



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Leopards instead of excuses – can Berlin support Ukraine more decisively?



Precisely 16 years after his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he accused NATO of not keeping its word with regard to its expansion to the east, Vladimir Putin is going to find himself in the same position, but as a topic for discussion on accountability for war crimes. "This theme of accountability, in the country of the Nuremberg trials, is the right place to do that. So I want to put the subject 'how to prevent impunity' high on the agenda", announced Christoph Heusgen, who chairs the annual event in Germany. If effective legal action really results from his concept of this year's Munich forum, that Munich and Germany remain the start and end points of Putin's confrontation with the West, which culminated in the aggression against Ukraine, what will Germany's role be, apart from being the place where Putin started and dishonourably ended his military adventure?

Heusgen, Angela Merkel's long-time adviser on foreign policy and security, wants Germany to take a much bigger role and responsibility in crushing Putin's aggression than it has so far. "We Germans committed appalling crimes in Ukraine during World War 2, and we have a moral duty to support that country. We should finally deliver Leopard tanks", Heusgen told the Welt am Sonntag. Leopard tanks are the key point of the German position on the war in Ukraine, and especially towards Russia, as the aggressor. Heusgen, as an experienced diplomat, with strong views on sending modern German tanks to help the Ukrainian fight, hints that the upcoming Munich forum will be "coloured" with that request.

Putin anticipates German reluctance

Olaf Scholz's government will not be comfortable with such an influential international forum addressing one of the most important internal issues for Germany. But the issue of Germany's attitude towards Russia and Ukraine has never been just Germany's business. From the very beginning of the Ukrainian invasion, Olaf Scholz's

government's reluctance to stand more decisively on Ukraine's side has had a strong gravitational pull on the smaller EU and NATO member states. German reluctance and calculation has also been at the centre of Putin's expectations for the "collective West" as he calls it, to be the key point of cracks, which have caused the failure of a decisive Western response to any attack on Ukraine. Russia's attack on Ukraine started poorly for Germany.

The first "military" aid from the Scholz's government to Kyiv was 5,000 military helmets, at a time when, for example, the UK and the US were sending rocket launchers, ammunition and other "real" weapons on a large scale. In the past 10 months, it has greatly increased and heavy weapons, such as Gepard anti-aircraft guns, howitzers and Mars rocket launchers have been delivered to Ukraine from Germany. The impression is that the government in Berlin is always working under pressure when it comes to sending weapons to Ukraine.

Sources of all excuses

One direction of pressure comes from the historical side, in which there must not be "deutscher Alleingang", meaning Germany's going at it alone, which has been the basis of the foreign policy of all governments after the Second World War. Another pressure comes from caution in the three-member coalition government in Berlin. However, only one party has been showing reluctance - the Social Democrats and Chancellor Scholz. "Sooner or later, we will have no other choice than to deliver modern, western battle tanks to Ukraine, his coalition colleague from the Greens, Anton Hofreiter, president of the Committee on European Union Affairs in the Bundestag, said earlier. Sending Leopards to Ukraine has also been requested by the third partner in the ruling bloc - the Free Democratic Party, and the conservative opposition from the CDU/CSU coalition. Weapons stockpiles has been on the list of excuses of the government in Berlin for not sending modern tanks to Ukraine. The

Minister of Defence Christine Lambrecht has warned about its depletion.

Also, there is the constant fear of Russia's reaction if any of the German heavy modern weapons, such as the Leopard tank, reach Ukraine. That fear is misplaced because it does not exist in countries that are geographically much closer to Russia than Germany, such as the Baltic countries and Poland, from which large quantities of weapons have been delivered to Ukraine. The reluctance of Scholz and his government to send Leopard and similar modern weapons without the consent of their security partners, principally the US, is increasingly less convincing. US Ambassador to Germany, Amy Gutmann, encouraged Berlin to send more weapons to Ukraine and while welcoming the German aid so far, she still told the ZDF that "her expectations are even higher".

Pressures in sight

The calculations and restraint in Olaf Scholz's cabinet will be greatly tested during the forthcoming Munich Security Conference, but also after it. Pressure from the domestic public and partners in the EU and NATO to help Ukraine more decisively will make the previous excuses even paler. Nevertheless, the main German expectation, regarding the moment when the Russian-Ukrainian war moves towards the conclusion of peace Germany would be influential in determining the direction of that peace, remains very strong. Germany wants that future peace to be beneficial for it as well, and that is where all its previous consideration towards Russia comes from, that is, its lack of determination to help Ukraine. Germany occupies the position of number one economic and security power in the EU, and it expects the respect and patience of everyone in the bloc. In short, it wants to be Europe's main bridge to post-war Russia. That is costing Germany its credibility with partners, particularly with Ukraine. Ukraine still expects Leopards, not excuses.