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The Montreux Convention After the Beginning of the Special Military Operation. Status Quo or Denunciation: Discourse of International Actors and Possible Geopolitical Implications for the Black Sea Region

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Abstract. The mode of operation of the Black Sea or Turkish straits is again becoming a matter of international discussion following the clash of two globalization projects: the American Greater Black Sea region and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as well as Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, which is primarily realized on the ground. Being the Black Sea straits a core object of international agreements between the World War I and the World War II, the Montreux Convention of 1936 secured the Black Sea from major naval clashes and accidents. The Convention, which is more than 85 years old, has the longest regime for regulating the passage of military and civilian ships through the Black Sea straits since 1783 and has reflected the geopolitical reality, in which the Black Sea littoral powers, which have been Türkiye and Russia for 240 years, have noticeable advantages over the navies of non-littoral powers. This provision contradicts the modern American aspirations to open the Black Sea region and the Black Sea — Caspian space for the military-political expansion of the United States and the coalition. The purpose of the article is to determine, on the basis of a discursive analysis, the goal-setting of the main geopolitical actors in relation to the Montreux Convention and to predict the possible transformations of the Black Sea region, which has become the center of a clash of interests of global and regional powers. The research methodology is based on the principles of systemic and interdisciplinary approaches to provide a combination of methods of political linguistics and geopolitical analysis and synthesis. The article examines the discourse of the leading actors of international relations around the Montreux Convention following the special military operation, which makes it possible to identify its transformations between the *status quo* or denunciation at the level of conceptual discussions. Türkiye traditionally balances between the interests of Russia and the West due to the role of a neutral “gatekeeper” of the straits, technologically applying Article 19 of the Convention, which so far fully meets the interests of Russia; while the USA shows a tendency to revise the Convention or circumvent it legally. Therefore, the Montreux Convention will remain at the center of public and real politics until the end of the formation of a new system of international relations that should ensure the stability of the development of the world for the next political era.

Key words: Turkish straits, Black Sea straits, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, special military operation

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Конвенция Монтрё после начала СВО. Статус-кво или денонсация: дискурс международных акторов и возможные геополитические последствия для Черноморского региона

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Аннотация. Режим функционирования Черноморских проливов Босфор и Дарданеллы вновь становится предметом международных дискуссий на фоне столкновения двух проектов глобализации (американского плана «Большой Черноморский регион» и китайской инициативы «Пояс и путь»), а также проведения и возможного влияния на весь регион Специальной военной операции России на территории Украины. Между Первой и Второй мировой войнами Черноморские проливы находились в центре международной повестки, однако Конвенция Монтрё 1936 г. обеспечила отсутствие крупных морских столкновений в Черном море. Конвенция, существующая более 85 лет, определяет самый длительный режим регулирования прохода военных и гражданских судов через Черноморские проливы после 1783 г. и отражает геополитическую реальность, когда крупнейшие прибрежные черноморские державы, которыми уже 240 лет являются Турция и Россия, обладают заметными преимуществами над военно-морскими силами нерегиональных держав. Данное положение противоречит современным американским устремлениям открыть Черноморский регион (ЧР) и черноморско-каспийское пространство для военно-политической экспансии США и ведомой ими коалиции. На основе дискурсивного анализа авторы намерены определить целеполагание основных геополитических акторов в отношении Конвенции Монтрё и спрогнозировать возможные трансформации Черноморского региона, ставшего центром столкновения интересов глобальных и региональных держав. В основе методологии исследования лежат принципы системного и междисциплинарного подходов, обеспечивающие сочетание методов политической лингвистики и геополитического анализа и синтеза. Рассматривается дискурс вокруг Конвенции Монтрё ведущих акторов международных отношений на фоне проведения специальной военной операции, что позволяет на уровне концептуальных дискуссий выявить возможные трансформации Конвенции между статус-кво или денонсацией. Турция традиционно балансирует между интересами России и Запада за счет роли нейтрального «привратника» Проливов, технологично применяя ст. 19 Конвенции, что пока в полной мере устраивает Россию, в то время как США демонстрируют намерение пересмотреть Конвенцию либо обойти ее в правовом поле. Поэтому Конвенция Монтрё будет оставаться в центре публичной и реальной политики до окончания процессов формирования новой системы международных отношений, обеспечивающей стабильность развития мира на последующую политическую эпоху.

Ключевые слова: турецкие проливы, Черноморские проливы, Босфор и Дарданеллы, специальная военная операция

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Introduction

Russia's decision to start a special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 has significantly accelerated the processes of forming a new system of international relations, once again shifting the established balance between unipolarity and multipolarity towards the latter. However, the fight is taking place mainly on land, which significantly limits the West's ability to influence the military and political situation in the Black Sea region. The Montreux Convention of 1936, which regulates the functioning of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits connecting the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, is increasingly mentioned on the international and national public agenda. In this context, some factors such as the Türkiye's project to build the Istanbul Canal parallel to the Bosphorus and the closure of the straits by Türkiye in the spring of 2022 after the start of the special military operation should be taken into account. For Türkiye, the balancing role in the region depends on its ability to fully manage the situation with the Straits, otherwise called the Black Sea or Turkish Straits (*Türk Boğazları*), as it has been for 86 years: controlling the flow of military and merchant ships through one of the most important waterways in the world. The Montreux Convention was a political instrument, whose significance became more and more obvious after the outbreak of the military conflict in the Black Sea.

With a legislative basis in the form of the Montreux Convention, the regulation of traffic through one of the critical waterways of the world is largely determined by the rules of the information field: any measures to be taken by Türkiye and other regional and non-regional actors are tested on the discursive and public information level, and the success of the

representation of one aspect or another is related to political decision-making. The hypothesis corresponds to the statement that discourse should be perceived not so much as reflecting political reality, but as creating it. Based on the concept of artificial region building through discourse, when there is a constant updating of definitions of a particular region, proposed by I. Neumann in 1994 (Neumann, 1994), I. Tsantoulis (2016) showed how Western actors have constructed the space of the Wider Black Sea region through discursive practices ("regions are talked and written into existence") since the early 2000s. Although, according to the researcher, the process came to naught by the mid-2010s without achieving the goal, now we are witnessing a revival of the rhetoric of the wider Black Sea region and its reconceptualization as a critical geopolitical space in which the factor of maritime space, rather than the country principle, dominates. This allows us to consider the Montreux Convention, which regulates the passage of warships to and from the Black Sea, as the core of the security of the Black Sea region.

The purpose of the article is to determine, on the basis of discourse analysis, the goals of the main geopolitical actors in relation to the Montreux Convention and to predict possible transformations of the Black Sea region, which has become the center of the clash of interests of global and regional powers.

