

Secu, Ioana Elena

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The dynamics of cooperation and conflict in the Black Sea area: From the region's history to current security challenges

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The dynamics of cooperation and conflict in the
Black Sea area. From the region's history to
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Ioana-Elena SECU

Bucharest, December 2023

Working Paper no. 50

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European Institute of Romania
7-9, Regina Elisabeta Blvd., Bucharest, Romania
Telephone: (4021) 314 26 96
E-mail: ier@ier.gov.ro; Website: www.ier.gov.ro

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyse the cooperation and security dynamics that characterise the Black Sea Region (BSR) since the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, while also considering the major historical developments in the area. The study examines the interests and actions of various actors in the region, focusing on the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Turkey, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Romania. By using qualitative research and analysis of archival discoveries, governmental documents, official speeches, media news, and scientific papers, this working paper seeks to shed light on the complex political and security considerations that shape the future prospects of the Black Sea region.

Keywords: Black Sea, European Union, NATO, Ukraine, security, war, geopolitics.

Biography:

Ioana-Elena Secu is an expert within the European Studies Unit, the European Institute of Romania. She has a PhD in the History of International Relations (University of Bucharest, 2017). Her last published book is “The Contaminated Revolution. The Russian Idea and the New International Politics of the Kremlin (1925-1953)”, (Cetatea de Scaun Publishing House, 2022).

E-mail: ioana.secu@ier.gov.ro

1. Introduction

The Black Sea region, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, finds itself in the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine, being of utmost strategic importance due to its energy resources, trade routes, and geopolitical and historical significance. The *Póntus Eúxinos* (the Hospitable Sea) has historically served as a space for meeting and confrontation between great powers, as well as a centre for trade, cultural exchanges, and sharing of resources. From a geopolitical perspective, throughout history, having the status of riparian state to the Black Sea has represented, on the one hand, a beacon of hope for the oppressed nations and a possibility of developing a European identity (e.g. for Ukraine and Georgia, which aspire to join the European Union), and on the other hand an asset for the Russian/Soviet or Turkish/Ottoman peoples in their pursuit of consolidating their position at the international level. The region has been a security chessboard for the great powers, contested in political, ideological, and economic terms, as well as for its natural resources, by both major key players and the nations of the region.

After the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine (which followed the annexation of Crimea by Russia – 2014), the security of the Black Sea area became a matter of international importance, both from a geopolitical, military-strategic point of view, but also, to a great extent, from a socio-economic one.

In this paper, the main actors we will be looking at are state actors. At the same time, we use the concept of security as it was defined by W. Lippmann: “*a nation is safe to the extent that it is not in danger of having to sacrifice essential values, if it wants to avoid war and can, when provoked, to maintain them, achieving victory in war*”¹, as well as the ability to ensure “*future well-being*”². In the last two decades (between the end of the Cold War and the illegal annexation of Crimea), we saw that the main actors in the Black Sea region, such as the member states of the European Union or Turkey, emphasised the importance of economic cooperation to increase their connectivity and to maintain the stability in the region. In this sense, it is noteworthy the work of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), as well as the European Union’s initiatives (the Black Sea Synergy, the Eastern Partnership).

¹ Walter Lippmann, *US Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*, Boston, Little Brown, 1943, p. 51.

² Martin Laurence, “Can there be national security in an uncertain age?”, *apud.* Barry Buzan, *The Peoples, and Fear. An agenda for international security studies in the post-Cold War era*, Chişinău, Cartier Publishing House, 2000.

Today, however, all the events in the extended Black Sea region³ indicate that security is viewed rather in terms of *hard power*, meaning the absence and/or avoidance of war, in all of its forms - military, political, ideological, hybrid, cyber, informational, etc.

2. Brief history of the Black Sea region's security or "How come we didn't see this coming (the invasion of Ukraine, ed.)?"⁴. The historic roles of Turkey and Russia

In this section we aimed to highlight the Black Sea's strategic importance for the European security. Thus, we should underline that it has been and continues to be a region of competition, and therefore its political control is a symbol of power for different actors in the region, mainly for Turkey and the Russian Federation. In this particular context, it is pertinent to start with the act that governs the security policy in the Black Sea, commonly referred to as the *Montreux Convention*. This act signed in 1936 by Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union, holds significant relevance⁵. It grants permission for all commercial vessels to navigate through the straits (namely, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles), thereby enabling access to the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, it imposes certain restrictions on the passage of warships through the Black Sea waters. During peacetime, warships belonging to non-riparian states to the Black Sea are subject to limitations in terms of size and duration of stay (with a maximum of 21 days)⁶. Additionally, they are required to notify the Turkish authorities of their intended passage at least 15 days in advance. In times of war, unless Turkey is involved in the conflict, belligerent warships are prohibited from traversing the Straits, except when returning to their respective home bases.⁷ These restrictions have played a pivotal role in upholding order within the Black Sea basin for more than eight decades. If we are to explore the existence of legislation aimed at ensuring the safety of the Black Sea region, it becomes imperative to examine the origins,

³ The extended Black Sea region is represented by: Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia, Russia (coastal states) and the Republic of Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia (associated states).

⁴ "Why did nobody see it coming?" This question, which the British Queen Elizabeth II posed to British economists after the 2008 financial crisis, may apply to the democratic governments today. The annexation of Crimea, the Russian-Ukrainian war and an unprecedented deterioration of Russian-Western relations have raised serious questions about the predictive capacity and the overall state of research on international relations in Europe; see Vsevolod Samokhvalov, *Russian-European Relations in the Balkans and Black Sea Region. Great Power Identity and the Idea of Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 8.

⁵ No 4015 – *Convention Concerning the Regime of the Straits. Signed in Montreux. 20 July 1936*, "League of Nations. Treaty Series", vol. CLXXIII, 1936-1937, No 4001 - 4032, pp. 214-244, available online at: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/LON/Volume%20173/v173.pdf>, accessed on: 20 September 2023.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 225.

locations, and nature of the security challenges. To address this inquiry, we must delve briefly into the geopolitical history of the area.

