



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory  
Report

**Is the European United  
Front Against Russia in  
Crisis?**

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On the 27<sup>th</sup> of October EU leaders met in Brussels to discuss an extension of military aid to Ukraine. The extension, totaling around 50 billion euros, must be approved unanimously in December. However, this may prove difficult. Both Hungary and Slovakia have voiced their opposition to the proposition and are pushing for alterations to be made. In his first EU summit since his election, Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico stated he is against the aid due to the endemic corruption that allegedly exists within Ukraine. He said, “Ukraine is among the most corrupt countries in the world and we are conditioning what is excessive financial support on guarantees that European money not be embezzled”. Hungarian officials have voiced similar opposition, with Prime Minister Viktor Orban stating that the EU strategy of sending military aid and money has failed and that Ukraine is unlikely to win on the battlefield.

### **EU Solidity with Ukraine: Cause for Concern?**

These developments demonstrate the increasingly uphill task the EU faces in maintaining a united front against Russia. Cracks began to show earlier this year when tensions caused by Russia’s suspension of the Black Sea Grain Deal caused disagreements amongst the bloc. In order to bypass Russia’s blockade of the Black Sea, an increased amount of wheat and grain began to move through East and Central Europe. This undermined local agricultural markets and led Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria to impose import bans on these commodities to protect local markets and farmers. The move received criticism from Kyiv and a host of European leaders, who argued that these countries were paying lip service to the Ukrainian cause, whilst undermining it in practice.

Russia has been intentionally stoking these tensions. For instance, during a meeting with Viktor Orban in mid-October, Putin stressed the importance of maintaining relations with European states, despite the current ‘geopolitical conditions’. In the meeting, the two leaders discussed increased cooperation on nuclear energy and oil and gas shipments. With Orban referring to Russia as Hungary’s ‘excellent partner’. Putin and Orban were then pictured shaking hands, an image that carries symbolic significance. Orban maintained his backing of Putin in Friday’s EU summit. He said that he is proud of the meeting with the Russian leader, highlighting Hungary’s ‘strategy for peace’ as appose to Europe’s ‘strategy for war’.

The election of Robert Fico in Slovakia has also caused headaches for the EU. In the lead up to the election, Fico campaigned on the promise to align his foreign policy with that of Hungary. Pledging to halt military support for Ukraine and support the relaxing of EU sanctions on Russia. Fico has consistently opposed Ukraine’s bid to join NATO and effectively taken Russia’s side during the war. Stating in August, “the war in Ukraine didn’t start a year ago, it started in 2014 when Ukrainian Nazis and fascists started murdering Russian citizens in the Donbas and Luhansk”. Whilst Slovakia is a relatively small country with little sway within the EU, Fico’s election signals a strengthening of the anti-Kyiv sentiment previously only championed by Hungary.

The recent tensions between Poland and Ukraine have further complicated matters. Disagreements over Poland’s embargo on Ukrainian grain as well as Warsaw’s announcement that it will halt arms shipments to Kyiv has strained relations between the

two states. A stark contrast to the close relationship the two enjoyed in the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This hostility was demonstrated when Polish President Andrzej Duda compared Ukraine to a, "drowning person clinging to anything available", at UN Summit in September. Despite this, many have claimed that the relationship fell victim to the electoral campaign in Poland. For instance, it has been argued that the appeasement of Polish farmers played a heavy role in the implementation of the import ban. With the passing of the election, it is possible that relations could stabilise once again. However, this is far from a certainty.

### **The Support for Ukraine**

Despite the seeming turn against Ukraine within Europe, the vast majority of EU states still back Kyiv. In response to Fico and Orban's seeming support for Putin, Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda said that it is strange to see country's starting to flirt with a regime that has committed such atrocities. Stating that it sends the wrong message to Ukraine and other EU member states. Similarly, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas criticised Orban's meeting with Putin and emphasised the importance of fulfilling promises to Ukraine. The vast majority of EU member states are still staunchly supporting Ukraine. However, collective action requires a consensus from all 27 members, and with recent developments considered, this is looking more and more unlikely.