To achieve this goal, the following tasks will be solved:

- to identify the main actors trying to influence the functioning of the Black Sea straits and trace the evolution of their discourse;
- to determine the political positions of the main regional and non-regional actors with regard to the Montreux Convention in the context of Türkiye's regulation of security in the Black Sea region;

– to characterize the scenarios for maintaining and changing the existing regime of the Black Sea straits in terms of their impact on the balance of power in the Black Sea.

The object of the study is the discourse of key actors in the Black Sea region regarding the Black Sea straits. The subject is the Montreux Convention in the information space of the USA, Türkiye and Russia after the start of the special military operation.

The research methodology is based on the principles of systemic and interdisciplinary approaches, providing a combination of methods of political linguistics and geopolitical analysis and synthesis. The authors carry out a critical analysis of documents (official government documents, papers of think tanks, scientific literature); analysis of public information space; discourse and intertextual analysis; use elements of event analysis, which makes it possible to predict scenarios of behavior of the main regional actors.

The role of the Montreux Convention as the core of the security of the Black Sea region is conceptualized unevenly in time from the political, expert, scientific and media point of view in statements made by political leaders of regional and non-regional actors and official papers, including doctrinal documents; analytical reports and concepts of think tanks; scientific analysis and media coverage or their hybrid forms (conferences, forums, etc.) — all the elements constitute the research material.

In Russia, there are not as many research papers devoted to the functioning of the Black Sea straits on the basis of the Montreux Convention as one might expect. Let us highlight several groups of studies:

1. historical, considering the role and regimes of the straits in the historical retrospective of Russian-Turkish relations with an emphasis on the events of the World War II and the Cold War (Smolnyak, 2015; Moshkin, 2016);

2. legal expert research, studying the legal foundations of the straits regime (Mitina, 2018;

Komleva & Tsvetkova, 2021), although their level cannot be called high;

3. those in the field of political science, analyzing the role of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles as key geopolitical space of the Black Sea region, taking into account possible changes in the geopolitical landscape after the planned construction of the Istanbul Canal (Voronin, Shvets & Voronina, 2017; Irkhin, 2018; Druzhilovsky, 2019; Boldyrev, 2020; Avatkov & Gudev, 2021).

It is worth mentioning the results of the content and event analysis of the history of violations of the provisions of the Convention, given in the article by RUDN University scientists (Ivkina, Pavlova & Nikulin, 2020): only in the period from 2008 (after the Russo-Georgian conflict) to 2019 there were 15 cases of violation of various provisions of the Convention by the US warships recorded, and after March 2014 the number of violations increased significantly.

It is natural that the interest is growing against the backdrop of a worsening international situation. In the context of Russia's national interests, the regime of the straits is considered in the monograph *The Greater Mediterranean as an Emerging Subsystem of International Relations* (Degterev & Aghazada, 2023). After the start of the special military operation, an attempt of a scientific forecast of the Convention status is made in article by A.A. Golovenchenko (2022). Among the fundamental works we highlight the 2019 dissertation by K. Yücel (2019), the author of which comes to the conclusion that a number of provisions of the Convention regarding the presence of warships of non-littoral powers in the Black Sea will be inevitably revised.

In 2020, in Türkiye, under the auspices of the Center for Eurasian Studies, the analytical report by T. Tulun was published, in which any possible steps to revise the Convention are equated with opening Pandora's box: based on the history of the application of the provisions of the Convention and related events, the author

comes to the conclusion that the “safety valve” that is the Convention must function properly and exclusively under the control of Türkiye (Tulun, 2020, p. 40). These works reflect the polarity of opinions expressed by Western or pro-Western Turkish experts and nationally-oriented Turkish scholars: the former promote the erosion of the Convention, while the latter see it as an imperative for Türkiye’s national security and independence.

Conflict Potential of the Black Sea region. The Montreux Convention as an Instrument for Türkiye to Regulate Security in the Black Sea Region

On January 18, 2023, the French Institute of International Relations (*Institut français des relations internationales, IFRI*), together with the French Navy, organized a conference, at which the three naval commanders of the NATO countries: the United States, Great Britain and France, were the main speakers. At the Paris Naval Conference the prospects for the return of naval combat in the context of a new strategic cycle were discussed. From the point of view of NATO countries, the events in the maritime space of the Black Sea region mark a transition to the maritime logic of warfare, when the fleet ceases to be solely a springboard for ground or air operations, but regains its independent combat significance.¹ Thus, by 2023, all projections of the Black Sea region are updated and linked into a common space of combat operations, which are actively returning to the information and analytical agenda as well. This connection is also actualized discursively.

In his opening remarks, IFRI Director Thomas Gomart proposed to the audience “a trip from Kursk to Moscow,” emphasizing that it is quite appropriate for a naval conference, since “Kursk” is not only the name

of a Russian city on the border with Ukraine, but also of a submarine, which reminds that Vladimir Putin’s reign started with a shipwreck, and Moscow is not only the capital, but also the name of the Russian cruiser sunk in April 2022: “This short trip reminds us of the importance of naval episodes even for a continental power like Russia.”² Both the allusive name “Paris Naval Conference” and the statements of its speakers are aimed at expanding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Admiral P. Vandier states the beginning of the “great battle of common spaces,”³ the head of the British Navy, B. Key, states that “Russia’s actions in Ukraine are more than just a land-based conflict,” and there cannot be seen “a return to a continental strategy.”⁴ The leitmotif is an appeal to the ideas of A. Mahan, repeated by the First Sea Lord,⁵ emphasizing the next round of strategic confrontation between tellurocracies and thalassocracies: “The sea is essential to our economic prosperity and our security.”⁶ The discussion carried out on the French platform had a conceptual and strategic nature.

In the Black Sea region, as in the past, the development and outcome of the conflict is again largely determined by the functioning of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and the access of warships to the Black Sea. The narrow straits form a natural buffer zone between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and are the key to the meeting point between Europe and Asia, awakening for centuries the imperial

² CNO Delivers Remarks at Paris Naval Conference // America’s Navy. January 18, 2023. URL: <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Speeches/display-speeches/Article/3273714/cno-delivers-remarks-at-paris-naval-conference/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The First Sea Lord is the traditional title of the head of the Royal British Navy and British Navy, which has survived to this day.

