

# Classic and Hybrid Challenges in the Black Sea Region



A joint assessment by  
New Strategy Center  
(Romania), Foundation for Political,  
Economic and Social Research – SETA  
(Turkey), Sofia Security Forum (Bulgaria)

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## ***Classic and Hybrid Challenges in the Black Sea Region***

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*New Strategy Center, Romania, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), Turkey, and Sofia Security Forum, Bulgaria, engaged in a common endeavor to develop a joint policy paper analyzing the current security challenges in the Black Sea Region.*

*NATO's cohesion is very important in a region that has to face classic and emerging challenges, hybrid threats, protracted conflicts and strategic competition among major actors within and outside the Black Sea space. The Black Sea Region is also important not only in terms of conflicting geopolitical interests but also as an area where traditional east-west and north-south trade and energy routes intersect. This has become especially significant after the*

*recent discovery of considerable, commercially viable offshore hydrocarbon resources in the Black Sea. Since NATO has acknowledged the strategic importance of the Black Sea region, the contribution and mutual cooperation of Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria as member states is crucial for regional stability and security. The study is intended to offer the analytical views of experts from the three think tanks and to suggest some practical recommendations on the way forward.*



### ***INTRODUCTORY NOTE***

Dark clouds are gathering once more over the Black Sea. The situation is becoming serious and requires serious thinking and appropriate action because it affects not only the fundamental interests of all riparian countries but also involves specific interests of other international actors. Historically, the region has been over the centuries the scene of epic confrontations for power and influence interspersed with brief spells when peace reigned, allowing for the emergence of flourishing civilizations, trade flows and harmonious interaction among the peoples living on the Sea's shores. In the current complicated period of shifting realities of power worldwide and unprecedented pace of change – political, economic, technological, social and

cultural – the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region has become more obvious than ever. The reasons for this resumed prominence of the region in European and world affairs are equally obvious.

Most, if not all, of Europe's protracted conflicts, old and new, which have a tendency to suddenly become kinetic and deadly, as recent experiences have shown, are located in the Black Sea region with little prospect for reasonable solutions in sight any time soon. People are still dying in combat here, while the civilian population has to suffer as a result of hostilities, war damage, displacement and economic hardship.

The rapid and extensive militarization of the Black Sea space as an instrument of policy has grown apace in the past several years, especially following the military actions of the Russian Federation against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 resulting in territorial aggrandizement, the illegal annexation of Crimea and military incursions in South-East Ukraine. The accumulation of enormous amounts of military hardware, concentrations of battle-ready troops in relatively small areas and resort to hybrid and other unconventional methods of warfare are seen as a threat to neighbouring countries; they consequently trigger a commensurable response, thus aggravating the danger of a regional arms race and potential escalation of minor incidents into full-scale war.

The designation of vast expanses of the sea for Russian Black Sea Fleet naval exercises, often encroaching on the exclusive economic zones of other riparian states is legitimately perceived as a threat to freedom of navigation and to the ongoing or planned hydrocarbon exploration and production offshore activities as it discourages serious investment in major, economically promising projects of substantial interest for our three countries.

The Covid-19 pandemic and its disruptive economic impact have starkly revealed the vulnerabilities of modern societies in the face of an unseen but no less ominous common threat, and they have tested our resilience and response capabilities in the region and across the world. The pandemic demonstrated that national and international security is a more comprehensive concept, including aspects that go well beyond the accepted notions of military capability and preparedness.

All these elements are adequately reflected in the documents of the recent NATO summit, to which our three nations have subscribed, emphasizing the strategic importance of the Black Sea and the allied commitment to security and stability in the region. It is to be expected that the Alliance should further give equal attention to building

effective deterrence all along its entire Eastern Flank, considering also the geopolitical significance of the Black Sea as a natural link to the no less strategic regions of the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean.

It is our well-considered and firm belief that, in the current and foreseeable circumstances fraught with uncertainty and unpleasant surprises, the scientific and academic community, think tanks in particular, have the ability and responsibility to make sense of the dynamic developments of today with an eye to the future, to identify likely trends and to exercise informed foresight. Only by doing so and by working together to that end we shall be able to fulfil our mission: to provide rational and feasible policy options and methodological tools to decision makers in our respective countries in line with enlightened national interest, which is also the common interest of having a peaceful, stable and prosperous Black Sea region.

*The introductory note is jointly undersigned by all the authors.*

## THE BLACK SEA REGION SECURITY - A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### I. INTRODUCTION

There are few moments in the Black Sea history with peace, stability and cooperation among riparian states, the region being rather characterized by conflict, rivalry and territorial fragmentation with repercussions on the entire international geopolitical climate and this despite region's economic, trade and energy potential. Being located at the geographical confluence between Europe, the Middle East and, respectively, Asia and North Africa, perhaps that is why the Black Sea has been for centuries the scene for the assertion of political, economic and trade interests and influences of regional and global powers.

Throughout history, two regional powers have influenced and shaped the security environment in the Black Sea region: Russia and Turkey, but in the last 30 years, Russia has been the main player. For centuries Russia has fought the Ottoman Empire, first for access to the Black Sea warm ports and then to assure its secure passage through the Turkish Straits towards the Mediterranean Sea, Middle East and North Africa. Since then, Russia continued to pursue the strategic goal of engaging in Middle East in order to re-establish Russia's presence at the crossroads of the world.

Former Romanian president Traian Băsescu warned the West as early as in 2005 about Russia's plans for the annexation of territories and war strategies in the Black Sea region: *"The Black Sea has been treated [by Russia] for centuries as a Russian lake, haven't you understood this yet?"*, president Băsescu said at that time in a speech he made in the United States. His controversial statements

#### Russia before 2014

"Work under the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) focuses on all areas of mutual interest identified in the Founding Act. Cooperation is being intensified in a number of key areas, which include the fight against terrorism, crisis management, non-proliferation, arms control and confidence-building measures, theatre missile defense, logistics, military-to-military cooperation, defense reform and civil emergencies.(...) In fact, hardly a day goes by without an NRC meeting at one level or another, leading to an unprecedented intensity of contacts and informal consultation in many different fields, conducted in a friendly and workmanlike atmosphere."

Source: NATO website - NATO-Russia Council at <https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/about/index.html>

then provoked a lot of criticism and irritation, but they proved true within a decade at a level that was difficult to anticipate, leading to several tragic events.<sup>1</sup> Why wasn't he believed? Because

#### Russia after 2014

"In April 2014, following Russia's illegal military intervention in Ukraine and its violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Alliance suspended all practical cooperation between NATO and Russia including that which took place in the framework of the NRC. However, the Alliance agreed to keep channels of communication open in the NRC and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council at Ambassadorial level and above, to allow the exchange of views, first and foremost on the crisis in Ukraine."

Source: NATO website - NATO-Russia Council at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm)

at that time, four years after the 9/11 attacks on US and the outbreak of the global war on terrorism, Russia was considered an equal

1 DW - Analysis - Marea Neagra ca "lac rusesc" (Black Sea as a "Russian Lake"), June 6, 2021 at (<https://www.dw.com/ro/rusia->

partner of NATO. In reality, Russia was just acting as a friend, instead collecting intelligence about NATO capabilities, strategies, plans and intentions, in the meantime preparing and refining its own strategies and plans to fulfill president Putin's vision to restore Russia's global posture, seeking just the right geopolitical moment to act.

So, Russia's invasion of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 had a strategic surprise effect on NATO and its member states, raising questions within the Alliance about this critical security situation: "When a country is attacked by conventional land, sea or air forces, it is usually clear how to best respond. But what happens when it is attacked by a mixture of special forces, information campaigns and backdoor proxies? What's the best response? And how can international security organizations like NATO adapt to these attacks?"<sup>2</sup>

## II. Defining elements of the Black Sea region current security environment

In terms of **conventional threats**, shortly after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia realized that it was facing a serious problem of national security at its borders, with threats coming from within the former Soviet space. Having at that time weak political and diplomatic coercive instruments, Russia resorted to the threat or the use of military force to create instability in the regions concerned, **creating an architecture of frozen conflicts that offered it a wide combination of political, strategic and military options towards the respective states, but also against the expansion of the social, economic and security values of the West.**

The military occupation of Transnistria in the Republic of Moldova (1991), of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia (2008), of the

Crimean peninsula and Donbass in Ukraine (2014), to which is added the unclear security situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, and at the same time excessive militarization of the Southern



Source: New Strategy Center - WHY THE BLACK SEA MATTERS – Policy Paper, May 2017

Military District and Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet respectively, led to an exacerbation of the political, military, social and economic insecurity of the states affected by the Russian military occupation, as well as to a certain "geopolitical anxiety"<sup>3</sup> for the other states in the region, characterized by risks, uncertainties and ambiguity about the future.

A year later, in 2015, the military intervention in Syria gave Russia the necessary impetus to assert itself as a player in a deep crisis situation on the geopolitical scene, but also the opportunity for the quested presence in the Middle East, challenging the US and NATO, taking advantage of their lack of strategic determination and reasserting itself as a major power broker. From the Mediterranean Sea, Russia had open access to the Planetary Ocean and to its global ambitions, but for this it had to revive the former political and military arrangements from the Soviet period with Egypt, Libya, Algeria and to maintain at least at the same level the political and diplomatic relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

nato-desf%C4%83%C8%99ur%C4%83ri-de-for%C8%9Be-la-marea-neagr%C4%83/a-58106255)

<sup>2</sup> NATO Review - Hybrid war - hybrid response? 1 July 2014 at <https://youtu.be/ferbM4hqkUA>

<sup>3</sup> Murat Yeşiltaş, director of the Security Research Department of the SETA Foundation, "Îngrijorare geopolitică" (Geopolitical Concern) - TRT Romanian, January 7, 2021 at <https://www.trt.net.tr/romana/programe/2021/01/07/ingrijorare-geopolitica-1559425>

## II.1. Russia Black Sea excessive militarization

Although the Russian-Georgian war was won in just six days (August 2008), it was a cold shower for Russian military strategists. The post-war analysis revealed profound deficiencies in the Russian Armed Forces organization, level of training, equipment and mode of action as well as a lack of cooperation between arms and services, inefficiency of the air force and of the command and control system and poor intelligence capabilities.<sup>4</sup> However, the surprise of the military leaders was overall greater as the Russian armed forces should have been prepared for battle having just finished the operational-strategic exercise KAVKAZ 2008<sup>5</sup>. The chief of the Russian General Staff at the time, General Nikolai Makarov, declared euphemistically: “... it is impossible not to notice a certain gap between theory and practice.”<sup>6</sup>

That moment marked the beginning of an ambitious program of military reform supported by former Defense Minister Antoly Serdyukov and dubbed “New Look.” Although at that time



Source: leonardodinu@newstrategycenter.ro

this program was quite controversial, on the one hand due to the objective of strengthening the military capacity, and on the other hand, downsizing, disbanding unnecessary units and reducing the level of the headquarters, despite the shortcomings, however, it was the starting point for the professionalization of the Russian army, for the flexibility and mobility of military and command structures, while the other deficiencies were remedied by the next Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoigu.

In less than seven years, the effectiveness of the Russian Armed Forces reform materialized in the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine (2014), then the military intervention in Syria (2015), which also **added the expeditionary dimension to the capabilities of the Russian military which shortly were assumed at doctrine level regarding naval operations until 2030: “ensuring the sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in the important strategic areas of the Planetary Ocean, as well as showing the flag and demonstrating the military power of the Russian Federation”**.<sup>7</sup>

Following the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea, Moscow launched an ambitious militarization program in the region in order to gain exclusive control over the Black Sea basin, as well as to ensure its freedom of movement and to project its political-economic and military interests into other regions like the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East.

