

Another aid package for Ukraine: a test for bipartisan support in the US

Jakub Graca

On 10 August, the White House submitted a request to Congress for approximately \$24bn in additional funding for military, economic and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. It was submitted to Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy, but it has not yet been processed in Congress, which was in recess until the end of August. There remains a bipartisan consensus among lawmakers in favour of supporting Ukraine. However, factors that make the current aid package to Kyiv contested (primarily by some Republicans) are gaining in importance; this means its adoption may be delayed, which could affect the approval of further tranches of US aid to Kyiv. These include declining public support for further support for Ukraine (particularly in the electorate of the Republican Party), the growing faction of Republican challengers to the current course of the Joe Biden administration in the House of Representatives, and the beginning of the campaign ahead of the presidential and congressional elections in November 2024.

Another aid package for Ukraine

As part of its fifth support package for Kyiv since the outbreak of the war (see Appendix: *US support to Ukraine so far*), the Biden administration wants to allocate around \$24bn for various direct and indirect forms of assistance to Ukraine, including \$4.5bn to replenish the Department of Defence stockpile, \$5bn to support the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) and nearly \$8bn for economic, social and humanitarian assistance. In addition to this sum, the administration is also requesting around \$16bn for other purposes (e.g. combating the effects of natural disasters, of the fentanyl flow into the US, and the protection of the southern border), making the request to Congress a total of around \$40bn. The proposal relates to needs that will arise in the first quarter of fiscal year 2024 (FY24, which begins on 1 October 2023), but formally the funds could also be used after that, by 30 September 2024 or even later. The submission of a request for additional funding for Ukraine in a package with funds for other purposes is no coincidence: it has been calculated to increase the chances of support for the package among sceptical Republican congressmen.

The request for additional funding comes as no surprise: the previously approved Congressional aid for Ukraine is already running out, and will only remain in place until the end of fiscal year 2023 (FY23), or 30 September this year. Since at least the end of 2022 onwards, there has been a lingering question as to what action the Biden administration intends to take once the funding pool to support Ukraine begins to run out. At present, Washington still has around \$5bn from the Presidential Drawdown Authority (PDA) budget at its disposal; this sum does not have to be spent by the end of FY23 as it has been

'recovered' by the Department of Defence, officially as a result of the discovery of an accounting error in which on a number of occasions the value of arms and military equipment transferred to Ukraine was estimated based on replenishment costs rather than the actual value of the equipment transferred to Kyiv. The new package provides for the replenishment of the PDA in amount of \$4.5 billion, while the USAI programme assumes the supply of equipment yet to be produced, so it is about medium and long-term support. In contrast, the funds to cover the cost of replenishing the Department of Defence's stockpile are only indirectly linked to support for Ukraine.

The situation in Congress

Both chambers of Congress continue to display bipartisan support for Ukraine, but this is more so in the Senate, where the Republicans do not have a majority (they hold 49 out of 100 seats), as opposed to the House of Representatives, where they do hold a majority (222 to 212). Those contesting the current course come primarily from the ranks of the Republican Party, and specifically those in the House of Representatives. The core of this group is the Freedom Caucus faction, which has a conservative-liberal agenda with isolationist tendencies in foreign policy. It currently numbers more than 40 congressmen, but over the last year, more representatives have joined the group during votes on support for Ukraine. In March 2022, for example, 54 Republicans in the House of Representatives voted against the support package for Ukraine, but in July this year as many as 89 Republicans supported an amendment to the 2024 defence budget which would reducing aid to Kyiv by US\$300 million. In contrast, there is a left-wing faction in the Democratic Party, the Congressional Progressive Caucus, which also advocates a focus on the domestic agenda at the expense of an active foreign policy. This group is even more numerous, as it now comprises around 100 members (almost 50% of the Democrats' representation) in the House of Representatives. However, despite loudly articulating its reservations about Washington's policy on Ukraine as recently as late 2022, it now generally votes along party leadership lines, although its stance may evolve over time. Open objections to the current support package for Ukraine are therefore basically only being voiced by Republican congressmen.

Those sceptical of supporting Ukraine most often raise the argument that the resources allocated to helping it should be used to overcome domestic problems, such as maintaining fiscal discipline, keeping the debt in check, protecting the southern border of the US, fighting the flow of opioids and other issues. Moreover, in the eyes of many Republican politicians, Kyiv is drawing Washington's attention away from the Indo-Pacific area in the context of the biggest challenge to the United States, which is the growing power of China. In their view, the security of the Europe should be financed to a greater extent by European states themselves. At the same time, they are unconvinced by the argument that a potential Russian victory against Ukraine will increase the likelihood of Chinese expansion in the Far East, mainly with regards to Taiwan. On the other hand, some Republican congressmen have said that sending further packages of US equipment to Ukraine is unlikely to tip the scales in Kyiv's favour, and should only be supported if the White House agrees, for example, to send ATACMS missiles with a range of 300 km to the front. Others advocate separating military from non-military aid, and approving only the former.

Adoption of the current support package in the House of Representatives will formally depend on the decision of the House Rules Committee, which decides which bills are put to the floor. Obstructionism from the three members of the Committee representing the extreme wing of the Republican party may make it difficult to bring the bill to a vote, meaning that negotiations with this group are likely to be necessary. Among other things, they may demand that any further aid to Ukraine be offset by cuts in the 2024 federal budget, which is currently under negotiation.

