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A difficult but essential partner. How Ukraine sees Germany

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The meeting between President Volodymyr Zelensky and Chancellor Olaf Scholz, together with Ukraine's support for Germany's candidacy to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council (as expressed during the UN General Assembly meeting held in New York on 20–21 September), symbolise the importance Kyiv attaches to its relationship with Berlin. The evolution of Ukraine's rhetoric on Germany – from critical in the first months of the war to positive in the subsequent period – indicates not so much a fundamental change in Ukraine's foreign policy, but rather a swap of the tools it uses to obtain regular, and increasing, financial and military support. To attain this most important of its wartime goals, Kyiv is placing particular emphasis on its relations with those states which are rich, influential and have state-of-the-art weapons, and those which, from its point of view, are insufficiently (considering their potential) convinced of the need to increase this support. This mainly applies to the United States and, as regards Europe, the US's closest ally – that is, Germany.

A change In rhetoric…

Over the last period of just under two years, the Ukrainian leadership's narrative regarding Germany has changed significantly. In the period preceding Russia's attack and in the first months following the invasion, it was characterised by particular harshness (see '*Ukraine: Germany is under increasing criticism*'). This resulted from Ukraine's disappointment at its cooperation with Berlin, which ahead of the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022 had been forcing through the implementation of the Minsk agreements and was continuing to develop its gas cooperation with Moscow. Kyiv's attitude was also conditioned by Germany's reluctance to provide Ukraine with weapons and military equipment, especially as other partners (including Poland) had long been sending heavy weaponry to Kyiv to help it to defend itself. At that time, Zelensky reproached Scholz for his conservative attitude, and declined to receive President Frank-Walter Steinmeier in Kyiv in April 2022. The Ukrainian authorities pursued this policy because they assumed that unless they could break through Germany's reluctance to provide the country with technologically advanced weapons, other European countries would likewise be less willing to provide such supplies. By playing on public sentiments, Ukraine also deliberately sought to convince Berlin to join the group of states which were providing active assistance to Kyiv.

This rhetoric eased several months following the invasion, when Germany provided Ukraine with the first supplies of heavy weaponry, and when in June the German Chancellor (alongside the leaders of Italy, France and Romania) paid a visit to Kyiv, during which he explicitly supported the proposal to grant Ukraine the status of an EU candidate country. In

July 2022, Kyiv dismissed Andriy Melnyk, Ukraine's ambassador to Germany, who had harshly criticised the German government for the excessively slow pace with which it provided weapons to Ukrainian defenders. From Ukraine's point of view, Berlin's policy then evolved in a favourable direction. Another positive development involved Berlin's consent (in January 2023) to deliver Leopard tanks to Kyiv. In May Zelensky paid a visit to Germany, which was received positively.

According to Kyiv, the factors of key importance in the process of Germany changing its attitude towards Ukraine included its own efforts, in particular the public pressure put on Berlin to convince it to abandon its former caution regarding arms supplies and drop its 'Russia first' policy. Germany's shift, which was long awaited by Ukraine, convinced the Ukrainian government that the assertive – and sometimes even aggressive and arrogant – diplomacy and attempts to point out Berlin's hesitation and mistakes it had made in the past were an effective method, which it should also apply in its contacts with the other partners who have been reluctant to help Kyiv (such as Israel).

The Ukrainian leadership is still putting pressure on Berlin regarding arms supplies, albeit in a more moderate manner. Official statements emphasise Ukraine's gratitude for the weapons already received (worth a total of €5.2 bn) as well as financial and humanitarian assistance. Germany still has certain types of weapons which Kyiv would like to obtain, such as the Taurus long range missiles, as well as political and financial assets. In the past, and today too, this potential has forced Ukraine to view its relations with Germany as a priority and to treat them as more important than its relations with other states, including with those which have offered significant assistance to Kyiv in wartime, and those which did not need much persuasion to continue offering such help.

…but no change in priorities

The change in Ukraine's rhetoric on Germany does not indicate an overall reorientation of Kyiv's policy to a focus on Berlin. It is a *de facto* continuation of the course already adopted (which is a rational one from Kyiv's point of view) towards a partner which can still offer it the military, financial and political assistance it needs most. What this change in attitude does involve is the application of different tools to those which were used immediately before and after the Russian invasion. Just as Ukraine's criticism of Germany at that time was driven by the strategic need to win this key state over and obtain its support, now Kyiv, in the hope of receiving more arms supplies and other assistance, is willing to emphasise Germany's role to try and persuade it to increase its support, and to assist Germany in finally overcoming the image crisis which emerged in the first months of the war.

Ukraine will be eager to contribute to the success of the *Zeitenwende* in the economic sphere by welcoming investments in green energy (hydrogen) and in infrastructure as part of its reconstruction effort, as well as by offering German business a prospect of generating profits at the expense of Russia, which is and will remain subject to economic sanctions. This is all the more important because this stance towards Germany is not inconsistent with Ukrainian public sentiment. According to a poll conducted by the Rating group in June, 80% of Ukrainians view Germany as a friendly state. Although Kyiv is aware that an accelerated pace of supplying arms does not mean Berlin is convinced that peace should be achieved on Ukraine's conditions, the fact that it is able to obtain concrete assistance – which is essential to continuing to put up resistance to the invaders – is more important than any

doubts.

Ukraine also views Germany as the EU's main player in the context of the bloc's future enlargement. It wishes to obtain EU membership as soon as possible – within the next two years, according to official statements. The reform of the EU proposed by Germany, France and several other EU member states, which they view as the precondition for accepting new member states, is not being widely discussed in Ukraine. It seems that Kyiv is either unaware of the intricate game the German authorities are playing with EU member states as regards the bloc's reform and future shape, or it is currently focusing on receiving a positive recommendation from the European Commission to open the negotiations (which is expected to be announced in October), and a similar decision from the member states during the EU summit in December.

This suggests that Ukraine assumes that those countries which do not support the reform proposed by Germany are *de facto* hampering the enlargement process. It may believe that the road to membership involves efforts to convince the main players to accept Ukraine. A similar situation applies regarding the decision to establish the future financial mechanism and how to spend its funds on the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine: Kyiv seeks to influence Germany's stance because Berlin is not only a major decision-maker regarding the form and size of the assistance offered within the EU and the G7 (and in the talks with the US), but it also has considerable domestic state and private capital to offer.

Since regaining its independence, Ukraine has viewed itself as a key European state and emphasised its territorial, demographic and economic potential, in a manner which was intended to suggest that it aspired to join the group of key players. The Russian invasion and Ukraine's heroic resistance have only boosted the conviction that Kyiv will play a special part in Europe once it defeats Russia. As a consequence, Kyiv views itself as an equal partner to Washington, Berlin and Paris, and treats other capitals as actors of secondary importance.