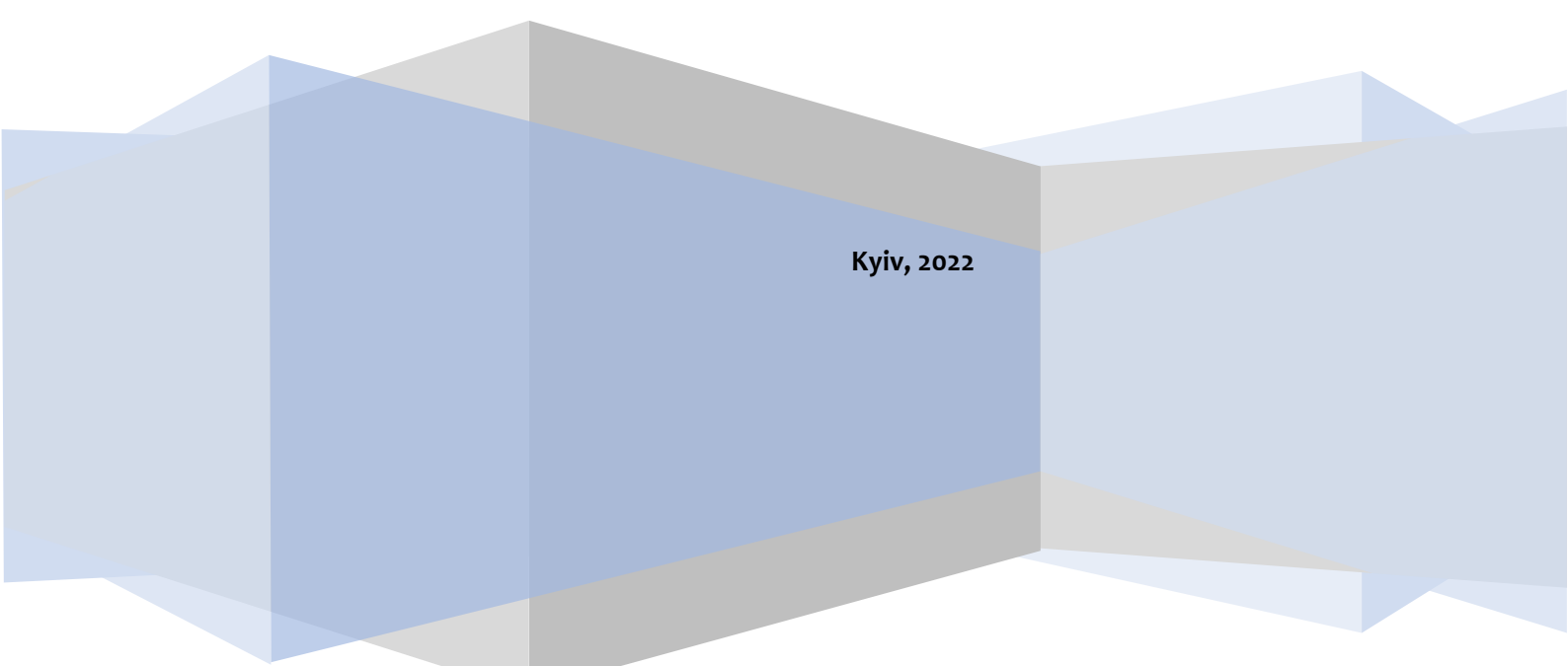


The reaction of the Black Sea countries on Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine: analysis of the objections

Policy brief

Mykhailo Drapak



Kyiv, 2022

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was not only a violation of international humanitarian law and an encroachment on the sovereignty of an independent country. This move has put the security of all European countries at significant risk, as the Kremlin's main focus of aggressive rhetoric in recent years has been on the West. Even before the massive offensive on Ukraine, Moscow used disinformation and lobbyists, energy and logistics, and even secret agents to destabilize the situation in European countries. For many months, the Russian leadership has insisted on returning to the principle of "zones of influence" in international relations, speaking of "NATO's rollback to the 1997 borders." In a broad sense, this means Russia's intention to appropriate the sovereignty of nearby states: some – de jure, some – de facto.