The main subject of the militarization program is the Southern Military District which underwent an extensive process of structural,

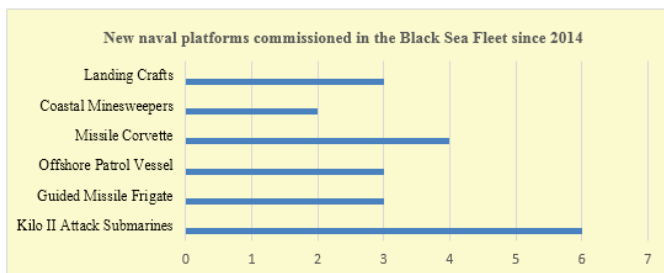
4 Michael Kofman - Russian Performance in The Russo-Georgian War Revisited, War On the Rocks, September 4, 2018 <https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/russian-performance-in-the-russo-georgian-war-revisited/>

5 Carolina Vendil Pallin & Fredrik Westerlund - Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences, Routledge, 2009 at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592310902975539>

6 Ibidem 3

7 Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period until 2030 July 2, 2017 at <https://dnnlwgwck.blob.core.windows.net/portals/o/NWCDepartments/>

functional reorganization and modernization programs through professionalization of the military personnel, establishing of new units and large units totaling 100,000 military personnel, 800 tanks, more than 2,500 armored combat vehicles, more than 2,000 100 mm and higher caliber artillery pieces, 240 combat aircraft, and 130 combat and combat support helicopters.<sup>8</sup>

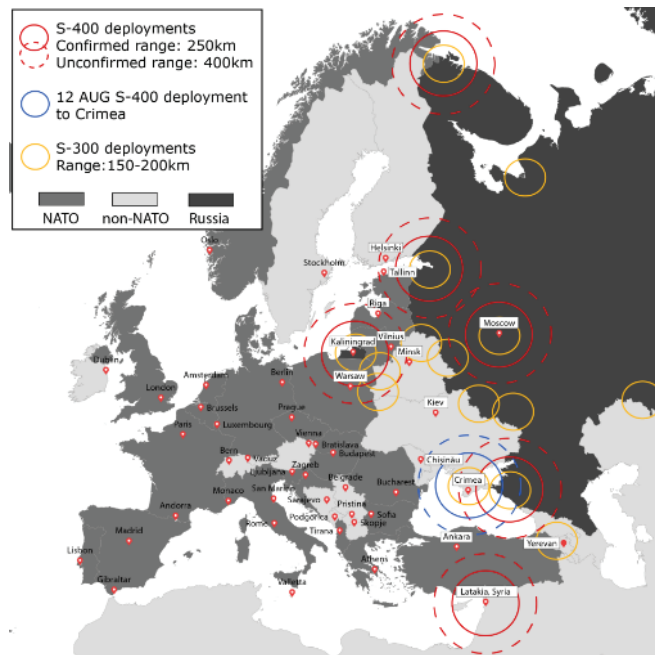


Source: leonardodinu@newstrategycenter.ro

Also, the Black Sea Fleet recorded the fastest modernization process: in only seven years it received 21 new naval platforms, of which six Kilo II submarines, 3 Admiral Grigorovich type frigates and four corvettes, equipped in total with 80 Kalibr cruise missiles<sup>9</sup>.

Along with increasing the military capability of its armed forces, Russia established an extended Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) umbrella over the Black Sea region that overlaps the other A2/ADs established in Northern Europe and Syria, creating a continuous line of air interdiction and air defense from Kola Peninsula down to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Moscow's main strategic goals in the Black Sea militarization process are to intimidate and deter the Black Sea riparian states against any hostile conventional activities affecting Russia, to block further NATO and EU expansion towards its borders, and to regain the former global power status through projection of its conventional and asymmetric forces towards the Planetary Ocean.



Source: NATO Science & Technology Organization - Analysis of Anti-access Area Denial (A2AD) at <https://www.sto.nato.int/SitePages/newsitem.aspx?ID=3546>  
Picture Source: Institute for the Study of War

## II.2. Russia's New Generation Warfare – the hybrid approach

Combined with the conventional use of threat and actual use of military force on states and regions considered as “rebellious” by Moscow, Russia has continuously developed a diverse range of hybrid tools that it uses to maintain a state of insecurity in order to ensure control over them through political, economic, social, informational tools as well as by fomenting interethnic, confessional and other tensions. Moreover, Russia has learned from the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa that overt use of conventional force may be detrimental to its wider interests, so it has resorted to so-called semi-private military companies (the notorious Wagner Group) for the purpose of limited force projection in regions of interest, intelligence gathering, political influence, clandestine operations and military support for local forces.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Andrzej Wilk - Eyes west! A shift in focus in Russia's Southern Military District - OSW Commentary, August 9, 2020, Centre for Eastern Studies, Poland

<sup>9</sup> Black Sea Fleet - Russian Navy 2021 at <http://russianships.info/eng/today/>

<sup>10</sup> Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Nicholas Harrington - The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020 at <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/>

“Wars are no longer declared and, once initiated, follow an unknown pattern ... the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic objectives has increased and, in many cases, surpassed the power of the armed forces in their effectiveness. The objective of the applied conflict methods has changed towards the widespread use of political, economic, information, humanitarian and other non-military measures - applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is complemented by covert military means, including the conduct of information warfare and special operations forces.”

Valery Gerasimov- Chief of Russian General Staff (2013)<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Black Sea region became Russia’s laboratory for testing and deployment of „**New Generation Warfare**”, or in Western terms “**Hybrid War**”<sup>11</sup> prepared by the Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov in 2013<sup>12</sup> and fully applied in the annexation operations of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The main goal of hybrid tactics against Black Sea states is to undermine public confidence in the region’s democratic institutions, especially the system of governance, judicial and electoral systems. The hybrid tools used are information operations, including disinformation campaigns on all available media channels, corruption at the political level and of central and local administrations, cyber-attacks, economic, commercial and energy conditioning, the use of organized crime groups<sup>13</sup> and the military industry.

Most likely, the hybrid war waged by Russia against the states in the Black Sea region is based on distinct operational plans depending on the specifics of each of them and according to the concrete political objectives pursued by Moscow. These plans are constantly adapted to the evolution of the regional and international security situation, but also as a result of the actions of some international organizations, mainly NATO and the EU.

**Russia’s Informational Operations** in the Black Sea region have as their main theme the undermining of the population’s trust in Western democratic values and having as its favorite targets NATO, the European Union and the United States. In this context, Russia makes use of the different dissensions and specific positions that exist between some member states of the two organizations, between the two organizations themselves and between them and the United States. In carrying out its informational campaigns, Moscow takes into account the positive attitude of a part of the population and some regional authorities towards Russia, as well as its historical ties and linguistic commonality with it. From our point of view, Russia’s informational campaigns have a double meaning, they are also aimed at domestic consumers in Russia, especially in terms of upholding anti-Western values, anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiments in strict interdependence with its disinformation campaigns.

**Conditioning the access of the Black Sea riparian states, and also some West European countries to Russia’s energy resources** and their involvement in gas distribution architectures is another hybrid instrument of pressure with effective results at all societal levels taking into account the overall economic growth objectives and population well-being in all countries bordering the Black Sea and also in Europe. “**Energy diplomacy**” is the best-known hybrid tool in this regard, selling gas at a preferential (cheap) price to allied and friendly countries and at expensive prices to adversaries. But the so called non-friendly countries are also divided into several categories, a fact clearly reflected in the final delivery price. On the other hand, the state-owned company Gazprom claims that the differences in the final price are due to contractual clauses such as market price, contract duration, imported

<sup>11</sup> Lt. Col. Frank G. Hoffman (USMC) - Conflict in the 21st Century, 2007, “Orice adversar care utilizează simultan și adaptiv o combinație de forțe convenționale, tactici neregulate (asimetrice), terorism și un comportament criminal în spațiul de luptă pentru a-și atinge obiectivele politice.”

<sup>12</sup> General Valery Gerasimov - The Value of Science in Prediction. Military-Industrial Kurier, February 27, 2013

<sup>13</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly - The Black Sea Region: Economic and Geo-politic Tensions, Economics and Security Committee Report (Ausrine Armonaite), November 20, 2020 at <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2020-revised-draft-report-black-sea-region-economic-and-geo-political-tensions-armonaite>

volume, guarantees, etc. and have nothing in common with Moscow's foreign policy.

In principle, we can agree that not all trade instruments are influenced by Moscow's foreign policy, but when they are, the differential is expressed through the following levers<sup>14</sup>:

- ✓ Manipulating the pricing policy of energy supplies to third countries
- ✓ Controlling energy assets, such as pipelines and gas operators in key countries
- ✓ Cutting, or disrupting, gas supplies
- ✓ Agreeing restrictive supply contracts
- ✓ Developing alternative supply routes to divert gas flows

Over time, Gazprom has developed as a tool of trade expertise for Russia's foreign policy, formulating technical and trade justifications to support coercion or, conversely, the prospect for discounts. All this coincides with Russia's strategic priorities, especially when it comes to the states of the wider Black Sea region.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, an important objective of Moscow is to expand the presence of Gazprom, Rosneft and Lukoil branches in the states bordering the Black Sea, in the Balkans and in Europe as possible intelligence networks.

**Protecting the cultural heritage and compatriots abroad** was defined in a foreign policy directive after the war in Georgia in 2008 having the objective to establish a strong connection between Russia and the Russian-speaking diaspora across Eastern Europe. It is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the Russian successful and prolonged engagement<sup>16</sup> in the „New Generation Warfare”. This was one of the first alleged motives for Russia's interventions in Crimea and Donbas and the trigger for an intense informational warfare between Russia and Ukraine, especially after

the adoption of new Ukrainian laws on the educational system and the banning of access to all Russian-language social media sites such as VKontakte, Mail.ru and Yandex.

**Protecting the Christian Orthodox brethren** in the region was and still is an important instrument of Russian foreign policy and a useful argument to maintain permanent contact with sister churches abroad in order to promote Moscow's strategic interests through religious channels, knowing that the Orthodox Church generally supports the incumbent state leadership. In recent years, the Russian Orthodox Church has been engaged in support of Vladimir Putin's endeavor to restore Russia's global posture as it was in its glorious time of the tsarist Empire. Also, the Russian Orthodox Church is used in neighboring countries to undermine Ukrainian and Georgian nationalism and to control the autocephalous Orthodox movements that may undercut the recognition of Russia's Orthodoxy as a world spiritual power. As an example, Putin discussed the annexation of Crimea as a holy mission, arguing the peninsula has an “undeniable civilizational and even sacred value” for Russia, and in Syria he promised to restore the Christian communities affected by the fighting.<sup>17</sup>

**Russia's cyber-attacks** in the Black Sea region have become more frequent and sophisticated, the main targets being the ex-Soviet independent-minded countries: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Using special codes, Russian hackers managed to turn off parts of the power grid in Ukraine (2015-2016), and a large cyber-attack in Georgia (February 2020) blocked thousands of official institutions and private companies, including the main state television broadcaster. The latest one was reported on July 9, 2021, when Russian hackers attacked the website of the Ukrainian

14 Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament - Energy as a tool of foreign policy of authoritarian states, in particular Russia, April 2018 at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603868/EXPO\\_STU\(2018\)603868\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/603868/EXPO_STU(2018)603868_EN.pdf)

15 Ibidem 13

16 Dani Belo and David Carment - Protecting Minority Rights to Undermine Russia's Compatriots Strategy, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, April 2019 at [https://www.cgai.ca/protecting\\_minority\\_rights\\_to\\_undermine\\_russias\\_compatriots\\_strategy](https://www.cgai.ca/protecting_minority_rights_to_undermine_russias_compatriots_strategy)

17 Peter S. Henne, The Geopolitics of Faith: Religious Soft Power in Russian and U.S. Foreign Policy, June 6, 2019 - Berkeley Center, Georgetown University at <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-geopolitics-of-faith-religious-soft-power-in-russian-and-u-s-foreign-policy>

Naval Forces and carried fake reports about the international Sea Breeze-2021 military drills.<sup>18</sup> According to various western sources as well as Georgian and Ukrainian ones, the most active agency in this domain is the Russian Military Intelligence (GRU), more exactly the so-called Sandworm unit.

**Russia's potential for Electronic Warfare (EW)** in the Black Sea has increased significantly, as shown by a GPS spoofing attacks in 2017 that affected 20 ships<sup>19</sup>. Reports of such interference with satellite navigation systems have led to a number of conclusions about Russians' experiments with electronic warfare that were meant to either disrupt the trajectory of weapons using GPS guidance or to destabilize US drones<sup>20</sup>.

**The use of active measures and other means** in the Black Sea area such as intelligence, special forces, private security companies is more prevalent in zones of protracted conflict and also for clandestine operations in other riparian states, especially for the purpose of obtaining intelligence and political and social influence. Paramilitary organizations like Wagner Group, Night Wolves Bikers Club or local pro-Russian groups may also have been used in several countries.

On the **diplomatic front**, Russia seeks to consolidate the strategic bridges to countries with which it claims to have had traditional or historical ties like Egypt, Libya, Algeria in order to provide a favorable political ground for Russian naval extended presence from the Black Sea to the Western Mediterranean Sea and a safe transit maritime route to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, if necessary.