Póntus Eóxinós has known a rather tense history, being a point of intersection of several civilisations, an area of commercial and cultural exchanges, but also an area of conflict between the great powers of the time or a possible strategic *glacis* (belt of security) against various threats. Throughout history, a free sea, and, later on, an Ottoman, Russian and Soviet “lake”, the Black Sea constituted a symbol of power for whoever ruled it, providing an access to the *centre of civilisation* (considered to be the Mediterranean area). From the 15th century and up until the middle of the 18th century, the Black Sea was essentially an “Ottoman Lake”⁸. However, Russia defied the *status quo* and began to expand around the Black Sea, with Constantinople as its ultimate *spiritual* goal. In order to control the entire region, Russia gradually absorbed the Ottoman lands, as it moved near the Black Sea straits. That resulted in more than a century of battles.⁹

The First Crimean War (1853-1856) remains a subject of contention among historians regarding the culpability of the parties involved in the outbreak of hostilities. These parties included Great Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, who stood against the Russian Empire.¹⁰ The *Treaty of Paris* of March 30, 1856, which ended the war, removed, for a time, the Russian Empire from the chess game of the Great Powers. It compelled the government of St. Petersburg to cede Bessarabia and the mouths of the Danube to the Ottoman Empire, and, moreover, to drop its claims to protect the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. From that moment on, the conquest of Crimea, and of the mouths of the Danube, as a means to approach the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits¹¹ and to achieve the final goal of controlling (territorially, politically and ideologically) Constantinople (also known as the “dream of the ages” of the Russians or the centre of spirituality), would provide a background for the supremacy claims of the imperial power. This ideal was to be transferred to the Soviet Union later on. Consequently, the struggle for gaining control over the Black Sea, struggle that opposed Russia

⁸ Kortepeter, Carl M., “Ottoman Imperial Policy and the Economy of the Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth Century”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 86, no. 2, 1966, pp. 86–113, available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/596423>, accessed on: 8 November 2023.

⁹ Mihai Sebe, “Why the Black Sea matters for the European Union. Brief remarks and possible developments”, Working Paper, June 2018, Institute of European Democrats, p. 4.

¹⁰ David Schimmelpennink Van der Oye, “Russian Foreign Policy: 1815-1817”, in Dominic Lieven, (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Russia, vol. II, Imperial Russia 1689-1917*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 560.

¹¹ Treaty of Paris, available at: https://content.ecf.org.il/files/M00934_TreatyOfParis1856English.pdf, accessed on: 6 September 2023.

to other European states, became a recurring theme in history, as noted the historian Gheorghe I. Brătianu. The latter emphasised that Crimea, with its natural harbours, ancient fortresses, and strategic position in the Black Sea, exerted significant influence over the entire maritime complex. Possessing Crimea equated to controlling the Black Sea, while losing Crimea meant lacking such power¹².

The Montreux Convention originated during a period of political instability, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War. It was established as a measure of protection against potential aggressors in the region. Even within this framework, in 1940, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union's leader, appeared to foster ambitions of seizing control of the straits by any means, with the purpose of creating a security buffer in the Black Sea region. This plan aimed to transform the area into a predominantly Russian sphere of influence. Interesting to note, in this context, is Romania's extremely important role on the chessboard of the Black Sea, shown in a document identified in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania. Thus, on June 4, 1940, at 00:30, at the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was registered a telegram from the Legation in Sofia, which presented "*a plan for the division of the Balkans between the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy, revealed by the United States minister (in Sofia, ed.) to the minister of a Balkan state*". The envoy of Bucharest to Bulgaria reports that, according to this alleged agreement, "*Russia claimed not only Bessarabia, Bucovina and old Dobrogea, but also to control Romania in its entirety. Southern Dobrogea was to be ceded to Bulgaria, which was also in the Soviet lot. [...] The Soviets would have obtained a common border with Bulgaria and the way open for an attack on the straits*"¹³. We know that, following the *percentage agreement*, both Romania and Bulgaria entered into the sphere of Soviet influence, with the Black Sea inevitably becoming a Russian outpost¹⁴. More than half a century later, they were to be liberated, and more than 70 years later Crimea to be "reclaimed" (2014; 2022).

After joining NATO in 1952, Turkey gained control over the southern Black Sea coast and straits, which led to a period of enhanced security in the region. The Montreux Convention is seen as a representation of Turkey's authority and influence in the area. It serves as a valuable instrument for Turkey to engage in negotiations with the Great Powers both in times of conflict

¹²Gheorghe I. Brătianu, *The Black Sea Question* (excerpt), available at: <https://culturainiasi.ro/gheorghe-i-bratianu/>, accessed on: 2 September 2023.

¹³ Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, fond 71/U.S.S.R., vol. 91 (1940 June – July), f. 27.

¹⁴ Rzheshovski, O.A., (ed.), *Stalin and Churchill. Conversations. Discussions. Documents. Commentaries (1941-1949)*, Moscow, Nauka Publishing House, 2004, p. 422.

and peace¹⁵. This was recently demonstrated when Turkey invoked Article 19 of the Convention on February 28, 2022, warning all states not to allow warships of belligerent actors to pass through the straits. According to the experts Daria Isachenko and Goran Swistek, Turkey has two interests in the Black Sea region. Firstly, politicians aim to avoid provoking Russia, an “old friend”. Secondly, Turkey seeks to assert its own leadership in the region in front of NATO and the USA, an endeavour which is related to past experiences (e.g., the establishment of an autonomous area by Iraqi Kurds in the north of the country after the US-led coalition’s intervention in Iraq in 1991, which posed a security problem for Turkey)¹⁶.

With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the countries in the extended Black Sea region regained their independence or autonomy from Russia. These developments lead to both a stagnant revisionist sentiment towards Russia and dramatic changes in the security scheme of the Black Sea. A number of conflicts broke out (the so-called *frozen conflicts*¹⁷), which continue to this day (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia).

Back in 1999, Vladimir Putin wrote that “[we must have a firm] belief in the greatness of Russia. Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence. They determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia and they cannot but do so at present”¹⁸. Since Putin came to power and changed the national security - especially after the integration of Romania and Bulgaria into NATO (2004) and into the European Union (2007), and after the decision of the other states in the region (the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) to participate in the Eastern Partnership - the Russian Federation has maintained the policy of *frozen conflicts*, and even provoked new ones, most likely with the aim of rebuilding its security belt in the Black Sea.