⁶ CNO Delivers Remarks at Paris Naval Conference // America’s Navy. January 18, 2023. URL: <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Speeches/display-speeches/Article/3273714/cno-delivers-remarks-at-paris-naval-conference/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹ Bachelier J., Tenenbaum É. Naval Combat Redux: A Renewed Challenge for Western Navies // *Éditoriaux de l’Ifri, Ifri*. January 9, 2023. URL: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/bachelier_tenenbaum_naval_combat_jan2023_v4.pdf (accessed: 25.03.2023).

ambitions of both Black Sea states and non-regional actors. “For Russia, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are the gateway to the Greater Mediterranean region; at the same time, through the straits, the capabilities of the power can be blocked in the Black Sea basin and, finally, significant hostile forces can be delivered to the shores of Russia through them” (Irkhin, 2018, p. 78). For Türkiye, the straits are a symbol of sovereignty. For non-regional actors, the presence of Russia in the Mediterranean and its access to India and Africa depend on the way they function.

Prior to the start of the special military operation, Türkiye had already successfully played the role of a recognized balancer in the Black Sea region, largely thanks to the Montreux Convention, which ensures maritime security in the region, allows the free passage of merchant ships through the straits and provides for a number of restrictions on the passage and presence of warships in the Black Sea. Therefore, Türkiye has always acted as a thoughtful and careful gatekeeper, holding the keys to the Bosphorus and trying to avoid destabilizing the region through an excessive presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea, which would irritate Russia.

On February 27, 2022, after the start of the special military operation, Türkiye announced the application of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention for the first time since World War II. In 1941, Türkiye blocked the straits, also invoking Article 19 of the Convention.⁷ Maintaining its neutral status, Türkiye then blocked the movement of warships of the Axis powers through the Bosphorus in both directions, as well as did not allow warships of the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition into the Black Sea, which prevented them from providing military assistance to the USSR. At

the same time, access to the Mediterranean Sea was closed to warships of the Black Sea Fleet. In World War II, Türkiye made every effort and maneuver in order to maintain good relations with the winner whichever it was. Turkish researcher S. Seydi identifies the key Turkish approach to the text of the document: “On many occasions, although Türkiye had applied the strict rule of the Convention to both sides, it found itself in the midst of a dilemma as to whether it should apply the exact terms or the spirit of the Convention in accordance with the new circumstances of the war” (Seydi, 2010, p. 122). Thus, decisions under Article 19 were still made “manually” by the Turkish authorities,⁸ which sometimes led to their inconsistency, but, nevertheless, they were always taken depending on the balance of power. After World War II, partly for this reason, there were ideas for a revision of the 1936 Convention.

Three days after the announcement of the special military operation and against the backdrop of repeated speculations on the topic of blocking the straits from the Ukrainian side, former Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu said that Türkiye considered the special military operation to be a war and intended to transparently implement all the provisions of the Montreux Convention: “If Türkiye is not a belligerent in the conflict, it has the authority to restrict the passage of the warring states’ warships across the straits. We adhere to the Montreux rules,”⁹ Anadolu news agency quoted him, adding that in accordance with the mentioned Article 19, the Russian Black Sea Fleet ships would have the opportunity to return to their home port. Following the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers on February 28, 2022, a significant clarification was made: Türkiye, not being a party to the conflict, is closing the straits to

⁷ For the text, see: 1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits // Centre for International Law. URL: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits-1.pdf> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

⁸ For examples and analysis, see: (Seydi, 2010).

⁹ Ozberk T. Turkey Closes the Dardanelles and Bosphorus to Warships // Naval News. February 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/02/turkey-closes-the-dardanelles-and-bosphorus-to-warships/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

military vessels of the warring states, both Black Sea states and non-Black Sea states, for the period of the Russian-Ukrainian war.¹⁰

The wording of the Minister of Foreign Affairs does leave any doubt about the knowledge of the document that secures the country's privileged position in the region. However, the contradiction with the declared article is obvious. Despite the prohibition on the entry of warships of any country into the Black Sea, which is inconsistent with the Convention, on the same day US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a telephone conversation with M. Çavuşoğlu, once again condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine and admired the unity of partners and allies in confronting the emerging crisis, and highly appreciated both Türkiye's consistent application of the Montreux Convention and the Turkish Foreign Ministry's commentary on the situation.¹¹ In its search for balance, Türkiye has chosen to follow the spirit of the Convention rather than its letter. Of interest is not so much the position of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which quite obviously seek to maintain a balance in the Black Sea region (especially in its maritime dimension) but rather the fact, that the unfounded ban on passage through the Straits was unanimously accepted and even demonstratively approved¹² by the countries of

the collective West, NATO allies. Although lawyers and experts have tried to demonstrate the inconsistency of such a decision.¹³

The closure of the Black Sea to NATO warships, which is illegal according to Article 19 until the North Atlantic Alliance enters the war, and may affect its operational capabilities to provide assistance to the Black Sea members of the Alliance, firstly, it is associated with Türkiye's desire to prevent possible escalation between Russia and NATO, which the United States also fears; secondly, in this way, R.T. Erdogan tried to emphasize neutrality without taking sides.¹⁴

A few days after the start of the special military operation, Türkiye began constructing its new role, or rather, skillfully took the chance to confirm the ideas repeatedly stated by R.T. Erdogan about the need for justice in the world (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021; Avatkov & Guzaerov, 2023; Demeshko, Avatkov & Irkhin, 2022). The first step was to determine the critical importance of Türkiye for the development of the conflict in the maritime space of the Black Sea region, which was implemented through the application of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention. Ankara's role as a mediator, ensured by the neutral status of the keeper of the gates between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, served as the basis for the Istanbul negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, and subsequently as a basis for the grain deal. The title of one of the Western expert materials in the late spring of 2022 accurately reflects the situation in the geopolitical arena after the start of the special

¹⁰ Ozberk T. Turkey Closes the Dardanelles and Bosphorus to Warships // *Naval News*. February 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/02/turkey-closes-the-dardanelles-and-bosphorus-to-warships/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹¹ Secretary Blinken's Call with Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu // US Department of State. February 28, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-turkish-foreign-minister-cavusoglu-8/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹² Atalay D. B. Türkiye Has Taken Strong Steps Within The Framework of the Montreux Convention // *Anadolu Agency*. March 9, 2022. (In Russian). URL: https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80/%D1%82%D1%83%D1%80%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%8F%D0%BB%D0%B0-%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5-%D1%88%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%

B2-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%85-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%BE%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%80%D1%91/2528297 (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹³ Overfield C. Turkey Must Close the Turkish Straits Only to Russian and Ukrainian Warships // *Lawfare*. March 5, 2022. URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/turkey-must-close-turkish-straits-only-russian-and-ukrainian-warships> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹⁴ Ibid.

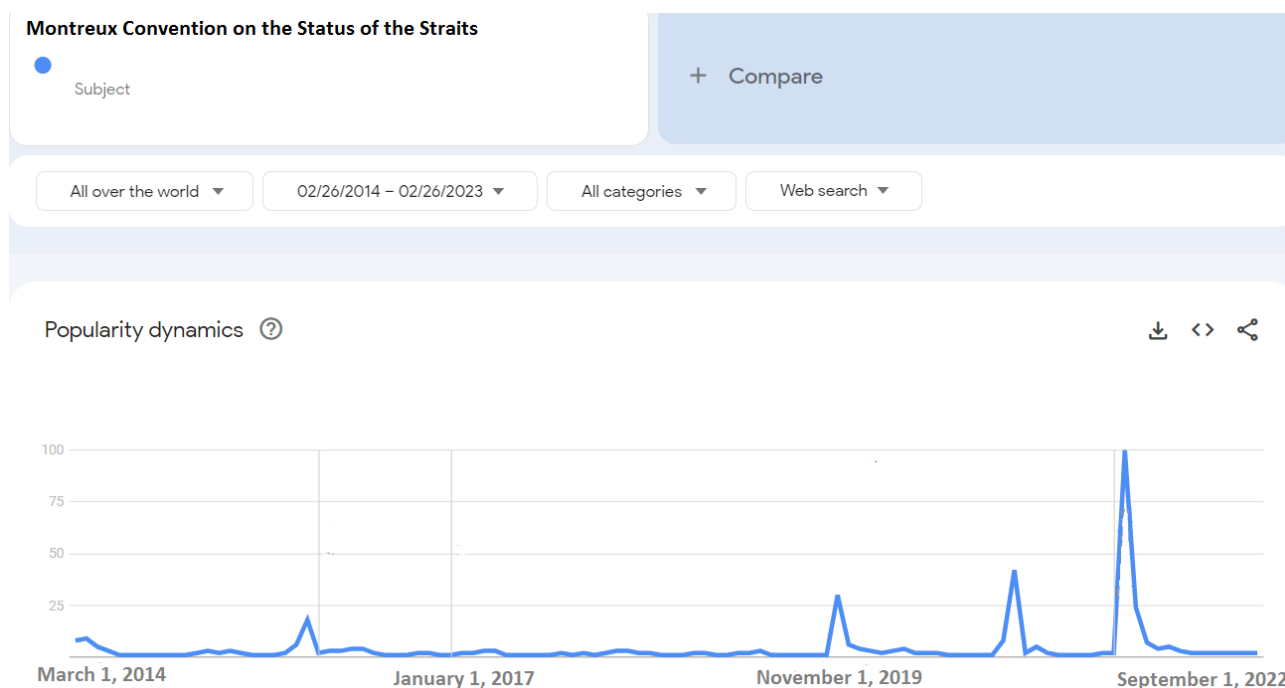


Figure 1. Dynamics of Google Trends Queries on the Topic “Montreux Convention” Since the Return of Crimea to the Russian Federation

Source: Google Trends. URL: <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2014-02-26%202023-02-26&q=%2Fm%2F054bn&hl=ru> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

military operation: “The Black Sea and Türkiye in Focus.” And at the beginning of 2023, a Center for Strategic & International Studies report outlined the position of the United States and NATO on the possibility of strengthening their presence in the region: “*Türkiye or nothing.*”¹⁵

The dynamics of user search queries on the topics “Montreux Convention” and “Black Sea Straits” is uneven and reflects moments of interstate tensions associated with the aggravation of the situation in the Black Sea region (Figure 1).

The absolute majority of queries occurs at the end of the winter of 2022 and is associated with the beginning of the special military operation, V. Zelensky’s demand to close the straits for Russia and Türkiye’s response.

¹⁵ Aronsson L., Mankoff J. The Inhospitable Sea // The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). February 2023. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/inhospitable-sea-toward-new-us-strategy-black-sea-region> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

The fluctuation of the curve of interest generally coincides with the reflection of the topic in Western expert and analytical materials. Until 2022, mentions of the Montreux Convention as ruling the passage of the Black Sea Straits were sporadic: think tanks broadcasting trends for NATO foreign policy reduced the significance of the document to zero at the discourse level. After the closure of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles in 2022, almost every analytical report mentions that Türkiye’s special regional status is ensured by the Montreux Convention. In the expert analytical discourse, and especially in the media discourse, the issue of the Black Sea straits regime, which has been in effect for no less than 86 years, is introduced as something new even for specialists in international relations. For example, the Hudson Institute’s commentary on the new US Black Sea strategy includes the section entitled “Montreux Convention for Beginners” (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023). The two-dimensional imagery of the title implies not

only the alleged ignorance of Western politicians about the meaning of the Convention, but also hints at deep strategies for overcoming it.

The previous round of interest occurred in April 2021, when the topic of the Montreux Convention reached the top of not only the national but also the world agenda after the publication of a letter from 104 retired Turkish admirals who opposed the construction of the Istanbul Canal parallel to the Bosphorus, which has every chance to undermine the Convention due to the emergence of an alternative sea route to the Black Sea. The Istanbul Canal, 45 km long and 275 m wide, was announced in 2011 by R.T. Erdogan,¹⁶ then Prime Minister of Türkiye (Kundak & Baypınar, 2011). The letter emphasized that the current straits regime ensures Türkiye's current independent position: "The Montreux Convention is the main document for the security of the Black Sea countries and the Convention that makes the Black Sea a sea of peace. This is the Convention that gives Türkiye the right not to enter the war on the side of one of the belligerents without its desire,"¹⁷ — an argument that excluded any discussion about revision and abolition. In his harsh response, R.T. Erdogan emphasized that he recognizes the Convention as a significant achievement of its time for Türkiye and intends to remain committed to it until a better option for control over the Straits is provided, and the Istanbul Canal will only strengthen Türkiye's sovereignty over the Straits. However, in the future, a revision of the Convention on terms that are best for Ankara and with the participation of the international community is possible.¹⁸

¹⁶ Eldem T. Canal Istanbul: Turkey's Controversial Megaproject // SWP Comment. 2021. No. 43. P. 1—8. URL: <https://doi.org/10.18449/2021C43> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹⁷ Retired Turkish Admirals Signed a Letter in Defense of the Montreux Convention // Forbes. April 4, 2021. (In Russian). URL: https://forbes.kz/news/2021/04/04/newsid_247088 (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹⁸ Alhas A. Turkey Remains Committed to Montreux Treaty: President // Anadolu Agency. April 5, 2021. URL:

If the project to build the Istanbul Canal is carried out, the canal will receive the status of artificial and national, which means that military and trade traffic through it will be regulated exclusively by the Turkish authorities, which suggests two options:

1. Türkiye completely prohibits the movement of military vessels through the Istanbul Canal, which fully preserves the supremacy of the Montreux Convention over the Straits;

2. Türkiye allows the movement of military vessels of littoral and non-littoral Black Sea states through the Istanbul Canal, which effectively removes them from the Montreux zone.