In addition to these forms of "New Generation Warfare", in order to achieve its strategic objectives Russia makes maximum use of other foreign policy resources, including diplomatic pressure combined with resort to lawfare. It also invokes the heritage of legal instruments, international acts and protocols concluded with the former USSR, which have not been updated and still have a number of loopholes, using them intelligently to amplify its asymmetric actions aiming to deepen the existing frictions between other Black Sea riparian states and to sow discord among NATO and EU member states in order to achieve its geopolitical goals.

### III. Defense, Deterrence, Resilience and Cooperation in the Black Sea region

In our opinion all in one represents the key for a stable, democratic and prosperous area, by opening the Black Sea to European and Euro-Atlantic cooperative values and processes, as well as by boosting regional cooperation with a focus on concrete projects that benefit all states in the region.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of defense and deterrence important NATO initiatives and decisions have been taken since Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion in Eastern Ukraine. Those were reflected in the Allied agreed Readiness Action Plan (RAP)<sup>22</sup> in 2014 and continued at the Warsaw Summit (2016)<sup>23</sup>, when it was also decided to create a rotational forward presence on the Eastern flank, namely the **enhanced Forward Presence/eFP in the north-eastern tier and the tailored Forward Presence/ tFP** in the Black Sea region.

18 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - Ukraine Blames Russian Hackers For Attack On Navy Website, July 9 at <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-hack-russia-navy-sea-breeze/31351045.html>

19 Mass GPS Spoofing Attack in Black Sea?, Dana Goward, The Maritime Executive, November, 7, 2017 at <https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/mass-gps-spoofing-attack-in-black-sea>

20 The Naval Power Shift In The Black Sea, Michael Petersen, War On The Rocks, January 9, 2019 at <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-naval-power-shift-in-the-black-sea/>

21 Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Marea Neagră (Black Sea) at <https://nato.mae.ro/node/178#null>

22 The implementation of RAP measures continues based on voluntary contributions of Allies, through a vigorous program of military activities mainly on the Eastern flank.

23 Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Collective Defense, Deterrence and Defense Posture, Allied decisions at <https://nato.mae.ro/en/node/1030>

Also, the latest NATO summit in Brussels (June 2021) signalled the further strengthening of the military deterrence and defense stance, and Alliance's political profile, the increased engagement with partner states in the Black Sea region to enhance resilience and to maintain technological advance in order to counter Russia's malign conventional and hybrid actions and its levers of influence against riparian Black Sea states and in other regions.

Romania advocates the need for a common Allied regional strategy based on the principles of unity, cohesion and solidarity. For the time being, we see a somewhat different approach by some NATO and EU member states, more evident between the northern tier of the Eastern Flank, where Poland and the Baltic states share the same vision and voice in NATO and EU, and the southern tier, where more dialogue and understanding among the Black Sea member states and partners is desirable and necessary in order to achieve a common vision on regional security. Moreover, **this differentiation between the two segments of the single Eastern Flank of NATO may contribute to misinterpretations and policy discrepancies, while Russia has a single unitary approach towards NATO that better serves Moscow's interests. It is also imperative to further deepen NATO's relationship and interaction with the European Union, actively involving partners that share the same values in the Black Sea region.**

Even though **from a security perspective a robust defense and deterrence architecture is taking shape in the Black Sea region, in terms of political and regional cooperation, despite the existence of several cooperative formats, there is a lot of space for more work and improvement, considering the relative dearth of new initiatives.**

### **The Black Sea Economic Cooperation**

**Organization (BSEC)**, established in 1992 following a Turkish initiative, now has 13 members from the wider Black Sea region. With the recent appointment of a new Secretary General in the person of former Romanian Foreign Minister Lazăr Comănescu<sup>24</sup>, it is hoped that the Organization may enhance its profile, improve effectiveness and come up with new initiatives, identifying optimal solutions for the rational management of institutional difficulties that impede the proper functioning of the organization.

Following exploration work conducted over the past 10 years, it has been estimated that the Black Sea could become in the medium term an important regional centre for the supply of gas and oil to neighbouring states. In addition to being an important energy transit hub to Europe, this new development generates economic opportunities as well as security challenges. Since Russia is also a BSEC member, the organization might eventually become a promising format for gradual, incremental steps toward mutually beneficial cooperation and constructive dialogue at a regional level.

After the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the European Union has become a Black Sea riparian power. In 2008, the EU produced the **Black Sea Synergy**, a regional initiative supporting the development of cooperation in areas such as energy, transport and environment. This initiative creatively allows for overlapping memberships and policies and enables dynamic interaction with some other EU-related and international institutional structures.<sup>25</sup> **The Black Sea Synergy** also opens new prospects for cooperation in areas that can have an impact on the sustainable development of the region such as fisheries, aquaculture, maritime affairs, research and innovation, connectivity, environmental protection, tourism, education/training and skills development. Recently, a common maritime agenda has moved into implementation phase.

<sup>24</sup> He is also member of the Scientific Council of the New Strategy Center

<sup>25</sup> Hatice YAZGAN - Black Sea Synergy: Success or Failure for the European Union?, Marmara University Journal of Political Science, 2017

Through the Black Sea Assistance Mechanism, administrations and stakeholders in the region get support for setting common priorities for cooperation at the level of the entire sea basin.<sup>26</sup>

Those and other important initiatives pertaining to Black Sea cooperation were almost totally blocked after the Russian aggressive actions against Ukraine in 2014. Russia is being increasingly perceived by the majority of riparian states as a direct security challenge. BSEC activities were reduced to formal meetings in some sub-formats, civic forums and technical discussions on specific topics. Because of Russia's obstructive tactics, the regional agenda was downsized to the lowest common denominator. At this stage, it has become obvious that any progress in regional cooperation is fundamentally dependent of the evolution of the security environment in the Black Sea space.

Other regional cooperation platforms like **The Three Seas Initiative** involving countries from the Barents and Baltic seas to the Adriatic and the Black Sea include only Bulgaria and Romania from the Black Sea region. The aims of that initiative are to increase convergence and cohesion among the new EU member states while reducing the economic development gap between the different areas of the EU, and to improve interconnectivity in the fields of energy, transport and digital technologies. Several major projects envisage links to the Black Sea such as "Rail-2-Sea", a strategic railway connecting the Romanian Black Sea port of Constantza to Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, and BRUA, an ambitious gas pipeline project connecting southern Bulgaria to Central Europe via Romania and Hungary. The corridor aims to integrate regional

### Three Seas Initiative (TSI): main infrastructure projects (Energy - Rail - Road)

Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann 2019



<sup>26</sup> European Commission Website - Oceans and fisheries - Black Sea at [https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/ocean/sea-basins/black-sea\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/oceans-and-fisheries/ocean/sea-basins/black-sea_en)

Source: Pierre-Emmanuel Thomann, „The Three Seas Initiative, a New Project at the Heart of European and Global Geopolitical Rivalries”, 2019, p. 35 [https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/riesw\\_2019-3-03.pdf](https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/riesw_2019-3-03.pdf)

markets and access offshore gas resources in the Black Sea; construction began in 2018, and phase I of the pipeline was completed by the end of 2020.

**Bucharest Nine or the Bucharest Format (B9)** is an initiative launched in 2015 by Romanian President Klaus Iohannis and the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda, involving NATO member states on the Eastern Flank (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia). The aim is to deepen dialogue and cooperation among those countries in order to articulate their specific contribution to the ongoing processes within the Alliance. On May 10, 2021, the most recent meeting took place, attended by the President of the United States, Joe Biden. According to the B9 Heads of State Joint Declaration, security developments in the Euro-Atlantic area were discussed, including in the Black Sea region. The need to maintain a strong and lasting transatlantic link was reaffirmed, and the US role for Europe's security was deemed to be indispensable.

Those two initiatives may also prove useful for promoting stability, democratic values and prosperity in NATO's and EU's Eastern neighbourhood, opening the wider Black Sea area to the benefits of European and Euro-Atlantic cooperation and also giving a dynamic impetus to regional cooperation with an emphasis on concrete projects and tangible advantages for the citizens of the area.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to geopolitical and strategic uncertainties affecting the Black Sea region, protracted conflicts, illegal migration, organized crime and general volatility of the security environment have caused great damage to economic development, international investment and trade. And yet the countries of the region have shown remarkable resilience in

the face of adversity, keeping alive the hopes for a better future. In fact, recent Romanian policy documents emphasize that the Black Sea "can become a space for stability and cooperate only to the extent that it develops freely and can freely pursue its own options, based on mutual respect and strict observance of the rules of international law."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem 21

<sup>28</sup> Comunicat după ședința Consiliului Suprem de Apărare (Supreme Council of National Defense Communique) - April 27, 2021 at <https://csat.presidency.ro/ro/comuni/sedinta-consiliului-suprem-de-aparare-a-tarii1619676147>

#### IV. Assessment of the evolving security environment in the Black Sea region

In the immediate and medium term, the Black Sea will continue to be the focal point in Moscow's strategic designs. The region will remain a key target for attempts to expand Russian influence over EU's Eastern Flank (Romania, Bulgaria) and partner countries (Georgia, Moldova, Turkey, and Ukraine). In the first instance, Moscow will seek to consolidate what it regards its own sphere of influence and to oppose the integration of those countries into Euro-Atlantic structures while focusing also on

"Russia's growing multi-domain military build-up, more assertive posture, novel military capabilities, and provocative activities, including near NATO borders, as well as its large-scale no-notice and snap exercises, the continued military build-up in Crimea, the deployment of modern dual-capable missiles in Kaliningrad, military integration with Belarus, and repeated violations of NATO Allied airspace, increasingly threaten the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and contribute to instability along NATO borders and beyond."

Source: Para 11 Brussels Summit communiqué (June 14, 2021) at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm)

preserving the stability of Russia's regime and further improving its military capabilities for national defense and power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa.

All of Russia's current strategic documents, based largely on president Vladimir Putin's directives, reveal the overriding goal of restoring Russia's position as a relevant global power. For this purpose Russia will continue to employ a variety of nonmilitary instruments in the informational, diplomatic, economic, energy, cultural and religious spheres, coupled with intelligence and clandestine operations and relying on its military clout. In the short term, Russia is likely to improve and diversify its hybrid tactics along with occasional military shows of force in the Black Sea region, the

Mediterranean Sea and North Africa, building on its existing political, military and non-conventional (hybrid) engagements in these regions.

In terms of conventional capabilities, Moscow is expected to strengthen its military posture, especially in Crimea, with the main focus on improving military infrastructure and logistical base, to continue the upgrading and modernization of its naval forces, to expand and strengthen its anti-access/area denial (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) facilities over its entire operational environment beyond the Black Sea region, and to improve the readiness of its land forces both in the Crimean Peninsula and in the whole Southern Military District in order to protect Russia's southwestern flank from a potential conventional attack.

In the medium term, we also expect to see an improvement in Russian strike capabilities in the Black Sea region. For the moment, it lacks the ability to launch a pre-emptive strike without a permanent deployment of Iskander nuclear-capable complexes, but the infrastructure has already been repaired and refitted, the deployment of such systems being only a matter of political decision and a clear sign that the security climate is worsening in the region.<sup>29</sup>

There is little likelihood of dramatic changes in the status of the protracted ('frozen')

The Paragraphs 9-15 of the Brussels NATO Summit communiqué (June 14, 2021) "provide one of the most comprehensive documentations of Moscow's aggressions and provocations in the history of NATO communiqués. Allies are to be commended for that consensus. What is absent is an articulation of actions NATO is going to execute to deter Moscow from further aggression and to convince Moscow to return the territories it has seized. That absence risks further emboldening Putin."

Source: Ian Brzezinski, Senior Fellow, Transatlantic Security Initiative, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/markup-our-experts-annotate-the-nato-communiqué/>

conflicts in Black Sea region since Russia appears to prefer the current, ambiguous situation in

<sup>29</sup> Ruslan Minich - Russia Shows its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond, Atlantic Council, November 2018 at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-shows-its-military-might-in-the-black-sea-and-beyond/>

order to keep its further strategic options open. For all intents and purposes, all these festering hotbeds of tension are treated by Moscow as forward operation bases.

As to hybrid warfare, Russia is likely to further expand its informational operations and disinformation campaigns, mostly targeted against NATO, US, Georgia and Ukraine. The US and NATO member states will continue to be considered as the main and traditional enemies threatening the very existence of the Russian state. The main object of criticism will likely be the enhanced and continued presence of NATO forces in the Black Sea, in Romania and Bulgaria. Developments in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia will be closely monitored by the Russian intelligence services and may become subject to clandestine operations in order to undermine NATO and EU involvement in those countries and to foment internal instability and political discord.

