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Zelensky Makes Last-Ditch Plea for U.S. Aid as Russia Claims Advances

By Danny Kemp for AFP

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (C), accompanied by US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (R) and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (L), arrives to meet with members of the U.S. Senate on Capitol Hill on Dec. 12. **Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky held last-ditch talks in Washington to plead for continued U.S. aid Tuesday, as Russia claimed advances on the battlefront and scornfully dismissed the impact of Western help for Kyiv.

After Zelensky met the leaders of both parties in the U.S. Senate, Democratic Majority leader Chuck Schumer warned that Ukraine needed the aid quickly to prevent Russian President Vladimir Putin claiming victory.

Zelensky then went on to the House of Representatives to confer with the Republican speaker, Mike Johnson, and was later set to move to the White House for one-on-one talks with President Joe Biden and a joint press conference.

"He made it clear and we all made it clear that if we lose, Putin wins," Schumer said after the talks with Zelensky, who wore a black sweater with a small Ukrainian trident symbol, and olive-green military trousers.

Embed:

> Watch: Zelensky just finished meeting with senators and exited.
>
> Schumer: “very good and productive meeting”
>
> Zelensky did not stop. pic.twitter.com/Vleb3K5wdy
>
> — Lisa Desjardins (@LisaDNews) December 12, 2023

The trip — coming as Ukraine's main phone operator suffered what it said was a massive hacking attack — represents a desperate bid by Zelensky to keep Ukraine's key international backer from drifting away.

But while Zelensky won a round of applause from senators, Republicans are increasingly lukewarm about the need to support Ukraine.

They are blocking Biden's request for $60 billion in new military aid unless he agrees to measures on U.S.-Mexico border security and immigration reform — one of the most intractable issues in U.S. politics.

The White House has warned that money for Ukraine will run out by the end of the year without a deal with Congress.

In a speech Monday to U.S. military officials, Zelensky said that politics should not "betray" Ukraine's soldiers and he echoed Biden's frequent warning that the Ukrainian struggle against invasion has global implications.

'Deadlock'

The Kremlin scoffed at the impact of U.S. support, echoing the arguments made by some senior Republicans who say that continuing the flood of weaponry to Ukraine would be futile after Kyiv's summer counteroffensive stalled.

"It is important for everyone to understand: the tens of billions of dollars pumped into Ukraine did not help it gain success on the battlefield," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday.

Putin said on Sunday that Ukraine was "running out" of arms because its defense industry was not able to produce enough.

Embed:

> Putin, with champagne: "Our military production is surging, we are making multiple times more weapons. Their (Ukraine's) resources are dwindling."
>
> The West has to get its act together ASAP, otherwise there will be much greater celebrations in Moscow soon. pic.twitter.com/yThCZsLTRm
>
> — Janis Kluge (@jakluge) December 10, 2023

Russia said it was pressing ahead on the ground, just as Ukraine's freezing winter deepens.

"Our units have advanced significantly forward northeast of Novopokrovka," said the Moscow-installed head of the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia region, Yevgeny Balitsky.

Ukraine said Russia had launched a "massive offensive" with armored vehicles in another part of the front near Avdiivka in the east.

In a blow felt by civilians behind the frontlines, Ukraine's main mobile operator said it had been paralyzed by a "powerful hacker attack."

The disruptions make it impossible to send out air raid alerts, just as Ukraine is dealing with nightly Russian bombing.

But the White House said Russia was paying a heavy price for small gains, with more than 13,000 dead and wounded in the east since it started its offensive in October.

"Russia seems to believe that a military deadlock through the winter will drain Western support for Ukraine and ultimately give Russia the advantage despite Russian losses," National Security Council spokeswoman Adrienne Watson said.

'Full mobilization'

Even as the United States ponders its future Ukraine policy, Kyiv's main European ally Poland urged global support.

Polish prime minister-designate Donald Tusk called for the "full mobilization on the part of the free world, the West in support of Ukraine in this war."

The message will likely be echoed loudly by Biden at the White House.

Republican senators last week blocked Biden's request for $106 billion in emergency aid primarily for Ukraine and Israel.

Talks are ongoing behind the scenes on a deal that would make concessions to Republican demands for tough measures against illegal immigration in return for the Ukraine package.

However, Biden, who is seeking re-election next year, needs to thread a narrow passage

between giving Republicans what they want and not alienating the left of his own party.

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