The states of the Black Sea basin are in a particular position in the context of Russian aggression. For geographical reasons and history, Russia seeks to maintain the region's political and economic leadership. Moscow is threatening three Black Sea countries – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – with military means. The other three, Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, belong to the NATO bloc, which the Kremlin sees as a hostile alliance. At the same time, the Russian government included Bucharest and Sofia in the list of "unfriendly capitals." In addition, pipelines delivering Russian gas to the countries of Southern and Central Europe have been laid in the Black Sea and the region. Moscow is interested in keeping transit volumes and new projects in this area. In addition, Russia's strong position in the Black Sea states also allows the Kremlin to pursue political and economic expansion in the Balkans and the Middle East.

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has increased the threat of the Kremlin's aggressive policy against the Black Sea states to its highest point since the end of the Cold War. Russia's navy is blocking Ukrainian ports, disrupting free trade in the region, and threatening food security worldwide. In addition, foreign sailors, including [Moldovan](#) and [Turk](#), suffer from the aggressor's shelling. The illegal war with Ukraine proves that Russia is ready for radical steps in its geopolitical aspirations. It is worth mentioning the [explosions](#) at [ammunition depots](#) in Bulgaria between 2011 and 2020, which allegedly involved Russian security services, and the dictator Putin's repeated statements about the "deployment of attack missiles" in Romania, refuted by the Romanian Ministry of Defence. Given this, we can say that all countries in the Black Sea region are at constant risk of the Kremlin's secret and open military operations. And after February 24, 2022, this risk increased significantly.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine requires a response from each of the countries of the Black Sea region that do not participate in the war. This support is vital for the Ukrainian state and society. Political,

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² This policy brief is developed within the project "Romanian – Ukrainian Civil Society Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation. Third edition", implemented by the Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association, Romania, in partnership with Strategic and Security Studies Group and Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian PRISM", Ukraine, with the support of Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund. The views expressed in this policy paper are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of ESGA partners.

economic, and military support and sanctions against the aggressor weaken Russia's ability to wage war and kill Ukrainian citizens.

In addition, Kyiv needs reliable and predictable steps by partners to unlock ports and stabilize the situation in the Black Sea. At the same time, a tough stance on Russian aggression is important for the countries of the region themselves. It will protect them from future Kremlin operations, weakening states' defense capabilities and political stability. At the same time, it is evident that each Black Sea state has its own limitations and interests, which determine the forms and scope of response to Russia's attack on Ukraine.

Bulgaria

Russia was one of the critical destinations for imports to the country. It [accounted](#) for more than 6% of all goods and services imported to Bulgaria in 2020. This is the fifth-largest trade partner in the country. About 60% of all imports from Russia at the time were energy products, most of which were oil and related products. Among all fuel suppliers to Bulgaria in 2019, Russian companies [provided](#) almost 59% of energy. This balance could be somewhat upset in Russia's favor, as in 2020, Sofia [signed](#) a two-year contract with Gazprom for fixed volumes of natural gas purchases.

In addition, Bulgaria and Russia have strong historical and political ties. This circumstance was expressed in particular in the loyal attitude to Moscow by society and political elites. Thus, 45% of Bulgarian respondents to the [GLOBSEC Trends 2021](#) survey saw Russia as the leading strategic partner among all the "great powers" of the world. This is one of the highest figures for the Kremlin in Central and Eastern Europe. In Bulgaria itself, this answer has left the United States and China far behind. In 2022, this number [dropped](#) to 30%, although it remained one of the highest in the region.

In addition, some Bulgarian political parties have shown loyalty to Russia. First, it is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). With its leaders Georgy Parvanov and Sergei Stanishev serving as president and prime minister in the first decade of the 21st century, respectively, Sofia announced participation in ambitious joint energy projects with Moscow, such as the South Stream gas pipeline and the Belene nuclear power plant.

Since 2014, when the BSP was already in opposition, its representatives have repeatedly called for lifting EU sanctions on Russia because of "their ineffectiveness." But the leader of the centrist Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (ГЕРБ – Bulgarian abbreviation) party, Boyko Borisov, who has served as prime minister for more than a decade, tried to keep his balance in foreign policy. In practice, this meant public disapproval of Russian aggression in recent years and construction of the Balkan Stream gas pipeline on Bulgarian territory. Meanwhile, Borisov's opponent, President Rumen Radev, said in an interview in 2021 that Crimea is currently Russian.