It is probable that Russia will continue to conduct extensive naval exercises and block for that purpose large perimeters of the Black Sea, thus affecting the freedom of navigation. The declaration by Russia of some portions of international waters and, most dangerously, of the exclusive economic zones of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey as “dangerous for navigation”, would not only restrict the free movement of ships, but would also hamper and intimidate the activities of vessels involved in exploration, production and construction of gas operating infrastructure in the Black Sea offshore area. Turkey and Romania have announced the discovery of significant gas reserves in their respective exclusive economic zones, while geological prospecting is under way also in Bulgaria. There is a gas-rich area at the

intersection of three exclusive economic zones, where the gas fields at Neptun Deep (Romania), Asparuch Han (Bulgaria) and Sakarya (Turkey) are located. Those fields are currently exposed to potential intrusions and provocative actions by Russian forces. Moscow is not likely to be happy to face competition from new gas resources to be produced in the Black Sea because they would reduce the dependence of Turkey and Bulgaria on imports from Russia. Consequently, there is room for cooperation between the naval forces of Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria to protect the economic interests of these three NATO allies.

From a Romanian perspective the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea for NATO is of such magnitude that it cannot be left at Russia’s discretion. At this juncture, according to official statements, the US administration is expected to focus primarily on the Indo-Pacific theatre and China while sticking to its current policies on Russia. In these circumstances it will not be surprising that Moscow, if unchallenged, chose to preserve or turn in its favour the current balance of forces in the Black Sea. The most recent developments in Belarus, Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, however, indicate that the status quo would not be easily maintained.

So, on the medium term, geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea and its neighbourhood will most likely be at the same level or increase, all depending largely on the policies, economic interests and strategic objectives of the riparian states and on the degree of NATO and EU involvement in the region.

# NON-CONVENTIONAL, NON-STATE AND ASYMETRIC CHALLENGES TO SECURITY IN THE BALKANS AND THE BLACK SEA: RUSSIAN CASE

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## I. Introduction

The Balkans and the Black Sea regions are located at the fault lines of civilizations that are further reflected in the intertwined nature of their societies. The heritage of history and successive waves of social movements produced complicated societal structures in the region that the concepts commonly applied in international politics often fail to explain and understand.<sup>30</sup> Friendships and enmities, blended with prejudices arising from societal memories, sometimes escalate tensions or, conversely, facilitate human-to-human and society-to-society exchanges (or other levels of interaction) of culture and knowledge. Security is usually perceived as the essential and indispensable goal of state-actors, and other entities as well, although a wider interpretation of security includes also other features such as economy, social movements, culture, religions or criminal networks may promote or cause a perception that state actors fall short of responding to ‘de-securitization’.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, states can exploit those rich but fragile characteristics of the region in order to achieve clearly identified goals.

This multifaceted dimension of both the Balkans and the Black Sea region may cause the nation states to become entrapped

in conventionality. This interest-oriented approach of the state actors may not encourage a political appetite to address the new and varied security risks.<sup>32</sup> The national and transnational cobweb of individuals and micro/mezo communities with differing identities provides an additional element to security contextualization and methodologies. In this sense, an inadequate understanding of regional specificity would make the fault lines appear as details in the mirror, while transnational interactions may challenge centuries-old meta-narratives that could otherwise be negatively exploited. Meanwhile, traditional and conventional thinking about security is likely to hold its ground as it is being constantly enriched with new actors and factors. For this reason, newly emerging trends have to be identified and properly scrutinized as a prerequisite for understanding the current security dynamics.

Within the above-mentioned parameters, the argument of this paper is that the traditionally defined notion of security becomes more complex than ever in the region because of the presence of uncontrollable and non-traditional features that modify the very essence of securitization. In this sense, the mixture of state-centric approaches and the fact of transnational interaction is blurring the security outlook in the region while mysteriously complementing the traditional with the transnational level of analysis. The

<sup>30</sup> Conev, Blagoj & Ilieva, Jana. (2017). “The Influence of National Identity in International Politics: A Comparative Outline of Europe and the Balkans.” *Political Science Forum*. Vol. 6, No. 1., pp. 16-27.

<sup>31</sup> Krasteva, Anna & Vladislavjević, Nebojša. (2017). “Securitisation Versus Citizenship in the Balkan States: Populist and Authoritarian Misuses of Security Threats and Civic Responses.” *Global Campus Human Rights Journal*. Vol. No. 2, pp. 373-392.

<sup>32</sup> Skočajić Juvan, Nina & Grizold, Anton. (2017). “The Complex of Security in The Western Balkans: Processes and Issues.” *Teorija in Praksa*. Vol. 54, No. 2. pp. 241-264.

question to be answered in the light of this examination is: **“Can solid securitization be achievable in the wider Balkan and Black Sea area if those emerging trends persist?”** In this context, we shall first review the main security topics with conceptual explanations that are relevant within the limitations and the scope of this article. Russia will be at the epicentre of this case study providing a review of conventional conflict probabilities and a short evaluation of the regional and global competitive environment as well. Finally, the exploitation of non-state actors and unconventional methods will be brought into discussion before offering a concluding assessment.

## ***II. Security Topics in the Balkans and the Black Sea***

The discourse on security now reaches beyond the positivist and post-positivist schools of thought because both traditions are required to visualize, explain and understand the relevant topics.<sup>33</sup> The deepening and widening nature of security calls for a combination of traditional and non-traditional approaches. The Balkans and the Black Sea area cannot be exempted from this argument. Conventional/unconventional, symmetric/asymmetric or ordered/ disordered representations of security have blended with each other at transnational level, while occasionally spilling over into national politics. The interaction of public forces requires both cooperation and competition between state and non-state actors with their specific concerns supported by legitimacy or interest. The above-mentioned ecosystem relies on the persistence of state-centric, ethno-centric and other networks as active security agents. In other words, states may either make use of such an informal coexistence of agents or discourage it. Examples can be found in the mythical image of

Serbian Chetniks, Croat HVIDRA, cooperating or competing mafia groups or Russian nationalist minorities in most countries of the region.<sup>34</sup>

The essential security deficits and vulnerabilities in the region form a long list. In fact, the state actors are demographically and culturally diverse with frequent non-native offshoots within their borders. On the other hand, a common feature of the region is poor economic performance and outdated infrastructure, which make rehabilitation and sustainable development a challenging, time-consuming and costly task. The quest for economic recovery requires regional and global integration to facilitate interaction with the established centres of power. The variety of actors – individuals, society and state – also includes the private zone, each of them interested in faster economic recovery by working together and not disconnected with each other. The complexity of business relations involving different actors may bypass the ‘authority zone’ because formal and informal loyalties depend on contractual obligations. Companies or micro societal groups may be in touch with, for instance, business circles in another state and engage in legal or illegal arrangements.<sup>35</sup>

The case of Russia’s behaviour in the region offers an appropriate model to support this argument. In this regard, countries in the region may need to cooperate with Russia – officially or unofficially, legally or illegally – while challenging its threatening posture at the same time. On the other hand, Russian organized criminal networks, possibly independent from state activities, have gained lucrative footholds in several countries, shaping the black markets in accordance with Russian interests and advancing penetration of influential government circles and various other layers of the system. In another example, FETO, an terrorist organization banned in Turkey, has expanded

<sup>33</sup> Aradau, C. (2018). “From Securitization Theory to Critical Approaches to (In)security.” *European Journal of International Security*. Vol. 3, No. 3. pp. 300-305.

<sup>34</sup> Bougarel, Xavier. September 2006, “The Shadow of Heroes : Former Combatants in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina.” *International Social Science Journal*. Vol. 189. pp. 479-490.

<sup>35</sup> Efe, Haydar. (2011). “The European Union’s Black Sea Region Policy.” <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/155328>.

its presence in some states of the region through educational and business activities striving to build their own elite as plausible candidates for governing positions. The two examples are in apparent contrast since Russian non-state actors may promote Russia's expansionist aims abroad while FETO undermines Turkey's state interests.<sup>36</sup> Therefore non-state entities do have the capacity to threaten the current status quo in the region by either supporting or challenging the institutional structure of the state or by pursuing their own profits through transnational cooperation.

From the arguments mentioned above it results that a combined assessment of conventional and unconventional security dynamics is apt to make the threat perceptions clearer. The question, to put it another way, is whether conventional threats are reinforced by non-conventional ones. In this sense, Russia's conventional and non-traditional extensions may be viewed as illustrative of the present new complex nature of regional security.

### *II.1. Russia: Not a Mystery*

Russia poses a significant conventional and unconventional threat to the region. The reasons of this might be found in Russia's historical quest for expansion, dedication to expand its areas of influence in the Communist era, its ambition to be a superpower once again or in its persistent psychology of hegemonic destiny. The military and nuclear capacity it inherited from the former Soviet Union along with its veto privilege in the UN Security Council encouraged Russia to be pro-active in regional and global crises by using 'smart' strategies. To this end, cost effective indirect interventions have been the primary instruments to achieve Russian interests. Russia's presence in Syria and Libya clearly indicates its conventional capability to combine the deployment of military expeditionary forces with active preventive diplomacy. The question is why Russia is so

strongly committed to regaining superiority in the region.

It is a natural tendency to try to regain what has been lost. But my evaluation is that Russian psychology plays a more important role than just having another leverage in international competition according to the basic concepts of great-power relations. Russia sharply shrank after the Cold War in terms of territorial expanse. Hence the trauma of having been diminished and the fear of more losses compared to Russia's greatness in the days of its mighty empire. A state can expand, reach a culminating point, experience an unproductive period and then retreat. Indeed, Russia's expansion started in 16<sup>th</sup> century after its wars against Ottomans, when it managed to advance towards Turkestan. In the Soviet era it reached a peak. The détente of the 1970s was the culmination of its might before its eventual disintegration. Russia is currently the heir of a collapsed Soviet system, having lost a vast bulk of its territory and area of influence. The following two decades after the Cold War can be described as its unproductive period. In this context, Russia needs, first, to preserve its current borders and, secondly, to expand and consolidate its 'eternal' reach.

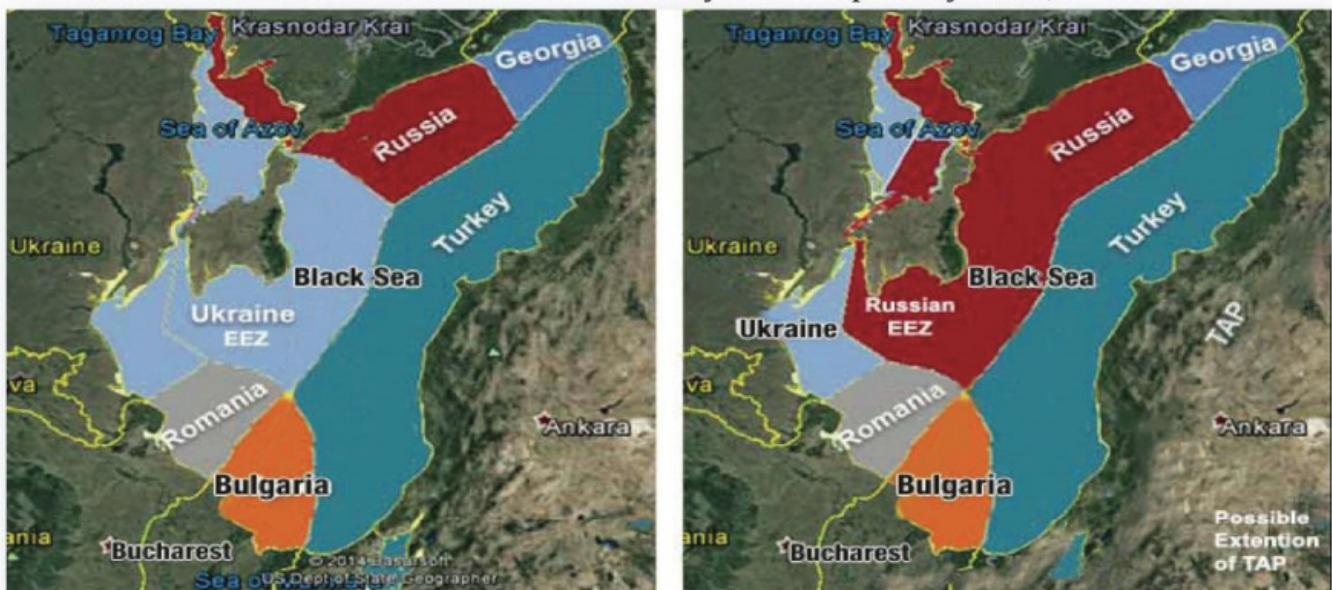
The assumption is that, once Russia retreats from the Black Sea and from areas further south, it may experience a period of weakness and marginalization in international affairs. Russia pursued two strategies to prevent a scenario of marginalization: enhancing its military posture in the Mediterranean Sea and seeking to gain stronger positions in the Black Sea and the Baltic, while also posing a challenge to Japan over the Kurile islands. To achieve this Russia seeks to challenge its adversaries by resorting to conventional interventionism backed with nuclear deterrence as illustrated by the annexation of Crimea and by the strategies pursued in Syria and Libya, and lately in Africa as well. The Baltic and Black Seas have become the scene of shows of military force in a sort

<sup>36</sup> Police Academy. (June 2019). "FETO as an International Threat." <https://www.pa.edu.tr/Upload/editor/files/FET%C3%96%20AS%20AN%20INTERNATIONAL%20THREAT.pdf>.

of 'sustainable escalation' below the threshold of actual confrontation. On the other hand, Russia's use of non-traditional instruments in the Balkans and the Black Sea complements its conventional capabilities, as will be discussed later. Russian revisionism is not something

new or mysterious, and the realization of this fact provides a strong incentive for regional and global actors to increase their vigilance in the Balkans, the Black Sea, and its geographical extension into the Caucasus.

