

War in Ukraine

Republican sceptics question 'blank cheque' support for Ukraine

Some US conservatives have pushed back on Kyiv's appeals as they vow to step up scrutiny next year



Republicans Lauren Boebert, second from left, and Matt Gaetz, right, during Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to Congress © AFP/Getty Images

Felicia Schwartz and **James Politi** in Washington YESTERDAY

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President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington this week elicited a burst of bipartisan admiration in Congress, including from many rank-and-file Republicans and party leaders who cheered on his speech and vowed to keep helping Ukraine.

But scrutiny on US support for [Ukraine](#) is set to intensify as Republicans take the reins of the House of Representatives in January. Part of their scepticism comes from traditional conservative concerns about government waste and excessive spending.

It is also being driven by the isolationist faction of the party closely tied to former president Donald Trump, which has continued to sneer at helping Kyiv even as [Zelenskyy toured Washington](#).

“They're utterly justified in saying, ‘we want to understand where aid to Ukraine comes in the big picture of American strategy and spending priorities’,” said Kori Schake, director of foreign and defence policy at the American Enterprise Institute. “I ardently hope that oversight in a Republican-controlled House does not descend into performative grandstanding.”

Some hard-right lawmakers such as Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia did not attend Zelenskyy's address. Others, such as Matt Gaetz of Florida and Lauren Boebert of Colorado, attended but often did not join their colleagues' applause at the Ukrainian president's emotional appeals.

At times, the attacks on [Zelenskyy](#) from the right were venomous. Tucker Carlson, the conservative Fox News host, mocked his olive green military attire, saying he looked like the "manager of a strip club". Donald Trump Jr, the former president's son, attacked him for being "basically an ungrateful international welfare queen".

But many other Republicans, even some who have been close to Trump, are not embracing those views. "They are not asking for American soldiers to do the fighting — they are asking for weapons and economic assistance so they can stay in the fight," Lindsey Graham, the Republican senator from South Carolina, said in a tweet. "Ukraine's victory is our victory. God bless Ukraine!"

When they take over the House next year, Republican leaders are planning more hearings featuring Biden administration officials to provide details about where and how aid is being spent and have vowed to apply more scrutiny for future requests.

"There's concern that the money's going to the places that it's intended. Having any taxpayer dollars that go anywhere, whether it's domestically or abroad, deserves scrutiny," House minority whip Steve Scalise told reporters after Zelenskyy's visit, adding that he had raised this with the Ukrainian leader. "We expressed an interest in making sure the money is going to be scrutinised."

Zelenskyy acknowledged their concerns, and repeatedly thanked Congress and the American people during the visit for the aid and promised that Kyiv was putting it to good use.

"Your money is not charity. It's an investment in the global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way," he said during an address to both chambers.

Biden administration officials dispute the notion that Ukraine has received unlimited assistance — "a blank cheque", as Republican House leader Kevin McCarthy has suggested. They have said every aid package has been crafted in consultation with lawmakers from both parties, including the legislation delivering \$45bn in new aid for Ukraine that is expected to be approved this week.

Some of the funds approved by Congress and signed into law by US president Joe

Biden do not go directly to Ukraine but are for supporting the US response to Russia's war, such as for neighbouring troops, food aid or replenishing weapons stockpiles.

One Republican aide said they are also looking for better information-sharing with the US executive branch, particularly on direct budget support to Ukraine, which is sent through the World Bank and has different reporting requirements.

The Republican scepticism comes as both parties are beginning to gear up for the 2024 presidential election and support is waning among some GOP voters for Ukraine assistance — to a certain extent.

A recent Wall Street Journal poll found that while a majority of Americans support continuing aid to Ukraine, 48 per cent of Republicans say the US is doing too much, up from 6 per cent in March. A YouGov poll released this week showed 50 per cent of Republicans still support sending weapons to Ukraine, compared with 31 per cent opposed, but they are less enthusiastic about economic assistance.

The US and its allies have sought to ensure that billions of dollars in weaponry are not falling into the wrong hands. The US government has stood up several efforts to track weapons, and both Democrats and Republicans say that as the war goes on, they are gaining greater insight into where US support for Ukraine goes.

Since last month the relevant congressional committees have begun to receive more regular updates from inspectors-general for the state department, defence department and US Agency for International Development on their oversight activities, as well as some preliminary reporting on how US funds are being used, said people familiar with the matter.

USAID also has contracted Deloitte Consulting to work with the Ukrainian government to help monitor international assistance for a period of up to seven years. The consultants are assessing Ukraine's existing monitoring systems and helping to detail where and how US funds are being used.

Congress generally has more insight into lethal aid than it does for direct budgetary assistance because most weapons have serial numbers and are well tracked by Ukrainian officials, who have co-operated with US personnel on the ground to supervise their movements, congressional officials said.

In recent months the US has increased efforts to track weapons heading into Ukraine. US military personnel also recently resumed on-site inspections of American weapons inside Ukraine, after being halted during Russia's invasion, "and will continue to do so whenever and wherever security conditions allow" the official said

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