

4. Wavering consensus? The impact of the 2024 bumper election year on Ukraine and European security

BY MARCUS HOW⁸

- › **The Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to be the main driver of political risks in CESEE.**
- › **These risks are currently elevated, due to the elections to the European Parliament, the US presidency and Congress, as well as to the parliaments of states in the region.**
- › **The European elections are likely to result in a rightward tilt at the EU level, fraying the consensus surrounding those European Commission flagship policies that are pertinent to strategic autonomy.**
- › **The ‘Mitteleuropean’ axis of populist illiberalism may begin to consolidate, with the Austrian elections being of particular importance. This would complicate EU efforts to agree new aid for Ukraine – efforts that are especially significant given the political instability in the US.**
- › **If Donald Trump is elected president in November, the US commitment not only to Ukraine but also to NATO will very likely end, increasing the security risks. The EU and European NATO members would be able to compensate for some (but not all) of the US commitments – if it can muster the political will.**
- › **However, this political will may diminish, given the influence of the aforementioned internal and external factors.**

The year 2024 is a bellwether one for the political outlook of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) over the coming two years and beyond. This is due to the plethora of elections that are taking place inside and outside the region, the geopolitical stability of which is more volatile than at any time since 1991.

Currently, regional risks are primarily informed by the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, the fallout from which is having an impact on security, energy supply and economic stability. This spills over into EU policy areas, as well as local politics, with illiberal and populist forces exhibiting ambivalence towards – if not sympathy for – the Russian government.

Meanwhile, the war has descended into stalemate, albeit one in which Ukraine is losing momentum, due to ammunition shortages (a result of political instability in the US) and chronic manpower issues. Russia has leveraged its widening material advantage to increase its attrition of Ukrainian capabilities, thereby managing incremental (if costly) advances in the Donbas region. These dynamics will be directly influenced by political developments in CESEE, the EU and the US over the two-year outlook.

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4.1. OVERVIEW OF THE ELECTORAL CALENDAR

In June, elections will be held to the European Parliament, the results of which will influence the composition and priorities of the next European Commission. Of even greater significance will be the US presidential and congressional elections scheduled for November.

Within CESEE itself, national elections are also taking place this year. In March, presidential elections were held in the Russian Federation, which Vladimir Putin (unsurprisingly) won after ensuring no meaningful opposition. Ukraine was scheduled to hold presidential and parliamentary elections that same month, but these have been postponed indefinitely.

Elsewhere, there will be presidential elections in Lithuania, Moldova and Slovakia; parliamentary elections in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia and North Macedonia; local elections in Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Turkey; and a cocktail of all three in Romania.

While few of these national elections are likely to be of any direct consequence, they will prove formative over the two-year outlook, both domestically and regionally.

4.2. EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

On 6-9 June, the European Parliament will hold elections for its 720 seats. While the European Parliament lacks the power of legislative initiative, it nonetheless commands very considerable influence in shaping the policy agenda of the EU. Since 2019, its core majority has been concentrated in a 'super grand coalition' of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the centre-left Socialists & Democrats (S&D) and the liberal Renew Europe (RE).

Average polling indicates that the coalition will retain its nominal majority, but its effectiveness will be compromised by the sharp losses expected to be suffered by parties associated with RE. Meanwhile, parties associated with the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) and right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups are forecast to post significant gains, exploiting public disaffection over the high inflation since 2021 and immigration to potentially win third and fourth place, respectively. This will hardly be a landslide, but it will represent a marked rightward tilt.

Although there is a core majority in the European Parliament, its groups may vote freely on policy issues. Thus, a strong showing by the ID and ECR would be significant, since that may facilitate the formation of shifting conservative majorities with the EPP – although these would be far from cohesive. Conversely, the progressive groupings of S&D and RE, as well as the Greens and the Left, are projected to lose out. The composition of the groups will only be finalised after the election, when they negotiate their reconstitution – but the indications are that the Parliament will not be as strongly integrationist as it has been historically.