Given these circumstances, one could expect official Sofia's reaction to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to be ambivalent. The extreme fragmentation of the country's current parliament, including the BSP, spoke in favor of such a scenario. However, Bulgaria not only proactively supported Ukraine but also unexpectedly entered into painful confrontations with the Kremlin in the political and economic dimensions. The government personally and by means of the relevant UN resolution condemned Russia's actions and supported the decision of the European Council and NATO on Moscow. Bulgaria was one of the first countries in Europe to close its airspace to Russian aircraft. Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Kirill Petkov have supported granting Ukraine candidate status. Also, a few days after Russia's invasion, the Bulgarian prime minister decided to dismiss Defence Minister Stefan Yanev only because, in his speech, he called Moscow's actions a "special operation" rather than a "war."

From the first days of the full-scale invasion, Sofia has been a party to arms talks in Kyiv. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell has said that United Europe intends to hand over even combat aircraft to Ukraine. These could include MiG-29 fighters, Su25 attack aircraft, and S-300 air defense systems in Bulgaria's service. However, Sofia did not send any aircraft or other military equipment to Ukraine. Although Kirill Petkov and his party, "We Continue the Change," favored sending

weapons. Rumen Radev noted that such steps could make Bulgaria a party to the war. The BSP also opposed this, arguing that it did not want to weaken Bulgaria's defense capabilities and go against the will of the majority of citizens. In the end, the Bulgarian parliament decided to limit itself to repairing military equipment from Ukraine. Bulgaria is [one](#) of two NATO countries that have not supplied arms to Ukraine. Although Bulgaria accepts refugees, provides economic support, and lobbies for EU accession, Sofia fully supports Kyiv. Bulgaria also [intends](#) to set up a hub in Varna to ship Ukrainian exports.

But the most unexpected reaction to Russia's aggression from Sofia was stepping into bilateral relations with the Kremlin. First, Kirill Petkov called to apologize to Russian ambassador Eleonora Mitrofanova when she named the Bulgarian government a "Euro-Atlantic henchman" and compared Russia's invasion of Ukraine to Russia's invasion of Bulgaria in the 19th century for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. In response, Rumen Radev also suggested recalling Bulgaria's ambassador to Russia. Second, official Sofia expelled 10 Russian diplomats on suspicion of espionage. It is not the first such action - in 2021, two subordinates of Mitrofanova were sent out. Third, the Bulgarian government banned key Russian propaganda channels on the second day of the invasion.

Most importantly, Bulgaria has effectively severed ties with Moscow in gas purchases. First, Deputy Prime Minister Asen Vasilev said that from 2023 Sofia will not buy natural gas from Gazprom. Then the Russian energy monopoly stopped supplying fuel to Bulgargaz due to its refusal to pay for it in rubles. Kirill Petkov called such action extortion and an attempt to influence stability in the country (Sofia transferred funds earlier). He also said that the Bulgarian government intends to revise not only the contracts with Gazprom for gas purchase but also for its transit to Serbia and Hungary. Such a stable position in this situation in Sofia was provided by possible alternative ways of supplying natural gas - from Azerbaijan through pipelines and from LNG terminals in Greece. Sofia later signed an agreement with the United States to supply liquefied natural gas.

After all, Bulgaria does not have a high need for natural gas - about [3 billion](#) cubic meters per year. The main consumers of this energy source are not the population, but the industry, so the reorientation to other sources of supply will have a moderate social impact. That can't be said about the oil sector. Sofia supported the EU embargo on purchasing Russian oil but asked for an exception; this regime will be fully operational from 2025. This is due to Bulgaria's total dependence on the fuel from Russia and the fact that the largest oil refinery in the country is owned by the Russian company Lukoil.

It is worth mentioning that another political crisis started in Bulgaria in June. The ruling coalition in parliament disintegrated and the majority of MPs expressed no confidence in Kirill Petkov's government. Of all the Bulgarian actors, the Prime Minister's Party is the most persistent and consistent supporter of Kyiv.

Georgia

Despite Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia and strained relations between the two countries over the past 15 years, Moscow remains one of Tbilisi's main foreign policy partners. In 2020, [in terms of trade](#), the Russian direction was second only to Türkiye. At that time, Russia accounted for 11.7% of Georgia's exports and 12% of its imports. Georgian companies sold the most Russian beverages (45.9%), metallurgical products (23.7%), and fruits and nuts (11.7%). The main items of imports from Russia for Georgia were fuel and related products (25.8%) and food (28.6%). At the same time, it should be noted that economic relations between the two countries have resumed in recent years after the 2008 shock. If in 2009 Russia accounted for 1.87% of Georgia's exports and 6.5% of imports, in 2020, Russia's share in both components is more than double.

