



# Weekly Briefing

**Bulgaria external relations briefing:  
Bulgarian Diplomacy, the War in Ukraine and European Security  
and Defense Issues  
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# **Bulgarian Diplomacy, the War in Ukraine and European Security and Defense Issues**

## **Summary**

*In February, Bulgaria showed exceptional diplomatic activity regarding the war in Ukraine and the European security issues. Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov, Foreign Minister Maria Gabriel and Defense Minister Todor Tagarev were particularly active. The most important international forums in which this activity was manifested were the following: the meeting of the defense ministers of the NATO member states held in Brussels on February 15, 2024, the Munich Security Conference held from 16 to 18 February 2024, as well as the high-level meeting in Paris dedicated to Ukraine, held on February 26, 2024. This extremely large activity of Bulgarian diplomacy ended with the visit of Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov to Kyiv on February 26, at the head of a large Bulgarian delegation. During this visit, it was announced that it would be discussed whether Bulgaria would sign a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine, as other EU countries have done.*

In February there was an extremely high activity of European diplomacy regarding the issue of the security and defense in Europe as well as the possible elaboration of common strategy regarding the existing security threats. The reason for the greater international activity was also the fact that February 24 marked two years since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. An event that brought into Europe a huge challenge. Marking the date of the beginning of this war, the European countries, including Bulgaria, wanted to demonstrate in an unequivocal way their unity and determination to support Ukraine in all possible ways (excluding direct military intervention) and to resist any further possible threats against European security and defense.

This is precisely the context in which Bulgaria also showed exceptional diplomatic activity regarding the issues related to the war in Ukraine, European security and the commitments of the Bulgarian government in these matters. The international forums in which this activity was demonstrated were: the meeting of the Ministers of Defense of the NATO Member States held in Brussels on February 15, 2024, the Munich Security Conference held from February 16 to 18, 2024, as well as the meeting at a high level in Paris, dedicated to Ukraine, held on February 26, 2024. In addition to participation in international forums, Bulgarian diplomacy also demonstrated two significant high-level visits made to Kyiv. It is

about the visit of the President of the Bulgarian Parliament Rosen Zhelyazkov to Ukraine on February 6, as well as the visit of Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov to Kyiv on February 26, at the head of a large Bulgarian delegation, which included three ministers - of justice, of the environment and of energy, as well as two deputy ministers - of foreign affairs and of defense.

### **Visit of the President of the National Assembly Rosen Zhelyazkov in Ukraine**

February began with a landmark Bulgarian visit to Ukraine. On February 6-7, the Ukrainian capital was visited by a delegation led by the President of the National Assembly Rosen Zhelyazkov at the invitation of the President of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Ruslan Stefanchuk.

In his talks with Ruslan Stefanchuk Rosen Zhelyazkov said that the EU's long-term commitment to Ukraine is the best guarantee of Ukraine's free and secure future.<sup>1</sup>

Rosen Zhelyazkov also stressed that Bulgaria welcomes the European Council's decision to start negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU and strongly supports Ukraine's European integration and Euro-Atlantic perspective. According to him the EU enlargement process has a huge transformative power and is key to promoting peace, security and democracy. Rosen Zhelyazkov stated that this policy is even more important against the backdrop of the new security context in Europe after Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine. *“It is of strategic importance for Bulgaria to have safe, stable, independent and prosperous countries in its immediate neighborhood, that share our common values - democracy, the rule of law, human rights, including the rights of national minorities”*, the President of Parliament added.<sup>2</sup>

Rosen Zhelyazkov noted that days ago, the leaders of the 27 EU member states unanimously approved the provision of an additional EUR 50 billion in aid to Ukraine from the European budget. In his words, this is an expression of the solidarity and support of the European countries, of their commitment in the process of reconstruction of Ukraine.