The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (EPP), is likely to be appointed for a second term with the support of the European Council of member states' governments – as well as of the Parliament. The flagship policies of von der Leyen's cabinet include financial and military support for Ukraine; enlargement of the EU to include Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkan states; addressing deficiencies in the rule of law; and a European Green Deal that seeks to improve energy

independence, while attaining carbon neutrality by 2050. The sum of these policies is to strengthen the cohesion and security of the EU – and with that, its ‘strategic autonomy’.

The ability of the Commission to continue implementing that agenda is likely to be hampered by the composition of the next European Parliament. This will not necessarily entail any policy U-turns, but rather a weakening of existing consensus, as Eurosceptic and nationalist perspectives become more commonplace. The Green Deal is a likely target, as right-wing groups lobby for greater permissiveness on the issue of phasing out fossil fuels. Most of the legislation underpinning the Green Deal has been adopted under the Fit for 55 package, but future initiatives may struggle. For example, the Commission’s REPowerEU proposal to end reliance on Russian fossil fuels by 2030 still requires additional financing for it to be viable.

The consensus in the Parliament surrounding support for Ukraine is unlikely to change based on its composition alone, as ID is the only group whose members are broadly sceptical of assistance to Ukraine. Nonetheless, there are indications that political changes at the member state level will increase the uncertainty surrounding this consensus.

4.3. NATIONAL ELECTIONS

The success of Eurosceptic and populist parties in national elections will be of particular significance for EU policy areas in which unanimity is required. The most important of these are the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), EU finances and EU membership. In 2023, the Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán demonstrated just how disruptive vetoes in this area can be, as decisions concerning the long-term aid committed to Ukraine and its future EU membership were continually delayed.

Orbán was largely isolated in his opposition at the time. However, there is some tentative change ahead, with the formation of a potential axis of allies. After parliamentary elections in Slovakia in October 2023, the Smer party of Robert Fico was able to form a left-right coalition that is opposed to military aid for Ukraine and sceptical of EU sanctions on Russia. In April 2024, its position was confirmed when Fico’s coalition partner and erstwhile protégé, Peter Pellegrini, won the election for the (largely ceremonial) presidency by portraying his opponent, former Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, as being ‘pro-war’.

The negotiations over EU membership and aid for Ukraine revealed that the Fico government was posturing for the benefit of his domestic audience, as it quickly backed down on the issue. However, future incidents may be more disruptive if the Eurosceptic axis gains a critical mass of like-minded governments. Last November, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders came first in the Dutch parliamentary elections and is currently attempting to form a coalition, albeit with considerable difficulty.

Another pivotal election will be the one due to be held in Austria in September. Although not formally part of CESEE, Austria has a strategic presence in the region and is closely bound up with it. The far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) of Herbert Kickl has led the polls for nearly 18 months, during which time the party has garnered up to 30% of the vote. Among other issues, it advocates positions that complement those of the Russian government: these include opposition to EU sanctions on Russia and to EU

investment in defence projects; support for peace negotiations in Ukraine; and the maximisation of gas usage as part of the green transition. It is a natural ally of the Orbán and Fico governments, with which it is likely to form a Central European illiberal axis.

If the FPÖ does win the election, it will attempt to negotiate a coalition government. Its only viable partner is the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP), which leads the current government. The ÖVP has officially pledged not to collaborate with the FPÖ under its current leadership and, under pressure from President Alexander Van der Bellen, may opt for a grand coalition with the Social Democrats (SPÖ) instead. Nonetheless, it is more likely that the ÖVP will abandon its pledge of non-collaboration and instead attempt to extract concessions from the FPÖ on policies regarding the EU, Ukraine and security.

Nevertheless, the FPÖ is more hardline than it has ever been, lacking the pragmatism that belies the performative rhetoric of the Orbán and Fico governments. This is highly likely to complicate policymaking in the European Council, especially when unanimity is required.