¹⁵Daria Isachenko, Goran Swistek, “The Black Sea as Mare Clausum. Turkey’s Special Role in the Regional Architecture”, SWP (*Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik – German Institute for International and Security Affairs*) Comment, No. 33, June 2023, p. 2, available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023C33/>, accessed on: 25 November 2023.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁷ The conflicts that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, except for Ukraine, are often referred to as ‘frozen’ conflicts. However, this term can be misleading and even perilous. The political dynamics surrounding these disputes are constantly evolving, and in some cases, there is a potential for a resurgence of violence. It may be more accurate to characterize the negotiation processes related to these conflicts as frozen, despite the sincere efforts of the diplomats involved, see Thomas de Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel, “Scenarios for the future of Eastern Europe’s unresolved conflicts” in Thomas de Waal and Nikolaus von Twickel (eds.), *Beyond Frozen Conflict. Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe*, CEPS – Brussels, 2020, pg. 17.

¹⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia Na Rubezhe Tysyacheletii” [Russia at the Turn of the Millennium], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No. 4, 1999, available at: https://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html, accessed on: 28 November 2023.

This seems to be the rationale behind its support for the separatist regime in Transnistria, the outbreak of the war in Georgia in 2008, and of the First Russian War in Ukraine (author's note) over Donbas, and the reason for annexing Crimea, and starting the Second Russian War (author's note) in Ukraine in February 2022.

In the context of the current war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, happening in the Black Sea over the ports of Odessa, Reni, Izmail¹⁹, one might think that the Russian military aggression in Ukraine has as its ultimate goal to increase the geopolitical influence of Russia in the Black Sea²⁰. Maintaining access by air, sea, and land is of utmost importance to Russia's strategic objectives, which include safeguarding its national security and the security of its allies, as well as promoting its aspirations for global leadership²¹. But the adoption of the *greatness politics*²² in foreign policy should not have come as a surprise in 2022.

The Russian Federation's security concept doctrine of March 2023²³ highlighted the significance of the Black Sea as a crucial area of national interest. In particular, the Russian Black Sea Fleet plays a pivotal role as one of the nation's four naval fleets, with its primary mission being the projection of regional power²⁴. The Russian fleet serves as a critical launching point for Russia's military operations in the Mediterranean, Middle East and nowadays, mainly, in the Black Sea²⁵. In this sense, one might think that Russia sees the Black Sea region as a buffer zone against NATO expansion. The strategy of Moscow in this area could be: "*a component in Putin's grand plan to reshape the global order and reinstate Russia as a prominent global player*". Simultaneously, the Kremlin aims to retain its spheres of influence in regions that were once part of the Soviet Union, which are referred to as "the near abroad" in the Russian strategic narrative²⁶. In this sense, in the not-too-distant future, some scholars might choose to describe today's events with the title "Russia's war in the Black Sea".

¹⁹ Robert Greenall, "Ukraine war: Russia attacks grain stores at River Danube ports", 24 July 2023, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66289136>, accessed on: 2 September 2023.

²⁰ Heather Mongilio, "A Brief Summary of the Battle of the Black Sea", *USNI (The U.S. Naval Institute) News*, November 15, 2023, available at: <https://news.usni.org/2023/11/15/a-brief-summary-of-the-battle-of-the-black-sea>, accessed on: 16 November 2023.

²¹ Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Black Sea Region in Russia Worldview", in Stephen J. Flanagan, Anika Binnendijk, Irina A. Chindea, Katherine Costello, Geoffrey Kirkwood, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach (eds.), *Russia, NATO and the Black Sea Security*, California, RAND Corporation, 2020, p. 19.

²² Fenghua Liu, "Russia's Foreign Policy Over the Past Three Decades Change and Continuity", *Chinese Journal of Slavic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 92, available at: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/cjss-2022-0004/html>, accessed on: 3 November 2023.

²³ Presidency of the Russian Federation, *Decree on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023*, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>, accessed on: 29 August 2023.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Leonardo Dinu, Jakub Godzimirski, "Russia in the Black Sea Region and in the High North. Similarities and differences in strategic posture and responses to war in Ukraine", *New Strategy Center*, November 2022, pp. 2 –

3. Soft security²⁷ and cooperation platforms in the Black Sea – the European Union’s *Black Sea Synergy*, the most successful cooperation framework in the region

The states freed from the Russian control or from the Soviet “motherland” (1989-1993) quickly made known their intentions to protect themselves under the Euro-Atlantic synergy umbrella. Thus, the first steps were to adhere to the European Union community and to join the NATO Partnership for Peace. In 2004 we witnessed the start of the implementation of the European Union’s Neighbourhood Policy, that is an instrument for strengthening relations between the states on the European borders, including those situated in the North Caucasus. In 2007, when EU membership was granted to Sofia and Bucharest, the Black Sea officially became a natural border of the European Union.

At the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, the Allies supported the future accession of Georgia and Ukraine, once they meet all the conditions. This generated an aggressive attitude from Moscow. After the war in Georgia (2008), Vladimir Putin sought to (re)build a sphere of influence in the Black Sea region, which culminated with the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014²⁸. In this sense, the experts Dinu and Godzimirski emphasise that “*Russia, immediately after its military intervention in Georgia (2008), started an extensive military build-up to dominate the Black Sea, materialized later through the illegal occupation of a centrepiece for its military presence in the Black Sea, supported the armed conflict of pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas (2014) and launched a full-scale military invasion against Ukraine on 24 February 2022*”²⁹.

Regarding the cooperation framework in the Black Sea, the first regional platforms began to emerge at the beginning of the '90s, focused mostly on the economy and sustainable development of the area. The European Union, NATO, and the United States of America

3, available at: <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NSC-NUPI-Russia-in-the-Black-Sea-region-and-in-the-High-North.pdf>, accessed on: 16 November 2023.

²⁷ For the *soft – hard security* concept in the last 30 years regarding the Black Sea region, see Hanna Shelest, “From Soft Security to Hard Security in the Black Sea Region – Does the OSCE fit?” in *Security and Human Rights*, No. 32, 2022, p. 106: “The turmoil of the Black Sea politics in the last 30 years is a perfect sample for analysis. It demonstrates both how hard security, which had been undermined by the soft security challenges, has been evoked again without being properly addressed by the littoral states and international organisations, and how different security threats are transforming and flowing between the hard and soft security domains.”

