

German arms deliveries to Ukraine – the SPD’s controversial course

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For some time now, Germany has been vigorously discussing military aid deliveries to Ukraine. The German government, which made a landmark decision in the first days of the invasion to start supplying Kyiv with weapons, became more cautious about extending military support in the following weeks of the war. Domestic pressure from the coalition parties and public opinion, as well as from Ukraine and NATO countries, have forced Chancellor Olaf Scholz to reluctantly extend its scope. German support still remains far behind that of the main NATO countries, however. The Social Democrats, who are responsible for the course of government policy, justify their restrained approach with a number of reasons. Nevertheless, it seems that behind this stance lies a conviction that Ukraine cannot fully win this war and Russia cannot completely lose it and risk being pushed to a political and economic collapse. According to the SPD’s prevailing opinion, this would lead to some potentially risky scenarios – escalation of the conflict by the use of weapons of mass destruction or the implosion of the Russian state, with unforeseeable consequences for Europe. According to the Social Democrats, the war will have to end sooner or later with peace talks, and limiting German military support for Ukraine should enable Berlin to return to its traditional role as an intermediary between Moscow and Kyiv. However, such a strategy on the part of the Chancellery is leading to a loss of Germany’s credibility in the EU and NATO, and in Ukraine also.

An imposed change

Until the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany did not supply weapons to Kyiv. This line, established by the Merkel cabinet, was also adopted by the Scholz government. Until December 2021, this policy enjoyed the support of all parties in the Bundestag. Berlin’s backing for this approach was driven by fears of expanding Russian military operations against Ukraine and of the conflict turning into a proxy war between Moscow and the West. It also saw itself as an intermediary between the two states and recognised that a decision to deliver arms to Kyiv would undermine this role.

The government also cited ‘difficult German history’ and pointed to the internal restrictions imposed by regulations on arms exports control to countries involved in armed conflicts. At the same time, it emphasised its financial and economic assistance to Ukraine. Although Berlin did not openly criticise



the allies supplying arms and ammunition to Kyiv, it blocked the transfer of post-Soviet heavy weapons coming from countries which acquired them from the Bundeswehr after Germany's reunification (Estonia, the Czech Republic). From the end of 2021, more and more voices coming from the Christian Democrats, but also among the Greens and Liberals, favoured a change in the restrictive German stance amidst the mounting Russian pressure on Ukraine and Kyiv's criticism of Berlin. However, it was only at the end of January, under pressure from international public opinion, that the SPD defence minister announced the dispatch of 5,000 helmets to Ukraine, which provoked further criticism at home and abroad.

In a speech in the Bundestag on 27 February, Chancellor Scholz confirmed the decision announced the previous day on sending arms supplies to Ukraine, and declared that "there can be no other answer

” Chancellor Scholz, who is under increasing pressure from public opinion, the opposition Christian Democrats, and the coalition partners, is responsible for the restrained stance on German arms supplies to Ukraine.

to Putin's aggression". It therefore seemed that there had been a historic breakthrough in Germany's stance after the onset of the war. However, these announcements were precipitated not only by the Russian invasion, but above all by pressure from the Greens, a reorientation of Germany's closest allies alongside an anticipation that the war would not last very long. In the first days of the war, the Netherlands requested permission to re-export German weapons, which Berlin could no longer refuse.

As part of the new policy, the German government also announced the transfer to Ukraine of first 1,000 and then an additional 3,000 man-portable anti-tank weapons, together with 500 Stinger short-range anti-aircraft missiles, 14 armoured vehicles and 10,000 tonnes of fuel, and then some 2,000 post-Soviet Strela anti-aircraft systems. In March and April, the media also reported the delivery of 100 MG3 machine guns, ammunition, grenades, mines, 50 Unimog military medical vehicles, 23,000 helmets, several thousand bulletproof vests, as well as food rations and medical supplies. Germany has also lifted the blockade on the re-export to Ukraine of military equipment formerly from East German stocks, including 9 D-30 self-propelled howitzers from Estonia, and later 56 infantry fighting vehicles from the Czech Republic.

It is not known how much arms and ammunition was delivered to Kyiv in total, as the Chancellery has imposed a restrictive information policy in this regard. Therefore, there have been no official announcements either on the deliveries or their value. According to the media, the cost of the arms transferred to Ukraine from 24 February to the end of March 2022 by Germany – the largest EU state, claiming leadership in both the EU and NATO, and one of the world's major arms exporters – was €186 million, while according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy it was €119 million. This is far less than the value of the military support provided by the largest allies (the US or UK). Parliamentarians in the Bundestag with access to the classified list of military aid to Ukraine confirm that although the government provides more than is publicly known, it actually sends less than other Western countries.