Other elections in the region have lower stakes from this perspective. Continuity may be expected in Romania and Croatia, with the incumbent governments remaining in office in one form or another. Meanwhile, Bulgaria – which is experiencing its sixth snap parliamentary election since 2021 – is likely to remain politically deadlocked.

Even if there is increased political instability at the EU level, this will have no impact on the military and financial aid that the EU has already agreed for Ukraine: namely, the tens of billions of euros earmarked for 2024-2027. However, it is likely to complicate negotiations over new aid, as well as over sanctions. If an illiberal axis does decide to place an embargo on new aid, it is likely that the EU will coordinate member states to provide fresh aid through intergovernmental mechanisms. This was done in 2012, when the UK vetoed the EU's fiscal compact, and was mooted in January 2024, when Hungary was blocking long-term aid to Ukraine.

4.4. US ELECTIONS

In November, the US will hold elections for the presidency, as well as for all the seats in the House of Representatives and a third of those in the Senate. The Democrat incumbent, Joe Biden, will (almost certainly) run for a second term against his Republican predecessor, Donald Trump. Currently, the polls indicate that Biden and Trump have an equal chance of victory. The outcome of the contest may have profound consequences not only for Ukraine, but also for European security more generally.

The commitment of the Biden administration to Ukraine has been crucial in maintaining that country's war effort. Since 2022, the US has provided approximately 26% of overall aid.⁹ And that share rises to 38% in the domain of military aid. The US has also been of critical importance in coordinating support packages from its NATO allies, as well as in assisting the Ukrainian security forces with intelligence.

Furthermore, the Biden administration has reinvigorated the US commitment to NATO, which Trump had questioned, citing the failure of European member states to meet defence spending targets. Besides

⁹ <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

leading on support for Ukraine, the Biden administration has increased armed force deployments to Europe by 40,000, raising the overall number of troops to 100,000.

If Trump is elected president, these policies will be in jeopardy. This is already being felt, with congressional Republicans blocking over six months attempts by the Biden administration to lock in USD 60bn in military aid for Ukraine for 2024-2025. This is even as Ukraine's stocks of air defence missiles and artillery rounds are depleted.

Meanwhile, Trump has pledged to end the war quickly, implying that his administration would force a peace settlement by simply ceasing its support for Ukraine. He has stated that his administration would regard Ukraine's surrender of Crimea and Donbas to Russia as the basis for such an agreement. He has also continued to criticise NATO, suggesting that his administration would tolerate the Russian invasion of member states that do not meet their defence spending targets.

On the one hand, these claims probably do contain some rhetorical exaggeration. In April, Congress finally approved the aid package, a portion of which was redesignated as loans – a proposal that had been made by Trump. Meanwhile, within CESEE, those NATO member states that are failing to meet their spending targets include Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Slovenia – none of which is immediately exposed to the threat of invasion.¹⁰ Concerning NATO, the US presidency is not in a position to withdraw unilaterally, as that would require congressional backing.

Yet on the other hand, Trump does harbour genuine antipathy towards Europe in general and NATO in particular. It would be possible for a Trump administration to render US participation in NATO obsolete. For example, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty – which obliges NATO members to aid each other in the event of an attack – may only be invoked collectively; and it anyhow leaves members broad discretion as to the form of assistance they render. Elsewhere, a Trump administration may decide to withdraw US forces from NATO missions, such as in Kosovo, leaving the European partners to provide the necessary security alone.

Outside of security, a Trump administration is also likely to harden its protectionist trade policy towards the EU. Potential measures include extending a broad 10% tariff to the EU (and China), as well as invoking Section 301 of the US Trade Act to respond unilaterally to conduct that it perceives to be undermining US interests.

At the very least, a second Trump administration would reassert a transactional approach to US foreign relations. It is also likely to be more cohesive than the first, unconstrained by Republican Atlanticists and boosted by a more disciplined team.