Georgia's economic ties and security vulnerability to a possible new Kremlin aggression have determined Tbilisi's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Rhetorically, the Georgian authorities have always disapproved of Moscow's actions and support for Kyiv. Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has [condemned](#) Russia's recognition of quasi-state formations in Ukraine's Donetsk and

Luhansk regions. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili [called](#) the full-scale Russian invasion unacceptable and called on the international community to stop the Kremlin from violating world order. At the same time, from the very beginning, the official [made it clear](#) that his country would not join the international sanctions against Russia, as this step would be too painful for the Georgian economy. In addition, Garibashvili said that there are no security threats to Georgia at the moment. This led to a protest in Tbilisi. Tens of thousands of Georgians [took to the streets](#) to show solidarity with Ukraine and call on their government to join international sanctions against Russia. One of the main messages of these people was the idea that their country could be in great danger if Ukraine could not withstand the attacks of Russian troops. According to a poll by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers, [two-thirds](#) of Georgians favor Tbilisi's stricter response to the Kremlin's actions and want some sanctions.

Meanwhile, Georgian companies have continued to do business with Russian partners. In addition, a few days after the start of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian state regulator Rosselkhozadzor [announced](#) that it intends to lift restrictions on imports of products from 15 Georgian milk producers. This is an interesting fact, given that Moscow used to use the embargo on goods as a means of pressure on Tbilisi. However, the Georgian government [denied](#) this information. At the same time, the country has become a popular destination for Russian citizens (including activists and journalists) and businesses who cannot continue working in their own country due to internal pressure, international sanctions and deteriorating economic conditions. As of mid-March, Georgia had accepted about [30,000](#) Russians, of whom about 12,000 remained for a long time. At the same time, the country has sheltered more than 5,000 Ukrainian refugees.

In addition, in April, the Defence Intelligence of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence [stated](#) that Russia was establishing smuggling channels to supply sanctioned goods through Georgian territory. The intelligence service also claimed that the country's political leadership had instructed Georgian security forces not to prevent this. The Georgian Ministry of Finance [called](#) such an accusation baseless. Georgian Foreign Minister Ilya Darchiashvili later [told](#) Dmytro Kuleba that his country was not helping Russia circumvent sanctions. However, this topic has not disappeared from the two countries' agendas. Already in June, the leader of the pro-presidential faction of the Ukrainian parliament, the Servant of the People, Davyd Arakhamiya, [said](#) that Russia was using the Georgian financial system and Georgian companies to circumvent the sanctions. The Georgian Ministry of Finance called the words a lie.

In early June, Irakli Garibashvili [said](#) his country had sent more than 1,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, provided \$7 million, and received about 28,000 Ukrainian refugees. Earlier, he [said](#) Tbilisi would continue to condemn Russia's actions and support Kyiv. Salome Zurbashvili also [condemned](#) the atrocities of Russian troops in Ukraine. Later, the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, Ruslan Stefanchuk, [invited](#) the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Shalva Papushvili, to visit Ukraine. In Tbilisi, they replied that this would be possible only if the Ukrainian side took back the baseless insults. Finally, in mid-April, a delegation of Georgian deputies led by Shalva Papushvili [arrived](#) in Ukraine.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine carries security risks for Georgia as well. In May, the Russian proxy leader in South Ossetia, Anatoly Bibilov, issued a decree calling for a referendum on Georgia's region accession to Russia. He did so after losing the "election" in an unrecognized formation. The newly elected "head" of the South Ossetian occupation administration, Alan Gagloyev, later suspended the referendum decree. Nevertheless, these events were a wake-up call for Tbilisi amid Moscow's recognition of quasi-states in Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In March, the Georgian Foreign Ministry [condemned](#) the intention to hold any referendums in its uncontrolled territory as unacceptable. In May, Irakli Garibashvili [said](#) he guaranteed his citizens that a new war with Russia was impossible.

Meanwhile, Tbilisi continues to integrate with the West on defence issues at the strategic and tactical levels. Thus, NATO leadership invited Georgian leaders to the Alliance's summit in June. Later, the Georgian Ministry of Defence and the US Department of Defence signed a 10-year concept of cooperation. The document is a continuation of the "Georgia Strengthening and Constraint Initiative" approved by the agencies last year. Within the framework of this cooperation, the parties will exchange information and experience and determine other annual specific areas of cooperation. In addition, Tbilisi and Chisinau were

invited to join Ramstein's international platform for Ukraine's military support. Irakli Garibashvili confirmed that his country continues to aspire to join NATO but said that the Prime Minister must first resolve territorial issues. It should be added that the Georgian authorities were disappointed with the decision of the European Commission to temporarily refuse to grant Georgia the status of a candidate for EU membership.