A quarrel in the coalition

Since mid-March, the SPD defence minister's rigid narrative that the ministry was doing everything possible to help Ukraine militarily was no longer credible. Both the Greens and the FDP began to complain about Christine Lambrecht's tardiness and her incompetence in managing the ministry. At the same time, information was leaked to the media that in early March a list was compiled of new and used military equipment (withdrawn from service in the Bundeswehr and stored by defence companies) that could be transferred to Kyiv fairly quickly. It reportedly included over 200 items and included Leopard 1A5 tanks, Marder infantry fighting vehicles and Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft fighting vehicles.

Due to the increasing brutality of the Russian army against the civilian population and the offensive in the Donbas, discussions within Germany about supplying weapons to Ukraine intensified in April. It became clear that the responsibility for the government's reticence in this area lay not with the Minister of Defence, but with Scholz himself, who became the target of increasing criticism from large sections of the national media and the expert community. The restrained position of the Chancellery and the Social Democrats was publicly denounced not only by the opposition Christian Democrats but also by representatives of the coalition parties – the Greens and the Liberals – and the few Social Democrats in the Bundestag who believe that Ukraine must prevail in this war. The loudest voices in favour of more supplies, including heavy weapons, have been the chairpersons of the three parliamentary committees for defence, foreign affairs and European affairs – Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann of the FDP, Anton Hofreiter of the Greens and Michael Roth of the SPD, who made a joint visit to Ukraine in the first half of April, which was publicly criticised by the Chancellery.

Under these pressures, Scholz announced in the middle of April that he would increase the funding of military aid to third countries in 2022 to €2 billion. More than half

” Not only does greater military support for Ukraine depend on breaking the dogma of Germany's policy towards Russia, but also its status in the post-war European security system.

of this sum is to be allocated to Ukraine, with an additional €400 million being the German contribution to the European Peace Facility (EPF), under which the EU will allocate €1.5 billion in military support to Kyiv. On 19 April, the Chancellor announced an acceleration of the transfer of these funds to Ukraine – as fears had been expressed that they might not actually be used until the autumn – to be used for the purchase of armament and equipment from the aforementioned list. According to the Ukrainian ambassador in Berlin, the Chancellery nonetheless removed heavy weaponry such as tanks and infantry fighting vehicles from the list.¹

In addition, Scholz announced that Germany is ready to supplement the resources of its eastern NATO allies if they hand over post-Soviet military equipment to Kyiv. It was planned to hand over 20 Marder infantry fighting vehicles and 20 Fuchs armoured personnel carriers to Slovenia, which in return would provide Ukraine with 30–40 post-Soviet T-72 tanks. The chancellor has also declared co-operation with the Netherlands, which is to offer Kyiv German-made PzH 2000 self-propelled howitzers, in which case Germany will provide training for Ukrainian soldiers on its territory. The Ramstein conference on further support for Ukraine, convened by the USA on 26 April, has forced Berlin to take another decision – to donate 50 Gepard self-propelled anti-aircraft fighting vehicles and subsequently 7 PzH 2000 howitzers from the Bundeswehr's stocks. Although this represents an extension of the aid provided to date, it is still significantly less than that offered by the largest Western states. Moreover, Germany's decisions are not so much the result of a desire to support Ukraine in this war, but of pressure from coalition partners (the Greens and FDP), the opposition (CDU/CSU), German and international public opinion and the allies.

An uncomfortable Ukraine and pressure from allies

Greater military aid (in addition to the introduction of an embargo on Russian oil and gas) is demanded of Germany above all by the forthright Ukrainian ambassador to Berlin, Andriy Melnyk, who has sharply criticised the previous and current policies of the Social Democrats. He has publicly called on the SPD to account for its years-long policy towards Russia and its shady business ties. To stimulate the German debate, Ukraine also bought weapons from German suppliers to demonstrate to Berlin what

¹ According to the media, anti-tank weapons, reconnaissance drones, small arms and armoured vehicles, among others, remained on the list.

could be done. In March, Kyiv ordered 5,100 Matador anti-tank grenade launchers in Germany with a short delivery date, and in April it placed an order for, among other things, used Marder infantry fighting vehicles stocked by Rheinmetall. Permission to sell them must now be granted by the government, including the Chancellery. In view of the reluctance to transfer heavy armoured equipment to Ukraine, this will be another important decision that depends primarily on the position of the SPD. Kyiv has been assertive in its relations with Berlin for months and uses every conceivable argument to move Germany to take a tougher line towards Russia. It realises that not only greater support during the current war, but also the status of both Ukraine and Russia in the European security system afterwards, depends on overturning previous German policy patterns towards Eastern Europe, for which the Social Democrats were largely responsible. On the one hand, this involves further political and economic isolation of Russia and maintaining its position as a pariah in Europe, and on the other hand it concerns the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and its relations with the West, including its membership in the European Union. Germany will remain the largest EU state and will significantly influence the future shape of EU policy towards Russia and its eastern neighbourhood.

