



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Zelensky in London and Paris – is there hope for a new shift in position?



London and Paris hosted Volodymyr Zelensky on the same day, but he was greeted by two different views on the future of his country's fight against Russian aggression.

London, as the first stop on the unannounced journey of the Ukrainian leader, was the meeting place of the wartime allies. In Paris, Zelensky had conversations with leaders who would like to engage in Ukraine when peace comes, and from that day forward.

Ukraine and Zelensky will have a hard time getting to point B, from which Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz want to lead the game, if there is no complete success achieved on point A, which is led by the US and the UK.

The visit of the Ukrainian president to London was the adrenaline climax of a solid, year-long wartime alliance.

From day one, Ukraine and the UK clearly knew what they had to do: the former, to defend itself with all its strength against aggression; the latter, to help it as much and as long as necessary.

This time last year, the UK was sending anti-tank missile launchers to Ukraine before the war had even started.

While some other European capitals were still debating who was lying – Putin, who said he would not attack Ukraine, or the US and the UK intelligence services who claimed the opposite – Javelins had been arriving in Ukraine.

London – a turning point for sending planes to Ukraine?

Not even a year later, Zelensky had little to explain to the UK leadership, or to convince them of the importance of equipping the Ukrainian army with the best weapons. He had to do that in some other capitals, but not in London.

“You extended your helping hand when the

world had not yet come to understand how to react”, said the Ukrainian leader to members of both houses of Parliament in Westminster Hall.

London was also the right place for Zelensky to get the strongest response for a new request for help, about sending modern jets to Ukraine.

In any other place, including Washington, he would have to be more cautious about his request to send “wings of freedom” to Ukraine, and ready to have tough conversations and present a series of arguments.

UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said after the conversation with Zelensky that “nothing is off the table” with regard to Ukraine's request to send modern jets.

Just as it spearheaded the recent move to send modern tanks to Ukraine, the UK is taking the lead in a new move that could change the stance of its Western partners on fighter jets from “No” to “Yes.”

UK Defence Minister Ben Wallace has been tasked with investigating which British aircraft would be most suitable for the Ukrainian defence as quickly and efficiently as possible.

“Mr Zelensky made a powerful case for the help his country needs. Mr Sunak has promised to support his plea. This should prompt NATO to provide Ukraine with the fighter jets needed to survive”, assessed The Times editorial, dedicated to Zelensky's visit to London.

Europe thinks of the day after

In Paris, Volodymyr Zelensky had interlocutors whose preoccupation with Ukraine has been more about the “day after” the war, and not how to reach that “day after”.

France, as the host of the trilateral meeting with Zelensky and German Chancellor Scholz, set out its position the day before, not at the meeting itself.

President Macron is in favour of organising a peace conference, with the maximum possible participation of international partners. At the same time, Macron sees the ten-point peace plan of the Ukrainian president as a "solid basis for creating a path to a peace conference".

By shifting the focus to peace initiatives and plans for the organisation of a peace conference, France, together with Germany, weakens the focus of Western partners on the primary issue, Ukraine's defence against aggression.

Before his visit to Paris, Zelensky told Le Figaro that Macron had significantly changed his stance toward Ukraine after the French president had sought to keep channels open to Russia in the early phase of the conflict.

Zelensky's impression of this is correct, bearing in mind Macron's recent determination to send a large number of light tanks to Ukraine and thus contribute to a reversal in the attitude of Western partners on sending heavy artillery.

However, even after the Paris meeting, the impression remains that France and Germany will be a major obstacle in the joint decision to raise aid to Ukraine to a new level, and send fighter jets.

French and German arrogance

The rhetoric of Macron and Chancellor Scholz was focused on the post-war period and assuring Ukraine that the EU sees it as a part of it.

Thus, the two have been cooling Ukraine's expectations about greater European aid in weapons and, as two of the most influential members of the EU, determine the narrative and political positions of the other members of the Union on the issue of Ukraine.

Macron's and Scholz's meeting with Zelensky also had a touch of arrogance, given that they dominated the conversation with the Ukrainian leader, placing other European

partners in the background.

This will not remain without consequences for the hard-built unity within the EU, and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni was the first to point this out, resenting the fact that Italy and other EU leaders were put behind France and Germany.

"Frankly, the invitation to Zelensky yesterday seemed more inappropriate to me because I think our strength in this fight is unity", said Meloni in Brussels.

"I understand the questions of internal politics, the fact of privileging domestic public opinion. But there are moments where privileging domestic public opinion risks being detrimental to the cause, and this seems to me one of those cases."

After his first departure from his country since the start of the war, the visit to Washington last December, Volodymyr Zelensky ended his tour of his most important partners with a round of talks with European leaders.

He thanked them for their support so far, but even more he used the opportunity to motivate them not to hesitate regarding the continuation of aid, particularly now when the threat of a new Russian offensive is becoming increasingly certain.

The answers he received can only partially satisfy him. He remains hopeful that the determination of the US and the UK to lead and push the coalition that sends military aid to Ukraine will overcome the hesitancy that still prevails among the most influential EU states.