²⁸ After the annexation of Crimea and the release of Russian – Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas region, Putin has been committed, until this day, to a “Great Power Diplomacy”, see Fenghua Liu, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Over the Past Three Decades Change and Continuity”, *Chinese Journal of Slavic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 92, available at: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/cjss-2022-0004/html>, accessed on: 3 November 2023.

²⁹ Leonardo Dinu, Jakub Godzimirski, “Russia in the Black Sea Region and in the High North. Similarities and differences in strategic posture and responses to war in Ukraine”, *New Strategy Center*, November 2022, p.12, available at: <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NSC-NUPI-Russia-in-the-Black-Sea-region-and-in-the-High-North.pdf>, accessed on: 16 November 2023.

supported these initiatives to strengthen the security environment of the Black Sea, through economic stability and prosperity. It was considered, at that time, that by unifying the aspirations of the states in the area, and bringing Russia to the same table, a new conflict in the region would be avoided.

Initially, the largest cooperation platform was the **Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation** (1992), especially in terms of economic collaboration between states, but also for other aspects related to the internal security of states: organised crime, social policies, and environment, or cross-border cooperation on fighting terrorism. In 1998, it evolved into a regional organisation that took on the responsibility of promoting integration processes within the region. The BSEC's scope widened to encompass economic collaboration in the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, and Mediterranean Sea areas, solidifying its significance in regional and sub-regional affairs³⁰.

However, until February 2022, the most effective form of regional cooperation in the Black Sea was the **Black Sea Synergy**, a format launched in 2007, through which the EU aimed to encourage its cooperation with the countries in the region³¹. This format, part of the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy, fosters the cooperation in various fields, such as trade, transport, transit of raw materials, research and development in the Black Sea area, environment and other policies. This creates a sustainable development framework for the states in the extended region (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia). In this context, it is worth mentioning that all the countries of the Black Sea region - apart from Romania and Bulgaria (which became EU members in 2007), and Turkey - joined the Eastern Partnership (established in 2009). A Black Sea area that is secure, both internally and externally, can become resilient in defending its own security interests, enhancing at the same time the wider regional and international security schemes.

The Black Sea Synergy has helped increase the security and stability in the region. Despite the obstacles, it led to positive changes in several areas, and encouraged the use of diplomacy in any differences arising between the countries involved³². In this context, we find

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Black Sea Synergy – a New Regional Cooperation Initiative*, Brussels, 11.4.2007, COM(2007), 160 final, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52007DC0160&from=EN>, accessed on: 17.09.2023.

³² European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *Black Sea Synergy: Review of a regional cooperation initiative – period 2015-2018*, Joint Staff Working Document, available at: https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/swd_2019_100_f1_joint_staff_working_paper_en_v3_p1_101378_8-1.pdf, accessed on: 6 September 2023.

it useful to mention the resolution of the European Parliament from January 20, 2011, which envisaged a European Union Strategy for the Black Sea. It states that „*having in mind the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for the European Union and the limited results of the Black Sea Synergy (...), the European Union may and should play a more active role in structuring a security framework in the Black Sea Region*”. In addition, the EU could be more involved in the prevention and resolution of the regional conflicts (i.e., *frozen conflicts*), and could lead the peace negotiations³³. An updated version of the Synergy, with the latest geopolitical transformations, might continue to play a significant role in shaping the future of the Black Sea region, if it honestly examines its limitations and its achievements, and might promote regional integration (for the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia), as well as the European foreign policy.

To compare the strengths and shortcomings of the Black Sea Synergy, an analysis was carried out, based on documents from the European Commission.

Table 1 – Strengths and weaknesses of the Black Sea Synergy

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>1. The Black Sea Synergy framework has played a pivotal role in the European Union’s regional policy for the Black Sea area. This initiative provided practical assistance in developing and enhancing regional cooperation within the Black Sea region, as well as between the EU and the region as a whole.</p> <p>2. The Black Sea Synergy established stronger connections with other EU initiatives, policies, and strategies. Notably, it aligns with the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the Integrated Maritime Policy, and the EU Maritime Security Strategy. The 2018 EU Communication on “Connecting Europe and Asia - Building</p>	<p>1. In the current geopolitical context, determined by Russia’s illegal armed aggression against Ukraine, the Black Sea Synergy is a cooperation format that lacks a common political statement of the participants regarding the emergence of a security strategy in the Black Sea.</p> <p>2. The lack of regional cooperation regarding the implementation of national security concepts, that correspond to common defence interests in the face of threats originating from the Black Sea basin (the war in Ukraine, hybrid war, climate change, etc.).</p> <p>3. The 2007 Communication on the Black Sea Synergy highlighted various areas of</p>

³³ *An EU Strategy for the Black Sea*, European Parliament resolution of 20 January 2011 on an EU Strategy for the Black Sea (2010/2087(INI)) Official Journal, C/136, 11.05.2012, p. 86,

<p>Blocks for an EU Strategy” specifically acknowledges the bridging role of the Black Sea basin and emphasises the importance of interconnectivity within the EU and between Europe and Asia.</p> <p>3. The Black Sea NGO Forum has emerged as a success story within the framework of the Black Sea Synergy. The forum’s inclusive membership ensures a diverse range of participants, fostering greater engagement and collaboration.</p>	<p>collaboration, including employment, social affairs, and trade. However, there was limited advancement in regional cooperation in these domains. Despite this, it is worth noting that the European Union (EU) continues to be a significant economic and trading partner for the countries in the Black Sea region. Therefore, fostering stronger economic cooperation, and maintaining preferential trade relations, remain crucial aspects of the EU’s relationship with these nations.</p>
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Source: Author’s representation based on the “Report Black Sea Synergy: Review of a regional cooperation initiative – period 2015-2018”, European Commission, 2019.

4. Current security challenges in the Black Sea basin. Key actors in maintaining or challenging the security in the region

At the moment, what can be called ‘a new battle for the mouths of the Danube’ is being waged. The attacks of the Russian drones against the Ukrainian ports (Odessa, Reni and Izmail) have endangered both the Ukrainian commercial transit routes, and the state of the food resources, because these ports have warehouses for the storage of grain and other foods. In this author’s understanding, Russia seems to create an economic shock wave for Kiev, which might force the latter to abandon its attempts to defend its Eastern territories and its aspiration to reintegrate Crimea within its borders.

