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**Working Paper**

## From synergy to strategy in the black sea region: Assessing opportunities and challenges

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**FROM SYNERGY TO STRATEGY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION.  
ASSESSING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**





# **FROM SYNERGY TO STRATEGY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION. ASSESSING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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## Contents

<b>Foreword .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Guest Opinion.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Lazăr COMĂNESCU	
The Role of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as a Confidence-Building Mechanism in the Region.....	11
<b>Views from the Black Sea Region States.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Armen GRIGORYAN (ARMENIA)	
Foreign and Economic Policy Diversification: A Priority for Armenia .....	15
Fariz ISMAILZADE (AZERBAIJAN)	
Connecting Caspian and Black Sea Regions in an Era of Geopolitical Challenges .....	17
Yasen GEORGIEV (BULGARIA)	
Bulgaria’s Contribution to Bridging Connectivity Bottlenecks in the Black Sea Region - Prospects for an Accelerated Catching-up after a Delayed Start .....	19
Ivan NACHEV & Hristo PANCHUGOV (BULGARIA)	
Bulgaria likes Black Sea Cooperation, But Not Quite....	23
Kakha GOGOLASHVILI (GEORGIA)	
The EU/NATO: Revising the Paradigm in the Black Sea .....	26
Nino SAMKHARADZE (GEORGIA)	
The Black Sea, as a Crucial Connecting Point for International Transit ..	29
Irakli SIRBILADZE (GEORGIA)	
Georgia’s Policy of Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Plurality: Implications for the Black Sea Region.....	31
Georgios MITRAKOS (GREECE)	
The Future of Economic Cooperation in the Black Sea. What’s Next? ....	34

Dimitris TSAKNIS (GREECE)	
Alexandroupolis: NATO’s New and Precious Strategic Asset on the Eastern Flank.....	37
Sanda SANDU (REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)	
Republic of Moldova’s Quiet Power: Shaping the Future of Black Sea Stability .....	39
Mihai ȚURCANU (REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA)	
How Do You Envisage the Black Sea Region by 2030? .....	42
Gül Günver TURAN (TÜRKIYE)	
Awaiting Miracles .....	44
Gül Günver TURAN (TÜRKIYE)	
Backsliding Democracies, Autocracies, and Ways Out .....	46
İlter TURAN (TÜRKIYE)	
Black Sea Security .....	48
Çiğdem ÜSTÜN (TÜRKIYE)	
A Gloomy Future for the Region! .....	50
Hatice YAZGAN (TÜRKIYE)	
Revisiting the Current Black Sea Security Challenges: What Role for Türkiye? .....	52
Sergiy Gerasymchuk (UKRAINE)	
Waves of Uncertainty and Storm Clouds Over the Black Sea: Navigating the Troubled Waters .....	54
Yuriy YAKYMENKO (UKRAINE)	
External Threats Can Become an Efficient Factor of Economic Growth..	56
<b>Views from other states .....</b>	<b>58</b>
Velina TCHAKAROVA (AUSTRIA)	
Black Sea Crossroads: Navigating the Future of Global Connectivity and Security .....	59

Bernard SIMAN (BELGIUM)	
Belgium and the Geopolitical Challenges and Security of the Black Sea .	62
Erzsébet N. RÓZSA & Tamás SZIGETVÁRI (HUNGARY)	
Connectivity, the Black Sea Region, and Hungarian Priorities .....	64
László VASA (HUNGARY)	
Black Sea Region's Role in the Middle Corridor: The New Golden Age? ..	66
Jędrzej BŁASZCZAK (POLAND)	
Polish Involvement in the Black Sea Region: Security and Transport .....	68
Konrad POPLAWSKI (POLAND)	
Black Sea - A New Pillar of the Eurasian Land Transportation System....	70
Małgorzata SAMOJEDNY (POLAND)	
Baltic - Black Sea Transportation Corridor - A New Beginning? .....	72
Andreas UMLAND (SWEDEN)	
Crimea as an Obstacle to Peace Between Kyiv and Moscow .....	74
Basil GERMOND (UNITED KINGDOM)	
The Maritime Geopolitics of the Black Sea: Keeping the Russians ashore, the Ukrainians afloat and the Turks onboard!.....	76
James Jay CARAFANO (UNITED STATES)	
Black Sea a New Strategic Priority for the US .....	79
Matthew BOYSE (UNITED STATES)	
The Black Sea Region has Enormous Potential .....	81
Grant W. TURNER & Seth CROPSEY (UNITED STATES)	
Three Seas Initiative (Plus) and Black Sea Security: Romania's Room for Leadership and Growth .....	83
<b>Views from Romania.....</b>	<b>86</b>
Antonia COLIBĂȘANU	
The Black and North Seas Are Already Connected. Why Not Make Use of it? .....	87



Valentin NAUMESCU

The Eye of the Storm: The Black Sea Region as a “Barometer” of the Competition/Confrontation for a New World Order ..... 89

Laurențiu PLEȘCA

Strengthening Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Romania's Strategic Partnership with Ukraine ..... 91

George SCUTARU

*Si vis pacem, para bellum!* Or why we should continue to support Ukraine ..... 93

Clara VOLINTIRU

Democratic Resilience in the Black Sea Region ..... 95

Ioana-Elena BĂDESCU-SECU

The Black Sea Region’s Security Requires a Global Strategy Until 2030. The Contribution of Romania..... 98

Mihai SEBE

Afterword: The Black Sea - From Peacetime to an Age of Conflicts Agenda ..... 101

## Foreword

This *collective report* on the Black Sea aims to present a clear image of the region in terms of security and economic dynamics, and to propose several specific policy steps. These steps will certainly enhance the efforts to provide security, stability and development for this area, as they come with original and accurate views on the different processes taking place nowadays.

Our initiative responds to the unabated need for fresh analysis on the topics related to the challenges we encounter in the Black Sea Region. The contributions evaluate the most recent developments in the region, and sometimes present potential scenarios. For greater clarity, we chose to structure the paper in **three main sections**. Firstly, we have **the national perspectives (other than Romania's)** of the states from the Black Sea region, and secondly, **regional perspectives** based on the viewpoints of other state actors. The last section displays **the Romanian experts' contributions**.

For the European Union, **the Black Sea is a region of great strategic importance** due to the fact that two of its member states - [Bulgaria and Romania - and four candidate states - Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Türkiye - are riparian countries](#). In 2007, after the accession to the EU of Romania and Bulgaria, [the Black Sea Synergy](#) was launched as a major instrument, aiming at contributing to deepening the regional cooperation. To date, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission have published a number of joint reports about the [implementation](#) of the Black Sea Synergy, the most recent one in [2019](#)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, in 2019, while Romania was holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU, two important documents (with impact on the Black Sea) were adopted, with support from the European Commission: the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda in the Black Sea region (launched in Bucharest on May 8, during a high-level meeting), and the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea (adopted in Bucharest on May 21). In 2023, Romania was the Coordinator for the implementation of the [Common Maritime Agenda \(CMA\)](#).

Due to the increased turbulences we have witnessed in the last decade in the Black Sea Region, we consider our initiative to be a legitimate endeavour to better understand and emphasize **the relevance of the Black Sea on the European and global stages**. [As underlined by some of the contributors, the Black Sea is the place where Europe meets the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East](#). Today,

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<sup>1</sup> The assessment of the implementation of the Black Sea Synergy for 2019-2023 was already underway at the moment of writing this material.

the Black Sea Region is important in terms of security, economy, and [sustainable development](#) of the area.


The **European Institute of Romania** has actively contributed (and we believe that it will continue to do so) to the dialogue concerning the developments in the Black Sea Region. In the editorial process, we have been guided by the honest belief that the developments in the Black Sea region are relevant not only for the riparian states, but also for the whole regional [Euro-Atlantic architecture](#), due to its connection with different regions of the world. Thus, the complexity of the topic of the Black Sea region is indeed challenging.

In our research endeavour, we have invited representatives of academia, think tanks, and public institutions to respond to the following guiding questions:

- *How do you evaluate your country's contribution to the enhancement of the security of the Black Sea region? Which are the main opportunities and challenges you foresee in the short- and medium term, and how can they be addressed?*
- *How can we strengthen democracy in the Black Sea region? Which are the possible risks and weaknesses/shortcomings one should take into account?*
- *Which are the main opportunities and challenges in terms of expanding the economic prosperity of the Black Sea region? How can your country contribute to addressing them?*
- *How do you assess the role of the Black Sea in the context of various regional and global connectivity projects? How do you evaluate the progress/results of the cooperation in terms of transportation, energy and/or digital connectivity infrastructures? How can they be improved?*
- *How do you perceive the future evolutions of the Black Sea Synergy? What can we expect next?*
- *How do you envisage the Black Sea region by 2030?*

The answers we received are insightful and thought-provoking, mirroring an wide-ranging expertise on the issues analysed in each contribution. I would like to highlight that one of the main conclusions of the contributors is that **increased and multifaceted cooperation will help strengthen and stabilise the region, and will facilitate economic development**. We remain firmly committed to supporting the progress needed for a stable and prosperous Black Sea Region, as an indispensable structure for the European security.

The current paper follows our previous collaborative reports. The 2021 report set forth the expectations of the EU's neighbouring countries (candidate and potential candidate states, as well as members of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas) regarding the future of Europe. The 2022 report mapped different views on how to strengthen the EU - African Union partnership, by encompassing the



African and Romanian perspectives, and, [in 2023](#), we published a Report on the Three Seas Initiative, as Romania was preparing to host a new high-level meeting on the 3SI.

I would like to take this opportunity and thank all the contributors for their support and extensive opinions on the challenges that the Black Sea region encounters nowadays. I also thank my colleague Mihai Sebe for the support in coordinating the research and editorial process and, at the same time, my colleagues from the Studies Unit for their help in editing the final version of the Report.

**Oana-Mihaela MOCANU, PhD**  
**Director General of the European Institute of Romania**

## Executive Summary

The Black Sea Region has been providing a vital connection, especially between the states of South-East Europe and the rest of the world - the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans, via sea and land routes since ancient times. However, after 2013 - and particularly after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 - the Black Sea region has become increasingly unstable. As the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation has intensified (we are now approaching its third year), the need for accurate policies, able to respond to the new challenges affecting the area, is mandatory. These well-informed policies will contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region and, at the same time, will maintain the European security.

Today, the Black Sea continues to have a lot to provide to humanity, and can provide various opportunities for the riparian and regional states. Additionally, the potential deepening of the trade links between different actors will facilitate the access to different resources. Its economic resources - like natural gas - that may step up Europe's energy independence, and the transition to renewable resources for many states, by supporting the green energy corridor can become more valuable with support from a network of partners. However, this would only be possible through a continued deepening of the cooperation first among all the riparian states, and then in the larger European and global contexts. One example of regional cooperation is the Three Seas Initiative which involves 13 participating states bordering the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas.

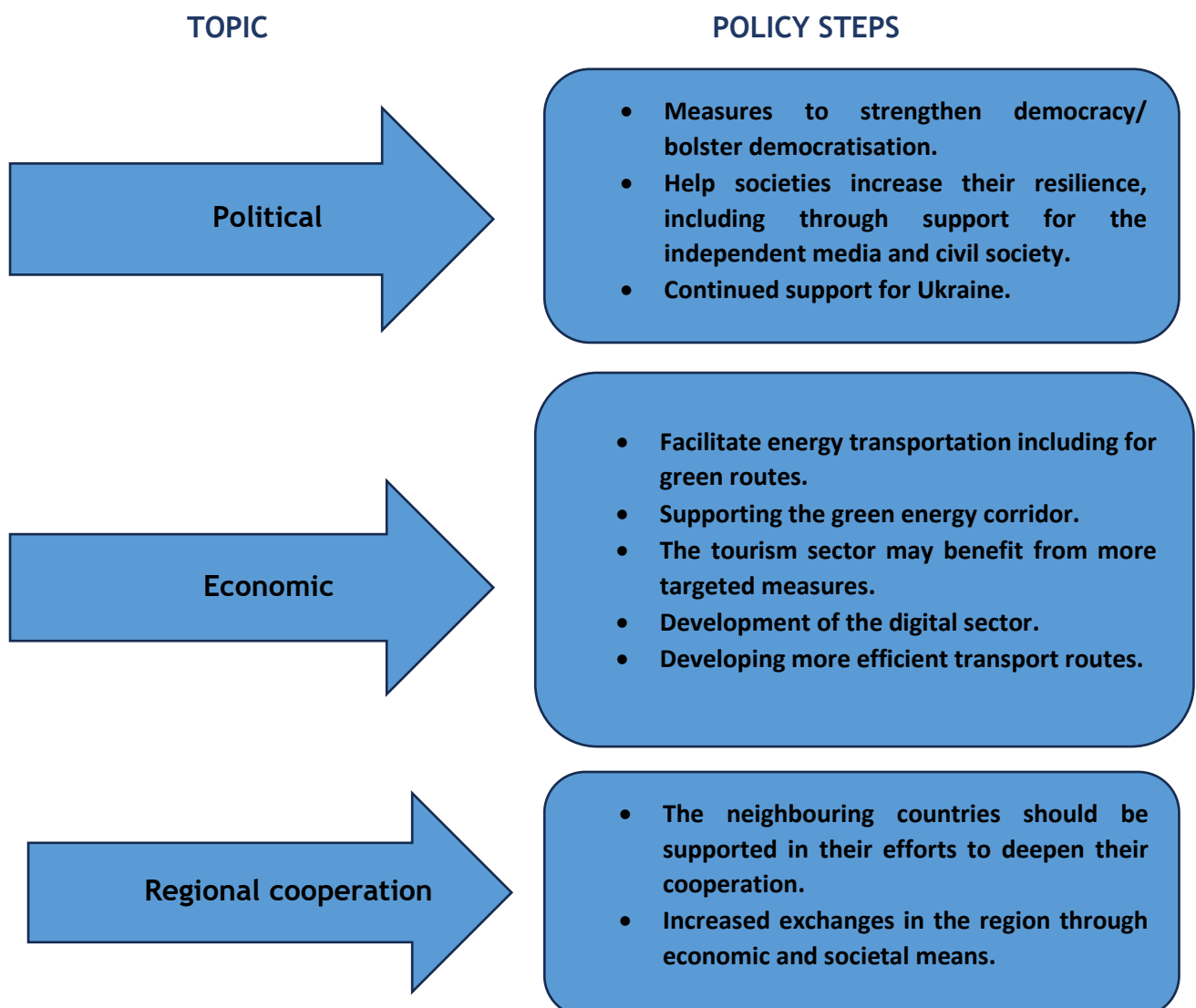
The goal of the collaborative report *From Synergy to Strategy in the Black Sea. Assessing opportunities and challenges* is to evaluate the current situation in the Black Sea region in terms of challenges and opportunities at political, economic, military, environmental and cultural levels. Thus, we offer analyses of the many aspects characteristic of the security developments in the Black Sea region. The scholars who have contributed to this initiative have provided informed perspectives, different explanations of the issues tackled in this report, and in some cases possible scenarios for present and future developments in the region.

We are pleased to present the complex contributions, collected between **January - February 2024**, of **38 authors** from Austria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Poland, Romania, Türkiye, Ukraine, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States of America. We consider this report to have at least two strong points, which recommend it as a useful tool for stakeholders and for all those interested in updating and expanding their knowledge on the topic of the Black Sea. The first advantage of this initiative is that **it has engaged relevant local and global experts** (researchers, scholars,

policymakers, and civil society activists working in the riparian states), and most viewpoints reflect their personal perceptions and understanding of the events. The second strong point resides in **the creative policy solutions proposed** by the contributors to this Report.

Our readers can thus discover herein a number of topics set forth by the authors and considered as highly relevant for the discussions about the Black Sea, such as political aspects, economic measures that may bolster cooperation, and means through which societies may become more engaged in finding solutions to common problems. Although sometimes the problems identified by the experts as needs that have to be addressed are not the same, one can notice that there is a common understanding of the fact that sharing, discussing and devising common solutions will lead to better resolutions.

**We hope that the expertise of the authors of this Report will contribute to the ongoing debate on the best ways that can be developed and supported in order to increase the security, stability and prosperity of the Black Sea region.**





## Guest Opinion

## The Role of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as a Confidence-Building Mechanism in the Region

Lazăr COMĂNESCU

Ambassador **Lazăr COMĂNESCU** (born in 1949) is a graduate and PhD of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES). He also graduated the Sorbonne course of “Langue et civilisation françaises contemporaines”.

From 1972 to 1982, he worked in the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, then lectured at BUES until early 1990 when he resumed his diplomatic career and successively served as deputy head of the Mission of Romania to the European Community (May 1990 - Nov 1994); director general (Dec 1994 - Dec 1995) and Secretary of State for European and Euro-Atlantic affairs in the MFA (Dec 1995 - Feb 1998); Ambassador to NATO (March 1998 - May 2001); Ambassador to the EU (May 2001 - April 2008); Minister of Foreign Affairs (April - December 2008); Ambassador to Germany (May 2009 - Feb 2015); Diplomatic Adviser to the President of Romania (Feb - Nov 2015); again Minister of Foreign Affairs (Nov 2015 - Jan 2017).

From February 2017 to June 2021 Ambassador Comănescu was Senior Adviser (foreign relations) within the Romanian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.


Since July 1 2021 he has been **BSEC Secretary General**. Elected initially for a three-year term, his mandate was renewed for another three years until July 2027.



The particular interest for the Black Sea Region has been observed since ancient times. That should not come as a surprise given its resources and its role in bridging different parts of the world. Starting with the Argonauts searching for the Golden Fleece, many developments were connected to the Black Sea area. It continues to be the case in our times. Currently, the region is facing serious challenges, notably the war in Ukraine, which greatly affects the security and cooperation there and beyond. No wonder, therefore, that, in the last couple of years, the attention and the debates about the Black Sea region have been concentrated on security-related issues, mostly on hard security aspects.

One should acknowledge, however, that security is multidimensional, with the **economic dimension being a most relevant one**. Indeed, security heavily relies on economic development and cooperation, trade and security of trade flows and routes, energy and security of energy supply, food security and migration, with the latter being mostly generated by economic reasons.






Strong economic relations and cooperation have not only brought economic progress and prosperity, but have helped **promoting stability, mutual understanding, and good neighbourly relations, and thus contributed to enhancing security.** And “yes”, cooperation does not exclude competition; a **fair competition - and not one leading to domination.** These were the principles laid down at the foundation, 32 years ago, of the **Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization - BSEC.**

Tracing BSEC’s history, one should recognize its contribution to fostering prosperity in the Black Sea region, a quite complex area that could be characterised as a “microcosm” with many sensitivities, to say the least. BSEC is covering an area of paramount geostrategic importance: it represents a **real bridge** between Europe and Asia, a significant energy hub and a vital crossroad for North-South and East-West transportation routes.

Undeterred by challenging contexts, BSEC has evolved as the most representative and institutionally mature regional economic organisation in the wider Black Sea area. It is an organisation with an activity that covers many areas such as: economic development, trade and services, customs and SMEs, transport, agriculture, energy, environment, tourism, culture, education, science and technology and even good governance, emergency assistance and combatting organised crime, etc.

A series of concrete results have been achieved in all of these areas and they have, for certain, enhanced BSEC’s relevance and resilience. The Organisation has opened up the space for collaboration by recurrently gathering representatives from all member states to discuss and promote projects for the benefit of all. Through dialogue and mutual understanding, BSEC has evolved into a very useful, first level, **confidence-building mechanism. It continues to act that way,** although, for reasons already referred to, the Organisation has encountered, since February 2022, serious difficulties with many of its activities having to be postponed or deferred. However, in the meantime, its activity has been resumed, almost to a full extent, thanks to the constructive approach adopted by all BSEC’s member states, and to their awareness about the overall benefits of having this Organisation fully functional. That also includes advancing the agenda of peace and security in the region, this being a proof of how important reasoning and wisdom are when dealing with complex and sensitive issues.