If the Biden administration is re-elected, continuity may be expected. However, there is a high chance that the Democrats will not win control of both chambers of Congress (or if they do, then by only narrow margins). Thus, if the MAGA faction continues to dominate the Republican party, it is likely that a Biden administration would struggle to get fresh aid for Ukraine through Congress – as the most recent package illustrated.

¹⁰ <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/which-countries-meet-natos-spending-target/>

Both scenarios indicate that the pressure on Europe to develop 'strategic autonomy' is increasing. There are clear continuities between US presidential administrations. Privately, the Biden administration believes that Crimea and Donbas are likely to be bargaining chips in any peace agreement in Ukraine. In the Western Balkans, it has maintained a transactional approach, engaging closely with illiberal governments such as that of Serbia – even as it imposes sanctions on certain politicians and businesspeople throughout the region.

And while the Trump administration was especially aggressive in its trade policy, the Biden administration has broadly adhered to that protectionism. Mass subsidies extended to the renewables sector under the Inflation Reduction Act prompted the European Commission to activate screening mechanisms over competition concerns.

Whatever its complexion, the future US administration will have other strategic priorities elsewhere that are likely to divert considerable resources: not just China and Taiwan, but also the Middle East, which emerged as a wildcard in 2023. The massacre perpetrated by the Hamas terrorist group outside Gaza in October has been highly destabilising, with Israel engaging in direct confrontations with Hamas's ally Iran in April that may be a precursor to wider war in the region. Thus, the US commitment to the security of CESEE is likely to wane over the two-year outlook, regardless of who wins the election.

4.5. BRAVE NEW WORLD

The coming elections herald significant uncertainty for Ukraine and for European security over the two-year outlook. Regardless of whether Biden or Trump is elected, the EU will come under pressure to greatly expand its financial and material support to Ukraine. Landmark measures have already been taken in this regard, and these are building momentum around defence integration.

The mandate of the European Peace Facility (EPF), initially established in 2021 to finance EU peacekeeping missions, has been extended to include the provision of weapons to third countries – namely, Ukraine. Currently, EUR 11.1bn in funds have been earmarked for the EPF, over and above the EUR 22bn in military aid provided bilaterally by EU member states.¹¹ Furthermore, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) is pooling EUR 1.1bn to stimulate the purchase and production of military items, including 155mm artillery shells and devices to intercept hypersonic weapons. Elsewhere, French President Emmanuel Macron has mooted the deployment of French troops to Ukraine to assist with training – in part to underline that country's strategic importance to European security.

Although significant, the volume of this support remains comparatively modest: while the ASAP foresees the annual production of between 1.3 and 1.7 million rounds of artillery ammunition, North Korea provided the Russian armed forces with between 1 and 3 million 152mm rounds in just a matter of months.¹² And given the increasing unpredictability of US supplies, it will be necessary for the EU and its member states to make up as much of the shortfall as possible.

¹¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-solidarity-ukraine/>

¹² <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/North-Korea-sent-more-than-3m-artillery-shells-to-Russia-says-Seoul>

The military aid package approved by the US Congress will provide cushioning in the 12-month outlook. Yet if fresh aid cannot be passed beyond 2025, the defence capabilities of Ukraine will be compromised. While the EU could make up some of the shortfall, the US provides Ukraine with advanced weaponry and technology that European states neither possess nor have the capability to produce. The likelihood of Russia expanding its military advantage would thus increase, along with the pressure on Ukraine to agree a peace settlement that would likely involve major territorial concessions.

Uncertainty surrounding the European consensus on Ukraine is thus likely to increase. The consensus is unlikely to disintegrate or otherwise change fundamentally, but external and internal factors may weaken it at a time when decisiveness is critical. That will have implications for European security – not least in CESEE, where that security has provided the foundation for economic development since 1989.