*The Black Sea Grain Initiative*³⁴, which facilitated safe sea transport for the export of wheat and other food products from the Ports of Odessa, Chornomorsk and Yuzhny, is no longer in force since last summer (July 27, 2023), when the Russian Federation rejected the extension of this agreement, thus compromising the global food security. This threat encompasses more than just the military and food security; energy security is also at stake. The Black Sea serves as a vital transit area for energy and gas routes, presenting an opportunity for Europe to enhance its energy self-sufficiency. This issue has been a prominent topic of

³⁴ United Nations, *The Black Sea Grain Initiative*, available at: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/black_sea_grain_initiative_full_text.pdf, accessed on: 15 September 2023.

discussion in Brussels ever since the war started, as EU member states sought to diminish their dependence on Russian gas and bolster their energy security.

A step forward, for deepening the economic cooperation in the region, was made through the *Three Seas Initiative Forum*, which took place last September in Bucharest (2023). The Forum laid the foundations for enhanced cooperation between the states in the region (future routes and infrastructure projects for the transport and transit of gas and oil, etc.)³⁵. The Black Sea remains, even in war conditions, a key transit area for oil and a strategic hub for gas. The precise quantities of gas resources in the Black Sea are currently unknown. The exact amount is still undetermined, given that Russia gained control over two-thirds of Ukraine's maritime area after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. In Turkey, the reserves in its offshore Tuna-1 exploration zone amount to 405 billion cubic meters. For Romania, the offshore reserves estimates vary between 150 to 200 billion cubic meters. In Bulgaria, the unexplored Khan Asparuh field is thought to have around 100 billion cubic meters of gas. Georgia is credited with holding approximately 266 billion cubic meters of recoverable gas resources in total³⁶.

And it is not just the war in Ukraine that threatens European security today. At the time of writing this paper, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh appeared to have ended, but with an enormous security cost: the exodus of more than 100,000 Armenians from the region, following the seizure of power by Azerbaijan. Due to its place in the wider energy scheme, Azerbaijan has not been held accountable by any major power for ousting with military force the separatist Armenian government of Nagorno-Karabakh³⁷.

With the Russian war against Ukraine and the blockade of the Ukrainian Black Sea ports, the extended Black Sea region has gained greater geopolitical and security importance.

4.1. NATO, the United States of America and the security in the Black Sea

Russia's aggressiveness influenced the behaviour of the Eastern European states that became more aware of their potential vulnerability in the new regional environment, due to Russia's proximity. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted NATO Allies to adapt

³⁵ See more about the Three Seas Initiative Forum in Bucharest at: <https://3seas.eu/event/three-seas-initiative-business-forum-bucharest-2023>, accessed on 1 October 2023.

³⁶ Aura Sabadus, "Why the Black Sea could emerge as the world's next great battleground", Atlantic Council, March 30, 2021, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-the-black-sea-could-emerge-as-the-worlds-next-great-energy-battleground/>, accessed on: 25 November 2023.

³⁷ VOA News, "Armenian Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh Ebbs as Azerbaijan Moves to Reaffirm Control", available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/7293219.html>, accessed on: 5 October 2023.

deterrence and defence measures against possible attacks from the Russian Federation³⁸. At the 2014 Wales Summit, they decided to halt all forms of cooperation with Moscow, to establish training programs for allied forces, and adjust the command-and-control structures³⁹. Two years later, at the NATO meeting in Warsaw, the Allies implemented a series of initiatives, including the rotation of multinational combat formations stationed in the East of the Alliance, highly trained reinforcements, and the repositioning of combat equipment in the Baltic States, considered then as a possible target. In 2016, to further strengthen the security of the region, NATO implemented the Tailored Forward Presence in Romania, and the Bucharest's initiative to anchor the Alliance's presence in air, on land, and sea through NATO's Multinational Division South-East in Romania, by providing training and improved exercises, as well as NATO Air Policing for Romania and Bulgaria⁴⁰. In the same year, the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis proposed a naval cooperation in the Black Sea under NATO's umbrella, led by the littoral states, but Bulgaria and Turkey did not agree.⁴¹

NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept places great importance on the Black Sea and highlights NATO's dedication to strengthening the readiness and resilience of the Black Sea states against Russian influence, as well as its willingness to support their ongoing integration into the Euro-Atlantic region. To achieve these objectives, NATO is actively bolstering its military capabilities in the Black Sea area. Notably, four additional multinational battle groups have been established in the region, with two of them stationed in Bulgaria and Romania. Since the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the number of NATO troops in Eastern Europe has nearly doubled, with the deployment of fighter jets, air defence systems, and surveillance flights⁴².

The substantial US support shown to Ukraine has also triggered among the Americans a growing awareness of the strategic importance of the Black Sea, and this determined the US

³⁸ Lord Mark Lancaster (Rapporteur), *Troubled Waters – How Russia's War in Ukraine Changes Black Sea Security*, Defense and Security Committee, Sub-Committee on Future Security and Defense Capabilities, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 18 August 2023, available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2023-09/020%20DSCFC%2023%20E%20rev.1%20-%20BLACK%20SEA%20-%20LANCASTER%20REPORT.pdf>, accessed on: 1 September 2023.

³⁹ NATO, *NATO Summit Declaration 2014*, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, accessed on: 13 September 2023.

⁴⁰ NATO, *NATO Summit Declaration 2016*, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm, accessed on: 13 September 2023.

⁴¹ Europa Liberă, "Ukraine wants to participate in NATO operations in the Black Sea", available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/29765682/1b10lbi92735.html>, accessed on: 20 September 2023.

⁴² NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022, available at: https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622strategic-concept.pdf, accessed on: 10 September 2023.

to officially acknowledge its significance for the broader security. Consequently, in March 2023, the Black Sea Security Act was introduced to the US Congress⁴³. This proposal seeks to augment the US and allied military presence in the region, as well as to promote economic engagement. The bill emphasises the critical nature of the US security interests in the Black Sea region, and underscores the value of the United States' strategic partners in the area, including Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey⁴⁴.