**The developments in the region and the decisions taken recently within BSEC are encouraging in this respect.** The first to mention is the adoption, by the December Council of Foreign Ministers of BSEC Member States, in its Meeting of 15 December 2023, of the new (revised) BSEC Economic Agenda, more precisely **“BSEC Economic Agenda: Towards a sustainable future for the wider Black Sea Area”.**



This document sets the framework strategy and establishes the priority areas and actions of the Organisation for the next decade. Secondly, through a decision by the same Council to reactivate the BSEC Project Development Fund, it was laid down the basis for strengthening the project-oriented dimension of Organisation. One additional remark related to the Economic Agenda: as the title indicates, a consolidated contribution by BSEC to a sustainable economic and social development in the region is a key priority for the Organisation, alongside energy, environment, digitalisation, connectivity, etc.

These decisions were the result of a constructive approach shared by all the member states of the Organisation. **Romania**, a founding member of the BSEC, **has been an active contributor** in this respect. Since its accession to the EU, Romania has been intensively working for the steady enhancement of BSEC-EU cooperation and interaction. Romania has also brought a significant contribution to the substantiation of the BSEC Business Council as it did over the time to the various BSEC working groups, including as a Country Coordinator for many of them. Romania will certainly continue the same way in the future, particularly in regard to the BSEC-EU cooperation and the enhancement of BSEC's capacity to upgrade its project-oriented drive. Moreover, Romania's contribution to better correlation, coordination, and complementarities between BSEC and other regional organisations and actors is of particular importance and value as well. For example, working for **transforming the Danube River** into a permanent and well-managed water transportation route would definitely strengthen the BSEC area's role as the real Europe-Asia infrastructure hub, while also contributing to the improvement of the environment.



## Views from the Black Sea Region States

## Foreign and Economic Policy Diversification: A Priority for Armenia

Armen GRIGORYAN

**Armen GRIGORYAN** is co-founder and president of the Yerevan-based Centre for Policy Studies, and a member of advisory board of the project *Resilience in the South Caucasus: Prospects and Challenges of a New EU Foreign Policy Concept*, implemented by the Institute of Slavic Languages and Caucasus Studies, Friedrich Schiller University Jena.


He has published several book chapters, journal articles and policy papers, and over 400 other articles and interviews in Armenian and foreign media.



Currently, Armenia's actions, intertwined with the security and connectivity of the Black Sea region, include attempts to proceed with a peaceful settlement with Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, it is following to avoid any possible violation of the state sovereignty and subjugation by authoritarian neighbour states, particularly, in the context of the 3+3 regional format suggested by Russia, Türkiye and Iran, and supported by Azerbaijan (in which Georgia firmly refuses to participate). This is, also, related to the problem of border regions being occupied by Azerbaijan, with the imminent threat of a further incursion, and the demands for the so-called "Zangezur corridor" (supposedly, to be controlled by the Russian Federal Security Service).

In the current setting, the efforts to increase democratic resilience and strengthen democracy include gradual diversification of foreign and economic policy. This specifically includes intensified policy dialogue with the United States, France, Germany and with other states, as well as attempts to establish relations with new prospective arms suppliers (despite the irritation and threats openly expressed by Russia), and plans to connect with India via Chabahar, the only Iranian port with direct access to the Indian Ocean. In the late January 2024, during a visit to Georgia, a declaration of establishment of a strategic partnership between the two countries was signed. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also stated interest in the possibility to join the Black Sea Energy submarine cable project. Generally, further deepening of the relations with Georgia is deemed a strategic necessity, especially after Georgia was granted with the EU candidate status.

Armenia's democratic resilience, intertwined with regional security, also requires the strengthening of information security. Unlike many countries, there is virtually no ideological cleavage between the political right and left: the dispute is



mainly between proponents of an ever-closer attachment to Russia and the gradual detachment, accompanied by diversification of international cooperation frameworks. Accordingly, the latter model of development is the target of hostile propaganda and psychological operations aimed at social polarisation. Concurrently, that squeezes out the genuine - and vitally important - dispute about the need for good governance and possible ways of the future democratic development.

While the improvement of cybersecurity and digital skills, the development of strategic communication skills, media literacy, fact checking activities and other measures of building democratic resilience are important, the need for legal amendments and executive actions cannot be underestimated. Aside from the evident possibility to stop broadcasting the Russian TV channels on the public multiplex (on 27 January 2024, the head of the regulatory commission on television and radio, Tigran Hakobyan, stated that foreign broadcasters should not have frequency slots - yet, that was not the first such statement), more drastic measures - as in the Republic of Moldova's case - may also be recommended. In this regard, Armenian regulatory authorities should consider the implications of the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights in the case of NIT S.R.L. v. the Republic of Moldova (ruling issued on 5 April 2022), whereupon the Court found no violation of the right to freedom of expression and information. The case concerned the revocation of broadcasting licence of a television station with non-transparent funding, which also used to promote hate speech, in order to mitigate similar information risks (the existing regulations in Armenia, such as the law on the broadcast media stipulating funding transparency, along with annual declarations on the real ownership, seem insufficient). Additionally, while TV stations in the Republic of Moldova were banned from broadcasting news and analysis programmes from Russia since 2022, more recently, over 50 websites were blocked for “online content used in the war of information against the Republic of Moldova”, and the licences of six domestic TV channels have been suspended for the same reason.

## Connecting Caspian and Black Sea Regions in an Era of Geopolitical Challenges

Fariz ISMAILZADE

**Fariz ISMAILZADE** is Vice Rector for External, Government and Student affairs at the ADA University (since 2006) and Director of Institute for Development and Diplomacy (since 2021).

Mr. Ismailzade has a Doctoral Degree from the Maastricht School of Management. He holds an Executive MBA from IE Business School (Spain), and a Master's Degree in Social and Economic Development from Washington University in St. Louis, and a BA in Political Science from Western University in Baku with one-year interim studies at Wesleyan University in Connecticut.


Mr. Ismailzade has done research at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C and Embassy of Azerbaijan in the US. His research interests include political affairs in the Caucasus and Central Asia, energy security, and development.



The Caspian Sea, with its rich energy resources and important geostrategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, unfortunately, is a landlocked water basin and has no access to the world oceans, except for the small Volga-Don water canal. Thus, its fate and success story are closely linked with its access and connectivity to the Black Sea. Azerbaijan, although not bordering the Black Sea itself, is considered part of the larger Black Sea region and therefore much interested in the secure region and deeper collaboration between all regional powers. Cooperation and interdependence lay the foundation for mutual prosperity and development.

This was exactly the vision of Azerbaijani political leadership in the 1990s when major oil and gas contracts were signed with the leading Western energy companies and the Georgia-Türkiye route was chosen for the export pipelines. This was indeed a significant strategic decision despite pressures from the neighbouring powers and it has sealed the political, economic, social, and security alliance between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and NATO member state Türkiye. This connectivity on energy projects has provided a basis for mutual development and overall regional prosperity.

Oil and gas projects (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Southern Gas Corridor) have further led to regional railway connectivity, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway with further extension of Baku's new Alat port and access to Central Asian markets. Thus, we observe deeper development of the East-West



transport corridor, which is reliable and safe for goods from Europe and Asia. This transport corridor has become an integral part of China's One Belt-One Road project as well as of other regional connectivity projects, such as the Lapis Lazuli corridor. Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the crisis in the Red Sea, the Black Sea-Caspian transport corridor, otherwise named lately as the Middle Corridor, has received further importance, due to the fact that it serves as the only secure passage for goods from both continents.

Governments of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Central Asian countries further invest in the capacity of this transport corridor, as was shown in recent bilateral talks between Azerbaijan and Georgia governments (expansion of the BTK railway), as well as the summit of SPECA in Baku. Another important project in this regard is the new green energy corridor between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and several EU member states, with the potential to export Azerbaijan's solar and wind-produced electricity to the European markets via the undersea cable in the Black Sea.

Azerbaijan is interested in deeper and more inclusive cooperation in the region. For this purpose, after the successful liberation of its formerly occupied territories, Azerbaijan has offered Armenia new connectivity projects—the Zangezur transport corridor, which would be a win-win scenario for both nations and will further seal Türkiye with the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Caspian regions.

The Black Sea region is going through turbulent changes and transformations. The war in Ukraine is the main challenge to regional security and cooperation. Azerbaijan has been a strong supporter of the principle of international law and territorial integrity. It has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and pledged to development projects in the region. The success of neighbours is considered the success of Azerbaijan and thus the government and people of Azerbaijan have strongly advocated for the end of the war in Ukraine and the resuming of regional cooperation projects, including within the GUAM framework as well as further enhancement of the Organization of Turkic States. Azerbaijan is the founding member of both of these organizations. Only peace and security in the regions can lay solid ground for economic prosperity in the future.



## Bulgaria's Contribution to Bridging Connectivity Bottlenecks in the Black Sea Region - Prospects for an Accelerated Catching-up after a Delayed Start

Yasen GEORGIEV

**Yasen GEORGIEV** is the Executive Director of the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) - a Sofia-based think-tank with 26 years of track record in investigating, analysing and explaining economic and socio-economic trends in Bulgaria and South-Eastern Europe.

His focus on the intersection between economy, public policy and international relations was sharpened during his academic and extracurricular studies at the University of National and World Economy (Sofia), Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Ludwigs-Maximilians University (Munich) and Hertie School of Governance (Berlin).

His experience includes various positions at the Association of German Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology of Germany and Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Bulgaria.




Russia's full-scale invasion against Ukraine in 2022 served as a wake-up call for many, with Bulgaria not being an exception. More than three decades after the country embarked on its post-socialist journey - by the time when the war started - Bulgaria had done little to decrease its energy dependency on supplies from Russia or establish alternative routes. Besides, the sluggish progress in improving national and regional energy connectivity, along with the persistent gaps in regional transport connectedness were among the main bottlenecks that Bulgaria had to face when war's repercussions started to unfold in the wider Black Sea region.

Against this backdrop, the war in Ukraine since 2022 has served as an incentive for delayed connectivity projects to receive a significant boost and new projects to be drafted. Initially, at first sight, this trend was observed in the energy sector, but it has also extended to road and water transport connectivity.

One notable development occurred in October 2022, when, after being postponed several times, the gas interconnector Greece - Bulgaria (IGB) finally started to be commercially operational. This project, with a cost of EUR 253 million, was funded mainly through EU sources, in the form of grants and loans. The IGB connects the natural gas transmission networks of Greece and Bulgaria, and it is linked to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) near the town of Komotini, which is part of the Southern Gas Corridor that carries Azeri gas to Europe. The 182-km pipeline between Bulgaria and Greece has a technical capacity of 3 billion cubic meters per year (bcm/y), with the potential for expansion of up to 5 bcm/y. The latter allows






for non-Russian gas to be provided to neighbouring Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, and, further, to the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Accordingly, it was not a coincidence that its inauguration ceremony in Sofia was attended by the leaders of Bulgaria, Greece, Azerbaijan, Romania, Serbia and North Macedonia, as well as by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. She stated that “this pipeline is a game changer. It’s a game changer for Bulgaria and for Europe’s energy security. And it means freedom. It means freedom from dependency on Russian gas”.

In December 2023, the Gas Interconnection Bulgaria - Serbia (IBS) project reached its completion. This connection between the national gas transmission networks of Bulgaria and Serbia stretches over 170 km (62 km of which are in Bulgaria, and 108 km in Serbia). It also has a planned transmission capacity of 1.8 billion cubic meters per year, with reverse flow capability. The EU co-founded the Bulgarian section of the pipeline with EUR 27.6 mln., under the Connecting Europe Facility Energy programme, and with EUR 6 mln. from structural funds. Similarly, the Commission has also funded the Serbian section of the pipeline, with an EU grant of EUR 49.6 mln., through the Instrument of Pre-Accession (IPA) scheme. This project enables Serbia to diversify gas supplies, reducing import dependency on Russian gas, and establishing alternative supply routes in South-East Europe.

Worth-mentioning is another initiative in the energy field. Towards the end of 2023, Bulgartransgaz, the Bulgarian gas transmission operator, announced its plans to analyse all opportunities for investment in a second LNG terminal in Greece. This strategic move aligns with Bulgartransgaz’s experience in this domain - in 2020 it acquired 20% of the capital of the project company Gaztrade SA, which builds the Alexandroupolis LNG terminal in Greece. The latter is under construction and is expected to go into operation in 2024. In the same year, it is anticipated to complete the expansion of the underground gas storage facility in Chiren (located in the North-Western Bulgaria). These developments, coupled with the aforementioned projects, will create favourable conditions for supplying larger volumes of LNG to the entire region, encompassing Serbia, North Macedonia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Beside the dynamics in the energy connectivity field, there is also an accelerated activity in the sector of transport connectivity. In September 2023, Bulgaria and Romania initiated concrete actions for the construction of a third bridge over the Danube. The two countries submitted a joint project to the European Commission, requesting a feasibility study on a second combined “road and rail” bridge over the Danube, connecting Ruse and Giurgiu. So, the study will assess the various routes and the points from which the bridge will start in Ruse and Giurgiu, respectively, and will support the selection of a technical solution. In January 2024,




the European Commission approved funding for the feasibility study in amount of EUR 6.9 mln., with the remaining EUR 7 mln. to be provided by the both countries.

This progress in transport connectivity fits into the overall efforts for enhancing regional connectivity, which were prominently demonstrated during a trilateral meeting at prime-minister level, between Bulgaria, Greece and Romania in Varna (Bulgaria), in October 2023. The main focus was on regional connectivity and, particularly, on the project for a corridor from Thessaloniki via Kavala, Alexandroupolis (Greece), Burgas and Varna (Bulgaria) to Constanta (Romania), with the possibility of extending it to the Republic of Moldova. The objective is to establish a modern infrastructure for transport, communication and energy along the route, which will boost economic and political ties between the countries involved. The high-level meeting was followed by several ministerial and working group discussions between Bulgaria and Greece. The plans were publicly announced in January 2024 for the preparation of an intergovernmental agreement to ensure that connectivity will be in place and built jointly by both countries.

Along with the efforts for building/modernising the North-South connectivity nexus, there are also plans for improving the EU-Central Asia/Middle East transport connectivity. In this endeavour, major points of interest are the Black Sea ports of Varna and Burgas, with a clear preference for the latter. In the summer of 2022, the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund (3SIIF) acquired a significant share in the major operator of the port of Burgas. Consequently, in the summer of 2023, this harbour, which is the closest European Union port to the Bosphorus, joined the International Association Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, thus, becoming the only European Black Sea port and one of the very few private companies, allowed to join the Association. In the meantime, the Port of Burgas has been constantly undergoing expansion of its capacity and is part, in this moment, of a project that includes dredging of the port area to a depth of 15.5 m. This will allow for the latest generation of container vessels - with a draft of up to 14.5 meters and up to 80,000 GT - to enter the new berth at one of its terminals.

Beyond any doubt, the Russian aggression in Ukraine played a pivotal role in accelerating regional connectivity projects, with the participation of Bulgaria, which for different reasons were delayed, put on hold or existed only as concepts over the last decades.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the initial impetus is here to stay no matter if the war ends soon, for what we can only hope. What is clear, though, is that security threats in the Black Sea region will continue to exist or even to grow in importance and magnitude. This will necessitate long-term engagement, which is going hand in hand with the corresponding financial commitment of all countries in



the region, including Bulgaria, that have to live up to the new realities that clearly show that Europe's centre of gravity has moved to the East.

## Bulgaria likes Black Sea Cooperation, But Not Quite...

Ivan NACHEV & Hristo PANCHUGOV

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Bulgaria was one of the 11 founding countries of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) on June 25, 1992. For Bulgaria, this is a unique and promising multilateral political and economic initiative model.

However, it took a decade to institutionalize this collaboration. To this date, the actual results are quite scarce and mainly come down to intentions and projects. Unfortunately, in recent years the Black Sea has become an area of increased tension on ethnic, national, and religious grounds.

For Bulgaria, the future development of the Black Sea region is determined by several main elements - implementation of specific projects of regional significance; strengthening relations between countries and the EU; and more active interaction with other regions - the Danube, Central Asia, and the Caspian Basin.

Therefore, Bulgaria is also involved in the process of reforming and adapting BSEC to modern challenges. So far, Bulgaria has assumed the rotating presidency of the BSEC four times - in 2003-2004, 2009-2010, 2014, 2019.

In 2019, under the motto "Sea of Opportunities", the Bulgarian Presidency worked for the development of BSEC as a project-oriented organization. Special emphasis is placed on cooperation in the fields of culture, transport, and environmental protection.



Throughout its more than 30 years of existence, BSEC has established itself as a major leader in the promotion of peace, stability, and prosperity, the promotion of friendly and good neighbourly relations in the Black Sea region.

Therefore, Bulgaria sees the potential for regional cooperation in a wide range of areas - tourism, trade, banking, communications, energy, transport, agriculture, healthcare, environmental protection, fight against organized crime, etc.

Unfortunately, cooperation in the energy field is facing major internal contradictions. Military cooperation also encounters certain difficulties. Despite the many forms of defence cooperation, the great geopolitical game in the region reflects on the trust between the countries of the Black Sea region and the effectiveness of naval cooperation between them.

Bulgaria works in the direction of promoting the Black Sea region as a leading tourist destination on a global scale, promoting the sustainable development of tourism, and developing and implementing projects and programs in the field of sea, winter, cultural, wine, and gastronomic and spa tourism.

Tourism is a key factor for the convergence of the peoples and cultures of the Black Sea region and the preservation of peace. Still, unfortunately, the results of the attempts to develop the infrastructure in the region are much too modest.


Bulgaria is working to build a highway ring around the Black Sea and to develop transport connections between port cities.

The Black Sea area is often defined as a “bridge” to other regions - the Danube in the west, the Caspian Basin, and Central Asia in the east.

Unfortunately, the historic reconciliation that is so necessary for regional cooperation is unlikely to happen anytime soon. The national idea continues to dominate the region. Even more so, the process of making each nation into a separate state is not over yet. The rivalry between Christianity and Islam deepens. The countries continue not to consider their participation in the Black Sea cooperation as a national priority

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Orthodoxy split up, and Catholicism and many-faceted Protestantism entered the stage. Bulgaria is torn between its historical ties to Russia and the desire to belong to the Western space.

If it can be summarized, the Black Sea area is a unique road between the East and the West, the North and the South. It is a bridge for interaction, but unfortunately, a new balance of power has not been created to date. This leads to the political instability and unpredictability of events in the region and makes it risky for local businesses and foreign investment.



In the attempt to establish a “new world order” there is a “new world chaos”. It reveals an opportunity for the EU to play a homogenizing role in the region.

## The EU/NATO: Revising the Paradigm in the Black Sea

Kakha GOGOLASHVILI


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It has 11 years of experience in foreign service, in high diplomatic positions. Holds a diplomatic rank of Envoy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary.

For the last 20 years, he has actively working on European Integration related policies through several international projects. He is the author of many scientific and analytical articles and policy papers.



The Black Sea region was always considered to be of strategic value for the EU, especially because of Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states along the Black Sea-Danube basin. The Union's energy security increasingly depends on the success of pipeline and [TEN corridor](#) extension projects passing through the South Caucasus, Ukraine, Türkiye, or other Wider Black Sea states. The European Neighbourhood Policy (2003), the Black Sea Synergy (BSS, 2007), and the Eastern Partnership (EaP, 2009) served as tools for the democratic transformation and internal consolidation of the region as well as for the closer cooperation of regional players with the EU. Russia's aggressive and revisionist behaviour (apparent since 2008 and aimed at a revision of national borders and its increased military build-up, the threat to use force, attempting strategic domination, and engaging in a geopolitical competition with the West) brought a considerable change to the security environment in and around the Black Sea. The EU's interest in the Black Sea has especially increased with the membership of Romania and Bulgaria in the EU (in 2007), and its interest in solving the numerous problems present in the area has strengthened. Cooperation projects were all designed as inclusive initiatives, but have practically failed after the Russian Federation annexed Crimea in 2014 and were made impossible after the recent invasion of Ukraine. It is well observed that the BSS and EaP, in many aspects, can cross-cut with each other and be complementary. As a basic idea, both policies should not create any tensions in the region, because no one was forced to cooperate on issues that were not in their interest, and no country was pressured to make those reforms and changes that it was reluctant to make. Indeed, the emerging gap between the EU and Russia,



especially apparent in the Black Sea, calls for a reconsideration of this paradigm. When the EU was developing both policies - the BSS and the EaP - there were still expectations that Russia may become a reliable partner and engage in deeper cooperation for the sake of peace and stability in the common neighbourhood. The standoff between Russia and the Western powers deepened the gap between the EU's strategic project and that of Russia, as its rival, and furthered the formation of a geopolitical split.


