



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Ukraine fatigue as a strategic goal?



Responsibility for the eventual outcome of the war in Ukraine is increasingly being shifted towards Europe. Both the US and Russia have in recent months stepped up the pressure on the continent amid signs that Ukraine fatigue is on the increase.

This fatigue is not so much a matter of public opinion, which, after more than two years of war, remains remarkably firm. It is most pronounced on a political and governmental level, where parties and leaders either feel squeezed by competing fiscal demands or use the issue as part of populist programmes.

Some of this can be seen in the German **discussion** on taking away social benefits, Bürgergeld, from Ukrainian refugees, which is fanned by figures in the ruling centre-right CDU/CSU.

And it was also on show in recent Czech elections, where reduced support for Ukraine **figured** in the campaign.

This mixture of inward-looking emphasis in tough economic times and a more sympathetic view of Russia on the political extremes and among populists can be seen across the continent.

As overall public support for Ukraine relatively holds strong, it appears that it is the political echelon that could be most vulnerable to being pressured into inaction.

The US is washing its hands of the conflict

Both the stepped-up Russian 'grey zone' warfare on Europe and Donald Trump's policy of letting Europe shoulder the financial and military burden of supporting Ukraine should be seen in this light.

Trump's recent **assertion** that Ukraine can win back all its territory "with the support of the European Union" ups the ante even more. It both shows how the US is washing its hands of the conflict and further increases the pressure

on the EU.

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Europe is already being squeezed by Trump's tariffs and his other protectionist and transactional economic policies. This on top of the economic costs to the continent at the beginning of the war, when, among other things, its energy dependence on Russia caused hardship. While some of that has been fixed, the economic impact is ongoing.

In this environment it's not surprising that some politicians are depicting both humanitarian and military support for Ukraine as excessive.

And while there's overall strong support for Europe's defence build-up, even that is now being parsed, as the recent disagreements over the EU's 'drone wall' made clear.

One of the biggest public shows of European disunity

The EU summit in Copenhagen at the beginning of October also **showed** further deep-seated disagreement over Ukraine and Russia.

European leaders squabbled, among other things, over who was in charge of defence, the path towards Ukraine's EU accession and using frozen Russian assets to fund Ukraine's war effort.

It was one of the biggest public shows of European disunity on Ukraine and Russia since the start of the invasion in 2022. While not directly endangering ongoing support for Ukraine, the cracks do pose questions over Europe's long-term commitment to do 'whatever it takes'.

Trump's remarks that Russia can actually be defeated with the help of the EU could create overblown expectations

While the divisions appear to play out mostly on a political rather than a popular level, part of the hesitancy might reflect a slight shift in the public's attitude.

Surveys have shown that more people now favour some kind of compromise over a fight to the end in order to defeat Russia.

Trump's remarks that Russia can actually be defeated with the help of the EU could create overblown expectations. Failure to achieve all-out victory, let alone Ukrainian defeat, will thus be more firmly blamed on the EU.

Testing Europe's political resolve

Russia, too, appears to be upping the pressure on Europe. If, as seems likely, the recent increase in drone incidents, air incursions and acts of sabotage on the continent can be ascribed to the Kremlin, these are likely meant at least partly to test Europe's political resolve.

As the 'drone wall' discussion has shown, it has already partly succeeded in laying bare the divisions.

In a recent analysis, the IISS **called** the uptick in Russian attacks on Europe "a new phase" in the war. Among the objectives, it posited, was "to deter and divide Europe" in light of the Kremlin's victory strategy to "outlast the West politically".

It cited a series of policy developments in the US, Europe, Russia, and China as the reason for this intensification of this grey zone warfare. The advent of Trump, it argued, had not shifted the picture significantly in Russia's favour.

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This might be too rosy a depiction of the state of affairs. It is hard to contemplate Trump's Ukraine policy without taking into account his, and his administration's, deep-seated hostility towards the EU.

His sudden shift, after the Alaska summit with Vladimir Putin, to becoming more open to the Ukrainian and European perspective, comes across as a ploy.

While ostensibly explained by his impatience or disappointment with Putin, this shift more fully reflects his desire to make Europe the owner of the conflict.

The timings of his apparent change of course and that of the increased Russian grey war activity in Europe overlap too much to be purely accidental.

At the very least, Moscow saw the additional burden that was placed on Europe and realised that it could add to the feeling of uncertainty and trepidation by upping its campaign.

"A continent of compromise and fear"

For Trump, the shift carries no risk and is all upside. By making the Europeans responsible for everything from purchasing Ukraine's weapons to ensuring its victory, he removes himself from the picture.

If tomorrow he takes steps to force a Ukrainian surrender after all, he can blame Europe for not having stepped up.



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The real question of time and on whose side it is might be the US midterm elections next year. In the yet unlikely event that the Democrats triumph, the now dormant Congressional majority in favour of more active support for Ukraine might be reinvigorated, impinging on both Trump's and Putin's plans.

In the meantime, and probably after, Europe is in the crosshairs. The increased pressure is already resulting in less, rather than more, unity and determination.

For now, this is mostly limited to technical and logistical issues rather than the principle of supporting Ukraine and standing up to Russia. But this might well change, especially if more Eurosceptic governments gain power in the EU.

The danger of Europe sliding ever deeper into Ukraine fatigue has not gone unnoticed in Kyiv, where this has always figured in the strategic calculations.

A recent article in the Kyiv Post, written by a Serbian analyst, **declares** that "Europe Has No Right to Fatigue While Ukraine Bleeds".

The central argument of the article is less emotional, though, and more of a dire warning to the EU. If Russia prevails, it argues, "Europe is no longer Europe but a continent of compromise and fear."

This is exactly the kind of new world order

that both Trump and Putin have in mind. And neither Europe's leaders nor its people can afford to become too fatigued to resist it.