

GERMANY: MODERNIZATION OF THE LEOPARD TANKS TO BEGIN IN 2017? MINISTRY OF DEFENCE REJECTS THE RUMORS PRESENT WITHIN THE MEDIA

German Ministry of Defence told us that modernization of the stored Leopard 2A4 tanks, up to the 2A7 standard, is expected to begin in 2017 or 2018. Currently, negotiation involving the industry is underway, while the programme receives “sufficient” funding. In this way, Berlin denies the recent media reports, suggesting that there is a plan to resign from the aforementioned undertaking, in the light of the budgetary constraints.

The Germans are planning to upgrade the Leopard 2A4 tanks that remain in storage up to the 2A7 variant, and then to introduce them into the Bundeswehr’s inventory, so that the Army would have 320, instead of 225 tanks at its disposal. In his statement provided for Defence24.pl, spokesman for the German Ministry of Defence claims the following: *„The planned purchase and upgrade of additional Main Battle Tanks (MBT) is sufficiently funded.”* In this way, the Ministry referred to the media reports, issued e.g. by the “Bild” newspaper, suggesting that no funds would be available in the 2017 budget, regarding the potential modernization and procurement of the tanks that would be required to fully equip the Bundeswehr’s units.

At the moment, industrial negotiation is underway, while modernization of the additional Leopard tanks shall begin in 2017 or 2018.

The Germans had decided to procure around 100 additional Leopard 2A4 tanks from the defence industry companies. These tanks had been withdrawn from active use in April 2015. Some of the aforementioned platforms, probably most of them, will be upgraded up to the 2A7 standard, while the remaining ones may be used as a chassis for the support vehicles (technical support or engineering platforms).

In the statement Defence24.pl received, the German Defence Ministry stressed: *„Details of ongoing negotiations with the industry concerning costs and timelines cannot be published.* Thus, no official knowledge about the date when the modernization of the additional Leopard tanks would be finalized, and no information pertaining to the ultimate cost of that programme is available.

Before the modernization is initiated, Leopard main battle tanks (in the 2A4 variant) will not be introduced into operational service in the German Army. The Germans are going to acquire the stored Leopard 2A4 tanks, nonetheless, before they are reintroduced into use, a modernization is going to be carried out.

Besides the stored Leopards, the Bundeswehr is also willing to introduce 16 Dutch Leopard 2A6NL main battle tanks into active service.

Initially, the Dutch Ministry of Defence was planning to completely withdraw main battle tanks from active service. Nonetheless, ultimately it was decided that a single company would become a part of the German-Dutch armoured battalion, formed within the framework of the Bundeswehr's 414th Battalion, initially seen as a reserve unit which now has been reactivated.

According to the information available, the unit shall attain combat readiness by the end of 2019. Achieving full operational capability by all six armoured battalions of the Bundeswehr is conditioned by finalization of the modernization works, the timeline of which has not yet been determined. In order to fully equip the existing units of the Army, including six armoured battalions together with the training units, ca. 320 Leopards are needed. The German Army, at the moment, has a little more than 200 Leopard 2A6 tanks at its disposal, with minor quantities of Leopard 2A7 and Leopard 2A5 platforms complementing the above package. The older vehicles have been withdrawn from active service, which, in conjunction with selling 105 2A5 tanks for Poland, caused the armoured units of the Bundeswehr to have insufficient quantity of tanks, in line with the latest reform of the Army, which was to diminish the costs and which reduced the combat readiness instead.

The Ministry of Defence additionally announced that *"the Bundeswehr plans to conduct all necessary system-upgrades in order to keep the high level standard within the existing version diversity of LEOPARD 2 family."* Procurement and 2A7 modernization plan is to make it possible for the Bundeswehr to equip majority of the armoured units with the latest main battle tanks, meeting top technological standard, among the variants that remain in the active service now.

According to the information published by Defense News in January this year, the Inspector of the Army, General Jorg Vollmer, announced that modernization of the tanks up to the 2A7 standard is to include two battalions - 88 vehicles in total. The number may be higher, as it may also include several vehicles for the training units. The remaining elements will still be using the Leopard 2A6 tanks, which are being used at the moment.

Implementation of such solution would mean that modernization of the tank up to the 2A7 standard is going to cover, above all, tanks which are acquired from the storage facilities. At the moment though, it is too early to define the way in which modernization works would be realized, when it comes to the 2A6 main battle tanks that are already being used by the Bundeswehr (and not the tanks which are planned to be introduced). It cannot be ruled out that Germany decides, in a few years, to develop and implement a main battle tank with capabilities which would be expanded, in comparison with the 2A7 platform. A concept assuming that Leopard would receive a 130 mm cannon constitutes an example of such solution. This proposal has been announced and presented a few months back, by the Rheinmetall company.

All symptoms suggest that a programme, the aim of which is to increase the number of tanks used in the German Army, is going to be implemented, however, no relevant workplan for that programme has been established. The issue of prospective tank modernizations, especially in case of the main battle tanks that are being currently used by the Bundeswehr, still remains open. Moreover, introductory conceptual works on a successor of the Leopard 2 tank have also been initiated. The vehicle is expected to become a part of the German inventory around the year 2030. The project will be realized as a collaborative effort with France. It is also possible that the KANT company is going to be involved in the development works related to the new main battle tank. The company has been established as a result of a fusion of the French Nexter and German KMW companies. The latter one is dealing with implementation of the 2A7 modernization programme.

Let us recall the fact that the 2A7 tank is going to receive a new battle management system, along with a new optronics suite. The tank is also going to have an improved armour protection. The 2A7 vehicle uses a 120 mm cannon with barrel length of 55 calibres, similarly as the 2A6 variant.

However, the 2A7 platform has an ability to use the DM-11 programmable rounds.

The information related to the German resignation from introducing the additional tanks did not turn out to be true. Nonetheless, schedule and modernization costs still remain undefined. In May this year, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung announced that several million euros are going to be allocated to procurement of additional vehicles in 2017, while the TLVS air defence system is going to be financed with a minor amount of several million euros.

In the light of the above, a question emerges, how one should interpret the media narrative and the reaction of the German authorities.

The expansion plan pertaining to the armoured forces is going to be continued, however, it may also be prolonged, distributed across a longer timeline. Due to the above, relevant capabilities are going to be obtained in a few years. This is a result of, above all, the scope of structural cuts undertaken by Germany, within the framework of the latest reforms of the Bundeswehr, implemented at the beginning of the current decade. One should also remember that even though the decisions related to the armoured weaponry will increase the combat potential, and despite the fact that the relevant steps are going to be taken, as all symptoms suggests, no decisions have been made related to reversal of the cuts, e.g. within the artillery units or direct air defence units of the land forces.

Finally, the German plans are burdened with a political risk, in the light of the possible detrimental changes that could follow the Bundestag election in 2017. Berlin also faces the personnel problems, in the recruitment area.

Thus, even though the general direction of the undertaken changes is positive, a complete assessment is yet to come.