Since the beginning of the special military operation, Türkiye has made every effort to achieve the role of an equidistant partner for Russia and the West, becoming first a platform for negotiations, and then a power that secured the grain deal: this tactic fits into Türkiye's strategy to achieve the status of a global actor (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021), which ultimately resulted in the assumed role of a global negotiator between the West and non-West, where one of the results is the spectacular involvement of such a maritime security instrument as the Montreux Convention. Türkiye, maintaining a neutral status and concluding *ad hoc* partnerships, seeks to win the role of one of the architects of the new world order, whatever it may be.

Another reason for the deliberately "casual" interpretation of the Convention is the idea of a possible fear of Russian reaction: citing discrimination on the basis of "belligerent / non-belligerent power" Russia could demand the denunciation of the Montreux Convention, which would automatically lead to the regulation of navigation in the straits in accordance with the UN Convention

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/turkey-remains-committed-to-montreux-treaty-president/2198967> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)¹⁹ and the opening of access to the Black Sea for any warships.²⁰

However, neither Russia nor Western countries protested against the closure of the straits. Russia's position fits into the regularly declared understanding of the Convention as an instrument for ensuring security in the Black Sea, an important condition of which is the resolution of economic and security issues in the region exclusively by the Black Sea powers, without outside interference.²¹ Thus, if for Russia the impossibility of the presence of the NATO fleet in the Black Sea is advantageous, then for the West the need for a military presence in the Black Sea has not arisen yet.

During this period, Türkiye has repeatedly drawn public attention to the fact that “it fulfills all the requirements of the Montreux Convention... Since March, not a single military vessel has passed through the Turkish Straits. Not a single Russian military aircraft used Turkish airspace on its way to Syria,”²² — the statements are accompanied by emphasis on

¹⁹ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea // United Nations. URL: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²⁰ Overfield C. Turkey Must Close the Turkish Straits Only to Russian and Ukrainian Warships // Lawfare. March 5, 2022. URL: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/turkey-must-close-turkish-straits-only-russian-and-ukrainian-warships> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²¹ See: Parliamentary Dimension of Cooperation in the Black Sea Region: Main Results, Trends, Prospects. Materials of Parliamentary Hearings // State Duma. February 20, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <http://duma.gov.ru/media/files/OrPEaA38V0iQCYdJuAy9Dv6TFxqB4PMI.pdf> (accessed: 25.03.2023); Speech by K.Yu. Gavrilov, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation at the Negotiations in Vienna on Military Security and Arms Control, at the 1043rd Plenary Meeting of the OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation // OSCE. May 3, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/a/544861.pdf> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²² Çavuşoğlu Said That Türkiye Fulfills All the Requirements of the Montreux Convention // RIA Novosti. November 29, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20221129/turtsiya-1835047922.html> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

Türkiye's high mission to fairly resolve international problems (Irkhin & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 92): “Ukraine needs a just peace. This is exactly what Türkiye is trying to achieve.”²³ The annual multinational exercise “Sea Breeze,” organized by the U.S. and Ukraine in the Black Sea since 1996, took place in July 2022 without entry of warships of non-littoral states into the Black Sea basin. At press conferences and in addresses to the nation, the country's top officials mention that Türkiye's decision ensures peace in the waters of the region and prevents the escalation of the conflict.²⁴ However, three days after the M. Çavuşoğlu's speech, in which he said that since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis not a single military ship had passed through the straits to the Black Sea,²⁵ the planned visit of the American destroyer USS Nitze (DDG-94) to Türkiye took place. The warship, fully armed, passed the Dardanelles and anchored in Istanbul at the entrance to the Bosphorus. The US Ambassador to Türkiye J. Flake used highly pathetic rhetoric, characterizing the cooperation with Türkiye with “exclusive” epithets: “Türkiye is a *highly valued* NATO Ally. Nitze's visit is an opportunity to further strengthen our *long-standing* and *vital* partnership with Türkiye.”²⁶

On the visual level, the photo of the US Ambassador on board against the backdrop of a

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Erdogan Announced Türkiye's Strict Compliance with the Montreux Convention on the Black Sea Straits // TASS. January 9, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16762693> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²⁵ Türkiye Said It Follows the Montreux Convention by Not Allowing Warships into the Black Sea // TASS. September 1, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16933499> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²⁶ Vandiesal C. USS Nitze (DDG 94) Arrives at Gölçük Naval Base in Türkiye // U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa. U.S. Sixth Fleet. February 5, 2023. URL: <https://www.c6f.navy.mil/Press-Room/News/Article/3287629/uss-nitze-ddg-94-arrives-at-glck-naval-base-in-trkiye/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

huge American flag and a Turkish flag several times smaller was seen as a demonstration of force by the U.S. Although the American destroyer did not formally enter the Black Sea, its passage through the Dardanelles can be considered as a precedent: the USA showed its superiority and *de facto* non-recognition of the option of applying the Montreux Convention declared by Türkiye at the beginning of the special military operation. The Turkish Straits in the Montreux Convention refer to the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus,²⁷ thus creating a single geographical and, more importantly, geopolitical space, enshrined in the Convention and providing transit between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The US consent to the ban on its warships entering the Black Sea can be characterized as voluntary and temporary. However, on the rhetorical level, the conditionality of its acceptance and the understanding of the incorrect application of Article 19 are repeatedly emphasized. “Ankara will continue to block warships from entering the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits for the foreseeable future. Although Türkiye has invoked Article 19 of the Montreux Convention, which pertains to the belligerents’ navies (vessels not home-ported in the Black Sea), the Turkish Foreign Office’s diplomatic rhetoric implied that Ankara would also prohibit outsider naval activity” (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 1). This is how the Turkish position is interpreted in one of the expert materials, in which the agreement with the Turkish decision turns into a kind of “goodwill gesture,” made by the U.S.²⁸

²⁷ The Convention is intended “...to regulate transit and navigation in the Straits of the Dardanelles, the Sea of Marmora and the Bosphorus comprised under the general term ‘Straits’”. See: 1936 Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits // Centre for International Law. URL: <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits-1.pdf> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

²⁸ See: Lancaster M. Troubled Waters — How Russia’s War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security. Preliminary

