

Zelensky's Plea for Ukraine Aid Will Find a Tough Audience in Washington

Ukraine's efforts in its war with Russia have stalled

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WASHINGTON—Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky enjoyed a hero's welcome when [he came to Washington](#) almost a year ago, a dramatic 10-hour visit that included an address to Congress complete with several standing ovations.

He will find a tougher audience when he returns to Capitol Hill on Tuesday to plead for a continued military aid package that is [facing resistance in Congress](#) at a critical juncture in a war against [Vladimir Putin's](#) Russia. Zelensky and his Western backers have tried to make the case that [Putin poses a threat](#) not only to European borders but to democratic governments that attempt to stand up to dictators. But even Zelensky's allies worry about the costs of continuing to fight Russia.

The Ukrainian leader was pushing for last-minute meetings hours before heading to Senate and House conference rooms for his third visit to Washington since the [Russian invasion](#) in February 2022. Zelensky is set to meet with President [Biden](#) Tuesday afternoon.

Zelensky makes his pitch as [war efforts have stalled](#) on the battlefield, leaving some lawmakers and more of the American public skeptical about how much U.S. taxpayers should continue to fund Ukraine's defense. The balance of power in the House has changed since last year, with Republicans now holding a narrow majority. Further complicating matters for Zelensky, his country's aid package is also enmeshed with [U.S. immigration policy](#) and linked to funding for a [war between Israel and Hamas](#), a conflict that has divided Biden's party.

"His issue is a life-and-death issue," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.). "I've seen what's going on over there and the desperation that he must feel to think that he's prepared to die for his cause, a cause which America encouraged him to press on."

Time is running short. Members of both chambers of Congress are expected to go out of session this week for the holidays and aren't scheduled to return until early January. That leaves just days for a deal to come together.

“Our members are pretty dug in,” said Sen. John Thune (R., S.D.), the No. 2 Senate Republican, indicating that GOP lawmakers would need Democrats to go along with strict new policies in order to vote for more Ukraine aid. “We want to help, but we need the Democrats to get serious about the border,” he said.

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.) said at The Wall Street Journal’s CEO Council Summit Monday night that he was prepared for his chamber to head home for recess Thursday [without approving an aid package](#) because the White House hadn’t shown a willingness to negotiate on the border.

“I don’t think it’s a radical proposition to say that if we’re going to have a national-security supplemental package, it ought to begin with our own national security,” he said.

The Ukrainian president plans to begin Tuesday on Capitol Hill, where the Senate last week rejected a roughly \$110 billion aid package that includes money for his military and government. Zelensky decided to personally press his case in Washington the same day that the legislation was defeated, according to a White House official.

Zelensky and Biden plan on holding a joint news conference—like they did during his December 2022 visit to Washington—scheduled for Tuesday afternoon.

In a sign of the challenges that Zelensky faces, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R., Ky.)—who is usually outspoken about funding Ukraine’s defense—used his weekly floor remarks on Monday to focus on addressing migration at the [U.S. southern border](#) rather than to rally support for Kyiv. Funding to address that is a Republican condition for passing the aid package, and Democrats say it is the main reason that a new infusion of aid for Kyiv has stalled.

The White House hopes that Zelensky, who has been an effective salesman for his country’s cause, can refocus attention on the fight against Russia.

“This is exactly the right time to be having President Zelensky in town to have these discussions,” said John Kirby, the White House’s national-security spokesman. Other officials noted that Zelensky has a knack for pushing lawmakers to his corner and that this is a critical moment for him to answer their questions.

At issue is a more-than \$110 billion aid package that includes military and economic support to Ukraine as well as funding for Israel, Gaza, the Indo-Pacific to help Taiwan and border security. The funds earmarked for Ukraine exceed \$60 billion, including \$12 billion to keep Kyiv’s government afloat along with \$13.5 billion for weapons built in the U.S. to rearm Ukraine. The White House initially requested a \$106 billion package that included Ukraine assistance.

Already Congress has voted for more than \$110 billion in supplemental funding for Ukraine and other national-security priorities, according to a White House letter issued earlier this month. The White House stressed that much of those go to U.S. businesses that make the munitions and weapons systems sent to Ukraine.

Republicans have been pressing the White House on what Zelensky's strategy is for victory and for what they view as a more reasonable price tag.

"What I've been trying to do is right-size this thing and what we're seeing are both sides digging in," said Rep. Mike Garcia (R., Calif.), who has been in close consultation with House Speaker Johnson on Ukraine funding. "They continue to ask for everything."

The aid package could be punted to next year, said several lawmakers on Monday before hearing Zelensky. "This is gonna be a January exercise," said Sen. John Cornyn (R., Texas).

The Biden administration wants to avoid that kind of delay.

The Pentagon says it is focused on the types of long-term military support that Ukraine will need to deter future Russian aggression going forward, such as armor, artillery and air capabilities. The U.S. and European allies are currently training Ukrainian F-16 pilots, and the first cadre could be ready for combat [as early as this winter](#).

There is roughly \$4.6 billion in remaining U.S. funds for military equipment and weapons and other support for Ukraine, but only another \$1 billion in separate funds to replenish U.S. stockpiles, [defense officials recently said](#). That means the U.S. can't provide more than \$1 billion in aid to Ukraine without potentially harming U.S. military readiness.

The Pentagon has stopped short of saying when it believes it could run out of funds.

Thirty-seven percent of Americans believe that the U.S. is doing too much to support Ukraine, according to a recent Wall Street Journal poll. The number has grown slightly since October 2022, when 30% said the country is doing too much.

Discussions around Zelensky's trip to the U.S. began taking shape last Wednesday, according to a White House official. Arrangements for the visit were finalized on Friday, and the White House announced it Sunday.

The Ukrainian leader wanted to make the case for aid himself to be sure he has done everything possible to secure military aid for the war, according to people familiar with the arrangements.

Around a dozen chief executives, including from the defense sector, met with Zelensky in Washington on Monday, a person familiar with the meeting said. During the gathering, Zelensky asked for their advice ahead of his meeting with Biden, the person said.

Any substantial decline in U.S. military support would cripple Kyiv's war effort, according to military analysts. The U.S. has supplied roughly half of the military aid to Ukraine, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, and it is unlikely any other countries could make up the shortfall if Washington pulled back. Many American weapons systems that are already in Ukraine need American ammunition.

Already, aid from the U.S. has slowed in recent months, leaving some troops short of artillery shells.

Zelensky described the situation in stark terms in a speech at the National Defense University in Washington on Monday. He said that Russia was trying to roll back the gains for democracy in Europe won in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed. Russia is a threat, he said, not only to Ukraine, but to freedom "from Warsaw to Chicago."

"America and all free nations need to be confident in themselves, in their strength, in their leadership, so that dictatorships doubt themselves and their power to undermine freedom," he said.

With Zelensky in Washington, Ukraine suffered one of its most serious cyberattacks since the start of the war. The country's largest telecom provider said on Tuesday morning that it had been hacked, interrupting internet and cell service.

In a post on social media, Kyivstar, which provides internet and cell service for more than 20 million people, said it had been "the target of a powerful hacker attack," resulting in widespread outages. A Ukrainian online payment company also reported being hacked.

Though neither Kyivstar nor Ukrainian officials commented on the cause of the attack, Ukraine has previously accused Russia of launching hundreds of cyberattacks. The Kyivstar hack is the first time cell and internet service has been knocked out across such a wide swath of the country.

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