



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The Leopard U-turn has begun in Berlin with the resignation of the Minister of Defence



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz should be grateful to his Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht for her loyalty. By resigning as defence minister, she left her boss with two options at a critical moment, when the chancellor appeared to be backed into a corner and left with only one option.

Christine Lambrecht's resignation on Monday had nothing to do with her. Literally – it was nothing personal. Her resignation, however, creates a context where Berlin will have to provide an answer very quickly: whether to stick with the current policy of tensions over the delivery of heavy weapons to Ukraine, or reset such a policy.

Ms. Lambrecht will no longer have any personal responsibility for those events, but with her resignation, she has put her government and the chancellor in a position where they will have to make long-term decisions in the coming days.

What options does Chancellor Scholz have after the resignation of his minister he said “worked with immense engagement to get away from the paths trodden for decades so that we could manage the major restart that's necessary both for national defence and also for Ukraine”?

Does Scholz want to torpedo the allies' tank deal?

Some German observers suspected that Lambrecht's resignation was actually a joint manoeuvre and a favour to Scholz so he could avoid making a decision on sending tanks to Ukraine.

This suspicion is related to the vital meeting of the "contact group for Ukraine" defence ministers. The US will preside over that meeting on Friday, where the final synchronisation of the decision on sending heavy weapons to Kiev is expected.

Since his defence minister resigned four days before the decisive meeting, these sceptics

believe that Scholz thus had a political excuse to continue with his reluctance to send Leopard tanks to Ukraine at the Ramstein Group meeting.

The chancellor has reasons to continue with such a policy. Those reasons are internal and party-motivated. His coalition is not in agreement about sending tanks to Ukraine, with the opposition largely coming from his own SPD party.

Will the new minister bring a new policy?

If he keeps his promise that the replacement for Christine Lambrecht will be "announced soon", and even if it happens on Tuesday, as the media in Germany has speculated, it could be a signal that Scholz does not want to torpedo the allies' meeting on Friday. Furthermore, this could be a hint of a change in Berlin's course.

However, even if this happens, and SPD co-chairman Lars Klingbeil is appointed as new defence minister, it will send a strong signal that Berlin's policy will remain unchanged. And the meeting of the allies on January 20 will pass a decision to send tanks to Ukraine without Germany's consent.

As one of the most serious candidates for new defence minister, Klingbeil is a great opponent of sending German tanks to Kiev, and believes that Germany should not unilaterally supply the Ukrainians with Leopard tanks. “No country is now supplying Kyiv with such heavy tanks as the Leopard 1 or Leopard 2. Therefore, it is right that the Americans, the French, and also we as the federal government, are constantly thinking about whether we can now become involved in this war”, Klingbeil said last week, according to RND.

This policy of the the ruling social democrats is clearly dictated by public opinion surveys, according to which there is still no significant support for the delivery of tanks to Ukraine. According to a survey published by Das Bild,

50% of respondents oppose the delivery of Leopard, and 38% are in favour.

Beginning of a u-turn under pressure from the allies

Christina Lambrecht's departure indicates that the turn from "no" to "yes" has already begun in Berlin with regard to the delivery of heavy weapons, and that the fears of Scholz and partners that Germany "will be left alone" have been suppressed by the actions of other partners.

The pressure on Berlin to make a positive decision was particularly intensified by London's announcement that it will send 14 Challenger tanks to Ukraine, with constant demands of European partners for Germany to approve sending Leopards from their stocks.

"I call on the Germans to act decisively and hand over all types of weapons to Ukraine. Today, there's no reason to block support for Ukraine. Tanks shouldn't be rusting away in storage, but be handed over to the defenders of Ukraine", said Mateusz Morawiecki, Prime Minister of Poland, one of several European countries that are ready to send their Leopards to Kiev as soon as Berlin gives them permission.

The pressure on Chancellor Scholz from the allies is extremely strong and will reach its peak on Friday, at the meeting of the allied coalition, but then again two days later when he is scheduled to meet with French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty.

In these circumstances, it seems that Christine Lambrecht's resignation has opened the way for her boss to change the policy and represents a good reason to pursue that route.

"The resignation opens the opportunity for Scholz to change the narrative around Germany's support for Ukraine", said Rafael Loss, a defence expert at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

This is an option that gives Scholz an opportunity to strengthen his leadership role amongst European and Atlantic allies in the long term. It will cause him political problems internally, but he can also reinforce his leadership role by changing the internal narrative towards Ukraine.

If by Friday he at least hints at a change in his restrained course towards Ukraine, Scholz will show his ambitions to play a leadership role amongst European allies in the long term, which is the strategy of every German chancellor.

If not, he could become a political victim of excessive calculation regarding internal interests, and this will further lead to the instability of his government, and certainly the loss of authority among partners. No German chancellor wants that.