

Prospects for an end to the Russian-Ukrainian war post-US elections 2024

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The Russian-Ukrainian war has been deteriorating security on the European continent for over 10 years. Russia cannot be allowed to win, since this would irreversibly damage international law and give incentives for other aggressors. The 2024 US presidential elections could lead to tougher policy against Russia and more support for Ukraine or an appeasement of Putin. Yet both Trump's and Harris's attitudes toward the war are not fully clear. With the uncertainty surrounding future US policy, European policymakers should develop closer cooperation in security, increase their own military production, increase financial and military support to Ukraine (provide weapons from its own stocks) and give full permission to Ukraine to use any weapons on Russian territory.

In this policy paper, I discuss the prospects for peace in the Russian-Ukrainian war after the 2024 US presidential elections. I examine the current discussions within US political parties and build scenarios for what the victory of each of the candidates would mean for the possibility of peace. In conclusion, I offer several policy recommendations on how Ukraine's victory may be achieved.

Introduction

Over the last decades, the US as the perceived “policeman of the world” has had a substantial impact on world politics. More than two and a half years of the Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war has shown that the US position – punishment of Russia and support for Ukraine – is crucial both for the development of the war and other countries' attitudes towards it. For instance, the US had provided 38 per cent of the overall assistance to Ukraine (including almost 50 per cent of military aid) during two and a half years of the invasion (Trebesch, Bomprezzi, and Kharitonov 2024). It can be said, then, that if European countries are not able to hugely increase their assistance to Ukraine and/or Russia's supporters, mainly China, India, Iran and North Korea, do not cease their help for Russia, the US position will stay crucial for the outcome of the war.

Ukraine's victory and Russia's defeat is of crucial importance both for stability in Europe and the triumph of international law, which Russia flagrantly broke in a number of ways. A Russian victory would give incentives for other countries to abuse their power and to disregard international rules as well. For example, China is closely following the Western response to Russian aggression and may take lessons for its future actions toward Taiwan.

To be able to win against a stronger Russia, Ukraine requires even more support from its partners. The months-long delay of support from the United States, which was held up in Congress,

deteriorated the situation on the frontline and cost thousands of Ukrainian lives. The US could have helped Ukraine even more, e.g. via more financial assistance, delivery of different kinds of weapons and the lifting of restrictions on attacking Russian territory. The change in power after the US presidential election will have an impact on the amount of US support for Ukraine and on how fast peace can be achieved.

Anticipated scenario in the case of a Harris victory

Since Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris has been vice president to Joe Biden and has confirmed her favourable stance towards Ukraine, Harris is expected to continue US support for Ukraine. Yet Biden's involvement in this war was widely criticised as being too slow and indecisive. Some even argue that the US "gives the Ukrainian people just enough military aid not to lose their war but not enough to win it" (Marlantes and Ackerman 2024). In her speeches, Harris promises "to stand strong with Ukraine and NATO allies" (Powell 2024), she met with Zelensky on a number of occasions and represented the US during the Ukraine Peace Summit in Switzerland. Analyst Anders Åslund argues that Harris has an opportunity to take a stronger position on the war and support for Ukraine by providing much more financial (by also using frozen Russian reserves) and military assistance (via more sophisticated weapons) and by allowing Ukraine to use US weapons to strike Russian territory (Åslund 2024). On the other hand, having a Republican Congress during a Harris presidency may also complicate US support for Ukraine. Thus, the one scenario is that a Harris administration continues the US's previous stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war and possibly even increases US support, despite Republican opposition in Congress.

Anticipated scenario in the case of a Trump victory

Many see Trump's possible victory as a major challenge for the transatlantic partnership. Although there are many speculations about Trump's policy towards the Russian-Ukrainian war, Trump has not laid out any consistent strategy "to end the war in 24 hours" (as he promised on a number of occasions). The plan that was given to Trump by his senior advisors included forcing both the Ukrainian and the Russian side to peace talks: if Ukraine refuses, US help would be stopped; if Russia refuses, the US would give Ukraine even more military support to resist Russia (Slattery and Lewis 2024). Ukrainian officials have assessed that Trump may want to reboot relations with Russia first, but later would realise the impossibility of trusting Putin. Additionally, Trump's voters would also understand that the weapons production for Ukraine is beneficial to the US (Podat' 2024). In one of his latest interviews, Trump guaranteed to end the war quickly, but refused to share any concrete plans, since that might undermine his plan's success (Fridman 2024).