In this context, it is also important to mention the Resolution 485, adopted on October 9, 2023, by NATO's Parliamentary Assembly in Copenhagen, which „urges member governments and parliaments of the North Atlantic Alliance **to develop a NATO Black Sea strategy** with a tailored and structured approach, including an Action Plan, underwritten by increased Alliance support to national Black Sea strategies”⁴⁵.

4.2. Ukraine

The Russian invasion of February 2022, which resulted in thousands of casualties, did not come as a surprise to the political and cultural elites of Kyiv. In this sense, the previous annexation of Crimea, the military attacks in Donbas, the blockades of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, the disruption of commercial shipping, and the attacks from the sea were all virtual realities for Ukraine's security situation from 2014 to 2022.

The *National Security Strategy of Ukraine* (2020)⁴⁶ had already given special attention to the Black Sea region, indicating that Russia was using Crimea as a bridge to the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Ukraine's first foreign policy strategy, adopted in 2021, also emphasised that the Black Sea region represents a priority for Russia. It characterised the Russian military projection in the Azov-Black Sea region as the main threat to Ukraine's security⁴⁷. Several Ukrainian specialists believe that the role of actors from Central and Eastern Europe (particularly, the role of Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states) will increase in the future security architecture of the region. They also emphasise that Ukraine could

⁴³US Congress, *The Black Sea Security Act, a bill to provide for the Security in the Black Sea Region and for other purposes*, available at: https://www.romney.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/black_sea_security_bill_2023.pdf, accessed on: 1 September 2023.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ NATO, *The Resolution 485* adopted by the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, on 9 October 2023, available at: <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/173-dsc-23-e-resolution-485-strengthening-stability-and-security-black-sea-region>, accessed on: 10.10.2023.

⁴⁶ Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, *National Security Strategy of Ukraine*, September 14, 2020, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/392/2020#Text>, accessed on: 14 September 2023.

⁴⁷ *The Strategy of Ukraine Foreign Policy Activities*, available at: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/n0054525-21#Text>, accessed on: 1 September 2023.

become one of the security guarantors in the Black Sea region, in the post-war stabilisation of the country⁴⁸.

4.3. Azerbaijan

Ever since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan has recognised the Black Sea as a vital gateway to the global market for its energy products. Being geographically located between the East and the West, the Black Sea serves as the sole connection between the European Union and the South Caucasus region. This strategic location is further highlighted by the presence of several crucial energy pipelines, such as the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline, as well as the connection with the Baku-Kars River.

In its *National Security Concept*, approved by the Law No. 2918 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, on 23 May 2007,⁴⁹ Baku is positioning itself “at the crossroads of the West and East”, sharing “the European values and [being] an inalienable component of the Euro-Atlantic security”. Thus, it “contributes to the security of this area”. The most important asset for the economic prosperity of the country is “the development of international transportation and communication corridors, including the construction of oil and gas pipelines”⁵⁰. Furthermore, the documents underline that “the integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political, security, economic, and other institutions constitutes the strategic goal” and that a “close cooperation of the Republic of Azerbaijan with the European Union will contribute to the stability in the Caucasus and will promote the European values in the region”⁵¹. Despite the dispute with Armenia (concerning Nagorno-Karabakh), Baku’s relationship with Georgia in the South Caucasus, and its extensive relations with the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine in the wider Black Sea region, are very important. The aforementioned document further declares that the Republic of Azerbaijan considers cooperation with the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as a crucial element on its foreign policy agenda.

⁴⁸ Kornely Kakachia, Anar Valiyev, Hanna Shelest, Bidzina Lebanidze, Maksym Khylyko, Ahmad Alili, Salome Kandelaki, “Black Sea Security after the Russian invasion of Ukraine: Views from Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan”, Policy Paper No. 31, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2022, p. 8.

⁴⁹ The Republic of Azerbaijan, *National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, 2007, available at: <https://e-qanun.az/framework/13373>, accessed on: 1 December 2023.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach has been deeply impacted by the war in Ukraine, positioning the country as a significant player in the energy supply to South-Eastern Europe, particularly to countries like Bulgaria, Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, and Albania. Gas exports will continue through the TANAP and TAP pipelines to Greece, Albania, and Italy. Plans to increase gas exports and supply to other European countries are also under discussion. Moreover, among the objectives, there is a project to establish a green corridor for the export of electricity to Romania, and then further to Central Europe via the Black Sea. These developments have boosted Azerbaijan's visibility as a relevant actor in the region, fact that might contribute to the regional stabilisation through increased cooperation⁵².

4.4. Georgia

Given the ongoing Russian military aggression against Ukraine, a cautious stance towards the invasion has been adopted, to prevent the opening of a second front and mitigate the pro-Russian sentiments of some government officials. Tbilisi's prudent posture on this issue has generated tensions with the Georgian citizens, mostly aligned with Western values, and has led to a persistent political crisis, caused by the disagreements between the Presidential Administration and the Government.

For Georgia, the significance of the Black Sea extends beyond material considerations to encompass an ideological attachment to the European civilisation. The country sees its ties with the Black Sea community as a means to connect with the rest of Europe. This idealistic outlook is reflected by the *National Security Concept* of Georgia, which states that as a "*Black Sea and South-Eastern European country, Georgia is part of Europe geographically, politically, and culturally, but has been disrupted from its natural course of development by historical upheavals*"⁵³.

Regarding the information warfare arena, it is noteworthy that Russian xenophobic and ethno-nationalist narratives are prevalent in the Georgian media. Meanwhile, the hybrid war is also still present in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁵⁴.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 27; see also: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/southern-gas-corridor-advisory-council-9th-ministerial-meeting-and-green-energy-advisory-council-1st-2023-02-03_en, accessed on: 2 October 2023.

⁵³ *National Security Concept of Georgia*, 2011, available at: <https://nsc.gov.ge/en/CONCEPTUAL-DOCUMENTS/National-Security-Concept>, accessed on: 7 September 2023.

⁵⁴ Batu Kutelia, Vasil (Dato) Sikharulidze, *Strategic Connectivity in the Black Sea: A Focus on Georgia*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (www.fpri.org), printed in the United States of America, 2021, p. 5.

