




Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:
Bulgaria's Positions and Reactions to the War in Ukraine**
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Bulgaria's Positions and Reactions to the War in Ukraine

Summary

From the very beginning of the gradual escalation of tensions between Ukraine and Russia, as well as between Russia and USA and NATO, long before the Russian military intervention in Ukraine on February 24, the Bulgarian government has stated a clear and firm position that it will be united with its allies from the European Union and NATO. At the same time, for a long time Bulgaria has demonstrated a desire and aspiration to contribute to the de-escalation of tensions. After February 24, 2022, the Bulgarian government as well as the Bulgarian parliament and Bulgarian President strongly condemned Russia's actions and unconditionally sided with the EU and NATO countries in support of the Ukrainian state.

On 24 February, Russia invaded Ukraine. In a television address, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a special military operation in the Donbas region in Ukraine's east, which, he said, was aimed at protecting civilians and countering the encroachment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Long before this worst turn of events, the Bulgarian government tried to demonstrate both a firm stance in support of Ukraine's sovereignty and inviolability and together with this a desire to de-escalate tensions.

Efforts for the diplomatic solution of the crises

On January 25, Prime Minister Kiril Petkov chaired the first meeting of the Security Council of the Council of Ministers in 2022, which discussed the risks and challenges in the context of the complicated security environment resulting from tensions around the Ukrainian border. The participants in the meeting presented to the Prime Minister an analysis of the geopolitical situation, as well as possible measures discussed within NATO to demonstrate solidarity on its southeastern flank.

The Prime Minister was adamant that all decisions taken by the government will be in line with the development of the situation and the possible escalation of the conflict, including measures to avoid negative economic effects. He stressed that Bulgaria is a loyal ally in the Alliance and unity is the strongest response.

The next day, on January 26, the Council of Ministers decided in the Bulgarian strategy to prioritize the de-escalation of tensions between NATO and the Russian Federation. The focus had to be put on resolving the conflict through diplomacy.

During the following weeks Bulgarian government was repeating many times that its position is clear – *“Bulgaria will be a constructive ally in NATO and the EU, and will maintain a responsible and predictable position.”* During an extraordinary session of Bulgarian Parliament on Ukraine the Prime Minister stressed that *“The first and most important position is to work to reduce tensions by all diplomatic means. De-escalation is our priority because the escalation is real. For the first time, the idea of our strategy is not to be benefactors of security, but to be partners”.*

At the same time the Defence Minister Stefan Yanev said that *“No Bulgarian soldier will take part in any kind of conflict or operation on the territory of Ukraine or another country, without the decision being made in the National Assembly or the Council of Ministers”.*

Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska defended the same thesis. According to her, Russia was currently trying to divide the allies into categories. Bulgaria’s position in this situation was clear – support for the sovereignty of Ukraine. Genchovska also pointed out that Bulgaria rejects the Russian idea of spheres of influence after Russia asked NATO to halt its eastward expansion and return to its 1997 borders.

The risks for Bulgaria are related to energy, particularly gas supplies, but the government reassured the parliament that it is working on a strategy that included an option of cutting off Russian gas supplies due to the crisis.

Unfortunately, diplomatic efforts and hopes for de-escalation of the tensions have failed, and after Russia recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as independent, President Putin announced a military operation in Ukraine explaining it with the need to protect civilians in eastern Ukraine — a claim the U.S. had predicted he would falsely make to justify an invasion. In a television address, Putin accused the U.S. and its allies of ignoring Russia’s demand to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO and offer Moscow security guarantees.

Reaction of Bulgaria on the Russian military invasion in Ukraine

A joint declaration in Bulgaria’s National Assembly on February 22 by three of the governing majority partners condemned Russian President Vladimir Putin for recognizing the self-proclaimed “independent” regions in eastern Ukraine. The declaration followed a statement of condemnation on the night of February 21 by Bulgaria’s Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, in the hours after Putin was shown signing documents recognizing the two Donbas republics as “independent”. The joint statement by the three parties said: *“Bulgaria unreservedly supports*

the territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.” The declaration also said that Bulgaria would insist that the EU and NATO continue to strongly defend the principles of international law.

