



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Bulgaria - a silent hero left unrewarded



Germany's reluctance to send heavy weapons to Ukraine as aid has occupied world attention and overshadowed the true heroism of European solidarity with Ukraine shown by Bulgaria.

While waiting for the richest European nation to make a decision and, after almost a year, more decisively to help Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression, it has been revealed that the poorest EU member has never undergone that dilemma.

Bulgaria provided crucial aid to Ukraine in the critical early days of the Russian aggression, taking the maximum risk for its economic and political stability. Almost a year ago, Bulgaria did what Germany is still reluctant to do today.

In the first months of the Russian occupation, Bulgaria sent Ukraine crucial aid in weapons and diesel, without which Kiev's resistance might have been crushed in the first attack.

## A matter of life and death

In a risky and complicated operation, Bulgaria sent Ukraine a third of its ammunition requirements and 40% of its diesel needs, Bulgaria's prime minister and finance minister at the time, Kiril Petkov and Assen Vassilev, told Die Welt.

"It was a matter of life and death", said Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, thanking Bulgarian leaders for their help at a crucial moment. "Kiril Petkov decided to be on the right side of history, and help us defend ourselves against a much stronger enemy".

Both the German government today, and the Bulgarian government almost a year ago, expressed worries about how their attitude towards helping Ukraine would affect the stability of their governments. Will the decision to send weapons cost them their seats in the government?

Olaf Scholz and his partners are still examining those limitations, but Kiril Petkov's

government did not hesitate for a moment, knowing that it could pay the price with their mandates for such a decision. That happened quickly.

The former Bulgarian prime minister sent huge amounts of ammunition and diesel to Ukraine, making decisions in an environment where not only a large part of the opposition, but also his coalition partner at the time, the Socialist Party, were strongly pro-Russian.

On the first day of the Russian aggression, February 24 last year, the pro-Western Kiril Petkov dismissed his defence minister because he refused to call the invasion an act of war.

The then Bulgarian government of Kiril Petkov led the way among European nations in resisting Putin's blackmail over gas and oil deliveries.

Bulgaria was the first country unilaterally to decide to stop Russian gas imports, while not having any alternative provided.

In this risky decision for the Bulgarian economy, which is otherwise very dependent on Russian gas, Sofia received critical support from the US, in the form of two LNG tankers, which helped the economy bypass its problems and focus on longer-term solutions.

## The high price of political courage

The price of this unprecedented determination from an EU member state was the highest for the pro-Western government in Sofia. The cabinet of Kiril Petkov received a vote of no-confidence in the parliament last June.

Since then, the country has been in a political vacuum and crisis, and new elections are expected in the spring, the fifth in just two years. It would not be a surprise if after those elections, an alliance that secures a majority is not achieved. There are rumours of elections in autumn, probably in September.

Despite being a member of the EU for 15 years and NATO for 19 years, pro-Russian sentiment in Bulgaria is still widespread. According to the assessment of local media on the eve of last year's elections, more than half of the 28 parties in contention had a pro-Russian political orientation.

The reformist and pro-Western government of Kiril Petkov has not yet received adequate support from Western partners, although as it can be seen now, from the beginning of the Russian invasion, it was a "silent hero" without which the Ukrainian defence could not have survived.

## Hesitation punishes the determined

Last December, Bulgaria, along with Romania, received a new refusal from the EU to include them in the border-free Schengen area, which once again caused frustration and dissatisfaction in Sofia.

One of the EU members which voted against Bulgaria is Austria, whose political leadership maintains a tolerant policy towards Russia. "European unity and stability received a tough blow today from a state that chose, in difficult times, to abandon its European comrades and serve instead the interests of Russia", said head of the ruling Romanian Social Democrats, Marcel Ciolacu, about Austria last December.

Such decisions of the European partners further increases anti-EU sentiment in Bulgaria, strengthening the positions of the pro-Russian parties and their leaders. At the same time, the sanctioning of Bulgarian pro-European leaders has been highlighted by countries such as Austria, which has refrained from helping Ukraine, citing its traditional neutrality.

The courage of the Bulgarian leadership at a critical moment for the defence of Ukraine will remain a source of pride for all of Europe when the conflict is over. Unfortunately, this will be without any reward at the right

moment, which this country badly needed.