The Chatam House report (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017), based on a comprehensive methodology, identified the Turkish Straits as being of strategic global importance, with a fifth of the world’s wheat exports and a sixth of maize exports, and suggested further intensive growth of grain exports from the Black Sea region, as the route through the Straits has no alternative (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017, pp. V—VII, 12). Moreover, already in 2017, both the Straits zone and the Black Sea ports were classified as regions of high instability, potential conflict and/or risk of state failure; it was assumed that there was a non-zero probability of an armed conflict in Türkiye itself after the 2016 coup attempt, as well as a possible deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations. However, even against this background, the experts practically did not consider the possibility of Türkiye blocking the Bosphorus (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017, pp. 36—37). The 124-page analytical document runs through the idea that the power that controls the straits has complete control over the flow of goods through it (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017), but it does not even mention the basis — the Montreux Convention that is governing civil, commercial and military shipping through the Black Sea straits. In 2022, Türkiye not only closed the Straits to warships of all states, but also acted as the organizer and keeper of the so-called “grain deal,” the need for which arose in connection with military operations in the Black Sea. Success in the role of a mediator has become one of the theses that R.T. Erdogan regularly puts into the public space both to promote Türkiye’s image in the world and on the domestic political agenda.

Draft Report // NATO Parliamentary Assembly. May 2, 2023. URL: <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2023-05/020%20DSCFC%2023%20E%20-%20BLACK%20%20SEA%20SECURITY%20-%20LANCASTER%20REPORT%20.pdf> (accessed: 25.07.2023).

Prospects for Denunciation or Revision of the Montreux Convention

The super mission of the only unbiased referee of the conflict, a global peacemaker, expressed and implemented by Türkiye, the demonstration of the “logic of good intentions” in the case of excess of power in the implementation of the Convention, can lead to the initiation of a revision or cancellation of both Türkiye’s decision and the entire Convention by the West.

The USA, being not a signatory to the Convention, promotes the issue of revising or abolishing the current Straits regime (regularly at the expert level, partly in the form of a legislative initiative, and actively at the discursive level), applying Russia’s dominance in the Black Sea region as a reason.²⁹ To ensure that the possible future initiative of the USA to actually abandon the Convention and, as a consequence, establish its dominance in the Black Sea region, is perceived normally, a multidimensional strategy is being implemented. One of its elements is the scientific justification. In the American version, it is supplemented by a mandatory component aimed at maintaining the country’s image as an agent of democratic values.

In July 2022, the Black Sea Security Act of 2022³⁰ was introduced in the US Congress, and in December 2022 it was adopted by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In 2023, the document undergoes an official adoption procedure titled as the Black Sea Security Act of 2023. Recognizing the critical importance of the Black Sea region for the national security of the six littoral states, the growing tensions in the region on the eastern border of the European Union (EU) and NATO borders, and the

strengthening of Russia in the region after 2014, the congressmen initiate a review of the US foreign policy in the Black Sea region. Noting the need to update the concept of the Black Sea for the United States in 2020, American experts abandoned the country-based principle of identifying it due to the remoteness and impersonality of most countries, but identified the geopolitical space of the Black Sea as the central element of the conceptualization. The region itself was presented through a sports metaphor: on a huge baseball field, the classic formation of nine players was reproduced, of which the three leading ones were endowed with agency: Ukraine in the North, Türkiye in the South, Russia in the Northeast (Moskalenko, Irkhin & Kabanova, 2022, p. 264).

Three years later, the United States explicitly calls the Black Sea located thousands of miles away geopolitically and economically important, critical to transatlantic interests and America’s geopolitical roadmap (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 4). Among the problematic factors in the region, the congressmen turned to the current functioning of the Black Sea Straits, since Russia’s war with Ukraine has increased the importance of the Black Sea region to the US national interests (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, pp. 3—4): “(9) While, in February 2022, Turkey blocked the entry of Russian warships into the Black Sea pursuant to the Convention on the regime of the straits, signed in Montreux, Switzerland, on July 20, 1936 (commonly known as the ‘Montreux Convention’). The Montreux Convention does not take into account the increase in size, weight, and capabilities of modern warships, and Russia does not have the same limits on tonnage as non-littoral states. (10) Turkey has resisted attempts to change its interpretation of the Montreux Convention in order to avoid weakening its position in the region.”³¹

These two statements, demonstrate, firstly, the US position regarding Türkiye’s application of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention and

²⁹ Graffy C. Who Will Control the Black Sea? // GIS. October 11, 2022. URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea-russia-turkey/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³⁰ S.4509 — Black Sea Security Act of 2022. 117th Congress (2021—2022) // Congress.gov. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/4509> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³¹ Ibid.

the closure of the straits to ships of all states. The wording of the bill mentions the blockade of the Straits for Russian ships only against the backdrop of the Turkish Foreign Ministry announcing a complete closure of the straits for all warships. Secondly, it raises the issue of revision at the legislative level in connection with changes in the tactical and technical characteristics of the fleets. Thirdly, and most importantly, it directly indicates the desire of the United States to influence the Republic of Türkiye in matters of regulating navigation through the straits and its dissatisfaction with its overly independent behavior in the Black Sea region.

The implementation of the main measures of the new Black Sea strategy of the U.S. should lead to the expansion of its economic and military presence, the development of the Three Seas Initiative, the establishment of democratic values, and the expansion of cooperation between the EU, the USA and NATO in the Black Sea region and the wider Black Sea region, including in the military and intelligence spheres. The bill places particular emphasis on containing Russia in the region and protecting freedom of navigation in the Black Sea to avoid the expansion of hostilities in Europe. It is proposed to create a joint multinational military headquarters in the Black Sea, responsible for all types of military operations in the wider Black Sea region, and working directly with Türkiye, Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria, to achieve freedom of navigation, which will increase the security and economic accessibility of the Black Sea (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, pp. 16—17).

In October 2022, the Liechtenstein-registered pro-American *Geopolitical Intelligence Service* think tank (GIS) put a direct request for a radical revision of the Montreux Convention as ensuring total control over the Black Sea on the expert agenda. According to C. Graffey, a law professor, the Montreux Convention turns the Black Sea into the “Russian lake,” giving it the opportunity to dominate the region, attack littoral states and seize their territories, since

after 2022 the Sea of Azov has become *de facto* “Russian lake,” the Volga-Don Canal allows the movement of ships from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea through the Kerch Strait, and the agreement with Syria provided Russia with the southern port of Tartus with unlimited access to the Mediterranean Sea. The analyst emphasizes that “if the special military operation is successful, Russia is ready to annex Transnistria,” which will further expand Russia’s Black Sea border.³²

The restrictions imposed by the Montreux Convention facilitate this negative scenario for the United States and its allies. Thus, the semantics of the justification for the unsuitability of the Montreux Convention, associated with the promotion by the United States of the concept of “freedom of navigation,” can be seen: “The Montreux provisions stand in stark contrast to the principles of free military seafaring in the waters of the open sea established centuries earlier. The ‘special rights’ for Black Sea countries now extend, effectively, only to Russia and Türkiye. These privileges run contrary to modern principles of international sea law, in the view of many critics. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides for the right of transit passage through international straits (Article 38). Ending the treaty could revert the region to the law of the sea norms that are followed by most nations.”³³

Depending on the development of the special military operation, American experts consider four scenarios for the Black Sea region.