The President of the Bulgarian National Assembly expressed Bulgaria's deep concern after the unprecedented military actions of the Russian Federation in the Black Sea region and noted that to counter the threat of sea mines in the Black Sea, on 11 January 2024, a Trilateral Memorandum was signed in Istanbul between Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey to establish a joint mission to counter the mines (MCM Black Sea) and expressed hope that this mission would meet its humanitarian goals and contribute to the safety of navigation in the Black Sea.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.parliament.bg/en/news/ID/5941>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parliament.bg/en/news/ID/5941>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.parliament.bg/en/news/ID/5941>

At the end Rosen Zhelyazkov reaffirmed Bulgaria's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. *“On the eve of the second year of Russian aggression, I am here today to express my admiration for the unprecedented heroism of the Ukrainians and to declare my country's unconditional support and sympathy for the cause of Ukraine”*, he said.<sup>4</sup>

Bulgaria has consistently supported Ukraine in all dimensions – political, financial, military and humanitarian and will support Ukraine for as long as necessary. Bulgarian assistance to Ukraine was stipulated at the highest level by seven decisions of the National Assembly. They envisage providing the Ukrainian side with armored transport equipment, ammunition for automatic small arms, training of Ukrainian military orderlies in Bulgaria, etc. The focus of the decisions of the Bulgarian Parliament was also the planned support in the recovery of the economy, infrastructure and energy, strengthening energy cooperation and humanitarian aid.<sup>5</sup>

### **Meeting of the Ministers of Defense of the NATO member states in Brussels**

After this high-level Bulgarian visit to Ukraine and the clear messages made, the next significant moment in Bulgarian diplomacy in February, in which a clear concerning the war in Ukraine and the issues of defense and security in Europe was declared, is the participation of the Minister of Defense Todor Tagarev in the meeting of the Ministers of Defense of the NATO member states, which took place in Brussels on February 15.<sup>6</sup>

The forum provided an opportunity to discuss decisions related to strengthening NATO's deterrence and defense potential in the context of preparations for the upcoming Alliance summit in July this year which will take place in Washington, USA.

During the meeting, key issues of the Alliance's agenda were also discussed, such as the fair sharing of burdens and responsibilities, and the implementation of the new Defense Investment Pledge (DIP), as well as progress on the implementation of the Defense Production Action Plan (DPAP).<sup>7</sup>

Allies are united around the view that in a more dangerous and competitive world they should continue to invest more in NATO. Alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg noted that support for Ukraine is an example of real transatlantic sharing of responsibilities in practice.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.parliament.bg/en/news/ID/5942>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.parliament.bg/en/news/ID/5942>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/618571-todor-tagarev-shte-uchastva-v-sreshtata-na-ministrите-na-otbranata-na-stranite-c>

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

During the meeting of defense ministers, a working meeting of the NATO-Ukraine Council at the level of defense ministers took place, where long-term political and practical support for Ukraine was discussed. Ministers also discussed the implementation of the Multiannual Assistance Program for Ukraine approved at the Vilnius Summit and the Annual National Program of Ukraine.<sup>8</sup>

During the meeting, Minister Tagarev emphasized that Bulgaria continues to consider opportunities to provide effective support to Ukraine - both military and humanitarian, within the national capabilities.

European NATO countries this year for the first time must reach defense spending equal to two percent of their total gross domestic product, announced the secretary general of the pact, Jens Stoltenberg, at a press conference, on the eve of the meeting of the defense ministers of the Alliance.<sup>9</sup>

*„This year, I expect 18 allies to spend two percent of their (national) GDP on defense, and that's a new record“*, Stoltenberg said. He noted that 2024 is the sixth consecutive year of defense spending increases in the past decade.

Stoltenberg also added that this year, European allies will provide \$380 billion for defense, last year they reported an unprecedented 11 percent increase in this spending. Since 2014, European NATO allies and Canada have invested more than \$6 billion in defense.<sup>10</sup>

From this point of view, the Bulgarian Minister of Defense notes that Bulgaria is among the 18 NATO countries that have already fulfilled the conditions for devoting 2 percent of GDP to defense.<sup>11</sup>