Under these conditions, we can expect increased competition in the region. Further attempts to continue the engagement and transformation of the partner countries in the Black Sea region would demand more efforts from the EU to increase their resilience to security threats and require more parallel engagement in security cooperation with candidate countries of Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. In addition, the EU alone is not able to deploy relevant instruments to help the partner countries withstand the growing security challenges. From one side, the EU is becoming intensively engaged in the area but, from another side, it lacks instruments to guarantee a stable and secure environment for the uninterrupted realization of its policy goals. Ultimately, it is NATO that remains the main guarantor of the EU's security and it is the sole actor that could defend European interests in any region; first of all, the EU's neighbourhood. The EU's recent interest in strengthening its security and defence policy (CSDP), among others, raised the issue of increased cooperation between the two blocks. Not incidentally, NATO has its agenda regarding the Black Sea and takes steps towards increasing the defence capacity of its partner states (Ukraine and Georgia). The EU and NATO adopted a text of joint declaration at the [NATO Warsaw Summit \(July 8, 2016\)](#) as one of the directions of cooperation between the two organizations and announced the aim of building "... the defence and security capacity and fostering the resilience of our (NATO and EU) partners... through specific projects..." in a variety of areas for individual recipient countries, including by strengthening maritime capacity."

A Common Set of New Proposals focuses on the development of joint (EU/NATO) projects and activities to counteract hybrid threats. Based on this new approach, it could be expected that NATO and the EU will promote joint activities in the Black Sea partner countries in the future. The latest NATO summits held in [Madrid \(2022\)](#) and [Vilnius \(2023\)](#) decided to intensify their support to the Black Sea states by enforcing their capabilities and increasing naval monitoring in the area. The abovementioned NATO objectives fully match the EU's policies, but actually there are very few that the EU and NATO do together in the region.

## Conclusion

With the increased pressure from Russia, the motivation of the Black Sea riparian states to keep their European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations may tend to





decrease. In this regard, the rapid advancement on the EU accession track for new candidate states would produce a considerable impact on their population and raise their aspiration and societal resilience. To keep its Black Sea policy dimension active, the EU will need to come up with more security tools and instruments to increase the resilience of the partner states and enable them to keep their European aspirations which, supposedly, would not be affordable for the Union acting alone. Joint and stronger coordination of the EU-NATO efforts would be required to ensure security in the region and allow for the effective use of the transformative power of the European Union.

## The Black Sea, as a Crucial Connecting Point for International Transit

Nino SAMKHARADZE


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As the Georgian president, Salome Zourabichvili stated during the 2024 Munich Security Conference, “[The Black Sea is Georgia’s key connection to Europe. \[And\] the security of the Black Sea is the security of Europe](#)”. This is why contributing to the enhancement of the security of the Black Sea region is of crucial strategic interest for Georgia. This interest has several dimensions and solutions in the short and medium term.

The Black Sea is a crucial connecting point for international transit from the East to the West. Thus, stability in building new infrastructure could contribute to the security of the Black Sea importantly. The submarine power cable project agreed upon with Romania, was critical in this regard. However, regarding connectivity, Georgia needs to accelerate bigger infrastructural plans such as concluding Anaklia deep-sea port. This highly anticipated and delayed, but vital project is an example of how Georgia can make itself a reliable transit route and enhance its geostrategic importance for its Western partners.

An important part of Georgia’s Black Sea coast is under Russian occupation and beyond the effective control of Tbilisi. Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 worsened the security environment for Georgia’s Black Sea coastline (including the occupied part of it). An agreement between the Kremlin and the so-called Abkhazian government on the new permanent Russian naval base to be built in Ochamchire, a seaside town 35 kilometres away from the closest Georgian-controlled settlement, is an example. As debated by different local pundits, this development brought the war closer to Georgia. In the absence of effective control over this territory, the role of international society should increase in managing and neutralizing threats coming from the Abkhazian part of the Black Sea zone. It would



be important if Tbilisi proactively puts on the table with Brussels the issue of bolstering the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM), and introducing maritime patrols across the Black Sea coast to prevent Russian military provocations.

*A new configuration of regional cooperation needs to be adjusted to the changing geopolitical givens.* Since Russia emerged as an immediate aggressor on the Eastern flank of Europe, initiating new formats of regional cooperation over the Black Sea is needed. Existing formats such as BSEC lost their efficiency due to Russia's changing image in the region. Black Sea security largely depends on the extent to which the littoral states manage consolidating and detaining Russian aggression. Initiating updated creative ways of cooperation with the participation of Bulgaria, Romania, Türkiye, and Ukraine, could re-boost existing Black Sea security strategies. As a small state located on the extreme east of the Black Sea, Georgia should proactively advocate for building a new transatlantic Black Sea security community.

The role of democratic resilience has been updated during recent years in Georgia since the country is experiencing gradual backsliding in this regard. Tbilisi's geopolitical detachment from the West tightly intertwines with the turbulent domestic democratic transition. Democratic resilience is an important tool to maintain international trust and be a member of the Western club of partners, which is now in an unprecedented confrontation with an illiberal geopolitical flank led by Russia.

Strengthening democracy in the Black Sea region requires planning based on the domino effect, which means that increasing logistical and political connectivity could depend more on Georgia's democratic development. This is particularly true for Georgia as a country in the EU enlargement package. Once Brussels strengthens its conditionality as a key instrument for the impact of democratisation, Georgia has more incentives for closer rapprochement with Western actors as traditional partners.

## Georgia's Policy of Geopolitical and Geoeconomic Plurality: Implications for the Black Sea Region

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Russia's war against Ukraine and the tensions in the Middle East have put the Black Sea region in the spotlight. The region has become a terrain of war, causing trade disruptions. Yet, economic sanctions on Russia have brought initiatives such as [the Middle Corridor](#) to the surface. Rising tensions in the Middle East - [with consequences for global trade](#) - further highlight the region's strategic value. However, the uncertainty of the war and feeble Western commitment to provide security for the wider Black Sea region means that the *status quo* in which security disrupts trade is likely to be sustained.

As a Black Sea riparian state with a favourable transit location, Georgia can help enhance connectivity with the EU and contribute to its energy security. Yet, democracy challenges at home and a fence-sitting foreign policy risk creating dependencies on authoritarian influences and tilting Georgia away from the West. The West should counter that by showing stronger security and economic presence in the Black Sea region.

Over the decades, the Black Sea has been a key identity marker for Georgia. It brought together the normative and pragmatic sides of the country's foreign policy: Georgia imagined itself as a European state, while its transit location contributed to the connectivity between Asia and Europe. To balance threats from Russia, Georgia has long [advocated for](#) increased NATO/US and the EU presence in the region. In the 2008 war with Russia, Georgia lost its *de facto* control over Abkhazia where Russia now [plans](#) to build a naval base. Georgia has sought to further develop its capabilities as a transit state, including by considering the construction of the Deep Sea Port on the shores of the Black Sea in Anaklia and through strengthening connectivity with the EU.




However, Russia's war against Ukraine rendered Georgia's foreign policy more multi-vector and transactional: it became more geopolitically prudent and geo-economically open. Geopolitically, Georgia still pursues EU and NATO integration although the latter is less pronounced and alignment with EU foreign and security policies is *decreasing*. It continues to have no formal political and security ties with Russia. It refuses any form of military support to Ukraine. In 2023, Georgia signed a strategic partnership agreement with China. Geo-economically, Georgia continues its post-2012 economic thaw with Russia and, while still complying with international sanctions, has refrained from sanctioning Russia. It seeks closer economic ties with China and the EU to consolidate its role as a transit location between the East and West.

The multi-vector and transactional turn in Georgia's foreign policy comes amid challenges in terms of democracy consolidation at home. Although formally seeking EU membership, the ruling party unsuccessfully sought to introduce Russian-style "foreign agent" legislation and governs through using increasingly *populist discourse* aimed at silencing opposition and civil society organisations. While securing EU candidate status at the end of 2023, the system of *one-party dominance hinders* the consolidation of Georgia's democracy and stands in the way of its further EU integration.

While Georgia's transit location and diverse economic relations can contribute to connectivity with Europe and its energy security, it comes with a price. Through closer economic ties with Russia and China, Georgia risks forging economic and political dependencies on them. The *possibility of* granting the Chinese company a majority share in Anaklia Deep Sea project would be the manifestation of China's influence. Moreover, democracy problems at home - primarily a failure to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in 2024 - may put the Georgian-Western relations to an important test. This might result in freezing progress in the EU integration, further distancing Georgia away from the EU-Ukraine-Republic of Moldova flank of the Black Sea and closer to Türkiye-Russia illiberal tandem.

To tap into the potential of the Black Sea region and ensure that rules-based international order prevails, the West should take the Black Sea region more seriously by providing necessary arms to Ukraine to ensure its victory against Russia; by advancing NATO integration of Ukraine and Georgia and, before the formal invitation to membership, forming a QUAD-like minilateral security arrangement with Ukraine, Georgia, and Republic of Moldova. Furthermore, the US should ensure securing trade routes in the Black Sea through some form of military presence while the EU should show more of its economic power. The EU must also nurture its geopolitical clout and take the security of the Black Sea region more seriously, especially given the fact that the Union's future borders may extend to the other side of the Black Sea.



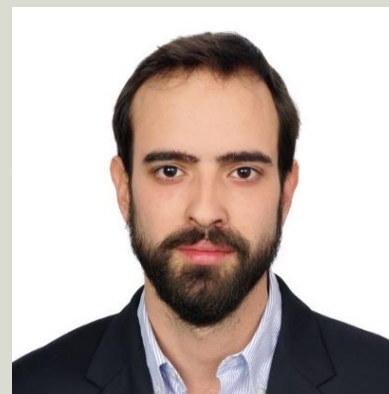
These structural developments are necessary as they can affect Georgia's foreign policy choices. With Georgia, the West needs to carefully balance between geopolitical necessities and democracy consolidation. Given its transit location, Georgia offers an added value to the West, although Georgia's engagement with authoritarian economies might in the long-term undermine the vision for a secure, democratic, and prosperous Black Sea region. To prevent that, the West should offer Georgia and the wider region more tangible security and economic benefits.

## The Future of Economic Cooperation in the Black Sea. What's Next?

Georgios MITRAKOS

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Georgios holds an MSc in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics (LSE) and a BSc in Political Science and Public Administration from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.



With a combined GDP of USD 2.95 trillion (as of 2020), the Black Sea region<sup>1</sup> represents 4% of the global economy and generates 14% of Europe's GDP. The region has always been an important commercial corridor due to its location, but also a crucial energy hub, known for its rich natural resources. The energy sector has the highest revenue for most of the region's countries; four of them (Russia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Romania) are among the top 50 countries of natural gas production<sup>2</sup> and key energy suppliers to neighbouring regions.

Other established and emerging economic sectors are trade, logistics, and ICT; while the up-and-coming blue sectors gain increasing ground in positive economic performance. Shipping<sup>3</sup> and fisheries<sup>4</sup> generate important revenues for the coastal countries and employ significant human personnel. At the same time, the


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<sup>1</sup> As a wider Black Sea region, the BSEC Region of thirteen Member States is composed of Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine. It covers an area of nearly 20 million km<sup>2</sup> and a population of over 350 million.

<sup>2</sup> As per IEA 2021, Russia was the second natural gas producer at 701.7 BCM, while Azerbaijan produced 18.9 BCM. In 2021, Russia was also second in oil production at 523 metric tons, Azerbaijan ranked 24th, and Romania 52nd.

<sup>3</sup> As per Black Sea Common Maritime Agenda 2021, the Black Sea has 57 commercial ports with nearly 700 million tons of port traffic capacity; the merchant fleet of the Black Sea countries represents 4% of the world total.

<sup>4</sup> As per Black Sea Common Maritime Agenda 2021, fisheries employ at least 1 in every 100 persons in coastal towns; while more than 10 thousand vessels are operating in the Black Sea basin. In 2020 the sector generated USD 251m total annual revenue.



Black Sea countries are becoming an attractive tourist destination. According to UNWTO, the region represents 10% of the world's arrivals in covid data, which equals 143 million international tourists.

Over the years, to harness the region's potential and address long-term bottlenecks, the EU, especially through its Black Sea Synergy, and other regional actors, like the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC), have fostered cooperation and dialogue through result-oriented actions.

A critical challenge for the EU Black Sea Synergy, since the beginning, was low regional integration. Bilateral relations between the EU and the Black Sea countries were more efficient than an EU - Black Sea region partnership. The challenge was mitigated to a certain level by a more active EU - BSEC cooperation, that over the years has successfully supported regional projects and policy-related initiatives, like the Common Maritime Agenda.


The Russian invasion of Ukraine however, endangered this relationship. The EU Black Sea Synergy unofficially was placed on hold giving way to the more suitable, for the time being, bilateral relations between the EU and the Black Sea countries, even accelerating procedures that remained stagnant for many years. On the other hand, the BSEC, having two of its member states on full-scale war, was confronted with a crucial dilemma of value v. interest that left the institution lingering in uncertainty for a while.

Given that the Russian aggression not only resulted in a devastating humanitarian crisis, but triggered a sequence of multiple effects in all policy spheres from the economy to the environment, the EU focus was inevitably shifted to Ukraine; thus, creating momentum for other regional actors to rise to the occasion and assume a more active role within the region. For the moment, with more than 30 years since its establishment, the BSEC is undoubtedly the most representative, inclusive, and mature form of intergovernmental cooperation in the wider Black Sea and, consequently, the most suitable to assume a more active role.

The BSEC Organization is neither a conflict resolution mechanism, and should not be considered as one, nor should it become a centre-stage for power politics. BSEC's new operational paradigm should be less about politics, and more about supporting human development and the wellbeing of the people of the BSEC region.

The Organization could very well benefit from a vast pool of scientific evidence, technological advancements, innovative solutions, and existing operational networks in business, academia, and civil society in the wider region, which to a certain extent remain untapped by national governments. Regional institutions, like BSEC, need to facilitate a stronger policy-science-industry-civil society nexus to support concretely trust building and sustainable development.





*Given that BSEC has a unique opportunity to be able to sit all parties at one table and put forward concrete recommendations and knowledge exchange, essentially, the question is one: how ready and willing is BSEC to assume a more pro-active role for the benefit of the people in the region?*

*How prepared is the Organization to put aside its traditional practices of 30 years, to adopt more modern procedures to respond to current challenges and actual needs?*

**Alexandroupolis: NATO's New and Precious Strategic Asset on the Eastern Flank**

Dimitris TSAKNIS

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Only a few know that Alexandroupolis has a small Russian community and was a sister city with Saint Petersburg, Sosnovy Bor, and Simferopol. After 2021, the situation changed. Due to its unique geographic position on the edge of Europe, Alexandroupolis is now considered to be the “transatlantic cornerstone” of the U.S. security architecture in the region of the Balkans and inevitably of the Black Sea. The Greek port has been rapidly transformed into one of the most crucial energy, transportation, and trade “hubs” in NATO’s southern “flank”, a condition that has upgraded the strategic role of Greece at an unprecedented level, with a view to the under formation, new “Black Sea security concept”. The upgrade of the small town in northern Greece remains part of a broader strategic agenda with a twofold goal. On the one hand, to control Russian aggression and on the second hand, to bypass the Bosphorus straits.

Through Alexandroupolis, NATO and the U.S. can maintain the critical supply (energy, goods, and military resources) line to Ukraine open, as the usage of sea routes via the Black Sea has now become extremely dangerous. On another note, the recent (from December 2023) deployment of the floating storage and regasification unit (FSRU) off the coast of the Alexandroupolis’ port and its upcoming interconnection with the subsea and onshore gas transmission pipeline system aims to ensure the energy supply to the Eastern flank, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and Ukraine as well as to the other European countries in Central Europe. This strategy contributes to the so-called energy differentiation from the Russian hydrocarbon resources which for the moment appears to be a serious challenge.

The town of Alexandroupolis appears in red, in the following map. It can be crucial in supplying Eastern Europe with liquefied natural gas. The creation of a new pipeline route is underway. The new route will pass from

Greece through Bulgaria, and Romania to Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (white arrows). According to the plan, the natural gas will flow to the central European countries as well.



Source: *Greek News Agenda*

Moreover, the development of greater capacities by concentrating or changing the position of the allied troops and consequently increasing the military posture of NATO in a sensitive area (such as Romania and Bulgaria), has not been less significant. The upgrade of Alexandroupolis provides the advantage of a swift and robust deployment of forces in case of emergency (but also proactively), especially following the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine.

The recent Trilateral Meetings, between the Prime Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Hellenic Republic, and Romania, in Euxinograd (Varna, October 2023) in fact, re-affirmed the “shift” of the NATO interests to the fragile, due to the Russian threat and the Turkish ambivalence, southern “flank”. The three allies agreed that more steps are necessary in many sectors (energy, trade, climate crisis, migration, EU enlargement process, etc.). However, the recognition of the necessity of constructing a multimodal transport corridor (highway and railway) linking Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania is a top priority and the U.S. is prepared to unconditionally support the venture to create a logistical “node” with unlimited access to the Black Sea as a counterbalance to the physical Black Sea. The dense presence of the Russian navy military forces, the interruption of the trade (especially the exports of the Ukrainian grain) due to the mining, and the consequent repercussions of the war have increased the region’s precarity and (have) converted the Black Sea into a very unsafe area. For the moment, the predictions about the region in light of 2030 look like a “Black Swan”.

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The Republic of Moldova's strategic position significantly influences the security dynamics of the region and proximity to the war zone, being a neighbouring country with Ukraine. As the European Union and NATO continue to emphasize the importance of the Black Sea in ensuring stability, the contribution of the Republic of Moldova becomes increasingly vital. This opinion piece explores Republic of Moldova's role in enhancing the security of the Black Sea region, the opportunities and challenges ahead, and strategies for addressing them.

### **Republic of Moldova's contribution to regional security**

Republic of Moldova's significance in regional security cannot be overstated. Despite its geopolitical vulnerabilities, especially given the proximity to the war in Ukraine, the frozen conflict in Transnistria, and the multiple threats facing the country, Republic of Moldova has shown a steadfast commitment to contributing to regional stability. Through initiatives aimed at bolstering democracy, fighting corruption, and ensuring a stable and secure environment, Republic of Moldova indirectly supports the broader goals of security and prosperity in the Black Sea region.

Republic of Moldova is already addressing many aspects of preparing its national security and defence system. At the same time, the country is diversifying its energy sources, investing more in defence, intensifying relationships with partners, and striving to improve strategic communication, but perhaps most important is the effort to enhance national resilience. This is a very important



aspect, which is ongoing and requires much effort, but it will surely make Republic of Moldova less vulnerable to Russian influence.

The experience of the Ukrainian theatre of operations has shown that modern warfare it is marked and influenced by access to information and data collection. The battlefield does not have a clearly defined security perimeter due to hybrid aspects. The dimension of cyber defence becomes crucial in the regional security equation. The Ukrainian experience indicates an openness to creativity and innovation. The efficient use of all available resources, especially human resources, can contribute to a strategic advantage difference.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

The current geopolitical landscape presents opportunities and challenges for Republic of Moldova in enhancing Black Sea security. Opportunities lie in deepening cooperation with the EU and NATO, leveraging its position to solve the frozen conflict on its territory, and promoting economic and energy cooperation. However, challenges are significant, including the threat of external interference, the need for robust defence and security reforms, and economic vulnerabilities.