The first, extremely unlikely scenario, assumes the protracted conflict, the transformation of the Black Sea into a “Russian lake” even without victory of Russia and the preservation of the Montreux Convention in its current version.

³² Graffey C. Who Will Control the Black Sea? // GIS. October 11, 2022. URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea-russia-turkey/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³³ Ibid.

The second scenario of moderate probability assumes the defeat of Russia, but due to the lack of political will of the West, the 1936 Convention remains unchanged.

In the third scenario of a moderate probability, Russia is defeated and the U.S., the EU, NATO, and the Black Sea states feel empowered to redraft the Montreux Convention in accordance with the Black Sea Security Act, but Türkiye's sovereignty over the Straits remains unchanged.

The fourth scenario, although assessed as unlikely due to Türkiye's position, involves the complete abolition of the Convention and the transition of the Straits to the general provisions of international maritime law.³⁴

The activities taken by the USA should first of all be associated with the growing Russian maritime presence in the Black Sea region: in the expert and analytical discourse it is referred to as the search for a *new nautical sphere of influence*, which requires the United States to have a new strategy in the region, in which Türkiye will one way or another remain an important element as long as it controls the straits. The U.S., as a rule, prefers not to indicate its steps towards the revision or abolition of the Montreux Convention in the public space, but readily mentions the attempts of the Russian Empire and the USSR to challenge Türkiye's unconditional authority over the straits.³⁵ Thus, it becomes important for the United States to achieve a strategic balance with Türkiye, which implies the removal of Türkiye's "ontological mistrust" of the United States: this is possible only on the condition that any increase in NATO's presence in the region does not violate the Montreux Convention.³⁶

³⁴ Graffy C. Who Will Control the Black Sea? // GIS. October 11, 2022. URL: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/black-sea-russia-turkey/> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³⁵ Aronsson L., Mankoff J. The Inhospitable Sea // The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). February 2023. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/inhospitable-sea-toward-new-us-strategy-black-sea-region> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

³⁶ Ibid. P. 25.

The events of the special military operation have brought back to the expert field the concept of the wider Black Sea region, which was put into circulation after the events of September 11, 2001 in the context of the expansion of the EU and NATO, but its key actors then did not achieve their goals (Tsantoulis, 2016, p. 6).

In their brief Hudson Institute experts L. Coffey and C. Kasapoğlu emphasize that the new geopolitical reality, especially its maritime dimension, requires the U.S. and NATO to have a long-term and multidimensional strategy designed for the wider Black Sea region, since "the region around the Black Sea remains an area for NATO and European Union enlargement" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 4). The authors use the term "Broader Black Sea region" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 1) as opposed to the established "Wider Black Sea region," confirming the choice of word with a renewed understanding of the region, where special strategic importance is attached to Azov and the Caspian Sea (with a key emphasis on Iran): "Russia sees the Caspian and Black Seas as being one geopolitical space — and so should NATO military planners and policymakers" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 11).

The factors for the revival of the concept are not only the beginning of the special military operation and the transformation of the Sea of Azov into a "Russian lake," but also Türkiye's appeal to the Montreux Convention, which reminded the world of its status in the region. In 2005, in the wake of promoting the concept of the Wider Black Sea Region, Washington's clear course of neglecting the provisions of the Convention was obvious (Tchantouridze, 2018, p. 44). Currently, the need to develop and implement a new strategy for the West in the region has the following prerequisites.

Türkiye will strive to maintain its *status quo* in the region due to the Montreux Convention, but in the context of a protracted Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the decision to block the straits has two sides: it not only limits

the deployment of NATO military vessels in the Black Sea, but also locks the weakened Russian Black Sea Fleet in the region with the possibility of strengthening it only via the Caspian Sea, and blocks its access to the Mediterranean Sea. For the West, aid to Ukraine to take Crimea back is strategically justified to ensure the security of the Alliance's eastern flank; containing Russia in the Black Sea will ensure the security of the southern flank. Turkish elites regard the Montreux Convention as an unshakable basis for a special posture in the region, and all other variables are of a contractual nature. According to American experts, the special military operation highlighted Türkiye's claims (geographically, economically, politically and historically based) to leadership in the Black Sea region, which, however, have practically exhausted themselves. Therefore, it is time to use Türkiye's ambitions wisely and subordinate its influence in the region to the goals of Western security and stability: "Türkiye's Western allies should focus on a new Black Sea cooperation model with Ankara — including intra-NATO naval cooperation models between the three littoral allies — instead of hopelessly asking for concessions relative to the Montreux regime" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 4).

In the US Black Sea Strategy, the Montreux Convention remains a reality that must be dealt with in the long term and through various means. The document being considered in Congress defines directions, which, however, are already filled with specific meanings and measures, the purpose of which is to ensure the leading role of the United States in the Black Sea region. In many ways, this is proposed to be achieved by eroding the existing regime of functioning of the Black Sea Straits and influencing Türkiye:

- to establish a Black Sea Maritime Patrol mission as soon as Türkiye lifts its restrictions on foreign warships transiting the Turkish Straits;

- if it is impossible to lift restrictions on the displacement and duration of stay of

warships of non-littoral states in the Black Sea, then it is necessary to help the NATO-oriented Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia to increase the size and capabilities of their navies;

- use effectively the capabilities of the coast guard. The real Ukrainian experience of naval combat in the almost complete absence of a fleet can be extended to other territories (for example, Azerbaijan, the Sea of Azov, Taiwan).

A number of measures involve the expansion of the Black Sea Region to the Black Sea — Caspian Region: "The extreme point of NATO's Black Sea border should be the southern coast of the Caspian Sea" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 12).

Another prerequisite is close cooperation with Türkiye under the primacy of the Montreux Convention, but with restrictions: regional cooperation between Türkiye and Russia is now excluded, and acceptable models of cooperation in the region must be determined by the United States. Traditionally, the USA resorts to the rhetoric of universal values: "No Black Sea nation would want to sit down with the siloviki-ruled Moscow following the invasion of Ukraine" (Coffey & Kasapoğlu, 2023, p. 13). As can be seen from the proposed measures within the framework of the strategy, Türkiye's claims to regional leadership and preservation of sovereignty over the straits are permissible for the United States only under a list of conditions, including, firstly, a number of indirect steps to erode the Montreux Convention, which will lead only to its nominal functioning without actually changing the text of the document, and secondly, a course of harsh pressure on the Republic of Türkiye up to a change of power, if R.T. Erdogan maintains his independent foreign policy line, implying balancing between the West and non-West, implemented largely through the so-called "chemistry"³⁷ between V.V. Putin and the Turkish leader.

