

Ukraine Could Tear Europe Apart

Doug Bandow

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Last week the U.S. and Europe loudly proclaimed their everlasting support for Ukraine at both the G7 meeting and NATO summit. So far money and arms continue to flow to Kiev.

However, just as Ukraine's backers were pleasantly surprised at that nation's stout defense against Russian aggression, they are increasingly discomfited by the failure of sanctions to wreck Moscow's economy. The push to end Russian energy exports has proved especially counterproductive, slowing European economies while raising both global energy prices and Moscow's export earnings.

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Rising resistance reflects the continent's economic travails. Many countries are hurting. Italy's ruling coalition is under strain with the split in the Five Star Movement over support for Ukraine. Also notable is Germany's plight, with its heavy reliance on Russian energy, unprecedented three-party coalition government, and promised military build-up. Days ago Yasmin Fahimi, who leads the German Federation of Trade Unions, warned: "Entire industries are in danger of collapsing permanently because of the gas bottlenecks: aluminum, glass, the chemical industry."

One wonders: Who is punishing whom?

Allied fractures highlight the importance of a speedy end to the war. Of course, it is up to Ukraine to decide for how long it intends to fight and for what purpose, but the allies should calibrate their support to reflect their interests, which is peace. Ultimately, they are responsible to their people, and no issue is more important today.

The initial sanctions drive benefited from a surge of popular support for Kiev, enhanced by President Volodymyr Zelensky's energetic leadership and Ukrainians' steadfastness under fire. However, nearly five months on public enthusiasm has ebbed. And early doubts are reemerging.

Last month the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) released a detailed study of the split between those focused on peace and on justice. The poll was conducted in May, when "[t]he public debate was turning away from events on the battlefield and towards questions of how the conflict will end, as well as its impact on people's lives, on their countries, and on the EU. It was also a moment when Europeans were becoming much more aware of the global economic and social consequences of the war: high inflation, and energy and food crises." Early in the war European leaders postured heroically and dismissed the difficulties to come. No longer, especially with sanctions appearing to be hurting the West more than Moscow. Over the long-term the Russian economy is likely to suffer from limited access to semiconductor chips and other critical technologies, as well as a youthful brain drain. However, that possibility offers scant comfort to Europeans who could soon find themselves unemployed.

Indeed, noted ECFR, governments will be forced

to balance the pursuit of European unity behind pressure on Moscow with opinions that diverge both inside and among member states. The survey reveals a growing gap between the stated positions of many European governments and the public mood in their countries. The big looming divide is between those who want to end the war as quickly as possible and those who want to carry on fighting until Russia has been defeated.

Dissent is growing, especially in western European states. For instance, more than a quarter of Italians and roughly a fifth of French and Germans, as well as Romanians, believe responsibility for the war rests primarily with Ukraine, the European Union, or America. When asked who is the biggest obstacle to peace, more than a third of Italians, a quarter of French and Romanians, and a fifth of Germans say Ukraine, E.U., or U.S.

Although these numbers indicate that dissenters remain a distinct minority, their impact is increasing in the continent's largest and most influential nations. Despite strong elite support for Kyiv, backed by efforts to extirpate most anything Russian, including contrary political opinions, from public life.

Even many people who blame Moscow for committing blatant aggression believe it critical to end the war quickly. In effect, they would focus on restoring peace rather than pursuing justice. Explained ECFR:

In theory, all European governments concur that it is up to the Ukrainians to decide when to stop the war and to agree the shape of peace. But clear divisions emerge in the poll when voters choose between whether Europe should seek to end the war as soon as possible—even if it means Ukraine making concessions—or whether the most important goal is to punish Russia for its aggression and to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine—even if such a road leads to protracted conflict and more human suffering.

Overall, the survey found 35 percent of respondents to be in the “peace camp,” 22 percent to be in the “justice camp,” and 20 percent to be “swing voters,” who want justice but fear escalation, and thus could move either way. Geographic divisions were significant. Italy’s numbers were 52, 16, and 8, respectively; Germany’s were 49, 19, and 14; Romania’s were 42, 23, and 10; France’s were 41, 20, and 13. Smaller pluralities emphasized peace in Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Finland, and even the United Kingdom. Of the ten countries polled, only Poland yielded a plurality, 41 percent, in the justice camp, compared to 16 percent in the peace camp and 25 percent as swing voters.

Divisions are likely to deepen over time. Noted ECFR: “As the conflict in Ukraine turns into a long war of attrition, it risks becoming the key dividing line in Europe. And, unless political leaders handle this difference in standpoint carefully, it could spell the end for Europe’s remarkable unity.” And swing voters seem more likely to shift to the peace camp than the justice camp as they and their countries suffer greater economic pain.

The partisan breakdown is complicated. Detailed ECFR: “In terms of party politics, it could be assumed that voters of the right are more likely to belong to the justice camp than voters of the left. But this rule seldom holds in full. In Germany, the preference for peace dominates among both center-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and center-left Social Democrat voters—while, from among the main parties, the Greens stand out in having the largest number of swing voters.” Opinion/party differences varied across nations.

Of course, being for peace does not mean backing Russia. Many people polled worried about the conflict’s impact on Ukraine. So far, the Ukrainian people have suffered much more, with not only thousands of military personnel killed and wounded, but also a wrecked economy, an aid-dependent government, mass social disruption, millions of citizens displaced, and multiple cities reduced to rubble.

Reported ECFR: “While both peace and justice camps agree that Russia and Ukraine will each be worse off as a result of this war, the justice camp believes Russia above all will be ‘much worse off’—while peace camp members foresee that, of the two,

Ukraine will suffer more. Some in the peace camp may therefore want the war to end because they consider it is inflicting excessive suffering on Ukraine.”

Peace advocates also worry more about the impact on the E.U. and, presumably, their own nations. Overall, 61 percent of those surveyed were concerned about both the higher cost of living, including energy prices, and possibility that Moscow might use nuclear weapons. Smaller numbers worried about potential Russian use of chemical weapons, expanded aggression, and cyber-attacks, as well as possible economic downturn and job loss.

Overall, 42 percent of people believed too much attention was being paid to the war compared to domestic problems; 36 percent believed the policy was about right. Only minuscule numbers believed governments were doing too little about Ukraine. Even some of those who prioritized justice over peace believed their governments were paying too much attention to the conflict.

Romania topped the list with 58 percent believing their government was too focused on the issue. Astonishingly, 52 percent of Poles believed the same. So did 48 percent of Italians. As well as pluralities in Spain, France, and Germany. The numbers reversed by a small margin in Portugal and the United Kingdom, with a significantly larger margin in Sweden. Only in Finland was the public overwhelmingly satisfied, with 60 percent of those polled favoring current policy.

European disunity is likely to grow if Ukraine emphasizes victory over Russia. That would require a longer, more intense war, with increased risk of escalation. ECFR worried that already “most Europeans see the EU as a major loser in the war, rather than reading its relative unity as a sign of a strengthening union.”

Russia is in the wrong and should not profit from its crimes. But continuing the war is too high a price to pay in search of justice, however defined. Peace is critical—for the U.S. and Europe, and especially Ukraine, which is bearing the conflict’s greatest burden.

***Doug Badow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire.*