According to Minister Tagarev, *“a significant part of this budget - over a third - is for investing in new capabilities, which is quite well received by our allies”*.<sup>12</sup> *“Cooperation between NATO and the EU in the field of defense production, comprehensive provision and assistance to Ukraine remains key to avoiding duplication of efforts, achieving complementarity and effective use of national and common resources,”* Defense Minister Todor Tagarev also said.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/world/618080-nato-predstavi-nay-novite-danni-za-voennite-razhodi-na-aliansa#%D0%9D%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%9E>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.actualno.com/politics/tagarev-v-bruksel-davame-poveche-ot-2-ot-bvr-za-otbrana-v-kriterija-na-nato-sme-news\\_2159921.html](https://www.actualno.com/politics/tagarev-v-bruksel-davame-poveche-ot-2-ot-bvr-za-otbrana-v-kriterija-na-nato-sme-news_2159921.html)

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

## Munich Security Conference

The next extremely important international forum in which Bulgaria took an active part was the 60th Munich Security Conference, which took place from 16 to 18 of February, 2024. The conference was attended by nearly 50 heads of state and government, over 100 ministers, as well as leaders of many key international and civil society organizations. Over the course of three days, the conference provided an opportunity to discuss the current challenges to international security at the highest level.<sup>14</sup>

At the center of the discussions in Munich were the present state and future of the international order, the necessary reforms of multilateral governance mechanisms, regional conflicts, transnational challenges such as climate change and food insecurity, as well as Europe's role in the world.<sup>15</sup>

At this forum, Bulgaria was represented by a delegation led by Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov. The delegation included Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Maria Gabriel, Defense Minister Todor Tagarev, as well as other ministers.

The position that the Bulgarian Prime Minister presented at the security conference regarding the war in Ukraine was that *"The danger is there and we must open our eyes. Let's open the eyes of every citizen in Europe that the life we enjoy, the life we want to be safe, can disappear, as has happened many times in history."*<sup>16</sup>

Within the discussion, Prime Minister Denkov emphasized the support that Bulgaria provides to Ukraine and emphasized that the sense of the need for urgent support remains as strong as in the early days of the war.<sup>17</sup>

In Munich, Bulgarian Prime Minister also held a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine, Olga Stefanishyna. During their conversation Denkov stated that Bulgaria remains a constant ally and supporter of the Ukrainian people. The Bulgarian government is determined to support Ukraine and recognizes its legal right to defend its territorial interests. According to Denkov, the most important principle supported by Bulgaria is that of Ukraine's sovereign right to determine the conditions and timing for negotiations with Russia.<sup>18</sup>

After the meeting, the Bulgarian Prime Minister underlined that.

*"The entire political world, both in Europe and in the US, realizes that Ukraine's predicament must be taken seriously, and that action must be taken very quickly to aid their efforts to stop Russian aggression. There is no longer any doubt, and everyone says this - that*

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<sup>14</sup> <https://securityconference.org/en/>

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/17158887>

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

*Ukraine is fighting not only for its own land, but also for upholding the principles of compliance with international law, democracy and freedom, because this is already at stake".<sup>19</sup>*

The Bulgarian Prime Minister was adamant that Russian politicians are no longer afraid to say that after Ukraine they would also look at other countries. According to him, it is high time that *"not only politicians, but also people in Europe understand that these dangers are real and, accordingly, they cause a reaction."* Nikolai Denkov gave as an example the agreements that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed with the Chancellor of Germany and the President of France. According to him, *"These are just examples of how different countries, along with the EU as a whole, are looking for a way to help Ukraine in this fight for freedom."*

On the Munich conference for security, the Bulgarian Prime Minister also pointed out that European defense should not be an alternative and should not compete with NATO, „but strengthen the Alliance in our region“. *"Bulgaria is doing exactly that - we are modernizing our army, we need to speed up these efforts even more. To integrate our capabilities with those of our neighbors as part of NATO's Eastern Flank,"* emphasized Denkov.<sup>20</sup>

In an interview to New York Times Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov argued that Europeans should draw three lessons from the cascade of troubles in relation to the war in Ukraine.

Denkov spoke to journalist Steven Erlanger at the Munich Security Conference.