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Moldova

Russia is Moldova's second-largest foreign economic partner after Romania. [In 2020](#), the Russian direction accounted for 9.26% of Moldovan exports and 8.64% of Moldovan imports. At the same time, more than 39.2% of Russia's sales to Moldova were fuel and related products, 14.4% – were products from the chemical industry, and 10.1% – were machinery and equipment for industry. The largest export items of Moldova to Russia were vegetable products (52.8%) and pharmaceuticals (13%). It is worth noting that over the past decade, Chisinau has overcome its dependence on trade with Moscow in foreign economic activity. For example, in 2012, Russia accounted for 30.3% of Moldova's exports and 15.2% of its imports. Thus, today the Moldovan government is ready for any restrictions (for example, a ban on the import of agricultural products) by the Russian authorities, which in the past brought a lot of trouble to the country's economy. Chisinau managed to reorient itself in foreign economic activity in the EU. However, Russian gas and oil remain without alternatives for Moldova.

The peculiarities of economic ties between Chisinau and Moscow partly determined the response of the Moldovan leadership to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Thus, on February 21, President Maia Sandu first [condemned](#) the Kremlin's recognition of self-proclaimed quasi-states in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, and [then the full-scale](#) invasion of Russian troops on February 24. However, Chisinau officially did not join the international sanctions against Moscow. Moldovan Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu [explained](#) the decision by saying that his country was too economically dependent on relations with Russia. According to him, stronger and more prosperous countries can make such a difficult decision. However, he added that Chisinau is currently in dialogue with Moscow only at the technical level and will continue to help refugees from Ukraine. Nicu Popescu also reminded us that his country had a neutral status in accordance with the Constitution.

At the same time, at the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova declared a state of emergency due to the influx of refugees. It closed its sky to any civilian flights. The particular legal regime ended within a few months, and the sky was opened for flights, but flights between Chisinau and any Russian city were not resumed. In April, Moldova also banned using symbols of Russian aggression – "St. George's ribbon," signs Z and V. Then, the country [passed](#) a law prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian channels. Chisinau also [provided](#) several consignments of humanitarian aid to Ukraine and [expressed](#) readiness to assist in the demining of liberated Ukrainian territories.

The Ukrainian leadership expected a more radical reaction to Russian aggression from official Chisinau. In a comment in early March, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba thanked Moldova for its solidarity and humanitarian aid but also pointed out its refusal to support sanctions. Within a month,

Maia Sandu [stressed](#) that her country would not impose restrictions on Russia due to the difficult energy situation. She said that any shocks could destabilize the situation in Moldova, which is not good for Ukraine. Moreover, the President noted that this year her country risks losing about 25% of exports and 15% of imports due to barriers to trade with Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. Also, the Ukrainian media "Yevropeiska Pravda" [published](#) information that at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, the Ukrainian authorities asked their colleagues in Chisinau to sell six MiG-29 fighters stored at the Mărculești air base. Moldovan authorities, according to media reports, refused Kyiv. Later, Moldovan Prime Minister Natalya Gavrilitsa, [answering](#) questions about the request, said her country did not have enough weapons to help Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has heightened tensions over Moldova's Transnistrian region, which is controlled by Russia's proxies and is a base for a group of Russian troops. For Ukraine, this territory is a source of potential attacks, and for Moldova, it is a source of instability. There were several provocations in Transnistria in May and June, including a [series](#) of explosions in Tiraspol and other settlements at "facilities of military structures of the unrecognized state". Russian proxies accused Ukraine of these actions. NATO Deputy Secretary-General Mircea Geoață [said](#) at the time that further excesses in the region should be expected, but they would not pose a threat to Moldova. Speaking in the European Parliament, Maia Sandu later [said](#) her country was in favour of a diplomatic resolution of the situation in Transnistria. At the same time, she called on the international community to support the withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory. In addition, the Moldovan leader reiterated that her state supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Despite the fact that many officials in Ukraine have been hoping for a stronger response from Moldova on both Russian aggression in general and the Transnistrian issue, today Chisinau has extremely limited opportunities to take steps in these areas. In this context, it is worth noting that the format of resolving the situation in Transnistria "5 + 2" de facto got frozen due to Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territory. At the same time, the current Moldovan government makes independent decisions and works with external partners to strengthen the stability of their country in political and security issues. Moldova together with Ukraine became a candidate for EU membership. This gives the country additional impetus for structural reforms and access to new European funds. Also, after obtaining the candidate status by Moldova, speaker of the Moldovan parliament Igor Grosu [announced](#) that his country, probably, should join the EU sanctions against Russia due to the new position in the relations with Brussels.