In a separate declaration, read earlier in the same day to reporters, the fourth partner in the ruling majority, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), expressed “*strong concern over recent developments in the conflict in eastern Ukraine*”. “*The recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics by the Russian Federation can be seen as a violation of international law. With this step, conflict in the region is entering a new, unpredictable phase,*” said the BSP declaration.

At the same time on the morning of February 22, in a message on Twitter, Bulgarian President Roumen Radev said: “*The recognition of the so-called DPR and LPR by the Russian federation dooms the efforts for de-escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and leads to rising tension throughout the whole region.*”

Soon after the Russian invasion in Ukraine Bulgaria’s Prime Minister stated that Bulgaria strongly condemn Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine and the use of military force against a sovereign state is unacceptable in the 21st century.

Kiril Petkov was among those participating in an emergency meeting of top state, government, military and intelligence officials convened by President Roumen Radev after Putin announced the attack on Ukraine.

A further attempt was being made for Bulgaria’s Parliament to come up with a joint position on Putin’s further invasion of Ukrainian territory.

The Bulgarian Foreign Minister Teodora Genchovska, who cancelled a planned visit to Kyiv, said that she also strongly condemns Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine. According to her “*This act undermines Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence and is a serious violation of international law*”.

There was a large turnout at a public protest outside the Russian embassy in Sofia on the evening of February 24, expressing outrage at the invasion of Ukraine and condemning the massive military aggression ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Earlier the same day Bulgaria’s Parliament voted overwhelmingly to approve a declaration condemning Russia’s gross violation of international law and encroachment on territorial integrity through military intervention against Ukraine.

Six out of seven parliamentary groups voted in favor, including the four from the ruling majority: We Continue the Change, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, There is Such People and the Democratic Bulgaria coalition, and the opposition GERB-United Democratic Forces and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms.

The declaration was voted clause by clause, however, with the BSP abstaining on the point backing sanctions.

The one group that voted against was the pro-Kremlin Vuzrazhdane party.

The declaration said that Bulgaria's National Assembly supports its partners and allies in the European Union and NATO in discussing a package of measures, including sanctions, to de-escalate the conflict.

It stated support for the Bulgarian government to take the necessary measures commensurate with the seriousness of the challenges to the international security architecture.

It also stated support for the Bulgarian government to consider and offer assistance to Ukraine, corresponding to the resources of the Bulgarian state.

The declaration also backed the Bulgarian government insisting that the protection of the life and health of civilians in the region be an absolute priority, to assist in obtaining immediate assistance from Bulgarian citizens and Bulgarians with Ukrainian citizenship living in Ukraine, including the need for evacuation.

The declaration said Parliament expected the Bulgarian government to propose and present a plan to deal with the consequences of the hostilities. It called on Russia to cease hostilities immediately and return to full compliance with international law.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, speaking during the debate in the Parliament said that there was no direct threat to Bulgaria and the government had formed 10 working groups to assess the risks in various areas.

Prime Minister Kiril Petkov said in a video address on February 27 that Bulgaria is joining other EU and NATO countries that will support Ukraine with humanitarian aid and military logistical support. Petkov said that the humanitarian aid that Bulgaria would send to Ukraine would include clothes, shoes, tents, sheets, blankets "to make sure that Ukrainian citizens feel the support of our country". No victim and no person in Ukraine should feel alone in this fratricidal war, he said.

Regarding the military-logistical assistance the Prime Minister announced that it would be coordinated with the European Union and NATO as "common aid".

At the same time on February 28 Bulgarian foreign ministry announced that Bulgaria is evacuating its embassy staff from the Ukraine capital Kyiv after evacuating the staff from its consular office in Odessa.

Together with this Bulgarian government has supported the strengthening of restrictive measures with a view to putting pressure on Russia to cease hostilities, as well as closing EU airspace to Russian aircraft.

Conclusion

Russia's war against Ukraine dramatically changed Bulgarian public opinion. According to the results of an express sociological survey conducted by the Bulgarian National Television and the Alpha Research Agency, during the four days of hostilities, Russian President has lost more than half of his popularity in Bulgaria. Despite ongoing efforts by European countries to resolve the conflict peacefully and de-escalate, this seems unlikely at this stage in the short term. Therefore, the Bulgarian authorities, in coordination with their European partners, must take action to protect Bulgaria's national security with a specific focus on humanitarian aspects and energy security.