To improve the strategy of collaboration, the quality, and quantity of information exchange on the EU Security Hub platform in Chişinău, two working groups were established - the first working group is responsible for monitoring and countering hybrid warfare. In contrast, the second focuses on systemic approaches to large captures of goods removed from civilian use, including weapons, drugs, and others.

Enhancing the degree of internal security, whether it is human, institutional, economic, energy, cyber, or environmental security, is perceived as an indicator of increasing investments and economic development. Security today becomes a principal element in the EU - Republic of Moldova dialogue, having ramifications in all areas where accession negotiations will be opened. The assistance provided by the EU to strengthen the security sector not only responds to the current needs generated by the regional humanitarian crisis and hybrid threats, but also simultaneously strengthens state institutions, increases the capacities and capabilities of personnel, and contributes to increasing the interoperability of institutional and human resources.

### **Strategies for the future**

To navigate these challenges and capitalize on opportunities, Republic of Moldova, with the support of its partners, should focus on several key areas:

1. Strengthening democracy and good governance by enhancing transparency, fighting corruption, and consolidating institutions will build resilience against external pressures and contribute to regional stability.

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2. Enhancing defence and security cooperation by deepening ties with NATO and the EU for security capacity building and intelligence sharing is crucial. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has highlighted the need for deepening relations that should aim towards a strategic partnership. The military defence and security of the Republic of Moldova depend on the tough battles that Ukrainian soldiers are fighting with the Russian army. Without Ukraine's indirect military support, Republic of Moldova would have been in a situation of imminent military danger. Therefore, it is paramount to foster strategic partnerships with countries from the Black Sea region, especially the strategic partnership with Romania. Constant and timely assistance on all levels during times of crisis makes Romania an indispensable strategic partner for the Republic of Moldova.
  3. Promoting economic and energy diversification by working with regional partners to reduce energy dependence and promote economic resilience will enhance security.
  4. Facilitating dialogue and conflict resolution of the frozen conflict. The fate of the Transnistrian conflict resolution and negotiations depend very much on the outcome of this war. In the event of a Ukrainian victory, it is hard to believe that the separatist Transnistrian region will maintain the same *status quo* that has been maintained for about 31 years.

Republic of Moldova's strategic importance in the Black Sea region's security landscape is undeniable. By addressing internal vulnerabilities and collaborating closely with regional and international partners, Republic of Moldova can significantly contribute to the stability and prosperity of the Black Sea region. The road ahead is fraught with challenges, but with targeted efforts and international support, Republic of Moldova can rise to the occasion and play a pivotal role in shaping a secure and stable Black Sea region.



## REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA How Do You Envisage the Black Sea Region by 2030?


Mihai ȚURCANU

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By 2030, the situation in the Black Sea region will continue to be shaped by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War. The Black Sea region is a global focal point because the war is a systemic one, that is, the Russian aggression is a revisionist and revanchist challenge to the current international order in many essential ways identical to the Nazi aggression. Should the war continue until 2030, or the conflict be frozen, the Black Sea region will remain the focus of global attention; attempting to find a solution to freeze the conflict at the expense of (some of) the regions currently occupied by Russia, as former U.S. President Donald Trump is believed by some to be willing to proceed, or as France and Germany did in 2014 when brokering the so-called Minsk agreements is an unrealistic strategy. That's because, [as former Russian president D. Medvedev recently publicly stated, the goal of Russia is the destruction of the Ukrainian state](#), the annihilation of its independence, and the conquest of all its territories, in the same way as for Hitler the existence of Czechoslovakia or Poland was unacceptable - although Chamberlain and Daladier persisted to the last moment in refusing to believe that. History does not repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain pointed out, it often rhymes. Any truce or attempt to freeze the conflict will only be used by Putin's regime to consolidate and prepare for renewed offensives against Ukraine, and should Ukraine fall, also against the Republic of Moldova, because, as former German foreign minister J. Fischer correctly points out, [Europe is just at the beginning of the Russian revisionist wars](#).

The Black Sea region is currently the epicentre of this process, and should Ukraine hold until 2030, it will continue to stay so. Should the West (and, first and foremost, the U.S.) abandon Ukraine and the Black Sea region, that might well signal the beginning of the end of NATO and of the EU: of NATO, because its Eastern members will subsequently never be able to bring themselves to believe that they



will not be one day abandoned in the same way as Ukraine was, under Russian nuclear blackmail and threats of eternally-prolonged wars, and in the situation defined by the reality that the so far untested NATO Article 5 is not a clause automatically activating compulsory military assistance; and of the EU, because the EU exists in the first place because NATO exists and provides a security framework ensured by the consolidating role of the U.S. military power and presence on the continent, in which framework only the common market, the economic and monetary unions and the plethora of common beneficial policies, could be implemented. Thus, if the U.S. and the EU (that is, at least Germany, France, and Italy) do not find the means to further support Ukraine, then the Black Sea region will become the ground zero of the disintegration processes that will backroll all the progress achieved in Europe since 1945.

Should, however, the U.S. and the EU find the wisdom and muster the courage not to throw at history's garbage bin all the unprecedented progress achieved in the last 70 years, and would, therefore, not abandon the Black Sea region and support Ukraine until Russian defeat, this, thanks to subsequent inevitable fall of the Russian autocracy and its absence as a forcefully imposed model, will lead to a democratization of the whole region. This process will involve not only smaller countries (as Russia is currently the actor most actively engaged in hindering their democratic reforms process), but also Türkiye, because, in the absence of the Russian threat, the importance of the Bosphorus Strait and, hence, of Türkiye itself as an international actor, as well as its ability to balance between East and West (also ideologically speaking), will diminish significantly. The whole region will then integrate closely with the EU and the common market, possibly ushering in a new era of prosperity and progress for the entire continent. The Black Sea region therefore seems to be the make-or-break point of freedom, democracy, and rules-based international order, at least in the Euro-Atlantic region.



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The answer to the question “How do you envisage the Black Sea region by 2030” can only be answered by predicting what will plague us in the world arena. I foresee that cybercrimes and cyber security, misinformation and disinformation, censorship, and illicit economic activity will, by 2030, still be on our agenda. Inequalities of wealth and income, climate change and the inability to adapt, the resulting economic recessions, and interstate armed conflicts in various regions of the world will continue and exacerbate voluntary and involuntary migration. The fragmented geopolitical environment will lead to different and competing power centres hampering cooperation urgently needed to solve these issues. Within the six years that lie before us, there is no reason to think that the trends that prevail in the international system will change substantially and thus will have a lasting impact on the Black Sea region.

Bulgaria and Romania both members of NATO and the EU will be dealing with internal domestic problems such as the exodus of their young educated population to economically better-off EU countries such as France and Germany, where population growth will have slowed down even more, while their population will have aged dramatically. Slowing growth rates and energy shortage will be on their agenda. U.S. security cooperation will still be of great importance and the American military presence will continue to be viewed as a threat by Russia.

Georgia will continue to be a candidate country of the EU, but attaining full membership to the EU will be slow because of the continuing occupation of the



disputed areas in South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russian forces. The EU will continue to pursue economic relations with Georgia in line with the agreement establishing a “deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA)”. Formal negotiations will have started and certain chapters of the *acquis communautaire* will have been opened, but membership will be a matter for the future. Georgia is unlikely to have become a member of NATO by 2030.

By 2030, the Republic of Moldova may have also been offered candidacy to join the EU, as in December 2023, the EU leaders decided to open accession negotiations with [Moldova](#). Like Georgia, NATO membership by that date is also highly unlikely since its dependence on Russian electricity produced in the semi-autonomous area of Transnistria will likely continue. The Republic of Moldova will probably prefer to continue to pursue a more balanced policy towards Russia.

As long as Ukraine-Russia conflict continues, one cannot expect Ukraine to become a member of either NATO or the EU. Reaching a peace agreement that both sides would want to preserve, on the other hand, appears unlikely. Costly as it may be, an uneasy peace (if achieved) that can always break down, will likely continue.

Türkiye will continue to hold the keys to the straits, trying to prevent conflicts among Black Sea littorals such as Russia and the Ukraine from developing into a more comprehensive international conflict. Türkiye is cognizant that Russia would never accept the Black Sea becoming a “NATO Sea” and therefore will continue to manage access to the Black Sea with strict adherence to the Montreux Convention. Türkiye will continue to be an active member of NATO, but its candidacy for the EU will remain frozen.

Russia will continue to see itself as a Eurasian country which wants to restore its place in the international system as a superpower. Maintaining such a state of mind, it will continue to be perceived as a major threat by Europe, which will continue to rely on NATO for its security.

Globally the wave of expanding autocratic regimes will continue. Many democracies will feel the pressure of authoritarian developments and the impact of backsliding of democracies which may result in an erosion of social cohesion in individual countries. These trends will inevitably also affect the Black Sea region. How deeply the region will be affected by such trends by 2030 will depend on how democratic deficits within the EU will be resolved and how efficiently its enlargement policy will be pursued.

## Backsliding Democracies, Autocracies, and Ways Out

Gül Günver TURAN

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179 countries were examined in 2022 by the V-Dem Institute in Sweden and the results were published in the [2023 Democracy Report](#). Only 89 states housing 30% of the world's population were found to have democratic governments, while 90 states housing 70% of the world's population were ruled by autocracies. Freedom House in its [Freedom in the World 2023 Report](#) assessed that 84 countries could be labelled as “free”, 54 as “semi free” and 57 as “not free”.

It's feared that the number of countries moving away from a liberal democratic system may rise in the future. The Black Sea region is comprised of six very different countries. Russia and Türkiye are viewed by Freedom House as having authoritarian regimes and, therefore, are not free. Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine are described as having transitional or hybrid regimes and as being partly free. Bulgaria and Romania, which are members of the EU, are viewed as being free, but as having semi-consolidated democracies. So, answers to how overall democracy could be strengthened in the Black Sea Area are not easy to find. Risks, weaknesses, and shortcomings are different for each country.

Can interventions aiming at strengthening democracy give the expected results? Research conducted by the team of the [International Initiative for Impact Evaluation](#) (3ie) in backsliding democracies on the effects of “democracy and freedom interventions” showed to have only small impacts. The implementers, whether local or national, faced barriers limiting their interventions. Powerholders resisted change. Scarce resources limited these interventions and long-established beliefs, and social norms were obstacles to change.



Different competing power centres exist in each country. Each has its own agenda. Economic inequality is widespread and populist policies are popular. Involuntary migration and the presence of minorities having different religions do lead to culturally conservative reactions from those not wanting any societal changes. The rise of extreme religious groups and ultra-nationalistic movements and parties end up contributing to this backsliding. Corruption, clientelism, and nepotism are also widespread.

Can these trends be reversed? Can common grounds for improving the democratic performance of countries still be found? Though the fate of democracy should largely rely on the shoulders of the Black Sea Countries themselves, organizations with which they have intense relations could and should also play an important role. The EU, even though it itself has democratic deficits in its operations, may be viewed as an anchor. It can monitor developments in both candidate and member countries. It can provide the resources needed to develop the infrastructure of a democratic environment. It could help and guide NGOs since Civil Society represented by various active NGOs can contribute to slowing any backsliding by reacting to changes in legislation which may hamper the regime, by making known abuses of power, and by influencing the decision-making process of political parties and governmental institutions.

Assuring judicial independence, not allowing political parties to have control over key judicial bodies and decentralizing local governments can also contribute to ending this backsliding. The EU could also try to ensure that media independence is promoted so that disinformation, misinformation and censorship do not cause an erosion of social cohesion leading to misunderstandings which might cause riots.

Improving democratic performance in authoritarian regimes and hybrid countries requires a will to change shared by the majority of their populations. If autocratic political systems can meet the challenges and the demands of their supporters, their success could lead to public indifference to a liberal democracy and to a reinforcement of backslidings.

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The Black Sea is an open sea that is linked to a huge body of water that covers a substantial portion of the earth's surface. But, at the same time, it is an inland sea connected to the world through a narrow passage called the Turkish Straits, on which Türkiye exercises sovereignty within the framework of the Montreux Convention.

There are two substantially different approaches to conceptualizing how to achieve the security of the Black Sea region, depending on whether it is viewed as an inland sea or as part of the global seas. Adopting the view that it is mainly an inland sea would give the littoral states the primary responsibility of ensuring its security. Seeing it as an open sea, on the other hand, may invite parties from outside the region to also assume roles in achieving regional security. Since access to it is only possible by going through the Turkish Straits, Türkiye feels that the littoral states should bear the responsibility of implementing the security of the Black Sea.

One of the keys to ensuring the security of the Black Sea is maintaining a balance among the naval power of the littorals. Such a balance is likely to serve as a deterrent to any one of them to threaten the security of others. The fact that the Montreux Convention imposes limitations on the access of the naval units of the non-littoral states is insurance that the within-sea naval balance may not be upset by actors from outside the region.



On the other hand, viewing the Black Sea as part of the global waters would allow outside powers to penetrate the area and engage in competitive and conflictual relations with some of the littoral states. Whether any benefit will accrue to the Black Sea states from such intervention is questionable. External actors would most likely offer to buttress the security of some littoral states in return for securing their cooperation against other littorals. Those cooperating with the outside Powers, understandably, would become natural targets of hostile policies of those who feel that their security is threatened and therefore fear that they would likely become immediate targets if an armed conflict emerges. It seems prudent for littoral states to assume the responsibility for developing a secure Black Sea rather than relying on out-of-area actors to help achieve it.

The future security of the Black Sea region should be planned within the framework of promoting greater cooperation among the littorals. At the moment, littorals other than Türkiye and Russia do not possess major naval capabilities. There is no reason, however, why other littorals could not develop greater capabilities than they currently possess, to enhance their security.

Developing greater cooperation among the littorals would contribute to building mutual trust. In which areas is cooperation possible? Search and rescue operations for which there is already a precedent between Türkiye and Russia is one area. Sweeping mines to keep the sea open for commercial traffic can be another area that has assumed new importance after the Ukraine-Russia conflict. The littorals may also jointly devise policies to avoid naval accidents. Finally, difficult as it may seem at the moment, it may be possible to achieve consensus on a naval arms limitations agreement among the littorals.

It is clear that trying to make the Black Sea an issue of contention between NATO and Russia and bringing non-littoral NATO members in will only serve to render the littorals targets of Russian hostility and expose them to threats that they would rather avoid.



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The Black Sea has never been an easy region. It witnessed great power rivalries throughout centuries and today the region is facing formidable challenges once again. The war in Ukraine has an immense potential to change not only the region, but also the established world order drastically.

Türkiye, as a NATO member state with diplomatic, economic, and political links to Russia, initiated Article 19 of the Montreux Convention at the start of the war in Ukraine while resisting calls to participate in the sanctions against Russia by its Western partners. Thus, Türkiye's position is a unique one in the region, still trying to continue with its balancing act.

One must admit that this position is not an easy one to keep. But one must also remember that Türkiye being part of the Western alliance after the Second World War, continued its diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and even there were high-level state officials' visits between the two countries.

Today, once more, this balancing act is a necessity for Türkiye, mainly from an economic perspective at a time when the country is facing financial difficulties. [The trade volume between Türkiye and the European Union was 196,4 billion dollars in 2022 and the EU maintained its position as Türkiye's most important trading partner](#), but in the last decade Türkiye's exports to Russia also increased and construction, tourism, and textile have become some of the main investment fields for Turkish companies in Russia.

On the other hand, Türkiye's close relations with Russia on the security front and purchasing S400s, as a NATO member, created big fractions in its relations with



the USA, ending up being removed from the F35 programme. Since then, negotiations on F16s have been continuing, lately affecting Sweden's accession to NATO. Sweden's NATO application being approved by Türkiye, followed by the approval of the selling of F16s to Türkiye, demonstrates clearly how Türkiye finds it in its strategic interest to be part of the NATO alliance. Thus, Türkiye needs to be more vigilant in keeping its safe distance from Russia on the security front while maintaining its trading relations.

In the short and medium terms, this seems like the biggest challenge that Türkiye would face in its relations with Russia. It is vital to keep the dialogue channels open with Russia, not only for Türkiye itself, but also for its Western allies. President Erdoğan's personal relations with Putin are an important part of this dialogue. The Grain Deal is an excellent example of an open dialogue in this regard. However, it is necessary to draw boundaries in the relationship, so as not to harm the NATO alliance. Incidentally, resolving the S400 issue is vital, as U.S. Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland underlined in her latest visit to Türkiye.

Regrettably, the region will continue to face ongoing challenges in the foreseeable future. Especially decisions of the EU to grant candidacy status to Georgia, to open negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have the potential to further alarm Russia and perceive these as moves against its national interest, namely protecting its near abroad as stated in the [Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in March 2023](#).

Besides, the upcoming elections and the increasing visibility of populist parties and rhetoric in European politics cast doubt on the most needed strong, affirmative, and precise EU to face these new challenges in the region. The populist waves have the potential to use diplomatic and political rows with Russia in fuelling polarization among European citizens, which, in return, has the potential to harm geopolitical Europe to resist Russia at a crucial moment.

The year 2030 looks gloomy for the region, and there is a need to approach these new challenges firmly, but with a sound mind to protect the liberal international world order as we know it.



## Revisiting the Current Black Sea Security Challenges: What Role for Türkiye?

Hatice YAZGAN

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The Black Sea region holds remarkable significance in today’s political circumstances, especially considering Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Through its Straits, Türkiye is a key player in the Black Sea - a hub for energy and commodity trade. This analysis aims to present the position of Türkiye in the current political circumstances considering its NATO membership and its relations with the EU.

Türkiye has taken a stance against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, denouncing the action and standing firm in its support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Türkiye provided defence industry products to Ukraine and, together with the UN, facilitated the establishment of a grain corridor for Ukraine’s grain to be safely exported. Since the onset of the war, Türkiye has firmly adhered to the Montreux Convention (1936) regulations for the passage of ships through the Turkish Straits. Nevertheless, Türkiye maintained a diplomatic equilibrium with Russia from the beginning of the war, taking into account its multifaceted interests in domestic and foreign policy. Türkiye refrained from implementing certain sanctions against Russia and the position of Türkiye has been met with diverse reactions.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine raises concerns both for NATO and the EU, with which Türkiye has substantial relations. The Black Sea region is considered to carry a strategic importance for the Alliance in NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, which describes Russia as a “direct threat” to the NATO Allies. Türkiye has been a member of NATO since 1952, and NATO has made an indispensable contribution to enhancing its security. Moreover, Türkiye, as a member of NATO, has been contributing to Euro-Atlantic security, both during the Cold War and the current political circumstances. Recently, in January 2024, as a NATO member itself, Türkiye and the other NATO



members and littoral states of the Black Sea, Bulgaria, and Romania created a form of cooperation and signed a memorandum of understanding for clearing the mines in the Black Sea caused by the Russian operations. Türkiye also supports the establishment of close ties between Ukraine and NATO structures. On the other hand, along with involvement in the EU security structures, Türkiye was accepted as a candidate country to the EU in 1999 and started accession negotiations in 2005. Currently, the relationship between Türkiye and the EU is not progressing in the accession process, and the parties mainly focus on migration cooperation, which refers to the so-called “contractual” relations. Türkiye’s position in the Black Sea as a key player didn’t cause a considerable change in its long-standing, albeit up-and-down relationship with the EU.

Ultimately, the future projections of these institutions are worth considering for Türkiye. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has led to changes in the NATO and the EU security structures, which share much in common regarding both their principles and organization. NATO is enlarging by including Finland and after the completion of the procedure, also Sweden. Furthermore, the European NATO allies demonstrated spectacular solidarity in support of Ukraine. Ukraine has been accepted as a candidate country to the EU, albeit it has a symbolic impact given the established procedure through the years of its enlargement history. Moreover, official EU documents such as the EU Global Strategy and the Strategic Compass contain considerable statements on dealing with Russia as a challenge and threat. This evident threat caused a united stance among the EU members during the invasion. However, amidst the debate on “strategic autonomy” and the uncertainty about the U.S.-EU relations, envisioning the future is a challenging task.