In addition, the Moldovan government has increased defence spending from \$30 million to \$47 million a year. Also, European Council President Charles Michel, U.S. Department of State Adviser Derek Scholle and British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss alternately [said](#) that international partners are ready to help Chisinau increase the fighting capacity of its national armed forces. During a visit to Moldova, French President Emmanuel Macron [proved](#) the EU would provide 40 million euros to strengthen the country's defence. Eventually, Moldovan representatives [joined](#) Ramstein's international coalition of military aid to Ukraine.

Romania

Of all the countries in the Black Sea region, Romania has the least Russian-oriented economy. In 2020, Russia [accounted](#) for 1.56% of the country's exports – 16th place among all foreign economic partners – and 2.34% of imports – 15th place among all partners. At that time, 24% of all sales from Romania to Russia were vehicles and their parts, 17.9% – were equipment for industry, 14.9% – were electrical appliances, and 11.4% – were pharmaceuticals. Russian companies primarily sold gas, oil, coal and related products to Romanian partners – 67.2% of Romania's imports from Russia. In 2019, 37.38% of all fuel imported into the country [came](#) from Russian suppliers. Thus, among all the capitals of the Black Sea region, Bucharest has the lowest economic and political risks in the event of radical action against Moscow. At the very least, the loss of most trade contacts with Russia does not appear to be a major challenge for Romania in the long run, although the issue needs to be considered in detail.

Romanian President Klaus Johannis [condemned](#) Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Bucharest was one of the first capitals to [close](#) its sky to Russian aviation. Back in February, Romanian government spokesman Dan Carbutaru [said](#) his country would send ammunition and military equipment to Ukraine. In addition, Romania then provided Ukrainian partners with fuel and medicines worth 3 million euros and expressed readiness to accept wounded Ukrainian servicemen for treatment. In April, the Romanian Ministry of Defence [passed](#) a resolution allowing the transfer of weapons from internal reserves not only to NATO countries but also to potential allies, including Ukraine. The text of the decision states that this is necessary for the context of Russia's military invasion of Ukrainian territory. However, after the adoption of this document, official Bucharest did not publish statements on the provision of weapons to Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Romanian government has been working to strengthen its defence capabilities. The country's Ministry of Defence has [announced](#) the abandonment of the widespread use of old MiG-21 fighters after several accidents in early March. Romania, meanwhile, has stepped up talks with Norway to buy 32 newer F-16 fighters. Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu later [said](#) his country wanted more NATO forces to be stationed on its territory because of threats from Russia. Next year, the Alliance's contingent in Romania will be reinforced by a new group of troops. Another NATO unit – 500 French servicemen – had already been deployed there in February-March, 2022.

Bucharest has also been actively involved in logistical assistance to Ukraine. In early April, Romania [abolished](#) all requirements for obtaining permits by Ukrainian carriers. Thus, transportation from and to Ukraine got rid of bureaucratic obstacles. Later, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries [began](#) negotiations on the export of Ukrainian agricultural products through Romanian territory. Soon, grain from Ukraine moved through the port of Constanța to other countries. However, representatives of both countries say that such transportation requires [additional costs](#) and [improved transport infrastructure](#) to increase export opportunities. However, during a recent visit to Kyiv, Romanian President Klaus Johannis [informed](#) that his country had ensured the export of more than 1 million tons of grain from Ukraine. He also condemned Russia's use of the crisis in the world food market as a weapon. In addition, Klaus Johannis [called on](#) the leaders of other countries to ensure the export of grain from Ukraine. It is necessary to add that back in April, Romania [closed](#) its ports to Russian ships.

The Romanian government also supports Ukraine in other dimensions. Official Bucharest condemned the Russian military's atrocities against Ukrainian citizens and [joined](#) the case of Ukraine's lawsuit against Russia in the UN International Court of Justice, in which Kyiv challenges Russia's use of genocide allegations against it as a pretext for invasion. During a visit to Kyiv, Klaus Johannis [called](#) for bringing Russian war criminals to justice. In addition, the Romanian state has been supporting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in their move to the EU since the application for accession. Klaus Johannis said this during a meeting with Volodymyr Zelensky. This was soon [confirmed](#) by members of the Romanian and Moldovan parliaments during a historic joint session.