The war in Ukraine was not just about gray zones between Europe and Russia, Denkov argued, but *"whether the democratic world we value can be beaten, and this is now well understood in Europe,"* quoted by the publication.

Second, European nations have realized that they must combine their forces in military, not just economic endeavors, to build up their own deterrence.

And third, they needed to separate Ukraine's urgent needs for ammunition and air defense from longer-term strategic goals. *"But given the imperialist rhetoric of Russia's leaders, long term in this case means three to five and maximum 10 years — it is really urgent,"* said Denkov.<sup>21</sup>

One more thing that Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov said in the Munich security forum was that Bulgaria fully remains in solidarity with Ukraine in its battle for a just peace, for Ukraine and for all democratic nations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/620998-prime-minister-denkov-to-new-york-times-europe-must-learn-its-lessons-from-ukra>

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

On February 24 Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov made a video message to mark the second anniversary of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In its address Denkov stressed that *"Russia cannot win this war, and one day there will be justice for all war crimes against the Ukrainian people"*. Denkov pointed out that *"For more than 700 days we have been witnessing the horrors of the brutal war waged by the Putin regime, which has been destroying peaceful towns, killing innocent people, tearing families apart, illegally abducting more than 20,000 Ukrainian children"*.<sup>23</sup>

Bulgarian Prime minister underlined also that *"In spite of the massive Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, there is no doubt that Russia is waging war on the right to a peaceful, happy and full life for every citizen of Europe, including of Bulgaria"*.<sup>24</sup>

Nikolai Denkov reminded that Bulgaria was one of the first countries to have come to the aid of Ukraine at the beginning of the war, and will continue to render it political, humanitarian, material and military help as much as is possible, depending on its capabilities and legislation.

Bulgarian government leader stated clearly that Bulgaria continues to stand in solidarity with Ukraine in its battle for a just peace – for Ukraine and for all democratic nations.

Finally, Nikolai Denkov highlighted that Bulgaria remains *"strongly committed to the processes of implementing President Zelensky's peace formula, the Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children and to the processes of recovery of Ukraine"*.<sup>25</sup>

On the same day, February 24, in a message on twitter, Bulgaria's Foreign Ministry said: *"Two years after Russia started its war against Ukraine, we stand with Ukraine in a unified EU and NATO response to Russia's aggressive behavior. Bulgaria is committed to engage as long as it takes and do whatever it takes for the victory, just peace and full recovery of Ukraine"*.<sup>26</sup>

### **Paris international conference in support of Ukraine**

Two days later, an international conference in support of Ukraine was held in Paris with the participation of 21 heads of state and government. The conference, organized by the French president, took place at a critical moment for Ukraine. The European Union had set itself the goal of delivering one million shells to Ukraine by March, but it will not be able to fulfill it. At

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<sup>23</sup> <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101953824/pm-nikolai-denkov-one-day-there-will-be-justice-for-all-war-crimes-against-the-ukrainian-people>

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.



the meeting in Paris, the creation of a coalition dedicated to the delivery of medium- and long-range missiles was announced.<sup>27</sup>

French President Emmanuel Macron has invited his European counterparts to the Elysee Palace for a working meeting that was hastily arranged because of an escalation of Russian aggression in the past few weeks, according to Macron's advisers.

The aim was to send a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin for a European solution to the conflict in Ukraine and to refute the Kremlin's claims that Russia will win the war, which has been going on for two years.<sup>28</sup>

Official representative of the Bulgarian side at this conference was once again Bulgarian Minister of Defense Todor Tagarev.

### **Official visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister to Kyiv**

At the same time, a kind of a peak of Bulgaria's diplomatic activity regarding the war in Ukraine and European security and defense issues was reached during the official visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister to Kyiv, which took place on February 26, 2024. The aim was to demonstrate support from of Bulgaria on marking the second year since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine.