**New exclusive economic zone delimitation in the Black Sea after the occupation of Crimea, the Russian vision**



Source - [www.russianworldforums.com](http://www.russianworldforums.com)

## II.2. Global and Regional Competition in the Balkans and the Black Sea

The actual facts of competition or cooperation place the region at the epicentre of the political and military efforts of major actors, displaying specific features that are interlinked with each other. The post-Cold War era has changed the alliance structure since the state actors that once were members of the Warsaw Pact have become members of NATO. This trend directly alerted Russia and incentivized it to stop the process in ways that it was capable to achieve. In this sense Ukraine and Georgia became the 'red lines' for the Russians in order to avoid further 'marginalization'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Russian covert interventions in the internal dynamics of Georgian politics and

securitization (or de-securitization) of Armenia have shored up Russia's sphere of influence through the use of 'soft escalation' policies. The inability of NATO to include, say, Ukraine or Georgia into the alliance culminated the competition of the West and Russia to the 'edge of toleration' that escalation generally imposes ambiguity of 'deterrent but soft' conflicts in the form of cost-effective modus operandi.

The Balkans, according to EU and NATO policies, have been kept away from the above-described way of thinking, even though the Black Sea region witnessed more tense competition. While applying the constraints of the Montreux Convention, NATO member states actors increased the frequency of their naval and aerial presence in the Black Sea in order to monitor and balance Russia's challenge. NATO military exercises, even though they are notified

<sup>37</sup> Tsereteli, Mamuka. "Russia Is Watching: Why NATO Must Welcome Ukraine and Georgia." 18 May 2021. <https://www.heritage.org/europe/commentary/russia-watching-why-nato-must-welcome-ukraine-and-georgia>.

months in advance, were designed to exhibit a determined stance against Russia. The NATO Alliance, mainly the USA and the UK, did not hesitate to be involved in simulated dogfights, surveillance flights and naval patrolling in the legitimate maritime and air space of Ukraine and Georgia. The essential question in this mutual military and political probing is that it might inadvertently lead both parties into an armed conflict. This, however, still appears to be a low risk.

If the overall intention of the West is to refrain from direct military engagements, with uncertain outcomes for either side, 'sustainable low-profile conflicts' have become the main *modus operandi*. Something more than a show of force but less than a limited use of force has become the main way to sustain the competition in the Black Sea. The united response of the NATO states, considering Russia as a potential opponent, has been to display adequate forces in the region while continuing the political dialogue either among themselves or with Russia. Russia's 'no tolerance' policy toward NATO's military presence in the region has been expressed in new force deployments and repositioning of offensive weapons. Still, further changes in the strategy of the Western allies may induce Russia to take additional concrete steps through active measures inside the region, while not directly targeting the West. The existing protracted conflicts in the region like the one between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabagh make the Russian military expansion easier in the format of peacekeeping and mediation missions.<sup>38</sup> Until now, Russia's actions have been both asymmetric and symmetric with an aim to confuse the West about its true intentions and capabilities.

With regard to the perception of Russia's intentions in the eyes of Western regional and global actors, there is now a better understanding of the Russia-centric engagement in the region. The West could not prevent the Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia. As a result, Russia felt free to violate the *status quo* in the region as a way to resolve its main concern: to avoid its marginalization in the context of global competition. But the Russian threat is not only about conventional capabilities and active interventionism but also about its wider use of non-state actors and asymmetry. The following section will delve into these new dynamics that are specific not only for Russia but involve or affect many of the regional actors.

#### ***II.4. Non-State Actors and Asymmetry***

Non-state actors are usually perceived as entities that are not controlled or regulated by the state. But Russia's case is exceptional because the state has traditionally been able to shape the options and the functions of the non-state actors. By contrast, the non-state actors in the other countries of the region are freer to interact with their other national or transnational counterparts. Businesses can also augment their benefits and reduce their risks through cross-border exchanges, while societal formations can build ways of international interaction of their own.

The exploitation of such relationships by government agencies can easily become object to political manipulation. For instance, Russia is the most convenient market for the agricultural goods produced by Turkey, so any political or military friction between the two countries was used by Russia to apply sanctions on such

<sup>38</sup> Borshchevskaya, Anna. "Foreign Perspective on the Russian Role in the Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan", <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/1157>. IFIMES. (2020). "2020 Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict: Return of Russia to Caucasus - end of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan." 3 December 2020. <https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2020-azerbaijan-armenia-conflict-return-of-russia-to-caucasus-end-of-war-between-armenia-and-azerbaijan/4701?page=4>.

exports for unspecified 'sanitary' reasons.<sup>39</sup> This induces the Turkish food exporters to press the government not to aggravate the problems but make tolerable concessions. Besides, Russia's traditional 'friends' in the region may also be compelled to enact similar measures against Turkish interests, thus increasing the effectiveness of the Russian decision. The same applies to the tourism sector because any Turkish political or military challenge to Russia is usually countered by cancelling flights to Turkey or prohibiting the Russian tour operators to take Turkey out of their destinations. All this shows that non-state actors of concern are not only private military companies for proxy wars anymore, but also societal and business entities in the targeted countries.

Demography and Slavic solidarity are also strong points of Russian action in the Balkans and the Black Sea. Russia has traditionally motivated the Slavs in the region to build *sui generis* revisionist entities that could challenge national authorities and regional peace and stability. The collapse of the Soviet Union left remnants of Russian population, distinct from other Slavic people, in several neighbouring countries.<sup>40</sup> The efforts to organize Russian ethnic groups under the slogans of local autonomy and eventual unification with the 'mainland' was the methodology in the case of Ukraine. Such scenarios are actually highly provocative because, once Russia starts to encourage and unconventionally to mobilize the ethnic elements, societal inclinations toward discriminative and punitive moods may threaten civilian lives. Therefore, demography-based unconventional warfare endangers not only the integrity of the targeted state, but may also disturb societal peace and submit the Russian-speaking groups to the danger of another kind of marginalization across the region.

The use of private military companies has come into the focus of defense-related debates following the notorious Wagner Group case in Syria and Libya. This cost-effective and semi-autonomous device allowed Russia to deny any official responsibility and to present it as purely commercial enterprise. In fact, states are responsible for the 'registered' tax-paying companies, while the Russian private military companies are exempted from any investigation concerning their activities in Syria and Libya, including accusations of war crimes. Russian interventionism, however, has often used the services of private military as an essential instrument of Russian state policies regardless of the country that that may have hired them.<sup>41</sup> The Wagner Group serves Russian interests in Libya by using standard equipment like the Pantsir air defense systems and the SU-24 aircraft of the Russian Air Force. Combat intelligence inputs are far beyond the capacity of such a company, so it is obvious that imagery and signal intelligence support must have come secretly from the Russian special services. It is interesting to note that outfits like the Wagner Group are also exempt from any national or international investigation because of the absence of relevant, properly codified international legislation. It is to be expected that, using the resources of the already well established private military sector, Russian authorities will continue to assign

Specific tasks to Wagner-type companies in support of favored friendly regimes and in order to promote the objectives of Russian expansionism.

<sup>39</sup> The Daily Sabah. "Turkish associations call for halt in quotas on tomato exports to Russia". 09 December 2020. <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkish-associations-call-for-halt-in-quotas-on-tomato-exports-to-russia>.

<sup>40</sup> Horváth, Csaba. (Summer 2011). "Ethno Demographic Changes in The Caucasus 1860-1960." *International Relations Quarterly*. Vol. 2. No. 6. pp. 1-20.

<sup>41</sup> Linder, Andrew. "Russian Private Military Companies in Syria and Beyond." <https://www.csis.org/npdf/russian-private-military-companies-syria-and-beyond>.



Non-state actors have proved to be effective tools for implementing the state policies overseas and the asymmetric nature of their action expands the scope of their operations. One essential asymmetry that is systematically exploited by Russia has been the supply of energy resources to the region through its state-owned or private companies.<sup>42</sup> The Russian decision to cut natural gas deliveries to Ukraine is still fresh in our memory, and it validates the practical effectiveness but also the dubious morality of that method. A different kind of example is the Turkish Stream pipeline, which does not discriminate politically among the participating states and regularly transfers their annual transit revenues. Russia is still vulnerable to fluctuations in energy prices, but the continued dependence of the Balkans and Central Europe on gas imports from Russia maintains its dominant position. For this reason, any escalation of tension in the Black Sea is likely to be accompanied by short term ‘shortages’ of gas ‘for technical reasons’ as a reminder of Russia’s asymmetric muscle.

Not surprisingly, some countries may prefer to remain silent in such a case in order not to face the asymmetric risk of an interruption of their vital gas supply.

Another type of asymmetric threat comes from the organized crime networks that state authorities in the region find hard to control. The networks of Russian descent are usually nationalist-minded and they operate in the Balkans and the Caucasus often in cooperation with the friendly local networks. They are involved in crimes such as smuggling and black-market operations, gambling, drug trafficking, prostitution, or blackmail. These networks may work hand in hand with intelligence organizations in their country of origin to collect information and perform unsavory deeds serving the interests of their state. Meanwhile, these networks can build their own ecosystem eventually targeting the interests of their host countries. Furthermore, they can cooperate with the criminal networks in other states. They can penetrate the sources of political unrest and shape domestic events to the benefit of external actors. The Chetnik-type networks remind us of the potential involvement of armed militia groups in traditional hotspots

<sup>42</sup> Sovsun, Inna. “Putin will use weaponized pipeline to blackmail Europe.” 10 July 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-will-use-weaponized-pipeline-to-blackmail-europe/>.



Source: U.S. Army National Guard / Staff Sgt. Amanda H. Johnson (Public Domain)

of conflict. Russian criminal networks in eastern Ukraine are clear examples of such formations. Furthermore, these networks may unnecessarily provoke the terror organizations that are active in other countries. For instance, the drug-trafficking branch of the PKK, which made the headlines over the Baybaşın case in the UK, represent the terror – organized criminal network affiliation. All in all, threat perceptions at state level now include also non-state and asymmetric challenges, thus shaping policy options and security measures designed to counter the vulnerabilities identified in that area.

In relation to criminal networks, cyber-crime has lately become the object of primary concern for most states. The characteristic feature of such criminal activities is that it is hard to identify their origin and to pinpoint the responsible individual, network or country. There is a vast catalogue of attempted cyber-attacks ranging from data manipulation to fraud, money laundering, discreditation of key decision makers, or spying. In this sense, cyber-crimes may face indictments but rarely end up with convictions in their country of origin to

due to a lack of mutually binding agreements to counter crime or to inadequate evidence.<sup>43</sup> Russia has increasingly become a safe haven for such criminal activities threatening not only the region but also the world as a whole. There has been no clear proof of the affiliation of cyber crime groups with a state actor, although silence about such crimes in the sovereign jurisdiction of a specific country may be an indication of responsibility. The American demands to find and punish suspected hackers are distinct point on the political agenda with Russia, but that a permanent solution may still be a remote prospect.