Türkiye

Türkiye has extensive economic and political ties with Russia, which can be called pragmatic but not warm. In 2020, the Russian direction accounted for 2.55% of Turk [exports](#) – the tenth-largest share among all countries. At the same time, Russia ensured 6.29% of Türkiye's imports – the third-largest of all countries. Of all the goods provided by Russian companies, 35% were fuel (primarily petrol) and related products, and 27% – were metallurgical products. The two countries have also become partners in building an additional route for the supply of natural gas from Russia to Europe – the Turk Stream, which was opened in 2020. In addition, in the last year before the pandemic – 2019 – tourists from Russia were the [largest](#) group of foreign vacationers who came to Türkiye – 15.6% of all. The total [contribution](#) of the tourism industry to the country's GDP was about 4% before the pandemic.

In the political dimension, official Ankara has been showing a desire to build relations with Moscow as widely as possible, while not favouring this partnership over others. At the same time, in the issues of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Turk authorities have tried and are trying to balance between the attacking

country and the defending country. For example, over the past year, Turk President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly stressed that his country supported the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and cared for the Turkic peoples living in Ukraine. Since 2018, the Turk company Baykar Makina has been selling Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine. At the same time, last year, Ankara became the only NATO country to [purchase](#) Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems. Earlier this year, dictator Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan [stressed](#) the need to "intensify a mutually beneficial partnership between Russia and Türkiye." After that, the Turk leader [called](#) the possibility of a full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine unrealistic. But according to Erdogan, if such a step had taken place, it would not have been the right one. Meanwhile, Turk Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu criticized the Kremlin for making unilateral demands on NATO, demanding "security guarantees".

On the eve of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, immediately after Moscow's recognition of the independence of its proxies in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ankara did not betray its principle of "equidistance." Recep Tayyip Erdogan then said that his country would not suspend relations with the Kremlin and would not impose sanctions in response to the decision made there. The Turk President [explained](#) this by the interests of his country and the need to leave room for peaceful resolution of issues. He also [expressed](#) readiness to mediate in the talks between Kyiv and Moscow.

Since February 24, Ankara has repeatedly [condemned](#) Russia's actions in Ukraine and, in response to Kyiv's call, closed the Bosphorus for any foreign warships to pass, in accordance with the Montreux Convention. However, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country would not lose ties with either the Russian or Ukrainian authorities in an attempt to mediate between the parties. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [has stepped up](#) contacts with Kyiv and Moscow since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion. Türkiye provided venues for a meeting of the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine, and then for [a meeting](#) of delegations to discuss both the ceasefire and the countries' next steps. However, these meetings did not yield results, as the Kremlin did not refuse to annex Ukrainian territories and even destroy Ukrainian statehood. Ankara continued to insist on a [ceasefire](#) and on [a meeting](#) between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Russian dictator Putin. The Office of the President of Ukraine, for its part, tried to ensure the evacuation of Ukrainian [civilians](#) and then the military from Mariupol with the help of Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Ukrainian side [hoped](#) for Ankara's mediation opportunities on other issues as well.

From the very beginning of the full-scale invasion, Türkiye has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and [cared for](#) Ukrainian refugees. Also, the Turk company Baykar Makina continued to supply Ukrainian partners with Bayraktar TB2 strike drones, for which contracts had been concluded earlier. Meanwhile, at the state level, official Ankara has not decided to provide Kyiv with any additional weapons. In April, the Recep Tayyip Erdogan administration [confirmed](#) that it saw only a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine. However, also in April, Ankara closed its airspace to Russian military planes bound for Syria. This decision [did not provoke](#) protests from Moscow though.

Türkiye also suffers from Russian blockades of the northern part of the Black Sea. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the Russian Navy [fired](#) on a Turk civilian ship. Later, several mines planted by Russian troops at sea [reached](#) the shores of Türkiye. After all, Ankara is directly interested in unblocking Ukrainian ports for the export of Ukrainian grain, as it is also a buyer of these goods. In May, Recep Tayyip Erdogan [discussed](#) possible ways to resolve the situation with Volodymyr Zelensky. In parallel, Ankara [launched](#) a dialogue with Russia on the issue. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu later [spoke](#) of the stagnation in unblocking Ukrainian exports by sea. Meanwhile, pieces of evidence that the Russian troops steal the grain and other agrarian products in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine come both from the Ukrainian [state actors](#) and [from farmers in the captured districts](#). Several [media investigations](#) show that the stolen products are carried to the temporarily occupied Crimea and then – by the Russian-registered and Syrian-registered ships – are transported to Türkiye and Syria. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [responded](#) that the Turk authorities had provided an investigation and had not found the evidence that Türkiye is a destination of that grain.

