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WAR IN UKRAINE : WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE STATE OF OPINION ?

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A Ukrainian victory over Russia is key for the future of democracy at a moment when democracy is challenged everywhere in the world. Ukraine has resisted until now thanks to the willingness of its people, the quality of its political, military, and societal leadership and to the decisive support of the EU, its member States, and the United States. This joint support remains indispensable. But it should not be taken for granted for the medium/long term. EU public opinions remain highly supportive of Ukraine, but that is far from being the case in America.

To ensure U.S. support in the long run, it is essential that the American public understands that contrary to the mainstream perception, the US is not the only one to support Ukraine and that Europeans share this burden for the sake of democracy and free world values. On the European side, if EU citizens are to go on supporting Ukraine, they must understand that there is no opposition between reinforcing NATO and more generally reinforcing EU strategic priorities, such as energy. It is key that Europeans take advantage of this war to develop a strong, autonomous defense manufacturing industry, an indispensable for Europeans regaining technological leadership, while maintaining jobs. Such autonomy can also overcome the false perception that Europe is a vassal to the US, a perception which populist and nationalistic movements weaponize.

Before the war began, there was widespread concern that publics in both Europe and the United States would rapidly lose support for Ukraine in the wake of rising energy prices and slowing economies. To date, that has not happened. But the share of Americans who say the United States is doing too much for Ukraine has nearly quadrupled, from 7% to 26%. And the portion that believe Washington has not done enough has halved, from 49% to 17%. Sentiment about Ukraine support has become increasingly partisan. In March 2022, 9% of Republicans and 5% of Democrats said the U.S. was doing too much for Ukraine. By January 2023, 40% of Republicans, but just 15% of Democrats complained Washington was doing too much.

This erosion of Americans' support for Ukraine reflects a declining willingness to endure economic hardship if necessary. Less than half (48%) of the public in November, compared to 58% in July, believed that Washington should support Ukraine for as long as it takes, even if it means American households have to pay higher gas and food prices as a consequence. A similar share, 47%—up from 38% in July—said the United States should urge Ukraine to settle for peace as soon as possible so the costs aren't so great for American households, even if that means Ukraine will lose some territory. The largely partisan decline in Americans' support for continuing aid to Ukraine may, in part, be driven by growing wariness of Kyiv. A bare majority of Americans (52%) express approval of Ukraine in a survey conducted in the first six weeks of 2023. This reflects a 19-percentage point decline in a year.

And there has been a similar erosion of positive sentiment toward Ukraine in much of Europe. In France, just 34% have a favorable opinion of Ukraine, down 19 points since a year ago. In Germany, 39% hold a positive view, down 28 points. (42% of the French and 43% of Germans express disapproval of Ukraine.) Approval is also down 23 points in Italy and 12 points in the United Kingdom.

A new survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations offers both hope and a cautionary conclusion. A plurality (38%) of the public in nine European countries believe that Ukraine needs to regain all of its territory, even if it means a longer war. A third (34%) of Americans share that view. Only 30% of Europeans and 21% of Americans say the conflict between Russia and Ukraine needs to stop as soon as possible, even if it means Ukraine giving control of areas to Russia. Notably, however, there is no majority support on either side of the Atlantic for a prolonged war.

However, the latest Eurobarometer (February 2023) shows wide European support to go on backing Ukraine. Nine-in-ten (91%) of those surveyed approved of humanitarian help and more than three-quarters approved of the massive financial support granted to Ukraine. After one year of fighting, 56% of the citizens of the European Union approved of the EU reaction to the Russian attack on Ukraine in spite of the massive costs for the EU and its citizens, in particular rising energy costs and insuing inflation. Putin bet that the war would divide the Europeans and would enrage European public opinion against the EU. His bet is lost, for the moment. European publics have rallied around more European policies in support of security, defense and the energy transition and group purchasing of energy. Indeed 77% of EU citizens now back a strong European defense and security policy and 82% support coordinated EU military procurement.

Vladimir Putin has been counting on an erosion of Western public support for Ukraine to ultimately deliver a victory he has not been able to achieve on the battlefield. The allies must not let this happen. But democracies on both sides of the Atlantic will also disregard at their peril public worries about a costly, forever Ukraine war. Policy makers seen as ignoring their citizens' views risk feeding the anti-establishment, anti-elitist narrative weaponized by right-wing populists and those on the left and the right who admire Putin's authoritarianism. Further erosion of public faith in the responsiveness of their elected leaders could have long-term corrosive consequences for both American and European democracy.

With so much at stake in both Ukraine and Western democracies, it is imperative that the Ukraine war be brought to a swift, victorious conclusion. This requires accelerated military support for Kyiv. Much will depend on the trajectory of the war over the next few months. If Ukraine is perceived as prevailing, European and American public opinion is likely to firm up. If Russia is seen as succeeding, the decline in support for Ukraine could accelerate.

Morally, the Ukrainians have the right to determine their own fate. Practically, regaining all of their lost territory is not achievable without fulsome Western support. And this duality poses challenges for European and American leaders. In conjunction with even greater military backing for Kyiv, it is time for frank, private discussions with the Ukrainian government about the necessary limitations on their objectives in light of waning Western public backing for the war effort. Such honest exchanges might include assurances of a post-war Western security guarantee short of immediate NATO membership, accelerated EU membership, and a united G7 commitment of public risk sharing to back massive private investment to rebuild post-war Ukraine.

After a year of war, American and European public support for Ukraine is much stronger than many feared on the eve of the conflict. But signs that backing is slowly eroding are indisputable in the US in particular. It is neither in Ukraine's nor in the allies' interest to wait until public opinion forces changes in the West's assistance for Kyiv. An immediate increase in military support for Ukraine should be accompanied by behind-the-scenes diplomacy on realistic expectations of the end game.