## Waves of Uncertainty and Storm Clouds Over the Black Sea: Navigating the Troubled Waters

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The year 2024 marks a crucial turning point for the Black Sea Region. The situation in Ukraine holds immense significance, as the Armed Forces of Ukraine face the challenge of maintaining their positions against the Russian aggressor. This task becomes even harder due to an ammunition deficit and uncertain support from the United States (U.S.). This complex context and the ability of Ukraine to withstand these pressures remains pivotal for the littoral states. Despite relative progress in securing the Black Sea route for the transit of Ukrainian grain, this progress might be reversed if European and American support decreases.

Apart from the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, another significant factor is the electoral processes in the wider Black Sea region. Russia possesses a wide array of hybrid warfare tools and may attempt to destabilize neighbouring countries such as Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Thus, in the Republic of Moldova, presidential elections have the potential to exacerbate the internal divisions, particularly regarding the Russian-controlled Transnistria and Găgăuzia regions. Meanwhile, in Romania, direct and indirect support might be provided to Eurosceptic forces following the parliamentary elections, which could undermine the current trans-atlantic strong ties.

Türkiye’s openness to engage with Russia and its degree of dependence on Russian support further may complicate the situation, especially when NATO member states are hesitant to demonstrate solidarity due to their own national interests. Moscow takes advantage of existing misunderstandings to strengthen its position in the Black Sea, leveraging Türkiye’s unique role in the region with its formidable army, fleet, and strategic control over the Straits.



Considering the broader context, the security concerns of the Black Sea region have historically been underestimated by the U.S., the EU, and NATO. Recent shocks have sparked discussions on the region's importance for European stability, yet the momentum has waned, with most emerging initiatives being reactive rather than proactive. The creation of the Black Sea Naval Mine Action Group by littoral member states Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye could play a significant role. But if there had been more solidarity in the past the Alliance could have had the capacity to prevent mining of the Black Sea.

Moreover, the possible lack of American interest in the region, coupled with the EU's failure to address security challenges, along with the rise of populists and pro-Russian proxies in regional elections, may further destabilize the area. Progress in Russian plans to control Ukraine's coastal line will only heighten tensions, with broader implications. Violations of maritime law by Russia could trigger chain reactions, affecting international maritime law globally. The restriction of free shipments could worsen food security issues, and further militarization of Crimea with possible nuclear weapon placement, could trigger an arms race, undermining international non-proliferation efforts.

In the worst-case scenario, the Black Sea region could come under Russian dominance, with the NATO states being unable to ensure its security beyond protecting ships and vessels navigating the sea. Maintaining the *status quo* would yield similar outcomes, limiting the sea's potential as a transit corridor and energy production site (including hydrocarbons and alternative sources, like offshore wind). Only by containing Russian influence through bolstering Ukraine and fostering solidarity among NATO countries can the region hope for prosperous development. Nevertheless, the damage inflicted by Russia's war against Ukraine may still require substantial efforts to revive the region's attractiveness and economic prospects.

## External Threats Can Become an Efficient Factor of Economic Growth

Yuriy YAKYMENKO

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Author of monographs, analytical reports, research papers, policy recommendations, numerous publications and comments for Ukrainian and foreign media on issues of Ukrainian politics.




The main goal of the Black Sea Synergy is encouraging cooperation between countries of the region and the EU in the fields of democracy, human rights, good governance, border management, trade, migration, development, etc.

However, Russia’s aggressive ideology and violent actions entirely contradict the goals and objectives of the Black Sea Synergy. In such conditions, Russia has no right to participate in the Synergy Initiative.

Another feature of the day that shapes the thrust of the Black Sea Synergy is that the current (political, economic, military) support for Ukraine enhances the security of the partner countries (first of all, European), both now and in the future.

Proper consideration of external threats can become an efficient factor of economic growth and condition the need for “synchronous” acceleration of the economy and enhancement of security. The unity of these goals lies in the sphere of the defence industry, focused on the production (in cooperation with international companies) of the widest possible range of weapons, which can guarantee the defence of the country and strengthen the eastern outpost of the European Union.

The strategic challenge faced by all countries is the development of the modern production infrastructure (as a prerequisite for successful business activity) alongside the preservation of cultural and environmental heritage.



For Ukraine, it means the upgrade of Ukraine's transport and logistic infrastructure and its integration into the European transport network, as well as the introduction of European standards, as a prerequisite for the European integration of Ukraine in the EU - infrastructural in general, and transport and logistics, in particular.

The European Commission incorporated Ukrainian logistic routes in the Trans-European Transport Network. One of the most urgent tasks is transitioning to the European standard rail track, which requires significant investments and coordination with the neighbouring Trans-Black Sea countries.

In addition, the heads of state and government of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which unites 13 EU participating countries located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas, decided to engage Ukraine in all unification projects as a partner country. In particular, the Ukrainian GTS operator joined the initiative of the Vertical Corridor - a new route for transporting gas from the south to the north of Europe, which will contribute to the diversification of gas supply in all countries and optimisation of their infrastructure.

A pressing challenge is presented by Ukraine's involvement in the European Green Deal, becoming even more topical in the conditions of Russian military aggression against Ukraine. Ukraine's obligations of European integration include increasing the share of renewable energy in power generation, transport and heat supply, which, despite the transformational difficulties, can contribute to its energy and economic independence. Ambitious aspirations to create a new sector of the economy - production, transportation and supply of hydrogen (using investments from the EU countries) - have been made public.

Participation in expansion investment projects is an important factor in economic acceleration and improvement of well-being, creation of conditions for the development of private initiative, strengthening of small and medium businesses, as well as full consideration of regional specificities, particularly in the field of environmental protection. Privatisation processes and investment expansion with the admission of international investors, reinforce each other. The involvement of investors from partner countries will make it more rational and transparent.

To sum up, we note that despite multiple scenarios of bankruptcy and collapse of the country, Ukraine has proven its ability to consistently implement and adhere to the principles of civilisation, joining global development, focusing on wellbeing, human rights and democratisation of society.



## Views from other states



**Black Sea Crossroads: Navigating the Future of Global Connectivity and Security**

Velina TCHAKAROVA

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**The Strategic importance of the Black Sea**

In the shadow of what I have dubbed the Cold War 2.0 between the U.S. and the Dragon Bear, the Black Sea region emerges as a pivotal arena in the global geopolitical landscape, marking a significant shift in the dynamics of regional and global connectivity projects amidst the spectre of a newly emerging Iron Curtain along the Eastern Flank of NATO. The Black Sea holds a critical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, serving as a crucial link for transportation and energy corridors that not only connect, but also sustain vast regions spanning from Scandinavia to the Eastern Mediterranean. Its proximity to global trade routes, particularly the Middle Corridor and China's Belt and Road Initiative, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) underscores its potential to thrive amidst geopolitical tensions and economic challenges.

**The Three Seas Initiative and Europe's Gateway: enhancing connectivity**

Moreover, the role of the Black Sea in the global and regional connectivity initiatives, such as the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and Europe's Gateway Initiative, underscores its strategic significance in the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of Europe. These initiatives aim to enhance infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, positioning the Black Sea region at a critical juncture in the broader effort to counterbalance China's Belt and Road Initiative and bolster Europe's periphery regions, including the Western Balkans and North Africa. By focusing on enhancing digital, energy, and transportation links, these initiatives aim to facilitate smoother trade flows, increase energy security, and promote economic development. The Black Sea's inclusion in these projects is





a testament to its strategic importance as a gateway between Europe, Asia, and Africa.

### **The strategic economic impact of Ukraine's Black Sea grain exports**

Ukraine's ability to navigate the challenges posed by Russia's blockade and the subsequent exit from the Black Sea grain deal in 2023 highlights the resilience and strategic importance of the Black Sea route. By successfully shipping millions of tons of food, the country not only bolstered its economy, but also contributed to stabilizing global food prices, which had soared to record highs following Russia's invasion. This achievement underscores the Black Sea's role as a lifeline for global food security and a vital artery for agricultural exports.


### **Challenges and opportunities for the Black Sea Region**

However, the increasing diversion of ships away from the Suez Canal-Red Sea route amid the crisis in the Red Sea directly impacts the Black Sea's connectivity potential. This shift highlights the need for continued investment and innovation in the Black Sea's transportation and logistical infrastructure to ensure it remains a competitive and efficient route for global trade.

### **Future prospects and policy recommendations**

To capitalize on the Black Sea's strategic position and enhance its role in global and regional connectivity, several policy recommendations emerge:

1. **Invest in Infrastructure:** Accelerate investments in port, rail, and road infrastructure in the Black Sea region to enhance its capacity as a major transportation hub. The establishment of an alternative export corridor, with robust backing from the EU, has been instrumental in this regard, sending a strong message of adaptability and cooperation in the face of geopolitical challenges.
2. **Strengthen Multilateral Cooperation and Diplomatic Channels:** Enhance cooperation between 3SI and Europe's Gateway Initiative countries, focusing on joint projects that improve connectivity and resilience against geopolitical threats. The upcoming 3SI summit in Lithuania will offer a solid platform for negotiations and business development.
3. **Support Ukraine's Export Capabilities:** Continue supporting Ukraine in maintaining and expanding its Black Sea grain export corridor, reinforcing the region's role in ensuring global food security. The Black Sea region, buoyed by Ukraine's strategic successes and the collective efforts of the EU, emerges as a beacon of resilience and strategic importance in the global trade and food security matrix.
4. **Enhance Maritime Security:** Strengthen maritime security measures to ensure the safe passage of goods through the Black Sea, particularly in light of growing



geopolitical tensions, notably the emergence of a new “Iron Curtain” and complicated relations with key players like China and Russia.

5. **Black Sea Hub for Gas and Diversifying Energy Sources:** The Black Sea region is poised to become a pivotal hub for both Russian and non-Russian gas imports, underscoring the strategic importance of Türkiye in facilitating energy flows to the continent. As Europe strides towards an energy transition, emphasizing the augmentation of renewable sources, the exigency for alternative energy sources becomes increasingly pronounced. This transition not only involves a shift towards renewables, but also necessitates the expansion of liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, the exploration of nuclear energy options, and even the prospect of gas exploration within the Black Sea itself.

6. **Leverage Digital Innovation:** Invest in digital infrastructure to improve the efficiency of logistics and supply chains, ensuring the Black Sea region remains a competitive route for trade. From blockchain for secure and transparent logistics operations to AI-driven predictive maintenance for infrastructure, harnessing these technologies can significantly reduce costs, improve reliability, and enhance the resilience of connectivity networks against physical and cyber threats.

### **Vision for 2030**

Looking towards 2030, the Black Sea region has the potential to transcend its role as a mere geopolitical flashpoint, evolving into a hub of economic and energy cooperation that benefits not only the surrounding nations but also contributes to global stability. This vision is contingent upon a concerted effort to resolve current conflicts, enhance infrastructure, and foster an environment conducive to collaboration. With NATO’s renewed focus on security along its northern and eastern boundaries, there is an opportunity to integrate these defence initiatives with broader economic and energy objectives, ensuring that the Black Sea region becomes a beacon of cooperation rather than a battleground of geopolitical rivalry.

## Belgium and the Geopolitical Challenges and Security of the Black Sea

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He specialises, among other areas, in Global Maritime Geopolitics. His regional interest centres around the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Black Sea affairs. He worked and lived, in addition to Belgium, in the U.K., Japan, and the Middle East. He has published extensively and is a regular speaker at relevant meetings.

After finishing his undergraduate studies in Belgium, he obtained, among others, an MPhil in Government from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a Graduate Diploma from Kyoto University (Japan). He was honoured by HM the Late Queen Elisabeth with the Order of the British Empire, and by HM King Filip of Belgium as a Knight in the Order of Leopold.



Until recently, it must be said that little attention was paid in Belgian foreign policy and geopolitical circles to the unique security and geopolitical issues and challenges that the Black Sea imposes not just for its littoral states, but the whole of Europe. The European security dimension to Black Sea issue was, and to a certain extent remains, lacking in how overall European security architecture is and will be impacted by the provisions of the Montreux Convention (1936) and how it operates. Energy and power links to the southern Caucasus and the security challenges these links present, were underestimated. Issues related to connectivity and maritime choke points security, also linked to global food security and supplies from Ukraine, were perhaps obscured by the benefits of 30 years of globalisation, free trade flows, lack of armed conflicts and fundamental geopolitical crises, as well as a general European benign approach to Russia's brand of expansionism since the illegal war on Georgia—a Black Sea littoral state, in 2008. This approach left unresolved the Black Sea-specific security challenges, so as not to complicate the relations with Russia, or, for that matter, with Türkiye. The focus of European, thus also Belgian, foreign policy priorities in so far as Türkiye is concerned was reduced to two main themes: migration and terrorism.



Türkiye and Russia have been the two largest geopolitical actors in the Black Sea. For decades, neither Europe nor Belgium wished to open another area of foreign policy tension with either. With the illegal war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine, there has not been a tidal wave of change. Rather, a gradual awareness is dawning in Belgian foreign and geopolitical policy circles that several challenges specific to the Black Sea security that directly impact Europe, will need to be confronted and addressed. The key change that has been slowly germinating is that there is a direct link between the Black Sea security, and that of Europe, including in the current war on Ukraine, and the day after the war ends.

Chief among these issues are three factors:

1. Any security guarantees given to Ukraine will have to have a Black Sea naval component necessitating passage through the two straits.

2. Article 42.7 of the Treaty on the European Union is akin to NATO's article 5, i.e. a mutual defence clause. To be able to support Romania and Bulgaria from the sea access to the Black Sea from the Mediterranean is essential. Georgia, a candidate member, cannot be reached by land the EU (except if Türkiye allows passage over its territory) and thus can only be supported from the Black Sea (but only if there is an agreement with Türkiye).

3. NATO's article 5 for Romania and Bulgaria will also depend to a certain extent on its implementation of access to the Black Sea.

These are the main challenges. As in all such situations change gives rise to opportunities. A key opportunity arises because this increased awareness has given rise to the realisation that discussions with Türkiye, a NATO ally, will have to cover a broader range of issues than migration and terrorism - the revenge of geography and geopolitics as they have been neglected for far too long. This is long overdue given Türkiye's unique strategic strengths and position, and its Black Sea interests.

## Connectivity, the Black Sea Region, and Hungarian Priorities

Erzsébet N. RÓZSA &amp; Tamás SZIGETVÁRI

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**Tamás SZIGETVÁRI** (born 1972) earned his MSc in Economics from the Budapest University of Economic Studies (today Corvinus University of Budapest) in 1996, and his PhD in International Relations in 2003, from the same university.


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His current research activity focuses on economic developments in the EU, EU's outer periphery, and on different aspects of regional development.



The Black Sea and the basin itself have for millennia been a transit route and provided connectivity - for military campaigns or migration among others - among Eastern - and Southeast Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, both on land and on sea. Yet, it has mostly remained peripheral to mainstream European history, a field of regional power competition (Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Türkiye), and even to global power interests (Great Britain). Despite the fact that, the Black Sea constituted the border between the two worlds, during the Cold War, it was the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the European Union and to NATO that seemed to offer renewed importance to the region.

In the consequently elaborated EU strategy, the Black Sea Synergy reflects the EU's traditional regional approach to its closer and wider neighbourhood. Regionalism has been a distinctive feature of EU thinking and terminology since the beginning of the European integration process, leading to several opportunities and at least as many challenges. The Black Sea region, on the one hand, includes/brings



together countries with different statuses in their relationship with the EU (member states, candidate states, ENP partners, strategic partners), and, on the other hand, is closely connected (without any real geographical, historical, or cultural border) and open to several other regions of Europe, Asia, and even Africa.

Nevertheless, besides this regional understanding, there has been a different, linear kind of approach. First, in the Russian strategy, historically, the Black Sea had the strategic importance of connecting Russia to the Mediterranean - with the annexation of Crimea, and growing activity around the region, this traditional element clearly re-emerged. The U.S. perspective seems to reflect this linear approach, too, by viewing the Black Sea as a kind of blockage to the spread of the Soviet/Russian influence. However, by forming an alliance in the region against Russian interests, and making the region “the doorstep of NATO”, the interest of the U.S. in the process of regional block-forming is also manifest.

The large-scale connectivity programs launched by China (the BRI) and more recently, by India (NSTC) have definitely come to reflect a challenge to the regional approach of both the EU and the U.S. But while the EU, despite its security concerns, still has strong economic interests in the enhanced connectivity throughout the region, for the U.S., it is the stop to/deterrence of not only Russian, but also Chinese intrusion into the region which is the top priority.

Among the regional actors, Türkiye is in a complex position. The country is placed at the cross-section of several smaller and greater regions, making connectivity one of its main assets. Still, the dilemma of handling the regional and the linear approach of connectivity persists. With the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Türkiye initiated a regional cooperation in 1992 that tried to promote economic cooperation, infrastructural connections, and cultural exchange among its member states. Its efforts to mediate between Ukraine and Russia in the recent conflict reflect well its interests. The question of whom to connect still exists, however.

The current Hungarian foreign policy was first based on the “Eastern opening” policy launched in 2012. It emphasizes, but also “naturalizes” the importance of maintaining global (eastern) connectivity - energy ties to Russia, and to Central Asia, trade and investment connections to China and the Far East - all among the high-priority interests of Hungarian foreign policy, even if they challenge the EU and U.S. approaches. While in the early 2010s the developing of synergies between the Danube Region Strategy and the Black Sea region (in alignment with the EU regional approach), and the Three Seas Initiative were among the priorities of the Hungarian foreign policy, its current low-profile activity in both the EU BS Synergy and the BSEC contradict these intentions.



## Black Sea Region's Role in the Middle Corridor: The New Golden Age?

László VASA

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His research fields include Central Asia and the Caucasus, economics of resources and current issues of connectivity. Laszlo is an active PhD supervisor of doctoral schools in Hungary and abroad, a member of the editorial board of different high-ranked international and Hungarian scientific journals, an active participant in international scientific organisations and networks as a visiting professor and honorary doctor at Japanese and Kazakh universities.




The Middle Corridor is getting a lot of attention, as due to the war in Ukraine, a new alternative solution to the Northern transport routes is needed to enable East-West trade connections. Nothing is more indicative of great power interest than the recent, first large forum on the situation and possibilities of the Middle Corridor ([EU Global Gateway: Investor Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity](#)), which was held in Brussels, being organized by the European Commission.

The current war in Ukraine caused several difficulties in different fields and industries. One of these problems, which affects the regions outside of the conflict zone, is the trade between Asia and Europe. The usual route from China to Europe passes through Russia, but the war has made the use of it impossible. Thus, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor (MC), seems to be a good option for the near future. TITR/MC is a rail freight and ferry system linking China to Europe. It starts from Southeast Asia and China, and runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye before reaching southern or Central Europe, depending on the cargo destination. Geographically, this is the shortest route between Western China and Europe.

The route involves a maritime crossing through the Caspian Sea to the Port of Baku in Azerbaijan, land-based transport options to the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi, and a maritime crossing through the Black Sea to the ports of Bulgaria and Romania. A second option is to cross by land from the Caucasus directly into Türkiye by truck or rail using the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which is also part of the EU's TEN-T extension.

Due to inefficiencies and infrastructure gaps in Türkiye, the Black Sea route is currently preferred by operators, who, nevertheless, face difficulties caused by the war in the northern part of the sea. So, both the terrestrial and the sea routes



are targeted to develop, which includes the plans for realizing the Zangezur Corridor between Azerbaijan and its exclave Nakhichevan via Armenian territory, along Iran's border. This would provide an alternative route for the Caucasus-Türkiye part of the Middle Corridor.

Taking the forecasts and the projects in the planning or implementation phase, the future is bright for the countries around the Black Sea. Even if the war in the North is over, the importance of the Middle Corridor will remain. Due to the increased transport volumes, the related infrastructure developments, and the enhanced logistics solutions, the Black Sea region will gain serious economic benefits.