Germany is also coming under increasing pressure from its allies – it is no longer just international public opinion which is criticising the sluggishness of German mili-

” **According to the SPD, the defeat of Russia and a possible ensuing political and economic collapse in the country could lead to dangerous scenarios becoming reality.**

tary support for Ukraine and raising questions about the continuation of Russian policy, but above all its key NATO partners. These are expanding their supplies of arms and military equipment to Kyiv and thus forcing Germany to join the NATO mainstream. Until now, Berlin has argued that neither the US nor Western European countries supply heavy equipment – artillery, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles. It has treated the supply of post-Soviet heavy equipment from the NATO’s eastern flank countries separately.

The controversial SPD stance

The reasons publicly mentioned by Chancellor Scholz and Social Democratic representatives to justify the limited support can be put into two categories. The first one includes the fear of the conflict spreading to the West, including Germany. According to this narrative, Germany could become involved in the war through larger arms supplies; the war in Ukraine could transform to a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia; larger supplies could increase Kyiv’s chances of repelling the Russian invasion, yet risking the use of tactical nuclear weapons by Moscow, which in the worst case could lead to a nuclear war with the West.

Other arguments cited against the supply of heavy weapons are of a military-technical nature. There is talk of the Bundeswehr’s inability to transfer armaments and military equipment to Ukraine due to the armed forces’ limited stocks. Such deliveries could pose a risk to fulfilling obligations in NATO, where Germany will take over responsibility for the high readiness joint task force (VJTF) next year. Nor would they be useful to Ukraine, as training Ukrainian soldiers on Western equipment would require a lot of time that Kyiv simply does not have. All of these arguments – although not entirely false and countered many times in the German public debate – are regularly repeated by leading social democrats.

However, they seem to be more of an excuse for a line of reasoning that is not spoken of publicly, but which most likely dominates the thinking in the Chancellery and in much of the SPD. According to this thinking, the Russian-Ukrainian war will end with peace talks between the parties after all. Ukraine cannot decisively win this war and Russia cannot decisively lose it (with the risk of an ensuing

political and economic collapse), as this would lead to dangerous scenarios of conflict escalation, such as the use of weapons of mass destruction or an implosion of Russia, all having unforeseeable consequences for the West. From the SPD's point of view it is impossible to fully support Ukraine in a clash with a nuclear power without risking an escalation. Therefore, Ukraine will not become part of the West and will at best remain a buffer zone between the EU/NATO and Russia, and at worst part of its sphere of influence. Prolonging the war through further arms deliveries at the expense of the progressive destruction of Ukrainian critical infrastructure and increasing numbers of civilian casualties makes no sense from this perspective. Seeing the inevitability of Ukrainian concessions, Berlin also does not wish to jeopardise Germany's traditional role as an intermediary in settling the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv by becoming too deeply involved in military support for Ukraine.

The coalition Greens and Liberals overwhelmingly disagree with this point of view and are putting considerable pressure on the Social Democrats. On 23 April, a motion calling for the direct transfer of heavy military equipment to Ukraine was supported by a large majority at the FDP party congress. At the same time, the coalition partners do not openly talk about the real reasons for the reticence of the Chancellery, as these are no longer in line with the goals of the Biden administration, nor would they be well received by public opinion in Germany.²

Although the discussion about military support for Ukraine is intensifying, the ruling coalition is unlikely to fall apart. The chairpersons of the Greens and the Liberals are toning down their criticism of Scholz. They also spoke unfavourably of attempts to divide the coalition in the Bundestag, where the head of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, Friedrich Merz, announced that he would table a draft resolution calling on the government to significantly increase arms supplies to Ukraine, including heavy equipment from the Bundeswehr's resources, in the hope of winning the votes of the Greens and the FDP. In the end, the coalition parties, together with the CDU/CSU, voted through a joint motion, albeit one containing weakened provisions on the transfer of heavy weapons.

By sticking to their vision of ending the war, the German Social Democrats are simultaneously contributing to the loss of Germany's credibility in the EU and NATO, especially on the eastern flank. A change in Berlin's policy bringing greater military support for Ukraine to defend itself in the face of Russian aggression can only be brought about by the current strategy of putting Berlin under intense internal and external pressure, raising the risk of Germany becoming isolated in the EU and NATO. Germany cannot allow itself to remain on the political margins of the West.

² According to an ARD-DeutschlandTREND poll of 14 April this year, 55% of those questioned are in favour of Berlin supplying heavy military equipment to Ukraine, while 37% are against it. As far as party supporters are concerned, 72% of those who support the Greens, 66% of SPD voters, 65% of FDP supporters and 63% of the Christian Democrats' electorate are in favour of the supplies. On the other hand, Alternative for Germany and the Left Party approve of Chancellor Scholz's restrained policy; their voters reject the transfer of heavy military technology to Ukraine (76% of AfD supporters do not want such measures). 'Mehrheit für Lieferung schwerer Waffen', Tagesschau, 14 April 2022, tagesschau.de.