³⁷ Goncharenko R. Erdogan "Takes Great Care Not to Cross" Putin // DW. May 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-taking-great-care-not-to-cross-russias-red-lines/a-62727068> (accessed: 25.03.2023).

The declared and successfully implemented solidarity of the West shifts the scale of probabilities towards a revision of the Montreux Convention up to the complete transfer of the straits under the regulation of the UNCLOS or the demilitarization of the Black Sea according to the model of the Paris Peace of 1856 as a result of the Crimean War. Given such scenarios and the U.S. call for revision or rejection of the Convention, the Nitze destroyer's passage through the Dardanelles to the Black Sea can be seen as a test of reaction, on the one hand, and the US position on Türkiye's declared application of Article 19, on the other.

Although back in 2021, an analysis of a similar case was made by experts in connection with the prospect of building the Istanbul Canal, according to the Turkish legislation regulating the stay of foreign military vessels in Turkish ports on the Sea of Marmara, a military vessel of a non-littoral state has the right to pass through the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara and visit the port of Istanbul as part of bilateral military ties under the patronage of the Turkish General Staff. According to K. Yücel, this approach makes it possible not to apply the Montreux Convention to the Dardanelles passage, since the second strait designated in the Convention is not affected. A logical question arises: does a military ship that has sailed from the Aegean Sea and made a stop at the port of Istanbul (or any other Turkish port on the Mediterranean Sea) have the right to enter the Black Sea waters (Yücel, 2019, pp. 244—249), especially if the Istanbul Canal is built and there is no need to cross the Bosphorus?

Conclusion

The research allows to highlight the discourse of the positions of leading international actors regarding the Montreux Convention in the public political, expert and media space.

Türkiye continues to declare its strict adherence to the regime of the Black Sea straits established in 1936, which ensures its special position in the Black Sea region. However, the

decision to close the Straits for warships of all countries in 2022, and not just the parties to the conflict, on the basis of Article 19 of the Convention is predominantly political, demonstrative and declarative in nature and is justified by the high goal of maintaining security in the region, despite the fact that its legal basis may be controversial. Obviously, Article 21 would be more appropriate: according to it, if Türkiye considers itself to be under immediate military danger, the passage of warships depends solely on the decision of the Turkish government. But this approach would narrow the possibilities for political maneuver and the established “manual mode” of the straits management. Türkiye successfully copes with the traditional balancing act between the interests of Russia and the West, largely due to its role as the neutral “gatekeeper” of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, following not so much the “letter” as the “spirit” of the Convention. It is necessary to emphasize the well-thought nature of such application of the articles of the Convention, thereby increasing the regional status and global role of Türkiye. But this raises the question of interpreting the articles of the Montreux Convention depending on the subjective views of the Turkish leadership, its goals and objectives in a certain period of time.

Despite all the apparent contradictions of the Turkish decision, it turned out to be in the interests of both Russia, which is still protected from the presence of large military forces in the waters of the Black Sea, and the Western countries, fearing a direct clash with Russia. For now, Russia has taken a wait-and-see approach and is refraining from making any statements regarding the application of Article 19 of the Convention. However, in the case of pressure on Türkiye from NATO allies, the decision may be revised, as it has an image-declarative nature.

The American-centric approach to the Turkish foreign policy assumes that the Montreux Convention can be ignored if necessary. So far, the request to revise the existing regime of the Black Sea straits, from

which the United States will be the main beneficiary, is being implemented at the discursive and media level. The U.S. is not a signatory to the Convention and tends to present Washington's compliance with it as a gesture of goodwill undertaken for the sake of the stability of the Black Sea region, as long as it does not come into direct conflict with American interests. However, the new US Black Sea strategy identifies the Black Sea region as critically important and defines a number of steps as part of the overall strategy for establishing the US influence. The updated concept is largely based on the version of the 2000—2010s, when the following goals were set: democratization, creation and development of state institutions, respect for human rights, integration of the countries of the region into the Euro-Atlantic community, energy security. These measures, according to the Americans, should have led to the creation of a single geostrategic space. From the perspective of 2022—2023, the United States discursively declares the same goals, but emphasizes the need to work with Türkiye regarding its sovereignty over the Straits in order to transform Ankara's approaches in a way that is beneficial to Washington. Türkiye's role as a balancer between the West and the non-West, which clearly emerged after the start of the special military operation, diplomatic and political bargaining for Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO, and claims to the role of a global negotiating platform through the regulation of military (and, in fact, commercial) shipping in the region do not satisfy the United States. And if earlier Türkiye, as a rule, occupied an undeniable position as NATO's flank in the region, now the U.S. is rapidly increasing military cooperation here — especially with Romania, which will to some extent allow circumventing the restrictions of the Montreux Convention even without its revision, and is testing various ways of putting pressure on Türkiye.

The logistical role and the military-political significance of the Black Sea straits have objectively increased in the last decade — in fact, due to the collision of two globalization projects: the American Wider Black Sea Region (7 littoral states, Azerbaijan and Armenia), adjusted to take into account the special military operation (Black Sea — Caspian region with an emphasis on Iran), on the one hand, and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, on the other hand. The implementation of the former will mean achieving an “operational encirclement” of the People's Republic of China from land and depriving it of the strategic depth, which is provided by the Eurasian land spaces and the system of neutral countries and Beijing's allies. And the advantage in favor of the second project of the “collective East” will allow China and Russia to break out into the strategic spaces of Europe and Eurasia, bypassing the global sea communications controlled by the United States. Therefore, the Montreux Convention will remain at the center of public and real politics until the end of the formation of a new system of international relations, ensuring the stability of world development for the next political era.

What this world will be — Western-centric or oriented towards the “collective East” — is being decided now, including in the Black Sea region, where the Black Sea straits (entry and exit, Southern Black Sea region) and Crimea (control over the Northern Black Sea region) are an imperative for control over the entire region.

Before the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), the Black Sea was considered in Istanbul as the “harem of Sultan,” that is, the entry of any foreign ship into it was impossible. Established within the framework of the Montreux Convention in 1936, even before World War II, the functioning regime of the Black Sea straits is the longest-lasting regime since 1774, and reflects a regional balance that is currently being eroded.

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