Moreover, the progress in connection with this transport route will contribute to the peace and security of the affected regions. The first hopeful sign of it is the peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia realized that making peace with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye would bring much more than the almost fully isolated situation it has nowadays. If there is peace in the South Caucasus, the opportunities of the Middle Corridor are multiplied. As the Black Sea is unavoidable in this corridor, the riparian countries will have the opportunity to have a share in the growing business.



## Polish Involvement in the Black Sea Region: Security and Transport

Jędrzej BŁASZCZAK

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His research interests focus on the international formats and Central Europe. He has a Master of Law and is a graduate of the University of Silesia, European Academy of Diplomacy, and Foreign Policy Study PISM.



For a long time, the Black Sea region has played a strategic role in relations between Russia and the West. Poland believes there is a vital need to secure NATO's eastern flank and foster economic development in the Black Sea region, whose significance extends beyond its local borders and has far-reaching implications for regional and Euro-Atlantic security. One reason for its importance is that all Ukrainian grain transport passes through the Black Sea. At present, the rivalry for control over the region has become a pivotal point of conflict in the Russian-Ukrainian war, and the effects of this will impact millions of people worldwide. Poland has taken a proactive approach to addressing these concerns by engaging in various EU and NATO campaigns and regional formats, including the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the "Poland-Romania-Türkiye Triangle". Moreover, it should be noted that Poland was one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which is a part of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy encompassing six states, most of which are Black Sea riparian states. Poland is also an observer in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

The 3SI and B9 aim to strengthen the region's standing within the EU and NATO by expanding transport infrastructure and energy corridors in a coordinated manner. The B9 is an intra-NATO format, focusing on NATO's eastern flank.

3SI projects, which are mainly focused on upgrading transport infrastructure in Central Europe, could also significantly relieve Ukrainian and Romanian ports and facilitate transport to and from those countries. The flagship 3SI project is the expansion of the Via Carpathia road in order to connect to connect states from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea. The Polish section is expected to be completed by 2026. This new corridor along the EU's eastern border is a response to the growing importance of the north-south axis in the EU transport policy from a geostrategic



perspective. It also fills an infrastructural gap on NATO's eastern flank. Another project that aligns with the 3SI's objectives is the Rail-2-Sea project: it also includes Romania, and will establish a new rail transport corridor from Gdansk to the ports on the Black Sea. The project's infrastructure is being reviewed for inclusion in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) core network, which will make the Baltic Sea - Black Sea - Aegean Sea European Transport Corridor eligible for the EU infrastructure project funding.

Cooperation in the B9 allows consultations to be held on the standard security policies of the nine NATO members, those most threatened by a Russian invasion, which could involve kinetic attacks, hybrid attacks, or both. Polish foreign policy observers have noticed closer cooperation taking place in the Poland-Romania-Türkiye Triangle, with Bucharest taking on a stronger role. In fact, Romania is becoming one of Poland's most important regional security partners. The intensity of the two states' mutual relations has increased in recent years, and they take a similar approach to Russia, Ukraine, the Black Sea region, and relations with the U.S. Expanding the sphere of their shared interests to include energy and infrastructure can enhance the effectiveness of the 'Triangle' and increase the region's resilience to energy threats.

To conclude: despite its distance from the Black Sea itself, Poland recognises the importance of the Black Sea region, and seeks to foster economic cooperation with the countries in the area. Poland also prioritises being involved in the security of NATO's eastern flank, and especially the cooperation within the Bucharest Nine. With its significant economic, territorial, and demographic potential, Romania is a crucial partner for Poland in implementing its objectives in Central Europe and the Black Sea region.

**Black Sea - A New Pillar of the Eurasian Land Transportation System**

Konrad POPLAWSKI


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In recent years, his area of expertise has focused on transport and connectivity issues in Central Europe and globally. He defended his doctorate with honours at the Warsaw School of Economics.



Paradoxically, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which brought war in the Black Sea region, could also strengthen its economic significance as an important route for diversifying goods traded between Europe and Asia.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has unleashed profound changes in the Eurasian land routes. On the one hand, Moscow's aggressive policy diminished the Northern Corridor - going from China through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus to the EU. Since February 2022, the traffic on this route has decreased significantly - just last year, it collapsed by 48%. On the other hand, it came to the renaissance of interest in the Middle Corridor (MC) - the route traversing from China through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Black Sea to Europe. Last year, the region of Central Asia hosted visits of many influential Western politicians, such as the president of France, Emmanuel Macron, the U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, and the president of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Moreover, global players in logistics, such as Maersk, MSC, CMA CGM, or DHL, started to offer services on the MC. Also, transit countries do not just take a wait-and-see approach. Transcaspian International Transport Route - the regional organisation founded in 2017 to promote the Middle Corridor - has recently intensified its activities to optimise it. In 2023, its members decided to establish a joint logistical operator on



the route and to sign a roadmap of needed actions. Their main organisational challenge will be creating a unified consignment note to eliminate the bureaucratic workload for freight forwarders.

However, there is a risk that this favourable economic and business momentum won't be used well. Essential to making the Middle Corridor efficient is to eliminate bottlenecks and this requires improving the rail and road infrastructure level in the transit countries, modernising ports, increasing the number of sea services on the Caspian and Black Sea, or building a network of logistic terminals. Otherwise, the transit time cannot be reduced to 13 days to attract the logistical sector on a larger scale. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, around 18 billion euros is needed to increase the traffic on the MC from the current level of approximately 20 thousand TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) to 1,4 million TEU in 2040.

The fundamental question is who's going to finance these costs? Beijing has been a staunch supporter of Moscow in recent years. More so, for the last decade, China has been devoted to developing the transiting Russian territory Northern Corridor. Since the invasion, the capacity of this route has been used for the Chinese-Russian bilateral trade; thus, China might be interested in developing the MC. The rail connection was a perfect fit for supplementing maritime transport, which is cheaper, but slower and more prone to geopolitical risks (as could be yet observed on the Red Sea). At the last *Belt and Road Forum*, Xi Jinping, in the presence of Central Asian leaders, openly endorsed the MC, proving that China wants to actively engage in the development of the initiative.

However, the fundamental issue is whether the EU is ready to treat the Middle Corridor according to its importance. Ultimately, developing this route helps transit countries diversify their trade from Russia and would constitute a political pushback from the West. Moscow's position in Central Asia or South Caucasus is weakened due to a growing dependence on various sanctions-evasion schemes going through those regions. The Middle Corridor's transit countries could offer multiple resources and minerals needed for the EU's de-risking. In the long term, strengthening economic ties with Europe could help, mainly Central Asia, settle a regional agenda and become more assertive towards Russia, thus weakening Russia's hinterland. Following the EU's Global Gateway strategy, investments in the Middle Corridor should focus on improving transport capacities on the Black Sea. In this way, it would not only significantly improve the EU connection with its candidate state, namely Georgia, but it could also be a basis for settling a common transport agenda with Türkiye, thus mitigating recent political tensions.

## Baltic - Black Sea Transportation Corridor - A New Beginning?

Małgorzata SAMOJEDNY

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Her scope of research is the broad view on the concept of state and legal order particularly in non-western orders and quasi-states.




In 2021, the Polish Port of Gdansk and the Ukrainian Port of Odesa began work on building [new infrastructure routes connecting the Baltic and the Black Sea](#). A railway was planned from the port of Gdansk to the Ukrainian Black Sea ports of Odesa, Yuzhnyj, and Czernomorsk, via Warsaw, Medyka (or Dorohusk), and Kyiv. The main goal of such cooperation was to provide an alternative route to Western Europe for trade coming from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond. Unfortunately, the project was stopped by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

However, these circumstances revealed not only new challenges, but also opportunities in building infrastructure links between CEE countries and the Black Sea. The need to supply Ukraine with ammunition and military equipment to effectively repel the Russian invasion has revealed, the critical importance of the transport potential of the Baltic-Black Sea bridge as well as its limitations due to inadequate rail and road infrastructure.

An additional factor causing a surge in transport exchanges in the region was the blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports by Russia and the prevention of Ukrainian exports by sea. It should be mentioned here that Ukraine is one of the largest exporters of cereals - wheat, maize, and barley. The main transport route was via Poland and Romania. Elzbieta Lukaniuk, a member of the Cabinet of the EU Transport Commissioner, indicated that from May to December 2022, 45 million tonnes were exported from Ukraine via the [‘solidarity lanes’](#) and 25 million tonnes in the other direction. The exchange amounted to around €60 billion.

What is also worth mentioning, is that the Polish MFA Radosław Sikorski during the [Munich Security Conference 2024](#), underlined the importance of the Black Sea as a significant element of the local and global supply chain, particularly relevant for the food supply [chain security](#).



Thus, as can be seen, the transport routes built during the war period, which are necessary to maintain the economic stability of the country, as well as being the main transit route for Ukraine's military and humanitarian goods. In the long term, after the end of the conflict these routes can form the basis of the planned expansion of the transport infrastructure of the rebuilt country. However, as of today, there are no immediate signs of an end to the conflict or concrete projections of a possible cessation of hostilities.

Thus, we enter the realm of future scenarios as regards the Black Sea region. One such scenario is rather a pessimistic one given the current situation. Even though the main principle of any peace talks is and should be [\*“nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”\*](#), in my view, we may envisage a rather plausible scenario where the chances that Ukraine will succeed in retaining both its eastern borderlands and Crimea, as a result of peace negotiations, are getting rather slim. Such an undesirable situation would seriously destabilise the security of the Black Sea, as a significant part of it would come under the jurisdiction of Russia - NATO's main adversary.

However, if, after the end of the conflict, Crimea is retained as an integral part of Ukraine, then the Black Sea can be considered as a semi-internal sea of the NATO alliance, similar to the Baltic Sea after Finland and in the future Sweden, join the alliance. In that case, **the Black Sea will become Europe's main gateway to the Caucasus and Central Asia and ultimately to the [\*Middle Corridor\*](#)**, filling a gap in the new EU project, [\*the Global Gateway\*](#). In addition, due to the Global Gateway and the EU funds to be allocated for global sustainable development, the countries of the Black Sea's eastern coast would also become net beneficiaries.



## Crimea as an Obstacle to Peace Between Kyiv and Moscow

Andreas UMLAND

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Umland holds a PhD in Politics from Cambridge, Dr Phil in History as well Diploma in Politology from FU Berlin, MPhil in Russian Studies from Oxford, and MA in Political Science from Stanford.

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A major obstacle to ending the Russo-Ukrainian War through negotiation is the special role that Crimea has played for the Russian state and its military actions since 2014. Crimea was and is the most popular territorial acquisition that Putin has presented to the Russian Federation - an achievement with far more recognition than the covert or overt Russian acquisitions of Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia or Kherson. This makes a Russian return of Crimea to Ukraine as a result of negotiations unlikely.

It also creates a strategic dilemma for the Kremlin. At some point, Moscow might be interested in ending the war. A new Russian leadership might even be willing to sacrifice part of the Russian mainland territory annexed in 2022 to achieve this goal. However, Crimea has always needed the Ukrainian mainland areas north of the peninsula for its development.

For only 32 years in its previous history - from 1922 to 1954 - Crimea had been administratively linked to the territory of today's Russian Federation. Before that, it was connected via the Crimean Khanate (until 1783) and the Romanov Empire's Tauric Government (1802-1917) to the territory of today's south Ukrainian mainland. After its subsequent brief period in the so-called Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), it was linked, *via* the Ukrainian Soviet Republic (1954-1991) and independent state (since 1991), to the entire territory of today's Ukraine.

The Russian character of Crimea is partly historical fiction and partly a result of ruthless demographic engineering by pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet governments. Over the last 240 years, St. Petersburg/Moscow brought down the





share of indigenous Crimean Tatars in Crimea's population from over 84% in 1785 to 12% today, according to Russian official statistics (which may overstate the real current percentage of Tatars in the peninsula). The Tsars, Bolsheviks, and Putin engaged in violent repression, deportation, and expulsion to permanently displace hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars from their native lands.

St. Petersburg/Moscow's colonial policies on the Black Sea peninsula also meant the replacement of indigenous people with Eastern Slavs. Yet, the share of ethnic Russians only rose over 50% after Stalin's violent and often lethal deportation of almost all of Crimea's indigenous people to the Asian part of the Soviet Union in 1944. Thus, Russian demographic dominance in Crimea - achieved *via* a horrendous mass crime - is less than 80 years old.

Notwithstanding, today most Russians and some outside observers believe that Crimea belongs to Russia. When Putin annexed Crimea in 2014, many Russians became ecstatic, and Russia's corruption perception index, as measured by Transparency International, went temporarily down. In the annexation year of 2014, the sky was bluer, and the grass was greener for most Russians.

The close geographical and historical connection between Crimea and Ukraine's mainland was the major reason why, in 1954, the Soviet government collectively (rather than, as it is often claimed, Nikita Khrushchev personally) decided to transfer Crimea from the Russian to the Ukrainian Soviet republic. In 2022, a somewhat similar consideration made Putin attack Ukraine full-scale. Having captured the peninsula in 2014, he realized that Russia needed to also occupy the Ukrainian mainland territories to Crimea's north to make the Black Sea pearl's economic development sustainable. Between 2014 and 2021, annexed Crimea had been not only the Russian Federation's most illegal, but also the most subsidized region.

Crimea is part and parcel of a larger geoeconomic area that also embraces large parts of Ukraine's mainland. In a hypothetical Russian-Ukrainian negotiation on the future of the currently occupied territories, it is all or nothing not only for Kyiv, but also for Moscow. This is especially so once the 2019 Kerch Bridge is destroyed by Ukraine's armed forces - an action likely to happen sooner or later.

A partial Russian acceptance of Ukraine regaining its mainland territories yet leaving Crimea as a consolation prize to Moscow would be unacceptable for Kyiv. It would also be an unsustainable solution for the Kremlin. To keep Crimea as an isolated exclave far away from other Russia-controlled lands would neither economically, nor strategically make much sense for Moscow. Nevertheless, many non-Ukrainian observers see Crimea as an object of negotiation and a potential compromise instrument. The peninsula is neither.

**The Maritime Geopolitics of the Black Sea: Keeping the Russians ashore, the Ukrainians afloat and the Turks onboard!**

Basil GERMOND

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His latest book is *Seapower in the Post-Modern World* with McGill-Queen's University Press. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.




The prosperity and security of trading nations is dependent on the sea. Western maritime preponderance has guaranteed freedom of navigation and the stability of the global maritime supply chain. Yet, this dominance is being challenged by China, and, at regional scales, the maritime supply chains are disrupted, for instance by the Yemenite Houthis in the Red Sea and Russia in the Black Sea.

The Black Sea is located at the periphery of the main trading routes. Nevertheless, it is crucial as a pivotal maritime geopolitical space at the intersection between NATO, Russia, and the Middle East. To paraphrase NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, the maritime geopolitics of the Black Sea depends on three factors:

**Keeping the Russians ashore...**

The Ukraine war has highlighted the geopolitical peculiarity of the Black Sea: its subordination to the *Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits*. Indeed, Ankara's immediate closure of the Turkish Straits to warships in application of the Convention has been impactful.

Russia's inability to reinforce its Black Sea Fleet with extra-regional assets combined with Ukraine's efficient use of land-based missiles and drones has resulted in Moscow's failure to exercise control over the Northwestern Black Sea. This explains why Russia has not been able to produce strategic effects from the sea nor to maintain a credible blockade of Ukraine. Romania and Bulgaria have also played an important role in enabling a safe export corridor along their coastlines.



The future maritime geopolitical seascape in the Black Sea will be very different from what it was before the war. Russia's Black Sea Fleet is already depleted with many major warships either destroyed or damaged. Russia will seek to beef it up, but this will be a slow process since its ability to procure new warships or to reallocate existing assets is limited. Warships are among the most expensive and time-consuming units to procure, and Russia's naval shipbuilding industrial base is deficient.

### **... the Ukrainians afloat...**

The reconstruction of Ukraine will be a lengthy process and a costly one. Western commitment to fund civilian recovery and economic development is important. Yet, sustaining Ukraine's defence industrial base will be a priority to deter future attacks. Controlling sea lanes of communication to and from Ukraine and interdicting Russian warships (including submarines) in its territorial waters will be key.

HM Government has announced the creation (together with Norway) of a Maritime Capability Coalition tasked with ["developing a Ukrainian maritime force capable of defending Ukraine's maritime flank and deterring Russia"](#). The promised delivery to Ukraine of minehunter ships will have to wait until naval traffic through the Turkish Straits is normalized. Ukraine will also need to acquire antisubmarine warfare capabilities (airborne and seaborne) to complement its domestically procured land-based antiship missiles and drones that already provide Kyiv with efficient anti-access/area denial capabilities to control its waters above the sea.


### **...and the Turks onboard**

Türkiye is a pivotal actor because of its control of the Straits and membership in NATO. Yet, Ankara's diplomatic positioning has been ambivalent. It depends on Russia's energy, has maintained open diplomatic channels with Moscow, and has not joined the West's sanctions regime. Türkiye's 'balanced' foreign policy has raised questions as to its reliability as a NATO member.

Yet, with Russia's naval capabilities severely diminished, Türkiye will *de facto* be the leading Black Sea Power and may be willing to further distance itself from Moscow. More NATO presence is necessary to visibly uphold freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, and Ankara can be the motor of this geopolitical reorientation. For instance, Türkiye has recently joined Romania and Bulgaria to form a task group to clear mines in the Black Sea.

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The maritime geopolitics of the Black Sea is at a turning point. Ukraine has overperformed at sea while Russia has underperformed. Yet, the future stability of



the region might well depend on Türkiye's commitment to NATO and on the empowerment of Romania and Bulgaria.

## Black Sea a New Strategic Priority for the US

James Jay CARAFANO

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A graduate of West Point, Carafano holds a master’s degree and a doctorate from Georgetown University, as well as a master’s degree in strategy from the U.S. Army War College.




Here is why a free and open Black Sea is important to the U.S. and why Washington ought to, and is likely to be, supportive of the effort to achieve that goal. There are three reasons.

First, Ukraine’s access to the Black Sea is vital to the nation’s survival. A free and open Black Sea is critical for the maintenance of an independent, secure, and prosperous Ukraine. An independent Ukraine is in America’s interests. Putin’s aggressive war in Ukraine is the first step in a long-term effort to reassert the occupation of the post-Soviet states, create a dominant sphere of influence over Central Europe, and put an end to collective security and the NATO alliance. An independent Ukraine is a firm roadblock to Putin’s destabilizing threat to the West.

Second, a free and open Black Sea is critical to the security of NATO’s southern flank. The U.S. military does not have to be in the Black Sea to defend the Black Sea. In a war scenario, the U.S. can dominate the Black Sea from forces in the Mediterranean. The most likely contemporaneous threats, however, come not from a general war scenario, but from “gray zone”, activities (e.g. mines, sabotage, corruption, and political interference) by Russia to interfere or threaten freedom of navigation and infrastructure (e.g. pipelines, ports, drilling and pumping platforms) in the Black Sea region. NATO must have the capacity to secure the Southern flank under these conditions. This will require a political-military response, with the U.S. as an active participant and supporter.

Third, the Black Sea is a pivot point in the pathways for trade, commerce, digital connectivity, energy, and development from North, Central, and Southern Europe to the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, North and East Africa, and the Caucasus and Central Asia. A free and open Black Sea facilitates mutual security,



stability, and prosperity, serving as a buffer against malicious influence from Russia, China, and Iran. These conditions greatly benefit the United States. American security and prosperity benefit from extending free and open spaces.

Here is how the U.S. can, and likely will, contribute to the goal of a free and open Black Sea. There are three important actions.

First, capacity building. The U.S. will assist littoral nations in building their capabilities and capacity to ensure freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and protect critical infrastructure. This could include expanding anti-mine, anti-ship, and anti-submarine warfare assets; increasing situational awareness for air and sea operations making them more efficient, effective, and comprehensive; and expanding means to defeat anti-access tactics and strategies.

Second, joint cooperation. The more littoral states of the region work together the more effective they can be in expanding the sphere of mutual security in the region. The U.S. will be a willing partner and supporter of joint planning, training, and exercises.