4.5. Republic of Moldova

In the Republic of Moldova, the presence of a Russian military force in Transnistria is a matter of great concern for both the Government and its Euro-Atlantic partners. A century of Russian/Soviet rule has left indelible marks, such as a cultural affinity, in addition to a linguistic connection. However, there are positive developments in Moldova's approach towards the West. The European Union has allocated 40 million euros from the *European Peace Facility* for the modernisation of the Moldovan Army, and joint military exercises were held between the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and the United States of America in the fall of 2022⁵⁵.

As regards the stability of the country in 2023, Alexandru Musteață, Head of the Intelligence and Security Service of Moldova, has expressed concerns about the possibility of a Russian invasion of his country. According to him, there was a high probability for such an attack to be envisioned in 2023: “*The question is not whether the Russian Federation will launch a new offensive towards the territory of the Republic of Moldova, but when this will happen [...] from the information we have, the Russian Federation intends to go further*”⁵⁶. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has significantly altered the perception of security in the region, and President Maia Sandu has emphasised the need for Moldova to build a more professional army. These developments highlight the importance of strengthening Moldova's defence capabilities and its relationship with the West.⁵⁷

In the recently approved *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova (December 14, 2023)*⁵⁸, the focus is on the relentless pursuit of joining the European Union by 2030, with a commitment to fulfil all the necessary requirements. The strategy emphasises the need to establish a professional and adequately funded national defence and security sector,

⁵⁵ Sergiy Gerasymchuk, “Case of Moldova. Russian octopus in the Black Sea region: identifying vulnerable areas and strengthening resilience”, Ukrainian Prism – Foreign Policy Council, 26.01.2023, available at: http://prismua.org/en/octopus_moldova/, accessed on: 5 September 2023.

⁵⁶ IPN, “Alexandru Musteață: Rusia ar avea în plan să invadeze și Moldova la începutul anului 2023” [Alexandru Musteață: Russia would also plan to invade Moldova at the beginning of 2023], available at: https://www.ipn.md/ro/alexandru-musteata-rusia-ar-avea-in-plan-sa-invadeze-7965_1094138.html, accessed on: 2 November 2023.

⁵⁷ In this sense, Natalia Stercul emphasises that “the states of the Black Sea Basin are in a particular position in the context of Russian aggression. For geographic and historical reasons, Russia seeks to maintain the region's political and economic leadership. Moscow is threatening three Black Sea countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – with military means”, Natalia Stercul, “The Black Sea Region as a zone of Irreconcilable Strategic Interests”, in Valentin Naumescu, Raluca Moldovan, Diana Petruț (eds.), *The EU and NATO approaches to the Black Sea Region*, vol. 2/2022, Cluj, Presa Universitară Clujeană Publishing House, 2022, pp. 287-288, available at: <http://www.ape.md/2022/11/natalia-stercul-the-black-sea-region-as-a-zone-of-irreconcilable-strategic-interests/>, accessed on: 5 November 2023.

⁵⁸ Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova*, available at: https://www.presedinte.md/app/webroot/proiecte/Proiect_%20Strategie_11.10.23.pdf, accessed on: 15 December 2023.

capable of addressing a wide range of national security needs. The current security environment shows that Moscow aims to undermine Ukraine's statehood and nation with the intention of expanding its own territorial control⁵⁹. These actions have also targeted the Republic of Moldova, as the Kremlin seeks to create a military corridor, and gain political and economic control over the country. The Russian Federation has employed different tactics, such as energy blackmail, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and interference in electoral processes to destabilise the Republic of Moldova⁶⁰. Given these circumstances, the strategy indicates that the Russian Federation will continue its hostile actions, fact which calls for the development of resilience and protection against hybrid security threats for the Republic of Moldova.⁶¹

4.6. Bulgaria

For Bulgaria, the *2011 National Security Strategy* indicates that the Black Sea region is viewed „in a broad European and Euro-Atlantic context in order to promote cooperation between countries in economy, trade and security”⁶². The region holds particular importance for the pipeline industry given the connection with Europe's energy markets. Also, in the Black Sea basin, “the Republic of Bulgaria strives to enhance its active role, bilaterally and multilaterally, in the promotion of regional peace and security, energy security included, and in the implementation of economic programs and infrastructure projects of regional and pan-European importance in the context of the EU and NATO activities”, that are singled out as priorities. Moreover, in the *Strategy for development of a single set of efficient forces for modern defence*, issued in 2011, Sofia recognises the increasing significance of the Black Sea region in terms of international security⁶³. This position stems from the region's role as a crucial link between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The presence of ongoing conflicts and the activities of terrorist organisations further amplify the vulnerability of the region, including the transnational energy and transport routes that traverse it. For Bulgaria, this holds even greater importance due to its responsibilities in safeguarding the external borders of both NATO and the EU⁶⁴.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

⁶² The Republic of Bulgaria, *The National Security Strategy, 2011*, available at: https://www.me.government.bg/files/useruploads/files/national_strategy1.pdf, accessed on: 12 December 2023.

⁶³ The Bulgarian Ministry of Defence, “Strategy for development of a single set of efficient forces for modern defence”, available at: https://www.mod.bg/en/cooperation_OP.html, accessed on: 10 December 2023.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

Sofia actively engages in various regional initiatives, including the Bucharest 9 Group, and in 2016, it took part in a joint Romanian-Bulgarian brigade led by NATO. However, the Bulgarian media has become a target of Russia's hybrid information warfare, particularly following the annexation of Crimea, and the conflict with Ukraine. In addition to the targeting of the civil society by disinformation, the political scene in Sofia has also been affected. After his election as President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev declared that, although Crimea is *de jure* a part of Ukraine, it belongs *de facto* to the Russian Federation⁶⁵. In the 2021 election campaign, Radev emphasised again that Russia is his country's ally. In May 2022, he opposed the decision of the Bulgarian Parliament on providing military-technical assistance to Ukraine, claiming that such initiatives could turn his country into a theatre of war for Russia. For the same reason, he refrained from supporting a possible accession of Ukraine to NATO.⁶⁶

4.7. Romania

Following its integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures, Romania has prompted its NATO and EU allies to acknowledge the need for a unified framework to ensure stability and security in the Black Sea region. Throughout this period, Romania has assumed the role of a key advocate for regional security, offering impartial and well-rounded strategic evaluations of the challenges and threats originating from the Black Sea region. This steadfast commitment continued until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine⁶⁷.