It might be useful to scrutinize also other types of non-traditional and asymmetric threats in addition to the ones described above. Those that seem adequate for an assessment clearly indicate that most threats come from a combination of conventional and unconventional, traditional and modern, or state and non-state factors. Russia appears to be a most capable state actor that can mobilize and

<sup>43</sup> DW. “US-Russia ties: Biden tells Putin to act on cybercrime.” 9 July 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/us-russia-ties-biden-tells-putin-to-act-on-cybercrime/a-58222333>.

manipulate hybrid models of threat types in the Balkans and the Black Sea region. A deeper risk assessment may prove useful for a better understanding of the threats and for designing the proper reactions or pro-active measures.

### ***III. Risk Assessment on the Availability of Stability in the Balkans and the Black Sea***

The integrated nature of threat perceptions at the level of state and non-state actors in the Balkans and the Black Sea region tends to expand by the addition of asymmetric and non-traditional ones. There exist two kinds of risks in the region that can be typified as Russia-dominated and autonomous. Russia-centric threats continue to be a challenge for the states of the region in the sense of overcoming the perception of Russia's intentions only in terms of its conventional capacity. This interpretation derives from a tendency to overrate Russia's degradation to the status of a developing country after the Cold War rather than that of a weakened superpower. Even so, Russia will continue to try to gain leverage in the region.

Russia's advantage is that it can widen the geographical spectrum of its external action by using an appropriate mix of conventional and unconventional forces. Russia can activate a military option by resorting to asymmetric methods complemented with the threat of conventional ones, while technically keeping within the limits of international law, even though disregarding ethics. Internal lines of communications enable Russia to shift the axis of low-profile and sustainable escalations in a wider geographical space. The West, on the other hand, is limited by the need to use long maritime routes for indefinite periods of time in order to mount a meaningful military response. This is compounded by the difficulty to agree on a joint political commitment to act that should be compliant with the requirements of international law.

Russia's concern about the prospect of marginalization is likely to push it to be more interventionist and to adopt a more confrontational stance, even though its preferred option is not to resort to hard power but rather to use a 'smart' approach. The Russian state with its centralized and authoritarian security structures is able to mobilize the non-state actors and asymmetric capacities that are motivated by the ultra-nationalism or Orthodoxy. Moreover, the demographic composition of the former eastern bloc countries offers additional opportunities for the Russian security agencies to intervene their internal affairs. They are known to have organized the Russian ethnic groups in the form of militias and to have fomented state-backed ethnic upheaval in order to keep their foothold on the shores of the Black Sea.

Private military establishments are flexible enough to provide deniability for military interventions in remote regions. The businesslike undertakings of such companies have focused on either regime preservation in Syria or regime change in Libya, showing their potential to escalate or suppress intra or interstate crises in accordance with Moscow's interests. Furthermore, these companies have also hired militias of other nationalities than those living in the Balkans and the Black Sea area, so that today one can see foreign nationals in the uniform of a Russian private military company. These and other developments emphasize the urgent need to produce agreed international legislation for the purpose of regulating the activities of such companies.

Other non-state actors such as criminal associations have a potential to grow into transnational networks operating in the region. Organized crime networks together with terrorist organizations are able to cross state boundaries easily and to cooperate with each other. The economic losses and societal costs that they cause are destructive for the countries of the region because criminal groups do not pay taxes to the state but produce huge flows of illicit money. Such organization can operate in

conjunction with unlawful militia groups thus overburdening the law enforcement capabilities of the state.

Conventional and unconventional threats other than symmetric and asymmetric ones are intertwined, shaping the new requirements for national security in the Balkans and the Black Sea region. The synergic integration of security and defense capabilities of the regional actors increases the effectiveness of their joint action. Russia has accomplished the task of merging its various capacities after a long period of strategic retreat. Russia is set on a course of interventions that controlled escalation of conflicts to provide the premises for further expansion in the Black Sea. This trend appears to be the preferred one for the future since the West does not favor military solutions and is reluctant to use force, giving priority to the tools of diplomacy. Current strategies appear to rely increasingly on the mobilization of diplomacy and hard power applied simultaneously. Turkey and Russia confronted each other in Syria and Libya militarily both directly and through proxies, while Ankara and Moscow engaged in negotiations at the level of presidents or technical teams.

Consequently, the current securitization efforts in the Balkans and the Black Sea region may find it hard to make meaningful progress as long as the disruptive trends toward de-securitization can easily escalate. The complex nature of regional developments facilitates the application of asymmetrical, 'smart' methods for deliberate and controlled escalation of tensions behind the shield of hard power assets. The political issues in the region have deep historical roots, while the newly emerging actors and factors are blurring the distinctions between friend and foe and undermining the authority of state actors. Russia appears to believe that it is in an advantageous position to challenge the *status quo* in the region and to exploit all available non-traditional and asymmetrical assets to that end.

## ***BLACK SEA SECURITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM BULGARIA***

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In June 2021, two incidents marked a new rise in tensions in the Black Sea. On June 23, 2021, while sailing from one Ukrainian port to another, the British destroyer “Defender” was intercepted by the Russian Navy, which fired warning shots. According to Russian officials, the HMS Defender had entered Russian territorial waters around the Crimean Peninsula, while the British Ministry of Defence claimed that the ship was exercising its right of fair passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law. In addition, according to the Ministry of Defense of the Netherlands, another incident took place on June 24, when the Dutch frigate “Evertsen” was near the Crimea. The Dutch side claims that Russian fighters flew dangerously close to “Evertsen” for several hours, simulating attacks. It is to be emphasized that these incidents are not isolated but are part of the general security dynamic in the region since Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and unilateral attempt to establish a new navigation regime and revise maritime borders.

What is more, tensions were further exacerbated by the comments of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said in an interview that „even if Russian ships had sunk the British destroyer “Defender” during the recent incident off the coast of Crimea, World War III would still not have started.” ...

“We are fighting for ourselves, for our future on our territory. It’s not us who came to them thousands of kilometres away, flew in or came by water - they came to our borders and violated our territorial sea,” the Russian president continued<sup>44</sup>. The remarks and emboldened behaviour of Russian forces clearly illustrate the risk of escalating tensions in the region.

It is both evident and just that NATO members do not recognize the illegal annexation of Crimea as long as Russia asserts its claims, including a different settlement of maritime areas according to its interests. This will undoubtedly create the preconditions for incidents, which is why it is important to analyse Russia’s interests in the Black Sea, its military capabilities and political will to engage in military action with NATO forces and to decide on what character this engagement would have. According to the former commanding general of the United States Army Europe Ben Hodges, “Moscow wants to ensure that no new east-west energy corridor can bypass Russia or weaken its grip on oil and gas exports. The Black Sea Region (BSR) is Russia’s key strategic maritime domain now and into the future. Russia believes it can operate with near impunity in the BSR, building and then projecting capabilities into the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Middle East, and beyond”<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> [/https://ria.ru/20210630/esminets-1739208605.html/](https://ria.ru/20210630/esminets-1739208605.html/)

<sup>45</sup> <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CEPA-SP-Black-Sea-Strategy-v2-1.19.21.pdf>

## 1. HMS Defender incident.<sup>46</sup>

Russia clearly sees NATO as a major risk to its national security. Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy states that „Building up the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and endowing it with global functions that are implemented in violation of international law, intensifying the military activities of the bloc countries, further expanding the alliance, bringing its military infrastructure closer to Russian borders pose a threat to national security.” To elaborate, this highlights that Russia perceives the expansion of NATO and the construction of military installations of the alliance near the borders of Russia as the main threat to its security. According to the Strategy, this deployment prevents the construction of a polycentric world order with Russia as one of the leading powers<sup>47</sup>. Based on this understanding, Russia is increasing its military strength along its western

border, while creating and maintaining conflicts in neighbouring countries as a deterrent against those countries' potential decision to join NATO at some point. Within this context, for Moscow it is vital to secure military superiority and a decisive say on issues pertaining to its interests in the Black Sea region.

Furthermore, Russia's 2015 naval doctrine regards the Black Sea (together with the Mediterranean) as a regional priority zone of the Atlantic. To elaborate, Russia sees the Black Sea primarily through the prism of the perceived threat from NATO. The stated goals of the future modernization and armament of the Black Sea Fleet, as defined in the naval doctrine, are defensive, in the sense of protecting and defending Russian territory. However, they are also offensive: the Black Sea Fleet forms the strategic basis for the projection of Russia's sea power through the Bosphorus into the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. This approach is a continuation of the traditional

<sup>46</sup> <https://lesdaily.com/uk-denies-russian-claims-that-its-army-dropped-bombs-in-path-of-royal-navy-destroyer-close-to-crimea/>

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391>

Russian policy, which historically seeks access to “warm waters” not only to defend the Russian southern flank but also to expand Russia’s influence in Southeast Europe and up to the Levant<sup>48</sup>.

In order to illustrate this view from a Kremlin perspective, one can turn to Russian publications on the issue, according to which in order to reach its goals “Russia’s leadership in the Black Sea region is extremely important, since in the confrontation with the West the region provides many geopolitical advantages. To ensure its leadership, Russia is taking a number of steps. First, NATO’s ties with the states in the region are to be weakened, obstacles are created to preclude the development of such relations, and, if necessary, force will be used to stop the expansion of the alliance. Second, Russia is increasing its military presence in the region, competing with NATO for dominance in the Black Sea”<sup>49</sup>. According to another publication in the Russian analytical journal, the importance of the Black Sea is determined by:

1. Dominance in the Black Sea will allow Russia to transfer forces to the Eastern Mediterranean, to the northern portion of the Middle East, to the Transcaucasus and to continental Europe.
2. The region is an important transit corridor for goods and energy resources.
3. The Black Sea is NATO’s Achilles’ heel on the eastern flank of the alliance, where Moscow can weaken the alliance’s cohesion and undermine confidence in it.<sup>50</sup>

Since 2014, Russia has been deploying anti-aircraft missile systems (S-300 and S-400) and anti-ship missile systems (Bastion-P) in Crimea, and it is also strengthening its coastal defences and naval aviation units. In combination with the equipment of the ships of the Black Sea Fleet with Kalibr missiles, the Russian Anti-Access - Area Denial (A<sub>2</sub> / AD) complex has been implemented covering most of the Black Sea. From Moscow’s point of view,

the security of the Russian southern flank and the secure development of offshore resources in its exclusive economic zone have improved significantly.

Russia is clearly more active in securing military superiority in the Black Sea region. In addition to increasing military capabilities, Russia has demonstrated that it does not respect international law by conducting military interventions in 2008 against Georgia and in 2014 against Ukraine. These actions, as well as the provocative behaviour of Russian planes flying near NATO’s air border or manoeuvring in close proximity to NATO ships and aircraft in neutral waters in the Black Sea raise the question of how far Russia would go in its obstruction to NATO. In other words, is Russia ready to engage in a more serious conflict with NATO in the Black Sea? The answer to this question lies in the analysis of trends in the development of Russia’s military capabilities, and of Russia’s interests in the region and beyond.

According to the Russian edition of the Independent Military Review, Russia’s Black Sea Fleet has been in the process of serious modernization and strengthening of combat capabilities in recent years. The fleet has received new ships, most of which are missile boats, but also frigate class. Additionally, new fighters and submarines have been relocated to the region, while Kalibr missile systems or air defence systems such as the S-400 and others are being installed in Crimea. However, still much of the armament in the Black Sea area remains obsolete<sup>51</sup>.

All this shows Russia’s desire to obtain a dominant military presence in the Black Sea in order to defend its interests, primarily by creating a system of measures that will not allow the concentration of NATO forces in the region or prevent their freedom of operation, such as the A<sub>2</sub>/AD. In addition, a potential maritime conflict brings with it some difficulties in using

48 [/https://invoen.ru/analitika/rossija-tshernoje-more-morskaja-doktrina/](https://invoen.ru/analitika/rossija-tshernoje-more-morskaja-doktrina/)  
 49 <https://invoen.ru/analitika/rossija-tshernoje-more-morskaja-doktrina/>  
 50 [Значение Чёрного моря в российских стратегических расчётах](#)  
 51 ( [https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2021-07-08/6\\_1148\\_blacksea.html](https://nvo.ng.ru/armament/2021-07-08/6_1148_blacksea.html) )

certain means, such as aircraft, if there are no aircraft carriers in the theatre and Russia does not have them in the region. The reliance on fast but small warships and missile systems, in addition to fighter jets, shows Russia's readiness for action around its borders. The question of how far Russia can go in pursuit of its interests has been analysed by RAND experts, who concluded that the Kremlin would not risk escalation with regard to NATO or individual countries, given the likely solidarity response and possible further escalation<sup>52</sup>.

patrol and border guard ships. The presence of ships of other NATO member states is severely limited by the provisions of the Montreux Convention, which limits not only the number of warships that can enter the sea but also the duration, i.e., a maximum 21-day stay.