Third, investment. The U.S. will continue to be supportive of the Three Seas Initiative and other investments that will expand infrastructure capacity in the Black Sea region extending to the Caucasus and the Middle Corridor. The U.S. should help in developing concrete and productive alternatives to Chinese and Russian financing and malicious, destabilizing, and corrupting influence. The U.S. should promote private-sector foreign direct investment in the region. The U.S. should support integrating investments with the reconstruction of Ukraine.

The expectation should be that the U.S. will be a willing and constructive partner in securing and maintaining a free and open Black Sea.

## The Black Sea Region has Enormous Potential

Matthew BOYSE

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A former Senior Foreign Service Officer, his last role was as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs overseeing U.S. policy toward Central Europe and the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues. He also served as **Chargé d'Affaires** in Switzerland, Finland, Romania, and the U.S. Mission to NATO, as well as in Ottawa (A/DCM), Wiesbaden (Political Advisor, U.S. Army Europe, Dusseldorf (Consul General), Berlin, Kabul, New Delhi, Warsaw, Moscow, Dhaka, and London.




Since 1991, successive U.S. administrations generally treated the Black Sea region (BSR) as peripheral to their relationship with Russia and other parts of Europe. This has finally changed for the better, but it took Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine to jolt the Biden Administration into action. Putin's war made Ukraine the centrepiece of the BSR, although all littoral states are very important. The future of the BSR will be decided in Ukraine.

The Obama Administration did not react robustly after Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and Donbas. The Trump Administration supplied lethal kit and improved ties with Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. The Biden Administration pursued mostly an Obama 2.0 policy until February 2022; since then, it has provided much support, but too little, too late.

After 2014, the U.S. Navy increasingly conducted FONOPs in the Black Sea until just before February 2022, in some years spending months on short deployments; this will presumably resume after the war ends. The 2022 NATO Summit focused more on the BSR and helped bring the disparity between the NE and SE sectors of the Eastern Flank closer to parity. Washington increased its military presence in Romania and Bulgaria.

The State Department's Black Sea Strategy, which Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien presented to Congress in October 2023, understood the fate of the BSR is inextricably linked to that of Ukraine and Europe. However, it could have been more ambitious. It described the situation well, but it was late, was not a whole-of-government effort, came with few additional resources, and offered no clear roadmap.





The December 2023 NDAA was an important step forward, stressing the U.S. interest in the BSR and recognizing it as an arena of Russian aggression. It described littoral states as contributors to NATO collective security, called Russian attempts to control access to the Mediterranean via the Black Sea a threat, noted the U.S. interest in strengthening economic ties with the BSR, and tasked a whole-of-government strategy in 2024.

**Biggest opportunities? Economic.** The BSR has enormous potential with its abundant resources, talented and enterprising people, attractive climate, and geopolitical location. Its energy resources are a potential game changer for European energy security. If Putin wins his war, however, these and other assets are unlikely to reach their full potential.

**Biggest challenge? A Russian victory in Ukraine.** The more Ukrainian territory Russia occupies when the war ends, and the closer it is to the Black Sea, the worse the outcome for those with interests there. A Black Sea that is whole, free, open, and at peace is critical for the survival of Ukraine and for the future of all littoral states.

Russia has been doing the most damage in BSR countries in which the EU has declared a strong interest: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia. A Putin victory would also negatively affect three NATO members and add another EEZ border, if unrecognized, with Russia. Romania has experienced Russian attacks on Ukrainian Danube targets; future spillovers could lead to Article 4 or even Article 5 cases at the NAC.

A Russian victory would further militarize the BSR, increase the likelihood of future conflict, expand Moscow's malign influence, enable Putin to be a larger player in SE Europe and the Balkans, and enable his power projection beyond. He may conclude he can continue redrawing the map of Europe.

A Putin victory would have negative consequences for the biggest threat the Global West faces: China. CCP leaders are watching closely. If they see weakness and division, they will take this as a greener light to shape their alternative world order. Other dictators and fence-sitters will draw their conclusions. **As Ukraine goes, so goes the BSR.**

**Three Seas Initiative (Plus) and Black Sea Security: Romania's Room for Leadership and Growth**

Grant W. TURNER & Seth CROPSEY

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The enhancement and expansion of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) is key to the security and prosperity of Romania, the Black Sea, Eastern Europe, the EU, and NATO. It both hedges against the reduction of U.S. and Western European support in the region, and incentivizes the continuation of it. As one of the original and largest financial backers of 3SI, Bucharest must be prepared to carry the project forward with or without significant assistance from the U.S. government. This requires a full-spectrum approach to diplomacy and security that is particularly sensitive to the interests and sensibilities of international and domestic stakeholders.

In this context, we assess some elements of security, commercial linkages, and expanding 3SI cooperation, as it pertains to Romania and the Black Sea region

within the next decade. We have also prepared a web page containing further reading, which can be accessed via [this link](#) or the web address in the footnote.<sup>5</sup>

## **Security**

Since at least 2005, Romania’s national security and defence strategies appear to have progressively increased their emphasis on a whole of society approach. The extent to which this has proceeded beyond rhetoric remains unclear. Furthermore, it seems likely that Bucharest’s path has been similar to nations such as the Baltics, meaning a shift from total defence to its integration with the collective defence offered by NATO.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has prompted many—especially the Baltic and Scandinavian nations—to look towards Finland’s comprehensive security model as the next evolution of national security and defence strategy. If it has not already, Romania should consider working with these nations to identify the ways in which it too can learn from the nations adapting Helsinki’s formula, particularly those who share the challenges of the past. Additionally, Bucharest could assist its neighbours in kind. Integrating these steps into the upcoming national security and defence strategy, and transparently implementing them would set a solid foundation for regional leadership, cooperation, and coordination in issues of security and development, and enable greater focus on the benefits of 3SI.


## **Commercial Linkages**

The legacy of Soviet transportation and energy infrastructure represents both the greatest challenges and opportunities to Eastern Europe’s economic and security interests. Romania should continue working with its 3SI members to accelerate the construction of existing north-south connectivity projects, and explore additional opportunities. Similarly, the region should continue to update its existing rail, communications, energy, and other infrastructure so they meet EU standards, and move away from Moscow’s. Priorities should include changing the rail gauge, ending reliance on parts and technology from Russia, and reducing contracts with Moscow backed firms.

That being said, there are several areas of concern. First, some continue to champion new canal projects, such as the Danube-Oder-Sea Canal. There may be aspects of these projects that prove strategically or economically desirable—even in the face of climate change—and studies should continue. However, until their value over other investments is certain, the improvement of existing canals and inland waterways should take priority.

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<sup>5</sup> Turner, Grant W., and Seth Cropsey. “Further Reading: Three Seas Initiative Plus and Black Sea Security.” Yorktown Institute, February 22, 2024, <https://yorktowninstitute.org/further-reading-three-seas-initiative-plus-and-black-sea-security/>.



Second, while energy and commercial links to the Caucasus are important for numerous reasons, until the security of the Black Sea and partners to its east can be virtually guaranteed, such infrastructure cannot be relied upon as an element of national security. Instead, emphasis should remain on the energy production and transportation capacities of NATO members, with an eye towards green (hydrogen, nuclear, wind, hydro, etc.). Romania's burgeoning technology sectors should be leveraged to develop this further. In parallel, 3SI should work to ensure the security of peripheral linkages (e.g., the Middle Corridor) that can then be more reliably integrated.

Third, Romania is still lagging far behind many other 3SI nations' in the EU's Digital Economy and Society Index. While there are a few dimensions in which it ranks highly, if it is to fully realize its potential, it must work with others to become a leader across them all. This will require increased investments, incentives, and transparency, which will enable greater education, attraction and retention of human capital, and international collaboration. Progress in this realm will ensure the success of energy, transportation, and technological projects, and by extension Romania's ability to help 3SI and remain relevant.

### **Expanding Cooperation**

Cooperation underpins the achievement of what we have outlined. First and foremost, 3SI should become 3SI+. This means working to gain new members (e.g., Scandinavian and Balkan nations), adding and assisting transitional partners (meaning nations seeking to join the EU, which can then become 3SI members), and integrating peripheral partners (those unlikely to ever be EU members, but that participate in arrangements such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Council of Europe). In this sense, the "plus" should include not just additional nations, but additional seas, such as the Caspian and the Barents.

Second, Bucharest needs to further diversify investment in Romania, the Black Sea, and 3SI+, particularly *via* non-governmental actors. This requires greater use of soft power and new approaches to strategic partnerships. Unfortunately, after years of improvement, the 2023 Global Soft Power Index featured a significant drop in Romania's ranking.

Using such metrics as a guideline, Bucharest needs to aggressively pursue public diplomacy, the creation of international working groups akin to the Visegrád Group, and leadership positions in international organizations. It should make better use of its population size, its diaspora, and its influence in the European Parliament. These efforts should not be limited to Europe or 3SI+, but even extend to Indo-Pacific nations, Africa, and Latin America—that is to say, these far-flung ties directly impact the security and prosperity of the Black Sea region, and must be fully capitalized upon.



## Views from Romania

## The Black and North Seas Are Already Connected. Why Not Make Use of it?

Antonia COLIBĂȘANU

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The Black Sea holds significant geopolitical and geoeconomic importance, being a node of Eurasia, as it serves as a vital connection point between the Levantine Basin, the Red Sea, and the Western Indian Ocean. Throughout history, the fate of the Black Sea area has always appeared to be heavily influenced by outside powers, due to their strategic interest in maritime routes and naval dominance.

Russia’s grand strategy revolves around gaining control over the Black Sea, which has long given it convenient access to the global ocean. In turn, NATO and the EU perceive the danger of a hostile Russian Black Sea dominance, which might lead to a lengthier hybrid confrontation between Russia and the West. This situation may trigger political divisions within the Western alliances. Therefore, the Black Sea



region holds a critical position for conventional and unconventional defence of the European values. In this context, Türkiye plays a crucial role, especially since the Montreux Convention that governs the Black Sea Straits restricts military deployment. However, the current war may lead to new deployment patterns and a force structure which, eventually, could diminish the Montreux's effect on military deployments.

If anything, the armed conflict in Ukraine has brought us adaptability and innovation. The kinetic war has taught us about modern military operations, but it has, also, highlighted the supply chain disruptions. International transporters have used the Eurasian Northern Corridor less, and Ukrainian grain export across the Black Sea has dropped. This gives two important lessons. Firstly, as the Ukraine war unfolds and the Middle Corridor gains more significance for Eurasian trade, China may soon become a key regional actor. Secondly, after the United Nations *grain deal* ended, Europe needed to adapt to continue to help Ukraine. Issues such as gauge discrepancies, border control and tax agreements, farmers' dissatisfaction, and inexcusable *Ukrainian fatigue* in Western cabinets have left *one option, yet not fully exploited: the Danube River*, the critical link between the Black Sea and the Nordic Seas of Europe.

While it is not a direct route for Ukrainian grain exports as the country's Black Sea ports, Kyiv needed to adapt and use the Danube for transporting its merchandise to the global markets. In doing so, it scratched the surface of the Danube's potential. A key inland waterway, a cost-effective and environmentally friendly mode of transport, the Danube's strategic economic importance lies in its role as a vital transportation corridor for Europe.

Although cohesion has been at the centre of all infrastructure-related debates in Brussels, the revised *EU Strategy for the Danube Region* (EUSDR) has not gained traction yet. It is worth noting that the EUSDR is the most accessible route, linking two halves of Europe, the West and the East, and indirectly connecting Europe's Northern Seas to the Black Sea. Still, significant challenges remain between and within EUSDR nations, compounded by economic problems related to post-pandemic concerns.

However, considering that some of these challenges include climate change and the digital transition, investing in developing the Danubian corridor – a green, cost-effective infrastructure project that may, also, serve as a model for increasing the EU cooperation through digitization – is a solution. One that Romania must keep advertising.



## The Eye of the Storm: The Black Sea Region as a “Barometer” of the Competition/Confrontation for a New World Order

Valentin NAUMESCU

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Among his recent books: *The Great Powers’ Foreign Policy: Approaching the Global Competition and the Russian War Against the West* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).



### Global context, prospects for 2030


This is more than a regional crisis. It is also more than a dispute for territories between Russia and Ukraine. We are in the context of a severe deterioration, in a full storm of the international relations’ system. It looks like a “perfect storm”, with the worst conditions accumulating in the medium-term forecasts.

An *anti-American and anti-Western revisionist axis of Oriental dictatorships* (Russia, China, Iran, North-Korea) contests increasingly aggressive the West’ pre-eminence, liberal values and global order based on regulations. It seems to be a long global storm and it wouldn’t be end by 2030, unless a decisive world confrontation will start in the next years.

So, 2030 seems to be a crucial horizon, not only because it represents the end of a tumultuous decade of successive crises (“permacrisis”), but mainly because we expect the *apogee of the competition/confrontation for global supremacy and restructuring of the international order*.

### Regional geopolitics

The Black Sea area is caught in the eye of the storm. It concentrates the conflicting potential of geopolitical crossroads, where the “worlds” meet each other. It is not only part of an ample confrontation of interests and visions, like all peripheries between rival centres of power, but it reflects the intensity of the global conflict. Subsequently, it acts like a “barometer”, indicating the growing pressures on the post-Cold War security order established after 1991.



This region is not the only periphery in the world located on a geopolitical fault, but it is, nowadays, possibly, one of the most explosive shifts. He who controls the Black Sea controls the south-eastern gates of Europe towards the Middle East and South Caucasus, and the strategic southern corridor between Europe and Asia. The hybrid competition for pre-eminence in the “crossroads region” of the Black Sea is essential for the future of the European security order, as it used to be in the past. At the origin of a new era, the Crimean War of 1853-1856 was a reaction of the Great European Powers to avoid Russian hegemony in the region.

*By 2030, most probably, the tensions will continue in the wider region, possibly with escalations of the two current wars and new conflicts in Eastern Europe, Middle East, South Caucasus, Western Balkans etc. Although a ceasefire could be signed between Russia and Ukraine no later than the end of 2025, a frozen conflict is not a guarantee for long-term security in the Black Sea area. Ceasefire does not necessarily mean peace, as the Minsk Agreements in 2014-2015 did not represent the end of the conflict, but just a break before a bigger war.*

#### **The EU, NATO enlargement in the area?**

The enthusiasm of enlargement/accession of new members in the EU and NATO will be tempered after the 2024 European and U.S. elections. Because of the occupied territories and unclear situation of the separatist regions in Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia, and member states’ disagreements regarding the future of the EU and NATO, it is *rather improbable to see any enlargement to the East by 2030*. In the Black Sea basin only the Republic of Moldova has some real chances to join the EU by 2030, however, with many “if-s” ...

Thus, the Black Sea area will remain, by the end of the decade (at least), a heterogeneous space between West and East, comprising distinct categories of countries: *NATO and the EU countries* (Romania and Bulgaria), *candidates to the European integration* in different phases of this process (Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Türkiye), *Russia* as an enemy of the West, and *Türkiye*, formally a NATO member and an EU candidate country, with changing and oscillating policies between Europe and Russia, with increasing Islamism and ambitions in the Middle East.

## Strengthening Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Romania's Strategic Partnership with Ukraine

Laurențiu PLEȘCA

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The Black Sea region, a crucial link in Europe's geopolitical and economic framework, faces multiple challenges, but also offers significant opportunities for the neighbouring countries and the European Union. The current context, marked by geopolitical tensions with the war in Ukraine and the need to strengthen energy and food security, calls for a strategic and coordinated approach to exploit the region's potential for the benefit of all stakeholders. Romania, as an EU member state in the Black Sea region, plays a key role in promoting stability, security, and prosperity in this strategic area.

The recently intensified cooperation with Ukraine, particularly in the context of the war, underlines the importance of Romania as a reliable partner and pivot for international support to Kyiv. This collaboration has materialized in various forms of assistance and bilateral initiatives, including support for Ukrainian grain transit, cooperation in the field of transport and infrastructure, and last but not least, the signing of a strategic partnership between the two states.

Romania continued to support grain exports from Ukraine after [Russia's withdrawal in July 2023](#) from the Türkiye-UN mediated agreements, also known as the Grain Deal. Moreover, Romania has become a vital hub for the transport of Ukrainian grain, facilitating its transit by opening a new rail route to Romanian ports and undertaking to double the monthly transit capacity through its ports from two million tonnes to four million tonnes of grain. [Around 60%](#) of Ukraine's total grain exports transit through Romania, thus strengthening Bucharest's position as the main transporter of these goods. This initiative has supported food security in the region and strengthened economic ties between the two countries.



Cooperation in the field of transport has also been essential, and the [establishment of a rail corridor](#) through Republic of Moldova has had a positive impact on connectivity between Bucharest, Kyiv, and Chişinău. Finally, yet importantly, progress in Romania's relationship with Ukraine was the improvement of the transport infrastructure and the facilitation of the common border crossing which demonstrated the desire of both countries to strengthen ties and cooperation in various fields even after the end of the war.

All these actions show us what a reliable partner Bucharest is for Kyiv. Romania will be a reliable partner in Ukraine's reconstruction plan, supporting the international community's efforts to help the Ukrainian economy recover. Additionally, there will be a much greater use of the [Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and Romania](#) signed on 10 October 2023.

Policy proposals for the Black Sea region, with a focus on cooperation between Romania and Ukraine, could include the following strategic directions. Firstly, a top priority should be strengthening of transport and logistics infrastructure. Developing transport infrastructure between Romania and Ukraine should focus on optimizing and expanding rail and road networks to support efficient freight flows and reduce transit time. This would also include, immediate development of [The Orient / East - Med corridor](#) covering Ukraine, Romania, and Republic of Moldova in the TEN-T extension. It can also include investments in Romanian ports to support increased transit capacity for grain and other essential goods.

Secondly, another priority should be the strengthening of energy cooperation. Interconnecting energy networks to ensure energy security for both countries and the region, thus facilitating access to diverse energy sources and promoting energy transition. Thirdly, Romania should be more involved in the support of Ukraine's post-war Reconstruction Plan to develop a win-win process. Public and private stakeholders could develop a mixed or blended financing mechanism for the reconstruction projects of Ukrainian infrastructure, with the participation of Romanian companies.

Finally, Romania should use current and future EU financial instruments dedicated to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries to increase cooperation. Romania can promote access to the EU funds for the Black Sea region to finance joint projects and stimulate economic and social development. For example, Romania could create a Romanian-Ukrainian-Moldovan working group to identify and coordinate projects eligible for European funding

*Si vis pacem, para bellum!* Or why we should continue to support Ukraine

George SCUTARU

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He holds a degree in History and a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Bucharest, as well as security programs organized in Romania and abroad by the U.S. State Department, NATO College (Rome) and the European Centre for Security Studies (Germany).



If you want peace, prepare for war! The Romans taught us not only the importance of roads, for what is now called military mobility, but also the role of permanent readiness of a military force capable of deterring aggressors. The current events near Romania's borders, in the Black Sea region, should compel the country's leaders to enhance its deterrence and defence capabilities. Primarily, they must consider all potential scenarios related to the situation on the Ukrainian front, including those with adverse effects.

The conflict in Ukraine has transformed into a war of attrition, resulting in substantial losses for both sides. Ukraine is exerting significant efforts to boost its ammunition production, hoping that Western assistance will not wane due to the growing "war fatigue", which is increasingly evident on both sides of the Atlantic. Due to the demographic disparity, Ukraine's human casualties have a much greater impact, despite the Russians suffering more losses on the front lines. Therefore, a war of attrition works to Ukraine's disadvantage, as it cannot offset the human losses, and its reliance on Western aid exposes it to shifting public and political sentiments.

The year 2024 is a crucial election year in Europe and the U.S., in which Russia will fully employ its hybrid arsenal, particularly disinformation campaigns, to diminish support for Ukraine and sow confusion and fear. Despite the bravery of the Ukrainian people, they will be unable to withstand the situation without consistent and timely support from the West. In addition, Ukraine requires economic assistance. Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has requested \$43 billion to balance the budget this year, with social stability ensured by Western support.