Romania's security sphere exhibits a commendable level of resilience, owing to its strong Euro-Atlantic aspirations and enhanced cooperation with its NATO allies, namely the United States and the European Union. In response to the 2022 Russian aggression on Ukraine, Romania adopted an updated National Defence Strategy (2020-2024), which acknowledges the evolving security landscape and requires not only the expansion and co-financing of its own defence, but also the exploration of novel approaches to adapt to the prevailing security conditions⁶⁸. On March 11, 2022, during a meeting with U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris,

⁶⁵ Georgy Gotev, "US "deeply concerned" by Bulgarian president's Crimea comment", EURACTIV, 22 November 2021, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/us-deeply-concerned-by-bulgarian-presidents-crimea-comment/>, accessed on: 5 September 2023.

⁶⁶ Mykhailo Drapak, "Case of Bulgaria. Russian Octopus in the Black Sea Region. Identifying Vulnerable Areas and Strengthening Resilience", Ukrainian Prism – Foreign Policy Council, 24.01.2023, available at: http://prismua.org/en/octopus_bulgaria/, accessed on: 5 September 2023, p.12.

⁶⁷ Leonardo Dinu, Jakub Godzimirski, "Russia in the Black Sea Region and in the High North. Similarities and differences in strategic posture and responses to war in Ukraine", New Strategy Center, November 2022, p. 4, available at: <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NSC-NUPI-Russia-in-the-Black-Sea-region-and-in-the-High-North.pdf>, accessed on: 16 November 2023.

⁶⁸ Presidential Administration of Romania, *National Strategy for the Defence of the Country*, 2019-2024, available at:

President Iohannis underscored the imperative of bolstering Romania's position on NATO's Eastern flank. He emphasised that security commences at home and affirmed Romania's unwavering commitment to fortify its transatlantic strategic partnership by augmenting defence measures⁶⁹. Romania's defence budget adopted in December 2021 amounted to 2% of its GDP. However, in light of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, Romania subsequently raised its defence spending to 2.5% of its national gross domestic product, which translates to an estimated 8 billion euros.⁷⁰

Romania plays a crucial role in upholding the security and stability on NATO's Eastern flank by employing a combination of soft power tools, such as diplomacy, economics, and humanitarian efforts, alongside hard security measures, including investments in defence and contributions to NATO's defence and deterrence actions. The country's *National Security Strategy* identifies the Russian Federation as a threat to both national security and the stability of the regional political and security landscape. To address this threat, the *National Defence Strategy 2020-2024* outlines a number of measures. These include bolstering the Alliance's isolation and defence capabilities, particularly on the Eastern flank, as well as strengthening Romania's own national defence and active involvement in NATO's Eastern flank. Additionally, the strategy emphasises the need to enhance the European Union's capacity for collective action and the United States of America's commitment to the security of the Black Sea region. Furthermore, the strategy aims to provide sustainable solutions that ensure regional stability, reaffirm the importance of the Black Sea, and promote regional cooperation on various humanitarian and economic issues. It also specifies that 2.5% of the country's GDP will be allocated to the military sector by 2023.⁷¹

The strategic significance of the Black Sea for Romania is evident in its designation as an area of interest for NATO. This recognition underscores the central role that the Black Sea plays in Romania's security policies. Furthermore, it highlights the need for the region to be a

https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf, accessed on 1 September 2023.

⁶⁹ Digi24, "Klaus Iohannis, Conferință de presă comună cu Kamala Harris: România nu a mai beneficiat până acum de astfel de garanții de securitate" [Klaus Iohannis, joint press conference with Kamala Harris: Romania has never benefited from such security guarantees before], available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/klaus-iohannis-conferinta-de-presa-comuna-cu-kamala-harris-romania-nu-a-mai-beneficiat-pana-acum-de-astfel-de-garantii-de-securitate-1868557>, accessed on: 15 September 2023.

⁷⁰ Răzvan Botea, "Guvernul a crescut bugetul Apărării la 2,5% din PIB și cumpără arme de 10 miliarde de euro" [The Government has raised the defence budget at 2.5% of the GDP and buys arms estimated at 10 billion euros], MEDIAFAX (Romania), available at: <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/guvernul-a-crescut-bugetul-apararii-la-2-5-din-pib-si-cumpara-arme-de-10-miliarde-de-euro-21726914>, accessed on: 25 November 2023.

⁷¹ Presidential Administration of Romania, *National Defence Strategy, 2020-2024*, available at: https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf, accessed on: 1 September 2023.

secure and predictable environment. However, this importance is juxtaposed with Russia's escalating aggression and the ensuing potential for deteriorating the security situation. This not only impacts the Black Sea region, but also has broader implications for the Euro-Atlantic area as a whole.⁷²

5. Conclusions

Our working paper aimed to analyse the security dynamics in the Black Sea Region (BSR) since the start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, while also considering a series of historical geopolitical developments. We have also examined the interests and actions of various actors in the region, including the EU, NATO, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and Romania, among others. By conducting this analysis, we contributed to the ongoing discussion on the growing significance of the Black Sea region for the European stability and security.

Complex power dynamics, security issues, and the threat of conflict are all present on the geopolitical chessboard that is now the region of the Black Sea. Tensions in the area have increased as a result of recent events: particularly, the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the battles for the Ukrainian ports on the Danube River. However, these challenges can be countered by the stability and collaboration instruments developed within the Euro-Atlantic synergy through NATO, the European Union, and diplomatic channels. To promote security and development in the face of these difficulties, state actors should continue their cooperation in the Black Sea area. The decisions taken by all parties involved, as they move across this complex geopolitical chessboard, will determine the future of the extended Black Sea region.

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⁷² Oleksandr Kraiev, “Case of Romania. Russian Octopus in the Black Sea Region. Identifying Vulnerable Areas and Strengthening Resilience”, Ukrainian Prism – Foreign Policy Council, 30.01.2023, available at: http://prismua.org/en/octopus_romania/, accessed on: 5 September 2023.

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