## 2. Balance of forces in the Black Sea.<sup>53</sup>



It should also be noted that NATO has significant deficits in terms of naval power in the region. First, of the three Black Sea NATO countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) only Turkey has significant military power in the Black Sea and has the capacity to transfer additional assets if deemed necessary. The armed forces of Bulgaria and Romania largely remain dependant on older equipment, despite their modernization efforts. NATO's partner countries Georgia and Ukraine also have significantly less naval power, mainly based on

What is more, the closed zones in along the Black Sea coast are viewed as a necessary step for Russia in the face of growing tension in the region. According to Russian military expert Yuri Lyamin "The Closed Sea zones are located at the southern, eastern and western extremities of the Crimean Peninsula [...], the closure of these areas of territorial waters for foreign warships looks logical in the context of increased tension in the region and the world." Lyamin also stresses that, since Moscow positions equipment such as radars or coastal anti-ship complexes and conduct exercises in such areas, they "should not be spied on from

52 <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE330.html>

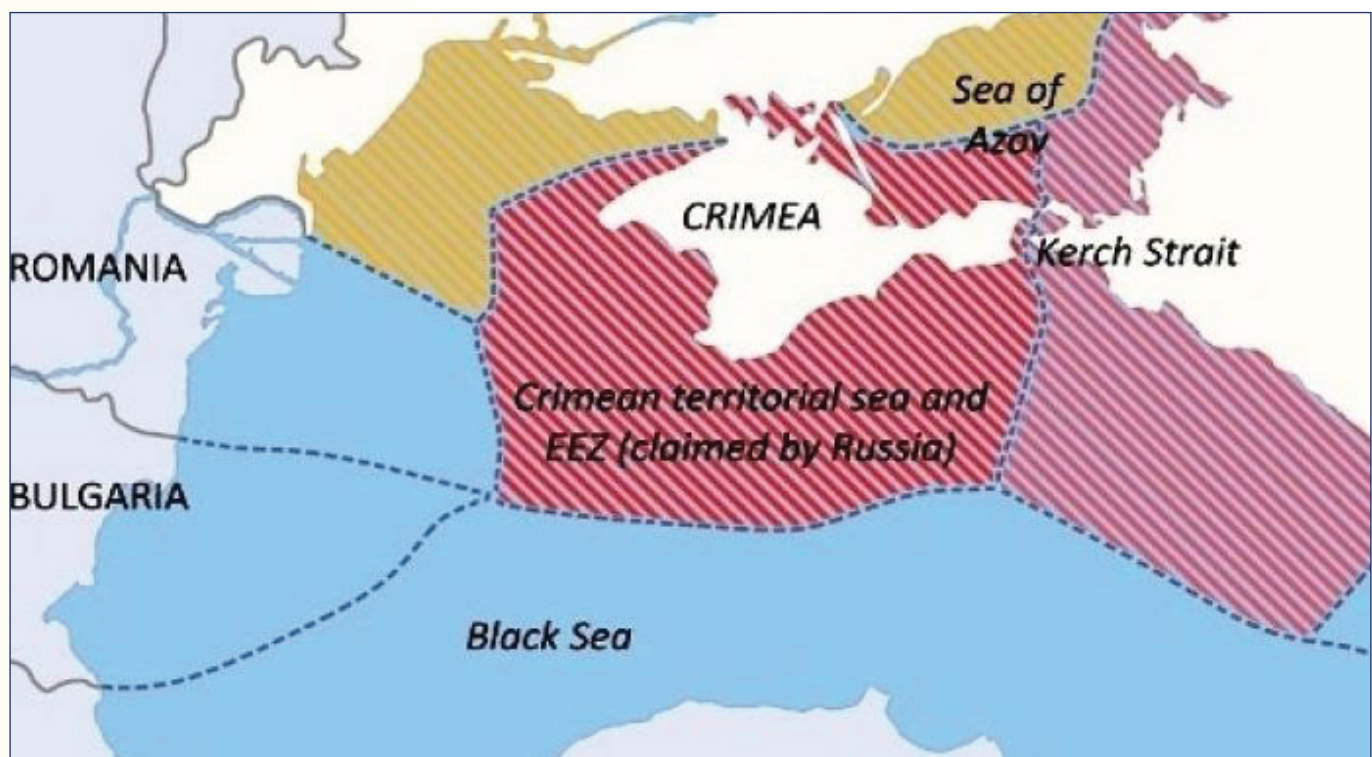
53 Map prepared by *De Re Military* for the purposes of this paper, <https://drmjournal.org/>

a minimum distance”,<sup>54</sup> thus further confirming their strategic importance for the Kremlin.

Nevertheless, regardless of Russia’s military supremacy in the region, it has no chance of achieving strategic superiority in a local conflict with NATO. Moreover, NATO can increase its military presence in the territories of member countries with the activation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Not to mention that any attack on a NATO member state can have unpredictable consequences, leading to an even greater military confrontation. From the above we can conclude that in the Black Sea there is a

a negative effect on economic activity in the region. Thus, for example, Ukraine’s interests in oil and gas production in the region are at stake in the first place, but Russian actions may also affect Romania’s interests. This will inevitably create tensions, similar to what we had on 23 and 24 July with ships from the Netherlands and Great Britain.

### 3. Territorial waters around Crimea.<sup>55</sup>



risk of military incidents rather than a danger of military action. This should be seen particularly within the context of the illegal annexation of Crimea, which has unilaterally changed the geography of the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea. On the one hand, as the annexation is not recognized by NATO, the peninsula is therefore considered to be legal territory of Ukraine. Accordingly, no new boundaries of the territorial sea and the economic zones are recognized. On the other hand, Russia claims that Crimea belongs to Russia, which is why Russia is imposing its own maritime traffic rules and claiming new zones. Russia’s claims to territorial sea around Crimea could have

*Russia claims the territorial waters of annexed Crimea (red). In addition to its own territorial waters (in purple) this effectively shuts down Ukraine (territorial waters in brownish) from access to the Kerch Strait and the Black Sea.*

Undoubtedly, Russia will use other means in its arsenal to weaken and challenge NATO in the region. This can be done through the use of hybrid means, cyber operations and other methods. One of Russia’s approaches is to identify areas of conflicting interests between

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/60812a4e9a79477ff5f1b1b6/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/eu-calls-for-de-escalation-after-russia-fires-on-and-seizes-ukrainian-ships-in-azov-sea/>

individual NATO members in the region, so as to weaken the alliance's unity. For example, this regards the exploitation of the specific interests of Bulgaria and Turkey in the field of energy by using Bulgaria's vulnerabilities. *Inter alia*, Russia will almost certainly try to keep alive the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine as well as in other countries on its periphery as a guarantee that NATO enlargement process will not include countries in Russia's immediate abroad.

The risk potential in the Black Sea is obvious. As Neil Melvin put it rightly, "Today, the Black Sea region is [...] affected by a set of interlinked negative security developments: a process of long-term conflict transformation is leading to the region's protracted conflicts merging with state-to-state and even internationalized competition; regional geopolitics are being reshaped towards confrontation; and there is a militarization and build-up of arms across the wider region. Regional security management and integration projects have broken down and there is a decline in transparency and confidence, and a growth in uncertainty over mutual security intentions"<sup>56</sup>. It is therefore evident that, in the current situation, it is essential to build an adequate response, both on the part of NATO and of individual countries. Nevertheless, it is also vital to keep in mind that Black Sea littoral states have different assessments of the risks emanating from Russia, as well as different economic, political, trade and other ties with Russia, which determine the specifics of their policies and actions.

Bulgaria does not have a separate strategy for the Black Sea, but from a number of strategic documents and political platforms, as well as from statements of political figures and public officials, some basic principles can be deduced, which outline Bulgarian interest and policies. The Black Sea is extremely important for the Bulgarian economy, transport, energy routes, raw materials, tourism, etc. Bulgaria also has high hopes for finding deposits of energy sources in the Black Sea, and explorations have

been conducted for years. Given this significant interest, Sofia places a substantial emphasis on security in the region.

Bulgaria's position in relation to developments in the Black Sea is based on four main pillars: First, as a member of NATO and the EU, Sofia insists on the need for more active participation of the two organizations in the quest for security in the region, but also for its economic development; Second, Bulgaria wants to avoid unnecessary confrontation with Russia while also developing relations with Moscow; Third, the development of regional, inclusive formats for cooperation that address current challenges and incorporate discussions on mutually beneficial economic prospects; and Fourth, complete respect for the rules of international law.

From Sofia's point of view, the main security challenges in the Black Sea region are related to the escalation of the confrontation in eastern Ukraine and the lack of progress in resolving the frozen conflict in Transnistria. Nevertheless, despite this assessment of security risks in the Black Sea region, Bulgaria has a specific approach to Russia. This is to be considered within a specific context: the two countries share many ties that extend beyond the commercial and pragmatic dimensions. What is more, a significant number of Bulgarians have pro-Russia views, which in turn shape and impacts not only political discourse but also has the potential to navigate aspects of the country's foreign policy. Historically, the two countries are connected in many ways - culture, arts, language, religion, etc. In the minds of many Bulgarians, Russia is a country that liberated Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. Over 60% of the Bulgarian population has a positive attitude towards Russia, precisely because of these factors. Naturally, Russia is not a role model for Bulgarian citizens - neither in an economic nor in a political, social or another context. Young Bulgarians do not want to study in Russia, they feel like European citizens. But it is this general positive attitude of the

56 [https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/sipripp50\\_o.pdf](https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/sipripp50_o.pdf)

general population that makes politicians more moderate in their assessments and actions.

The dynamics of Russia-Bulgaria relations have specific features that need to be understood in order to avoid misinterpretation. In its strategic documents, Sofia assesses that the security environment in the Black Sea region is shaped by the attempts of the Russian Federation to establish itself as a military and political factor on a regional and global scale as the Kremlin's policy of confrontation with NATO and the EU continues. What is more, the intensive strengthening and modernization of the Russian military in the region creates an additional dimension of security challenges. The capabilities of the Russian Federation on the territory of the illegally annexed Crimean Peninsula, including the adjacent waters considerably deepen the geostrategic and military imbalance in the Black Sea region. Bulgaria considers that the Russian Federation is explicitly violating international law and the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea with its unilateral acts of provocation. This is a principled assessment that is in line with the evaluations given in NATO and EU documents. It should be noted that Bulgaria participates in all discussions and in the approval of the documents and assessments of the two organizations regarding Russia. Sofia also favours common policies within the EU and NATO concerning purely regional initiatives vis-à-vis Russia. Nevertheless, it should be noted that neither the official documents nor the positions of the main political parties identify Russia as an immediate military threat to the security and territorial integrity of Bulgaria. To a certain extent, this approach was the primary driving force behind Sofia's stance not to support the creation of a Black Sea flotilla as a regional initiative.

A number of factors influence the formation of Bulgaria's position towards Russia. First of all, the country is almost completely dependent on Russian gas and oil. Unfortunately, Bulgarian governments have done little to diversify gas supplies. Among

the unfinished projects is the construction of a gas connection with Greece, through which gas can be supplied from various international sources. Moreover, in recent years, Bulgaria has built a continuation of the Turkish Stream gas route through its territory entirely at its own expense. This means a Bulgarian investment for the supply of Russian gas through Bulgarian territory, which amounts to almost 3 billion leva (approximately 1.5 billion euros). Given the fact that both input and output capacities of the pipeline have been reserved for Gazprom for years to come, this almost certainly means continued gas dependence on Russia. In addition, Bulgaria is completely dependent on Russia for nuclear fuel and for the maintenance of the existing Kozloduy nuclear power plant. In the past, a decision was made to build a second nuclear power plant at Belene for which Bulgaria bought and paid Russian equipment for over 600 million euros (over 500 million euros were invested in the necessary infrastructure as well). What is more, Bulgaria practically is completely reliant on Russia and Russian companies to complete the project, as the lack of feasibility studies for the Belene nuclear power plant dissuades other prospective investors.

