

# Four questions about the West's future support for Ukraine

*As the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches, the West appears divided over how to support Ukraine. **Spyros Economides** assesses four key questions underpinning the role of the West in the war, arguing that for future support to be effective, western leaders must found their actions on pragmatic concerns rather than moralism.*

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Talk of a "[stalemate](#)" or the need for a "[negotiated settlement with Russia](#)" in the war in Ukraine is typically met with derision: appeasement, defeatism and even betrayal are invoked against those voicing such opinions. The current battlefield reality is such that there is no prospect of short-term Ukrainian victory and the longer the war drags on Russia's military position strengthens.

For many, the solution is that the "West" needs to provide Ukrainian armed forces with greater quantities of and more sophisticated military equipment. This would, [they argue](#), tip the strategic balance. But does the West have the willingness and capability to do so? If yes, then the western world could get increasingly sucked into a longer-term conflict which public opinion will grow to oppose. If not, then a negotiated political settlement is the likeliest outcome, and it would include territorial concessions.

## What is the West defending in Ukraine?

There are four fundamental questions underpinning the future role of the West in the Ukraine War. First, the West's willingness and ability to continue supporting Ukraine is based on agreeing exactly what it is defending against. Here we are talking about the transatlantic core of the West: the group of "Euro-Atlantic" states represented by NATO and the EU, who are materially engaged in supporting Ukraine's war effort.

Rhetorically, western support has been based on the normative argument that Russian aggression is a direct attack on democracy, liberty and human rights, as well as an overt violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The primary justification given is that of

the defence of values and freedoms – the very essence of the “West”. By defending Ukraine, the West is defending the western way of life.

Truth be told, the defence of Ukraine is more readily explicable by realpolitik, where confronting Russia is about stopping territorial expansionism and a growing sphere of influence, by managing a regional and perhaps global balance of power. Once the discussion on continuing support for Ukraine has shifted emphasis to defending interests as well as rights then there would be common ground for a renewed transatlantic partnership for continued and enhanced support of Ukraine with the prospect of a longer-term settlement in mind.

### **How can support for Ukraine be squared with support for Israel?**

Second, there is the changing perception of “westernness” through the war in Gaza. The West is coming under increasing pressure to clarify how it can condemn Russian aggression in Ukraine and yet condone Israeli tactics in Gaza. The support of Israel’s territorial integrity and right to self-defence are unquestionable, but through what means and at what civilian cost?

This is a political conundrum for the West: where is western virtue and humanitarianism in Gaza? Increasingly, western governments’ support of the current Israeli military operation is being challenged and calls for a ceasefire are growing. The West leaves itself open to charges of hypocrisy when its stand on the two conflicts is compared.

How can it accept the humanitarian devastation of Israel’s pursuit of Hamas while condemning Russian aggression against Ukrainian civilians, accusing Putin and his regime of war crimes, and providing extensive military aid to combat this aggression. Ultimately, the truth is that it is western interests that prevail, creating these contradictory positions in moral and ideational terms.

### **Can the West’s support for Ukraine survive the electoral cycle?**

Third, the West’s position on the future of the Ukraine War is complicated by the electoral cycle both in the US and Europe. The EU agreed a further aid package to Ukraine despite Hungarian opposition, and individual EU and NATO states continue to pledge war materiel for Ukraine. Yet, since last year, there has been a slow-down in its

production and delivery.

There is both an economic and political cost for this aid. The “[Zeitenwende](#)”, or historic “turning point”, announced by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz seems to be running out of steam, not least because of the domestic political challenge to his government. This coincides with the rise of populism, illiberalism and right-wing extremism across Europe, which views Russia in a more favourable light. These are important dynamics in the run up to European Parliament elections in May.

And of course, who can ignore the increasingly possible re-election of Donald Trump? His recent [outlandish remarks on Russia and possible attacks on NATO members](#), coupled with his long-standing threat to withdraw the US from NATO, has enormous implications for the transatlantic core of the “western world” and for future support of Ukraine. Until the electoral cycle is complete, policies are on hold, weakening the Ukrainian position and strengthening Moscow’s hand.

### **Can the West reach a consensus on bringing an end to the war?**

Fourth, there is the need to prepare the ground for a potential negotiated settlement with Putin. This is a decision for Ukraine to make – of this there is no doubt. But the key is the type of settlement that might be acceptable. Zelensky’s maximalist position of no possible settlement without Russian withdrawal from all Ukrainian territory remains. This is undermined by the reality of the military situation on the ground and among the populations of territory now under Russian control.

Russia’s own maximalist position of capturing territory and having a determining say on the future international orientation of Ukraine is also untenable. One potential settlement recently proposed includes a territorial compromise by Ukraine and in return Russia would accept its membership of NATO and the EU (much like the West German settlement during the Cold War). This might provide the basis for a pragmatic settlement, but there is a long way to go in forging a western consensus let alone persuading Kyiv of its merits.

### **A pragmatic, interest-based position**

These issues cut to the heart of who comprises the West and what it stands for in

international relations. What binds it together in the face of Russia's challenge? Is it a coherent grouping of states with a united front? Is its resistance to Russian aggression based on pragmatism and interests or more idealistic concerns? Does it have the support of a broad-based electoral consensus and public opinion?

To be coherent, relevant and effective, the West has to convince that its actions are founded on pragmatic concerns. These should be interest based and include the defence of democracy and human rights. For this to succeed, the "West" needs to manage expectations both within itself and in Ukraine and be wary of rhetorical entrapment on unreachable moral grounds. These are achievable goals and would allow for revived transatlantic understanding with coherent objectives in Ukraine and beyond.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Union](#)*

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