At the beginning of June, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov [arrived](#) in Türkiye. Following the meeting, he said that Ukraine is blocking the demining of ports and waters of the Black Sea, and Russia is ready to provide guarantees for the passage of ships. Instead, Kyiv [claims](#) that under such proposals, the

Kremlin hides its intention to disarm Ukrainian forces in the south of Ukraine and attack ports. After talks with Lavrov, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said Türkiye [supported](#) the UN's idea of a "grain corridor" jointly provided by the UN, Kyiv, Moscow and Ankara. Two weeks after the meeting, no significant progress has been made in implementing the initiative. Recep Tayyip Erdogan hopes to hold talks with Volodymyr Zelensky and dictator Putin to resolve the situation. Turk Defence Minister Hulusi Akar [has called](#) for red line diplomacy when the Ukrainian and Russian defence ministries are to send two responsible generals to resolve the issue in close contact with Ankara.

Meanwhile, Türkiye remains open to economic contact with Moscow. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu [said](#) his country did not support sanctions against Russia, but would not allow them to be circumvented. He explained that Ankara needs to maintain its mediating position in the negotiations between the parties. In addition, many Russian companies that are unable to operate in their homeland due to sanctions or other unacceptable conditions [have re-registered](#) their business in Türkiye. In addition, Ankara has become the only capital among NATO members that has not closed the sky to Russian civil aviation. Moreover, Turk carriers keep flights to Russia, although they have significantly reduced their number. At the same time, Türkiye [has created](#) three airlines to serve the Russian direction. Most likely, this is due to the intention to preserve the flow of tourists from Russia. Türkiye [has also not blocked](#) Russia's Mir payment system on its territory, as Western countries have done.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The main common denominator in the context of the reaction of the Black Sea states to Russia's attack on Ukraine is that all countries have condemned the Kremlin's actions. In addition, the governments of each state have shown interest in ending the war and restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity. Representatives of Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Türkiye have joined Ramstein's informal international group of military support of Kyiv.
- However, the Black Sea capitals see different opportunities for their influence on the situation around the Russian invasion and different mechanisms for achieving goals. Today, there are no political, institutional or economic grounds for joint action by the Black Sea states to put pressure on Russia. Moreover, some capitals, such as Ankara, do not consider pressure on the Kremlin acceptable, and some, such as Chisinau and Tbilisi, point to a lack of means to influence Moscow in their arsenal. The government in Sofia has weak domestic political conditions for tough action on Russia in the long run. And only Bucharest can feel confident in any anti-Putin coalition.
- In these circumstances, Ukraine should initiate negotiations/consultations between the states that today form the core of the international resistance to the Kremlin – including the United States, Britain, and Poland – for the development of mechanisms for long-term support of the Black Sea region in resilience towards Russia's destructive influences (primarily of Moldova, Georgia and Bulgaria). In this context, it is in the interests of official Kyiv to share its experience in countering the Kremlin's aggression (both in the conventional and non-conventional senses) to partners in the Black Sea region. Also, the EU could consider galvanisation of the Black Sea Synergy initiative for such purposes.
- Despite the difference in the level of resilience and readiness to communicate with the Kremlin, all countries in the Black Sea region remain important partners of Ukraine. Kyiv should maintain the political support of Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Türkiye, appealing to the security threats posed by Russia. At the same time, it will be impossible to keep this support if the West, especially France and Germany, does not show effective solidarity with Ukraine.
- Without unblocking the Black Sea, it is impossible to talk about the safety of navigation and the preservation of critical trade routes for all countries in the region. It is in the interests of the countries of the region to clear the Black Sea of uncontrolled actions of the Russian navy and to restore waterways. In the short term, this issue cannot be resolved without the active participation

of Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria as the largest political, economic and military powers in the region. But in a long term, this issue needs the participation of the global actors. The Russian blockade creates a dangerous precedent which might be used by some other states without facing relevant international resistance. Another possible field for such rampant actions is the South China Sea and/or Eastern China Sea.

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Bucharest, Romania

2022

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