Furthermore, he also suggested that he would decrease oil prices by two times or more and “Putin would not be able to fight this war with oil for \$50” (Karbunar 2024).

In one possible scenario, Trump pushes Ukraine to hold talks with Russia and to painful compromises, e.g. to abandon its occupied territories to Russia and to forget about its aspirations for NATO membership. In another possible scenario, Trump is less cautious and bureaucratic than Biden, allowing Ukraine to attack Russia on its territory and deliver all the needed weapons quicker. He also uses his relationship to put pressure on Putin to end the war.

In a scenario in which Trump stops all support for Ukraine on the first day of his presidency, Ukraine will be faced with a lack of weapons, ammunition and finances to fight against Russia. The situation will become critical after several weeks or months. Seeing the US withdraw from the war, Russia will feel empowered. The outcome could be either Ukraine’s total mobilisation (more soldiers, more military production – all of this will just buy them a bit more time) and/or full European involvement (more financial and military support, possibly more diplomatic pressure on Putin) or Russian victory in one way or another (occupation of parts or the whole of the country). What speaks against this scenario is that the US still feels a certain responsibility for peace in Europe, the American public is still in favour of supporting Ukraine and Ukrainians are still determined to resist Russia. Thus, withdrawal from Ukraine as from Afghanistan is not currently a viable option for the US.

Recommendations if Harris wins

Harris’s victory would probably continue the US commitment to security in Europe and to supporting Ukraine against Russia. In this vein, transatlantic policymakers should invest in building mutual trust, cooperation and a common peaceful vision of the future. The US will most likely remain a leader in supporting Ukraine, but each country could still implement individual policies, e.g. regarding the permission to Ukraine to attack Russian territory. However, the Republican-controlled Congress may decrease or delay US support for Ukraine. In this case, Democrats should look for compromises with Republicans to maintain US support. During this process, European policymakers should take up a bigger role in providing for security in Europe. The below recommendations in case of a Trump victory can also be implemented by European decision-makers with Harris in office – even with the presence of the US as “big brother”, there is no harm in building a stronger, more self-reliant Europe.

Recommendations if Trump wins

Trump's possible victory is often viewed as a threat to transatlantic unity. Yet, this may be a chance as well – a chance for Europe to become more self-reliant and united. The European defence industry needs to increase its production to sustain security in Europe and this security starts with Ukraine. Yet, the effects of an increase in military production will only be felt in the years to come. Currently, European countries should provide Ukraine with weapons that they already have in their stockpiles. Secondly, European countries should permit Ukraine to use the delivered weapons on Russian territory.

The third thing European decision-makers should implement is the total economic isolation of Russia. Last year, all EU countries' imports from Russia amounted to around €50 billion (Eurostat 2024). The EU received 15 per cent of its gas supplies from Russia (Sullivan 2024). The EU has managed to decrease this amount after Russia's attack on Ukraine, but there is no need to wait until the target year of 2027 to end all gas imports from Russia. Since the EU Energy Commissioner recently said the EU could manage without Russian gas (Fox 2024), it should do so. The EU can get everything from its more reliable and friendly partners and Russia will have less money for its war against Ukraine. Let us remember that one of the core reasons for the USSR's collapse was its economic isolation. Thus, Euro-Atlantic decision-makers should do everything to stop their own countries' trade with Russia and to convince others, e.g. China (though unlikely to be persuaded), Brazil and India, to do so as well.

Apart from the above, the EU countries bordering Ukraine could start protecting Ukrainian civilians and shooting down Russian drones and missiles over Ukraine either from their own territory or via entering Ukrainian airspace with their planes. Such discussions have been ongoing for quite a while and recently Poland offered to do this if Russia was to attack Ukraine's nuclear plants (Shevko 2024). Western countries shoot missiles and drones over Israel and can do this over Ukraine (they would be shooting the same Iranian Shahed drones).

With future US policy towards Europe remaining uncertain, Europe should get prepared for any scenario and become a guardian of its own security. There may be certain opposition within the EU, e.g. from Hungary, which would require EU policymakers to search for new approaches in its foreign policy decision-making. When Putin feels Europe's and Ukraine's strength and understands that his blackmail does not work, he will be forced to end his unjust war rather sooner than later.

Note: The respective author is responsible for the content of the article. The contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung and the Europa-Kolleg Hamburg.

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