberal and pro-Western political party (Nicholson 2023). Fico has repeatedly and publicly displayed his unwavering willingness to end the country's support for the Ukrainian military actions against the Russian Federation. Now SMER, the party he leads, is the majoritarian political force of the governing coalition and is already making Slovakia lean more eastwards hampering the country's military support for Ukraine. Slovakia was not among the main military providers of Ukraine but this new government will further hamper the overall Western support towards Ukraine.

Conclusion – The Way Forward

The first cracks in the Western support of Ukraine are emerging and are likely to widen in the coming months. Having witnessed little progresses by the Ukrainian army throughout the last four months of counteroffensive, it is becoming increasingly clear that steady Western deliveries of offensive war supplies will probably only result in a long, costly, and excruciating war of attrition. Nevertheless, abruptly curtailing the flow of weapons and economic support for Kyiv could be an even more pernicious strategy to pursue because it would in all likelihoods allow Moscow to achieve a landslide strategic victory over Ukraine. This scenario would not only incentivise Russia to keep pursuing its expansionist policies in the future, but also galvanise other Western strategic competitors to do the same in the years to come. Consequently, a middle ground between unwavering unlimited support and a sudden interruption of all aid provided so far has to be found. Providing Kyiv with only the military equipment strictly necessary to avoid further penetrations of Russian land forces into Ukrainian territory, and therefore freeze the current frontline, might be the wiser way for Western states to behave. Defensive weapons, such as Javelins and Stinger, are considerably cheaper than what has been delivered in the last months to Ukraine to allow its counteroffensive. Furthermore, they proved to be in the first phase of this war extremely effective in wiping out hundreds of Russian mechanised vehicles, costing up to millions per unit.

At war, defendants always have a significant comparative advantage over invading forces. This ingrained dynamic has been proven accurate throughout the course of this conflict and, arguably, it is about time for the Ukrainians to realize that it is not through economically and humanly unsustainable offensives that Russian-occupied territories will be freed. It is, instead, a long-term strategy rooted in defensive wait-and-see tactics, which can prove more fruitful and also more acceptable to fund for Western states.

Understandably, Zelensky and his government are still trying to rally the international support needed to continue this offensive through the delivery of tanks, fighters and long-range missiles. However, being the Western support enormously consequential for every Ukrainian initiative on the ground, Western states have sufficient leverage to influence the developments of this war. It is becoming increasingly clear that momentarily freezing the conflict and instead focusing on rebuilding Ukraine, while stopping the daily atrocities on the front, is the best way forward not only for the West, but for Ukraine as well.

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