



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Zelensky in Eastern Europe and Turkey - nervousness in the Kremlin



The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has been staying outside his country for an unusually long time and often these days, because condensed international events dictate that he deals more with diplomacy than coordinating affairs at home.

The trip to four European capitals and talks with their leaders in just two days were President Zelensky's attempt to resolve several significant issues for Ukrainian defence.

His short tour of Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and finally Turkey comes at a time when the Ukrainian military is carrying out a long-prepared counter-offensive against Russian forces in the occupied territories in the east of the country.

Directly related to this has been Zelensky's effort to ensure a stable and increased supply of weapons, particularly ammunition, from partner countries, given the expectations that the coming months will be marked by extensive fighting in the east of Ukraine.

Since the start of the Russian aggression, Ukraine's three Eastern European allies have been amongst its most generous weapon suppliers, particularly those from the Soviet era that Ukrainian troops continue to use.

Bulgarian hesitation

Zelensky has visited Bulgaria for the first time since the start of the Russian aggression. This was also a gesture of gratitude for its decisive military assistance to Ukraine in the first days of the war.

This was Zelensky's first meeting with the new Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov, who has been leading the government for only a month, but has announced the continuation of military support to Kyiv, despite strong internal opposition.

It seems that Zelensky's presence in Sofia, and

particularly his very sharp reply to the pro-Russian President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, in front of TV cameras at the beginning of their meeting, gave a boost to Denkov's government and its pro-Ukrainian policy, which has been experiencing strong internal pressures.

Due to the strong pro-Russian sentiment among the population, long-term political crisis, extraordinary elections and changes of governments, Bulgaria has been considered a weak link in NATO's eastern wing regarding joint support for Ukraine.

Despite this, it has sent a large number of weapons to Ukraine in the past year and a half. The biggest part of the record arms export in 2022 of around €4 billion went to Ukraine, three times more than five years earlier.

Bulgaria still has large stockpiles of Soviet-standard weapons and ammunition needed by the Ukrainian army, and its weapons factories have been working at full steam since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Eastern European support for Ukraine's membership in NATO

Zelensky has had a similar motive and the effects during his visit to Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, a country whose population has also been divided between Russia and Ukraine.

The government of Slovakia has been one of the most stable and generous suppliers of weapons to Ukraine throughout the war, including MiG-29 fighter jets.

Surveys at the end of last year showed that approximately half of Slovaks would welcome Russia's victory in Ukraine and only slightly fewer considered NATO responsible for the Russian invasion.

"What is a pro-Russian position? It's a pro-terrorist position, and it's wrong. Pro-Ukrainian position means a pro-European position", said Zelensky at a joint press conference with President Zuzana Čaputová in Bratislava.

As in Bulgaria and Slovakia, Zelensky encouraged support for Ukraine's request for membership in the Alliance with the President of the Czech Republic and former high-ranking general of NATO, Petr Pavel.

All three governments enthusiastically support Ukraine's admission, even though they share the position of the other partners in the Alliance that this should happen after the end of the war.

Kyiv is aware that it will not be able to remove that restriction. Zelensky's tour of three Eastern European capitals and his new meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan represents his efforts to secure support just days before the start of the NATO summit in Lithuania.

Also, by meeting with the leaders of nations whose public opinion is still wavering regarding the war in Ukraine, Zelensky seeks to strengthen the "weakest points" in support of Ukraine's future membership in NATO ahead of the decisive summit in Vilnius.

Given that the Joe Biden administration repeated this week its reticence regarding Ukraine's admission to NATO ("Ukraine must reform and meet the same NATO standards as other countries before it can be accepted into the alliance"), Zelensky's tour has the goal to ensure the broadest support of the Europeans from NATO, as a counterweight to the cautious American attitude.

Russian nervousness and threats to Turkey

Zelensky also received support in Istanbul, the last and most significant stop in his tour, where Turkish President Erdoğan said that "Ukraine deserves NATO membership".

Last Friday's meeting was dominated by the crisis surrounding a possible Russian blockade of the Black Sea grain deal after July 17, when its two-month validity expires.

The Turkish leader, who renewed his presidential mandate and increased support for his government with his recent election victory, said that he has been optimistic about the continuation of the arrangement on the export of Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea ports, which has been the most positive hint so far about the resolution of the crisis initiated by Moscow.

Judging by the reactions from the Kremlin, Zelensky's tour hit several significant targets, even though its announced itinerary seemed like an odd choice.

So far, Zelensky has travelled only to the capitals of the most influential Western countries, on which military and all other support for Ukraine crucially depended.

The Kremlin reacted nervously to his trip, with a note of threat to Turkey due to the reception of Zelensky: "We will very closely follow the results of these talks. It will be interesting for us to find out what was discussed. It's important", said Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin's spokesman.

Russia fears that Turkey as the main mediator in reaching the grain export agreement a year ago could blunt its blackmail policy to block the agreement.

It fears that Turkey's influence to extend the agreement could leave Moscow without the

ability to weaponise the issue. Judging by President Erdoğan's latest statement that he hopes to extend the agreement, Russian fears have been justified.

Moscow has shown nervousness regarding Zelensky's visit to Sofia and his talks with the new, pro-Ukrainian government, and they accused the Ukrainian leader of trying to "draw" other countries into the conflict.

"This topic will be discussed with Bulgarians", said Putin's spokesman Peskov, knowing that such a threat is futile but still an attempt to incite division in the Bulgarian public regarding the war in Ukraine.

Zelensky's tour also aimed to discourage Moscow's expectations of division and indecisiveness among the eastern members of NATO, and it largely succeeded.