During the visit Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov addressed President Volodymyr Zelensky with the words that Bulgarians saw this horror in the eyes of the thousands of refugees to whom they opened their homes and hearts two years ago. Together with this Denkov pointed out that *"It is now clear that Putin's goals extend beyond Ukraine. The ambitions of Russian aggression are also a threat to the national security of Bulgaria"*. He explained that Bulgarian support for Ukraine is a defense for itself.<sup>29</sup>

For his part, President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed his gratitude to Prime Minister Denkov for the support that Bulgaria provides to Kyiv throughout the period of full-scale Russian aggression. *"We highly value the fact that Bulgaria is with us and with the entire united Europe"*, Zelensky pointed out. The President of Ukraine emphasized the need of joint efforts in the Black Sea and the Danube region to expand trade flows and restore normal shipping. Denkov and Zelensky also discussed cooperation in the energy. The President of Ukraine also

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<sup>27</sup> <https://bntnews.bg/news/pomosht-za-ukraina-kakvi-resheniya-byaha-vzeti-na-konferenciyata-v-parizh-1268552news.html>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.mediapool.bg/konferentsiya-v-parizh-shte-oprovergae-chuvstvoto-na-pesimizam-i-uninie-za-ukraina-news356580.html>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestentar/novini/premierat-denkov-kam-prezidenta-zelenski-podkrepatani-za-ukrayna-e-zashtita-za-nas-samite>

underlined that Ukrainians appreciate Bulgaria's support for their move towards the European and Euro-Atlantic community and this strengthens their common security.<sup>30</sup>

The Bulgarian Prime Minister highlighted that Bulgaria stands unquestioningly on the side of Ukraine in this unjust and brutal military aggression - on the side of human life and dignity, freedom, democracy and the international legal order. Denkov also emphasized that the Bulgarian government and parliamentary majority are working hard to provide maximum political, military, diplomatic, humanitarian and material support for Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>

The main motive of Bulgarian Prime minister was that: *"Russia cannot win this war!"*. He was sure that one day there will be justice for all war crimes. The Prime Minister called on the international democratic community to remain united in its support for Ukraine, so that this day would be sooner.<sup>32</sup>

The final words of Bulgarian Prime minister were that Bulgaria remains committed to the implementation of the Ukraine Peace Formula to achieve a just, comprehensive and sustainable peace based on the principles of the UN Charter and international law.<sup>33</sup>

On February 26, 2024, Bulgarian Prime Minister met with the Prime Minister of Ukraine Denis Shmigal. The two sides signed a joint statement on key topics of bilateral cooperation.

Bulgaria has confirmed its readiness to strengthen cooperation aimed at ending the Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine and restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders. The support that Bulgaria has given to the Ukrainian refugees is also emphasized.<sup>34</sup>

It was also agreed to support bilateral cooperation for the joint production of weapons, equipment and ammunition, as well as the implementation of the Memorandum of Intent between the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine dated October 11, 2023.<sup>35</sup>

Further development of cooperation in the field of restoring security in the Black Sea region was also agreed, noting the importance of holding the Second Conference on Black Sea Security of the International Crimean Platform, which will be held in Sofia in April 2024.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> [https://www.gov.bg/files/common/Joint\\_Statement\\_26.02.2024.pdf](https://www.gov.bg/files/common/Joint_Statement_26.02.2024.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem.

## **Conclusion**

February was filled with special diplomatic activity throughout Europe. The main topic of European diplomacy was Ukraine war and Russia's threat to European security and defense. The reason for this was the fact that February 24 marked the second year since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Bulgarian diplomacy proved to be one of the most active during all the international forums and bilateral meetings that were held in recent weeks. The aim of the Bulgarian government was to declare a clear and firm position in support of Ukraine against Russia, which was denounced as an aggressor and a threat not only to the European, but also to the national security of Bulgaria.

Obviously, Bulgaria is one of the countries with the most strongly motivated and directly expressed position in support of Ukraine, and at the same time against Russia. This gives rise to strong concerns in the Bulgarian society, due to the chance for the country to be involved into the war in Ukraine. Up to that moment Prime Minister Nikolai Denkov and also Defense Minister Todor Tagarev convincingly stated in the Parliament that there are no plans to send Bulgarian troops to Ukraine. Despite this assurance, a large part of the Bulgarian society feels mistrust and fear.