Why should Romania continue to help Ukraine? There are Romanians who ask this question, especially in the context of the confusion generated by populist politicians, with an anti-European discourse, who launch Russian-inspired narratives into the public space. Despite previous disputes with the neighbouring country on various issues and numerous clichés on both sides, Romania has only one option: support for Ukraine. The alternative will be, if the Ukrainian front collapses, seeing the Russians back at the mouth of the Danube and perhaps on the Prut, occupying the Republic of Moldova. A direct border with the Russian Federation is Romania's strategic nightmare, which is why it is worth every effort to avoid this scenario.

Even though 2024 will be a dense election year in Romania, we should consider several concrete actions:

1. Establish institutional mechanisms to combat disinformation.
2. Reviewing the Strategic Defence Analysis and ensuring an increase in the number of soldiers in the Romanian Army.
3. Simplify legislation for arms procurement.
4. Committing to a 3-year accelerated armament programme, focusing on anti-air and anti-missile capabilities, air and naval drones, and anti-drone and electronic warfare capabilities. Priority zero must be the strengthening of naval forces to meet the challenges in the Black Sea and protect Romania's interests in the Exclusive Economic Zone, especially the upcoming energy projects in 2025 and 2026, which will make Romania the largest gas producer in the EU.
5. Extensive investment in air and naval drone production, munitions production, and cyber capabilities.
6. Improved legislation for preparing the population for defence.
7. Increasing military salaries to make military careers more attractive.
8. Accelerate investment in infrastructure that impacts military mobility.
9. After the 2024 elections, a budget of 3% of GDP is needed for defence, to be spent in full. We need to abandon the temptation to use part of the defence funds to cover other budgetary expenditures, as it unfortunately happened in the year 2023.

It is better to prepare at a national and allied level for all possible scenarios. This way we will not be surprised by a fast and negative development of the situation and we will be able to increase the resilience of our country, but also the defence capability of NATO in the Black Sea, where Russia shows such aggressive behaviour.



## Democratic Resilience in the Black Sea Region

Clara VOLINTIRU

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Her recent publications appeared with Oxford University Press, Palgrave, Routledge, Springer, and in peer-reviewed journals such as *Journal of European Public Policy*, *European Political Science Review*, *Acta Politica*, *CESifo Economic Studies*, *European Politics and Society*, *Eastern European Politics*, *European Political Science*, or *Research & Politics*. Synthetic versions of her work are available in video abstracts or such online platforms as *Forbes*, *EUROPP*, *IPI Global Observatory*, *Emerging Europe*, *Global Policy*, *Social Europe*, *Huffington Post* and on the GMF website.




The Black Sea Region has not been acknowledged over the past years as an organic, interconnected entity. Just as negative spillover effects with democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies harm the European Union from within, so too does the democratic vulnerability in its neighbourhood, in a context of increased commitment to Eastern Enlargement. Several challenges emerge in this context.

#### **Diasporas and cross-regional vulnerabilities**

The Moldovan, Romanian, Ukrainian or Georgian Diasporas are spread across the world, and with the upcoming elections, taking place this year across Europe and America, there is an increasing risk of having a historically pro-western electoral group affected by disinformation campaigns that reach target audiences in their host countries instead of domestically.

As a super-election year is upon us across the world, the Black Sea Region is also on the verge of significant path dependencies that can shape its Western trajectory or not—Romania, Republic of Moldova, and Georgia all face upcoming elections, while no illusion of change surrounding the elections in Azerbaijan, Belarus and Russia in the first part of the year. Elections in Romania and Republic of





Moldova, for example, will be intrinsically linked in terms of influencers and disinformation narratives in the Romanian language. Georgian activists could benefit from the support of neighbouring peers from Armenia, Republic of Moldova, or Romania to escape malicious suspicions of responding only to Western interests.


There is little to no strategy on the table for coordinated non-governmental action in this respect. Donors either in the U.S. (e.g. USAID) or in the EU (e.g. DG Near), focus on in-country support for countering disinformation, while many of these narratives are imported from outside the targeted countries. Within country funding for Republic of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine on the rise, there is little incentive for local activists to collaborate with neighbouring EU-member state civic actors, which in turn creates lower public support for Eastern Enlargement in CEE countries. Cross-regional cooperation in civil society, as well as exchange programs for youth, independent media, local public officials, local associations etc. between Romania and Republic of Moldova and Ukraine and Poland are an essential stepping-stone to long-term popular support for European assistance.

#### **Linking economic assistance to democratic promotion**

There is a need to integrate amplification programming in assistance packages, as many of the investments that USAID or EU are delivering in the region, especially in Republic of Moldova, are not always connected by the public to Western support. For Moldovans and Ukrainians, the public is still far behind the elites' understanding of the interdependences in the transatlantic space and the overall benefits that Western allies are delivering to domestic groups. As democratic promotion and economic assistance are deployed distinctively, the amplification effect of the latter through the former largely misses in the region. Civic dialogues between various business associations, think tanks, independent media, and local activists should be developed to inform the public better about the impact of Western support in their local communities, as central governments and presidents tend to take all the credit domestically for any investment executed, especially in the current electoral context.

Regional infrastructure planning in the EU is revised to integrate better Ukraine and Republic of Moldova with Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria (e.g. railways, energy), but this will require substantial inter-governmental coordination and involvement of private sector actors. National governments in the region have not proven apt at supporting a meaningful cross-regional cooperation process, at either the governmental levels or private sector level (e.g. stalling in the 3SI fora). New vehicles for promoting cross-regional dialogue are essential, from convening to focused consultations to make the new corridors planned a reality in the short term.

Farmers have both shared and competing concerns in the Black Sea Region, and as part of the Black Sea Strategy, cross-border dialogue in this specific category



of stakeholder is essential to promote and maintain support for the European integration of Ukraine, and EU-led initiatives such as Solidarity lanes. Again, civic dialogues would lead to a peer-to-peer policy dialogue that can inform better-coordinated initiatives to resolve existing tensions and frustrations and alleviate public pressures against delivering further support to Ukraine in the coming years. The stakeholder group is already fervently targeted by pro-Russian opinion leaders and discarded by pro-Western ones, and presents a high electoral risk in case of polarization against pro-Western parties.

### **Policy recommendations**

Several actionable points emerge from the current context. **Firstly, domestic actors and international partners have to focus on countering external malign influences in the region.** This should not be done only through counter-narratives and Western public diplomacy, but also through media literacy, fact-checking, and investigative journalism at home and at the local level, in local communities, and national languages. Furthermore, such efforts to promote and defend democratic integrity in elections, governance processes, and public awareness, should be coordinated, emphasizing the interconnectedness of elections in Romania and Republic of Moldova for example.

**Secondly, international assistance should consolidate the demand side of the democratic resilience process,** by supporting capacity building for CSOs promoting youth engagement, voter education, and social inclusion—as pillar stones of democracy beyond the current political offers that are highly polarized and cater predominantly to its base. Beyond the war in Ukraine, the Black Sea Region will face its highest threat from within each country, as social cohesion and consensus are increasingly harder to grasp everywhere.

**Finally, all forms of diplomatic efforts should focus on supporting the public aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration in a practical manner.** Specific policy development and co-design (e.g. monitoring EU conditionalities, detailing implementation pathways for the Black Sea Strategy, contributing to the formulation of a Recovery and Reconstruction plan for Ukraine), advocacy (e.g. promoting citizen electoral monitoring), and capacity building for CSOs and leaders advocating for integration should be considered. International aid from Romania for regional civil society initiatives (e.g. cross-regional counteroffensive efforts to tackle misinformation, and promoting a Euro-Atlantic policy agenda) would position it at the forefront of the fight for trusted democratic outcomes and prosperity across the Black Sea Region.

## The Black Sea Region's Security Requires a Global Strategy Until 2030. The Contribution of Romania

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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). She recently wrote about *The dynamics of cooperation and conflict in the Black Sea area. From the region's history to current security challenges* (European Institute of Romania, December 2023).



The illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014, accompanied by its militarization, marked not only the beginning of an [international armed conflict](#) (IAC), but also served as a clear message to the international community that the Black Sea region is no longer a mere periphery of the European Union or NATO, but rather a volatile area with the potential to ignite global conflicts. Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, which commenced in February 2022, can be considered as a [new Iron Curtain](#) across Europe, Black Sea included.

The deployment of Russian drones over the Black Sea, as well as the hybrid actions in the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, have transformed what was once a regional issue into a global concern. The consequences of these actions extend beyond the military realm, encompassing social factors, such as migration and the influx of refugees, economic implications (e.g. food crises, and restrictions on Ukrainian food exports to other regions like Africa), and political ramifications - the rise of populist political parties with either pro-Russian ideologies and/or aspirations for territorial expansion. In light of these developments, any comprehensive security strategy for the Black Sea region, in my perspective, should not be determined by the outcomes of national elections, including those in 2024 and in the subsequent years until 2030. The defence of democracies necessitates to reduce the volatility and unpredictability posed by aggressive actors.

The domino effect initiated by Putin signifies that the security of the Black Sea region is no longer confined to the regional level, but rather assumes a global dimension [and a deep attachment to multilateralism, as Romania's global commitments are to promote freedom, strengthen democracy and observe the rules of international law, as the foundations on which the security and prosperity of](#)


[nations are built](#). Stability and predictability are needed, with an emphasis on “predictability” that underscores its significance, in my opinion.

As we are in the [age of the polycrisis](#), predictability has emerged as a crucial element for the Western world, serving as a unifying force for all those who seek peace and democracy. Romania recognizes the significance of fostering strong alliances, like the recently established partnership with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as outlined in the new *Joint Declaration on the Romanian-British Strategic Partnership* of March 2023. Following this understanding, both parties assume that together will strengthen NATO’s long-term defence posture, ensuring it has a wide network of partnerships ready to tackle all threats to Euro-Atlantic security. [Russia’s aggressive actions in the Black Sea, especially Ukraine, since 2014, highlight the importance of their cooperation in the Black Sea, Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans.](#)

Romania places great importance on developing a comprehensive security and development strategy for the Black Sea region, considering it a national priority. By assuming the role of a pole and provider of security in the Black Sea and beyond, Romania aims to contribute to international stability. Furthermore, Romania seeks to enhance the partnership between the European Union and NATO, ensuring a more effective defence framework, and avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a forceful democratic community, with a strong emphasis on the Euro-Atlantic synergy.

The security situation in the Black Sea region needs a unified approach to address current and emerging threats. Consequently, Romania, along with its NATO allies, the Republic of Türkiye and Bulgaria, signed a [Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of a Task Force to Counter the Sea Mines in the Black Sea](#), on 11 January 2024. This initiative aims to achieve two crucial objectives: enhancing safety of navigation in the Black Sea, and bolstering NATO’s deterrence and defence posture on its Eastern flank. Additionally, [Romania participates](#) in training programmes conducted in the UK, such as the [INTERFLEX operation](#), and in the European Union, e.g. the EU Military Assistance Mission Support of Ukraine (EUMAM). It is worth highlighting that Romania [hosts](#) the *European F-16 Training Centre* for Ukrainian pilots. Furthermore, *NATO Response Force* units have been [deployed](#) to Romania since March 2022 to reinforce the Alliance’s defensive posture in the Eastern part.

For Romania, the membership to NATO and the EU, along with its strategic partnership with the United States, provide the foundation for its security options and approaches. These alliances offer the advantages of strong security, but, also, specific obligations. Moreover, Romania’s active involvement in the *Three Seas*



*Initiative* is of great significance, particularly as regards the preparations for assisting Ukraine's reconstruction following the end of the war.

For Bucharest, two of the objectives assumed by its foreign policy for the next period (until 2030) are the [operationalization and full development of NATO multinational projects on the territory of Romania](#) (*South-East Multinational Corps Command - HQ MNC-SE; South-East Multinational Division Command East - HQ MND - SE; Command of the South-East Multinational Brigade - HQ MN BDE-SE; NATO Forces Integration Unit - NFIU*), and the implementation of the necessary measures for countering the anti-access and area denial systems (A2/AD). Regarding the European Union's role as a security provider on the international stage, Romania supports and is involved in the EU's efforts to manage crises in the Black Sea region.

As a member of the EU, [Romania endorses and plays an active part in a series of EU Initiatives](#), such as: the *Permanent Structured Cooperation*, the *European Defence Fund*, and the *Coordinated Annual Review on Defence*. Romania also participates in the decision-making process within the *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP), and in the capability development processes in the multinational cooperation formats provided by the *European Defence Agency*. Moreover, it contributes to the operations and missions carried out under the auspices of the EU.

Romania's role as a security provider in the Black Sea area is clearly defined in its national documents that highlight the security of this area as a crucial objective in its foreign policy. Through its strategic posture and active engagement, Romania proves to be an essential actor in the future construction of security in the Black Sea, contributing to the promotion of predictability and democracy in the region.

## Afterword: The Black Sea - From Peacetime to an Age of Conflicts Agenda

Mihai SEBE

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When we discuss about the Black Sea, one famous quote can apply “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” (William Faulkner). This has never been truer as in the case of this troubled region, the home of the legendary Golden Fleece, where periods of intense trade alternated with long periods of apparent calm, and times of conflict.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romania has had a rather disengaged attitude towards the Black Sea, with limited national reflections on why it matters to us, and what we can do in the region. As the Second World War unfolded, the historian [Gheorghe I. Brătianu](#) spoke about the two main geopolitical positions in the Black Sea that Romania should pay attention to: the Bosphorus entry point and Crimea. He stated that the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries can be summarised as ‘a struggle for the Black Sea between Russia and Europe’.

After Romania’s accession to the EU and NATO, the Black Sea returned to the continental agenda. [Romania promoted](#) the strategic importance of the Black Sea for the regional stability and the European continent. Its importance stems from the developments in the states of this area and from the major role played by the Black Sea in connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. In a nutshell, it is a reprise of [two conflicting visions of the Black Sea](#). One of them considers that **the Black Sea must belong to the riparians** (“they have to manage it; they have to decide on its destiny, including its strategical problems”). The other suggests that **the Black Sea must be an open sea**, not only for trade, but also for strategic reasons (“it must be acknowledged that other strategic actors can influence strategic developments in the region”).



As a result, swiftly after joining the EU, we have had the **2007 [Black Sea Synergy](#)**, which identified a series of main cooperation areas with key elements, including **building confidence, fostering regional dialogue, and achieving tangible results for states and citizens in the region**. The Synergy was to be subject to an array of evaluation reports, the most recent implementation report being published in 2019 and titled **[“The Joint Staff Working Document 'Black Sea Synergy: review of a regional cooperation initiative - period 2015-2018”](#)**. It underlined the region’s **untapped potential for interconnectivity**, given **[the bridging role of the Black Sea basin](#)**.


The heyday of this peaceful approach to the Black Sea was to be encountered during the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the EU. In May 2019, we saw the adoption of a **[Ministerial Declaration on a Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea](#)**, and of the **[Black Sea Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda](#)** in line with the Black Sea Synergy. **[Council Conclusions on the EU's engagement to the Black Sea regional cooperation](#)** is another key document of that period. It “emphasizes the increasing strategic importance of the Black Sea area for the EU and calls for enhanced engagement to the regional cooperation there”, while also expressing concerns over “the security challenges in the Black Sea area”.

As the situation evolved in times that are more conflictual, Romania focused on the security needs of the region. The adoption of **[Romania’s Black Sea Security Strategy](#)** on July 18, 2019, in the Supreme Council of National Defence, reflected these novel requirements. The intention was to consolidate NATO’s posture of deterrence and defence in the region. Romania’s actions aimed to ensure the much-needed military capabilities, to use NATO’s and EU’s instruments and programmes likely to improve regional security, to support the NATO partnerships (with the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine), to intensify the political dialogue with the allies, to constantly monitor the regional situation, and to adopt measures for combatting cross-border criminality. As a riparian state, we have also provided a common view and a complex understanding of the Black Sea in the transatlantic circles that helped draft the U.S. Black Sea Strategy.

If we examine the parliamentary interpellations from the **[Chamber of Deputies](#)** and the **[Romanian Senate](#)** from 2021 onwards, and the latest **[Government Programme 2023-2024](#)**, we can discern a series of key topics.

First and foremost, the Black Sea is strongly connected with the **energy security** aspects, the topic of the offshore natural gas exploitations in the Black Sea being a recurrent one. In 2022, we witnessed the official launch of the natural gas production in the **[Midia Natural Gas Development Project](#)**, the first new project on the Romanian continental plateau in the last 30 years.





We also have on the agenda the Agreement, signed in 2022, between the Governments of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania, and titled [Strategic Partnership in the green energy development and transport fields](#). It is meant to promote the production and transportation of green energy (electric energy and green hydrogen). The interconnection is expected to be challenging, and yet eventually feasible.

The Black Sea fishery sector is also on the agenda with a series of parliamentary questions related to the fishing of [various species](#), and the creation of [logistical facilities](#) for fishermen.


As the conflict in Ukraine rages on, a new series of parliamentary inquiries addressed the issue of **pollution in the Black Sea**. The Romanian authorities are thus carefully [monitoring the impact](#) of events in Ukraine on the level of pollution of the Black Sea.

Last but not least, **interconnectivity** is on the agenda, as Romania promotes the **development of interconnectivity based on the completion of the Agreement on the Caspian Sea-Black Sea transport route** (an initiative of Romania and Turkmenistan, with the participation of Georgia and Azerbaijan). Another priority was and continues to be **the development of transport infrastructure** through various sources of financing, including the National Resilience and Recovery Plan. The [Three Seas Initiative continues to have a remarkable potential, amplified by the current geopolitical context](#), with the [Rail2Sea](#) and [Via Carpathia](#) projects that would connect the entire region.

As the conflict in Ukraine rages on, **the security of the Black Sea is essential**, and Romania tries to foster a unitary defence throughout the entire Eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, as well as the advancement of its own major objectives. Since [Ukraine's victory is imperative for the security and stability of the Black Sea region](#), the need to consolidate the regional security initiatives becomes crucial, given also the role of the region in providing [food security](#) for vulnerable countries.

In terms of security, Romania welcomed the recognition of the strategic importance of the Black Sea region. At the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington, one of Romania's priorities will be to strengthen the defence posture on the Eastern Flank, especially at the Black Sea. As Romania continues its bilateral dialogue with the United States of America, this [joint action will proceed with positive, tangible effects for the security, resilience, prosperity, and connectivity of the Black Sea region](#).

At the end of the day, the Black Sea region security is a matter of interest for all of us. A part of Romania's [grand objectives](#) are: the consolidation in the eastern



proximity of a stable, democratic, and prosperous area, by connecting the Black Sea space to European and Euro-Atlantic cooperation values and processes, and by boosting regional cooperation with focus on concrete projects and benefits for the citizens of the states in the region. These cannot be achieved without peace in the region.

In order to achieve this, in my opinion, we need to act on several plans. At the national level, we must continue the efforts towards infrastructure development, economic growth, sustained improvement of the good governance, and societal resilience. Moreover, we should rediscover the art of territorial defence with all its prerequisites: sufficient human resources, developing the arms industry, etc.

At the regional level, we must pursue the efforts towards obtaining full integration into the Schengen Area, and increasing the relevance of the trilateral formats in the region and of the Three Seas Initiative. Working together with Türkiye is essential, as it is a key naval power in the region and a NATO ally.

As the European Union is focusing more on the Black Sea region, given the numerous candidate states in the region, both old and new, we should also strive for transforming the Black Sea Synergy into a fully-fledged European Union Black Sea Strategy. Meanwhile, we should push for the enlargement process in the region, avoiding any unnecessary delays.

We need to do a soul search in order to see what we are willing to do in order to attain our objectives, by working together with our allies and like-minded friends in view of creating plans for the region to prosper, give hope and good future prospects. Transforming the Black Sea into a region where the ancient cries of joy replace the drums of war is within our reach as the seas are meant to bring us together, not to separate us. [Thálatta! Thálatta!](#)

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