It should be mentioned that a significant part of Bulgaria's military equipment is almost entirely obsolete, dating for the Soviet-era, which creates an additional dimension of reliance on Russia. For example, Bulgaria's air force, which is based on MiG-29 and SU-25 aircraft, depends on repairs and spare parts from Russia. Sofia has taken an important step in overcoming this challenge by concluding a contract with the US for the supply of 8 F-16 aircraft, but they will be operational in a few years. Additionally, modernization programmes have been undertaken to increase the capabilities of the navy as well as to build a NATO coordination centre for the Black Sea. In this context, regardless of certain dependencies and pro-Russia sentiments among Bulgarians, it must be emphasized that there is no major political party, organization, etc. to oppose a common position vis-à-vis Russia or to unilaterally violate common policies within

NATO and the EU. From this point of view, Bulgaria cannot be considered a “Trojan horse” of Russia. The establishment of clear and principled EU and NATO policies towards Russia, including in the Black Sea region, is a preferred option for Bulgaria and corresponds to its interests, as these interests can be better protected only within the framework of common policies.

### ***Conclusions and recommendations***

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a security dilemma in the Black Sea which involves several actors: NATO, the EU, aspiring members, and Russia. Tensions in the region are likely to remain high for the foreseeable future, as Moscow’s aggressive approach has changed the security architecture unilaterally. With the invasion of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, continuing support of separatists in Lugansk and Donetsk, and sporadic but persistent acts of provocation in the Black Sea, Russia is demonstrating that it is willing and capable of defying international order and law. This necessitates a unified, coordinated and comprehensive approach from NATO. First and foremost, the Alliance should promote regular meeting between members and partners in the region on various levels. This will both accommodate and encourage cooperation and exchange of good practices and lessons learned. Nevertheless, it is the Black Sea littoral members that should take the initiative to focus NATO efforts in the region, as it is Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey that are in the front line of Russian provocations and the corresponding threats.

Secondly, while military modernization will remain on national level, it would be very beneficial for the three countries to coordinate some programmes, including procurement of military equipment. While Turkey has been investing heavily in its military for decades, both Bulgaria and Romania are currently undertaking

their modernizations. This provides them with the opportunity to coordinate and even jointly acquire naval equipment and even, for example, unmanned aerial vehicles. The fact of the matter is that, while the Black Sea is becoming of ever more importance not only for NATO but for the West as a whole, it is for the three NATO Black Sea littoral states to explicitly draw attention to the specific threats, encourage coordination, drive innovation and modernization, accommodate formats with NATO partners, and ultimately and objectively ensure that unintended incidents as a result of Russian provocations are reduced to bare minimum, while unlikely aggression will be met with capacity for reciprocity.

## *The Way Forward: Some Conclusions and Recommendations*

*The conclusions and recommendations are jointly undersigned by all the authors.*

In the summer of 2021, two subjects dominated the headlines in the world media: the continued onslaught of the mutating Covid-19 pandemic and the alarming Report of the United Nations Panel on Climate Change. The consequences of global warming and increased air, water and soil pollution caused by human activities appear now to be much more menacing compared to the projections of ten years ago. Both threats are universal in scope, know no boundaries and affect all nations, big and small, rich and poor. And yet there is a growing feeling among responsible people everywhere, politicians and scientists alike, that those challenges can still be met, provided we can muster the necessary political will and determination to seek and apply rational, science-based solutions, even though that may require vast efforts and resources, as well as changes to the lifestyle that many people have become accustomed to.

At first sight, it may seem that pandemics and climate change have little to do with the conventional, accepted notions of national, regional and international security. But at closer scrutiny the relevance is striking. If we keep a sound sense of proportions, it may seem logical that our current security concerns pale in comparison with the dimension and impact of global challenges. Therefore it would appear that cooperation must come first. However, we also have the important question of sequence. In order to engage in a worldwide common endeavour of such magnitude, we have to remove the security-related obstacles that may stand in the way, preventing us from working together toward our shared strategic goal of sheer survival. Therefore it may be tempting to

suggest that security must come first. The point is that we in the Black Sea region and the Balkans can ill afford to be trapped in that dilemma. We need **both security and cooperation** involving prevention, response and mitigation, both regionally and in a broader global framework.

A synthesis of the analytical contributions from the three think tanks based in NATO member states of the region (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey) reveals an extremely **complex regional geopolitical security equation** having Russia as the common denominator and comprising a series of constants and variables. The resulting picture opens the way to a multitude of security configurations and options in the Black Sea region that also have an international impact.

As a **common denominator of regional security, Russia**, given its historical, social and cultural heritage, appears to be striving to regain the status of a global power that it lost after the dissolution of the USSR and to maintain and expand its geostrategic influence in its immediate vicinity, which it deems vital for its national survival. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's political, economic, diplomatic and military stature drastically diminished compared to NATO, the US and the EU. Following an extensive recovery in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Kremlin resorted to a combination of strategies and tactics that it knew well from the days of the Cold War aiming to maintain and promote its interests in the 'near abroad' 360 degrees around its borders and in the global scene. For the past 12 years, after the war in Georgia, Russia has continually refined this strategy of combining the use of military

and unconventional tools of power applying the doctrinal concept of what is now described as “new generation warfare.”

In the Black Sea area, Russia’s new ways of waging war are based on a number of **constants** in the regional security environment that were also highlighted by other contributors to this study. Among them the most significant are abiding memories of historical conflicts and rivalries as well as the effects of ethnic and religious diversity. The existence of linguistic, cultural and religious minority communities in the region offers a strong potential for cooperation but can also be exploited for Russia’s asymmetric action.

An important constant in the equation of regional security environment is Russia’s **excessive militarization** and use of the Black Sea for the projection of military force into the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa so as to secure its maritime communication lines of access to the Planetary Ocean. For this purpose Moscow is likely to continue to strengthen its military forces especially in Crimea, the main focus being on the modernization of its naval forces and on the consolidation of its anti-access/area denial (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) complexes and land forces both in the Peninsula and in the Southern Military District in order to protect Russia’s southwestern flank from a potential attack. In the following years, we can also expect to see further improvements in Russian strike capabilities in the Black Sea.

Another defining constant of the regional political environment is **energy security**, more specifically the dependence of some states in the region on continued supply of Russian gas and oil resources, which is being cleverly used by Moscow as an instrument of pressure to promote its own interests in the immediate strategic neighbourhood.

These constant elements of the security equation, plus the less predictable variable ones, are shaping the different and sometime divergent geopolitical perceptions of the regional actors

regarding Russia’s intentions and actions in the Black Sea area, the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. The existence of different perceptions of the threats emanating from Russia, even among the NATO states bordering the Black Sea, is hampering the formulation of a firmly outlined NATO strategy regarding the Black Sea region. Unfortunately, NATO member states in this area have not reached the same level of solidarity and strategic coherence as the NATO states in the Baltic and Scandinavian regions. Those differences in the evaluations and political positions of the Black Sea riparian states may ultimately serve Moscow’s strategic interest to exploit any sign of discord not only among regional actors but within NATO and the EU as well.

As distinct from Turkey, which has the military capability to face Russia’s challenges in the Black Sea, Romania and Bulgaria depend for their own security in the face of Russian threats on the support of NATO and especially of the US. Washington’s policy of reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific space forces Bucharest and Sofia to be as creative as possible in finding the proper arguments to keep US attention focused also on the Black Sea region. The fact that Russia is using the military capabilities that it accumulated here to project its strategic interests in the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa is a persuasive argument that emphasizes the strategic importance of the Black Sea region. In addition, the fact that it borders on two other as yet unstable regions, the Middle East and the Balkans, further increases the vulnerability of the Black Sea region entailing the risk of potential contagion.

Russia also uses the Black Sea region as a testing ground for its hybrid instruments such as campaigns meant to undermine national and regional stability and to spread disinformation about the US, NATO and the EU, cyber-attacks, political pressure, and the skilful exploitation of the energy dependence of several regional states. In this way it becomes evident that geographical distance is no longer a sufficient

shield to provide a sense of comfort against Moscow's aggressive acts. A cyber-attack can be just as devastating in Ankara or in Paris, while disinformation and hostile propaganda campaigns affect the stability and institutional effectiveness of a state just as much in Britain, Spain, Bulgaria, or Romania. NATO states that have different perceptions about the real threats to their security may be well advised to note that Russian intrusions and the negative effects of hybrid actions typical of the "new generation warfare" can be as harmful in Western Europe as they are in the Black Sea or the Baltic region.

What is more, the regional security equation involves a number of **variables** deriving mainly from specific interpretations of the evolving security environment in the Black Sea and the appreciation of the role of international organizations in solving outstanding security problems in the region such as the protracted (frozen) conflicts or meeting the democratic, social and security aspirations of other states in the wider Black Sea space.

The dominant opinion among political scientists is that dramatic changes in the resolution of **protracted conflicts** in the Black Sea region are highly unlikely in the foreseeable future. Russia is expected to strive to maintain the present *status quo*, which best serves its interests, in order to keep further strategic options open. Moscow appears to see all these active or latent hotspots of tension as something similar to forward operation bases. On the other hand, despite generous promises, the European and Atlantic perspective for the aspiring states in the region, i.e. eventual NATO and EU membership, is no longer very clear, even though their expectations remain quite high.

Other variables such as the impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, severe global climate change, dramatic upheavals in the international security situation or destabilizing actions by other actors like China, Iran or North Korea may have an unfavourable impact worldwide, likewise affecting the Black Sea region.

The contributions included in this study also contain a number of worthy analytical consideration and concrete suggestions for future action. Without attempting to summarize them, it may be appropriate to enumerate a few highlights specifically concerning the security situation and outlook in the Black Sea region.

- The security threats and vulnerabilities in the Black Sea region as identified in NATO documents and in the relevant national assessments of our three countries remain real and present, and they require adequate and measured responses. Delineation of maritime space and freedom of navigation in the Black Sea continue to be matters of serious concern.
- NATO needs to adopt a unified strategic posture along the entire Eastern Flank and no longer treat the Black Sea region and the Baltic Sea region as separate entities in terms of available instruments for ensuring coherent policies of deterrence and defence. The current arrangement, which provides for the existence of an Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic Sea region and a Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea region, respectively, should be gradually replaced by a unitary approach, thus sending a clear and strong message to Russia. The fact that the two military conflicts initiated by Russia in recent years have taken place in the Black Sea region, namely the 2008 Georgian war and the 2014 aggression against Ukraine, which resulted in the illegal annexation of Crimea and the armed intervention in Donbas, shows that those areas are seen in Moscow as highly valuable strategic assets that warrant large-scale military action.
- Since the military-political situation in the Black Sea remains tense and is unlikely to undergo significant changes in the immediate future, it is important to emphasize the primacy of international law and accepted practice in regional affairs, including the Montreux Convention.

- Closer interaction in the Black Sea region between the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union is desirable, including a possible more active political involvement by the EU in pursuit of fair and reasonable resolution of protracted conflicts.
- The time may be right for a realistic evaluation of the existing regional formats and initiatives with a view to establishing what they can and cannot do in their supportive role to improve the political climate and enhance the spirit of understanding and cooperation among peoples.
- Cultural, ethnic or religious diversity may have been the root cause of some violent conflicts in the past and may have engendered persistent animosities or affinities to this day, but now this diversity is increasingly perceived as a valuable common heritage and a meaningful incentive for mutually rewarding exchanges and fruitful interaction. Despite the existing difficulties and complex issues, the Black Sea may still have the capability and the energy to play a synergetic role.

Regarding cooperation between Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, especially in the military field, the experts of the three think tanks submit the following proposals for further consideration:

- The naval forces of the 3 states can collaborate to protect the offshore perimeters where substantial reserves of natural gas have been discovered in their exclusive economic zones. The fact that these perimeters are relatively close to each other is deemed to be an advantage. In this way, Russia will likely be much more careful about engaging in acts of intimidation that could obstruct the work for building the infrastructure necessary for the exploitation of gas reserves.

- Romania and Bulgaria as members of both NATO and EU may wish to explore possible procedures for joint procurement of weapon systems and for sharing capabilities. A pilot project would be useful in this regard, perhaps in terms of some Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities such as unmanned underwater systems.
- Turkey is much more advanced in the design, manufacture and use of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and a broad range of defence systems technologies. Sharing some of its knowhow with Romania and Bulgaria might be considered through joint exercises and projects on UAVs.

In conclusion, to counterbalance Russia's aggressive stance, an integrated approach is needed both at regional and allied levels, combining efforts to consolidate a credible and sustainable military deterrence posture, to enhance the effectiveness of political and diplomatic action and to engage in concrete, unitary, continuous and coherent strategic communication.

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