Decline in (Republican) support for Ukraine in the polls

Public opinion polls (see Appendix) indicate that public approval for continued support for Ukraine on the current basis is declining over time. It still remains relatively high among the American public as a whole, but not in the Republican Party electorate. In a CNN poll from early August, 55% of respondents indicated that Congress should not approve additional aid to Ukraine, while 45% expressed support for such an action. At the same time, 51% of those questioned felt that the US has done enough for Ukraine, while 48% said that more should be done (in the corresponding poll at the end of February 2022, the figures were 38% and 62% respectively). When broken down by party voters, a clear split is evident: 71% of Republican supporters oppose the additional package, while 62% of Democratic Party supporters support it. At the same time, 59% of the former group believe that the US has done enough for Ukraine, while 61% of the latter group think Washington should do more.

To the more general question “should the US provide arms to Ukraine?” asked in late June this year by Reuters and Ipsos, 65% of respondents (81% of Democratic supporters, 56% of Republican voters) answered positively. A Pew Research Center survey from June this year shows that the percentage of Americans who think the US has done too much for Ukraine has risen since March 2022 from 7 to 28% (among Republican supporters this increase is greater, from 9 to 44%), while 16% think more should be done (up from 42% at the start of the war). By contrast, the percentage of those who say Washington’s assistance to Kyiv is at the right level has changed only slightly (32% at the start of the war, 31% now). Other polls also show a clear downward trend in support for backing Ukraine, especially compared to the start of the war, although much also depends on the questions asked.

The ongoing electoral campaign

In addition, the ongoing electoral campaign and changing public moods (especially among Republican supporters) are causing more Republican presidential candidates besides Donald Trump (most notably Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy, currently running second and third in party polls) to contest the current model of support for Ukraine. The arguments and concerns they raise range from the need for greater control over spending and questions about the effectiveness of the support and whether the Biden administration really has a strategy calculated to win Ukraine and end the war, to statements questioning the legitimacy of providing aid to Kyiv and the relevance of Russian aggression to US national interests.

The strong political polarisation, together with the fact that leading US media and think tanks often get politically involved, mean that renowned institutions (Heritage Foundation) or influential commentators (such as Tucker Carlson) are using the issue of aid to Ukraine instrumentally as part of their support for the Republican party in the ongoing campaign. The Heritage Foundation is one of the most prominent conservative thinktanks in the US;

over the past two years it has seen significant changes in personnel, resulting in a shift away from the traditional Republican foreign policy vision to an approach closer to that of Trump. In August this year, the foundation posted a picture on one social media site of a bustling Kyiv juxtaposed with an image of the fire-damaged island of Maui in Hawaii, thus suggesting that Biden had taken money from the administration there to give to Ukraine. Additionally, among broad swathes of Republican Party voters, the Ukrainian state is seen as deeply corrupt, and also as being linked to the case of the son of current US President Hunter Biden, who sat on the board of directors of the Ukrainian gas holding company Burisma from 2014 to 2019. Trump and his supporters have accused Joe Biden of withholding a loan guarantee to Ukraine while he was vice-president in order to put pressure on the government in Kyiv to dismiss its then attorney general in order to help prevent an anti-corruption investigation against Burisma.

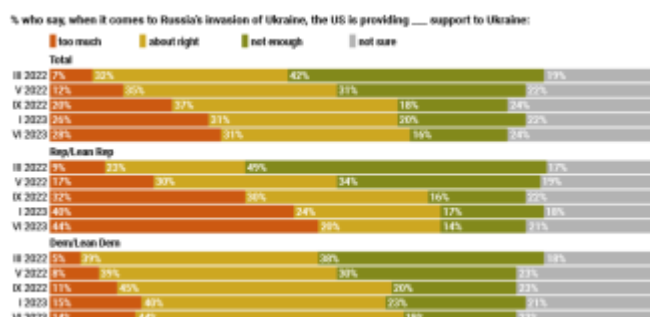
An additional factor influencing public sentiment is the activity of Russian propaganda on US social media. It exploits the high propensity of the American population to believe in conspiracy theories (exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Trump's campaign promoting the thesis that the 2020 elections were rigged), as well as the isolationist sentiment which prevails among the Republican electorate.

APPENDIX

US support for Ukraine so far

To date, Congress has approved four support packages for Ukraine, amounting to approximately \$14bn (March 2022), \$40bn (May 2022), \$12bn (September 2022) and \$45bn (December 2022) respectively. The total amount is therefore more than \$110bn, of which approximately \$50bn has gone on direct military assistance to the Ukrainian Armed Forces as provided through various procedures and programmes. The first of these is the Presidential Special Drawdown Authority (PDA) mechanism, which allows direct transfers of arms and military equipment from Department of Defence stockpiles. Through this, the US has so far pledged approximately \$24bn worth of US weapons as part of more than 40 tranches of military aid to Ukraine (of which more than \$6bn have been 'recovered'). In turn, almost \$19bn has been used from the Ukraine Budget Support Initiative (USAI) funds, and about \$8bn from funds allocated to other mechanisms, making a total of about \$50bn.

Chart. Republican and Democratic voters' attitudes to US support for Ukraine between March 2022 and June 2023



Source: Pew Research Center.