



Costs associated with U.S. not supporting Ukraine are steep

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With few exceptions, aiding Ukraine in its efforts to push back against Russian aggression continues to enjoy broad bipartisan support, both in Congress and among the American public. But precisely how much Washington can and should underwrite Kyiv's war effort has become something of a political football — especially among conservatives. The arguments are varied and range from worries over fraud to accusations of misplaced priorities. Each has its grounding in legitimate concerns. Yet each fails to grasp the significance of what is at stake in the current fight against Russia's imperialist ambitions.

Here, it's worth noting that the support already provided by the United States is sizable. According to Germany's Kiel Institute, the U.S. spent just under 48 billion euros (\$50.5 billion) on military, financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine in the 10 months between January and November 2022. Moreover, still more funds are forthcoming; the U.S. government's \$1.7 trillion spending bill recently signed into law by President Biden includes an added \$47 billion in aid for Ukraine. The scope of this assistance has led some to argue that America has discharged its duty, and the financial spigot should now be turned off — or should at least be tempered while other Western partners step up to the plate.

Such burden-sharing is, of course, desirable. And recent days have brought welcome news of increased military aid from France, as well as hopes that Germany might soon follow suit. But America remains the linchpin of the Western order, and absent leadership on today's most pressing international conflict will see its global standing erode — something that Russian President Vladimir Putin and other global autocrats, like China's Xi Jinping, very much desire.

Some have argued that more aid to Ukraine is unsustainable in light of growing governmental debt. That problem is bad and getting worse. In late 2022, U.S. debt as a percentage of gross domestic product stood at 120.23%. By comparison, American debt was just 33.92% in 1982, and 20 years ago clocked in at 56.7%.

But eliminating aid to Ukraine is not the answer. The money spent to date on the defense of a fellow democracy is a drop in the bucket compared with the waste, fraud and abuse endemic to programs like Medicaid and Medicare (which alone are estimated to be in the neighborhood of \$120 billion annually). Moreover, eliminating that aid won't do anything to alter Washington's culture of profligate spending, which has become a decidedly bipartisan pastime and may, in fact, make matters significantly worse.

That's because the costs associated with not supporting Ukraine are liable to be steep. Should Russia's current war of aggression result in territorial gains, it will give the Kremlin incentive to take still more in the future, either from Ukraine or from other countries (such as the Baltic states) over which it still harbors imperial designs. Moreover, a comparative Russian success in Ukraine will embolden other hostile regimes, such as China and Iran, to press the advantage in their respective territorial ambitions. The resulting expenses required for the United States to keep the peace in the Taiwan Strait or the Persian Gulf will make our current spending on Ukraine seem paltry by comparison.

Then there is the question of corruption. Among the most persistent criticisms of U.S. support for Ukraine is the country's persistent post-Cold War track record of corruption. The issue has long bedeviled the country, with oligarchs controlling vast swaths of the national economy and a widespread lack of investor trust. It continues to be a serious problem. In the 2021 Corruptions Perceptions Index compiled by accountability watchdog Transparency International, Ukraine ranked 122nd of 180 countries surveyed.

But under the current government of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, this is changing materially. Simply put, officials in Kyiv understand very well that Western aid for their war effort will dry up if they do not, at long last, get serious about greater transparency and accountability. Moreover, the current war has reinforced the conviction among an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians that their future lies with the European Union and that joining the Western community of nations will require greater adherence to the rule of law and deep-seated governmental and economic improvements.

As a result, recent months have seen significant domestic efforts to root out corruption and institute political reforms on the part of the Ukrainian government. These include extensive judicial reforms proposed by the EU and the appointment of a new (and highly regarded) anti-corruption prosecutor, among assorted other measures. Moreover, Ukrainian officials are taking great pains to demonstrate to the United States and its partners that their aid is being used well, with regular reports to Congress and other relevant parties as reassurance. The logic is simple. "Corruption in Ukraine now would be like stealing Western money," says Vitaliy Shabunin, head of the country's Anti-Corruption Action Center.

All of this makes our investments in Ukraine's victory a good economic bet and an even better strategic one. The critics would do well to recognize them as such.