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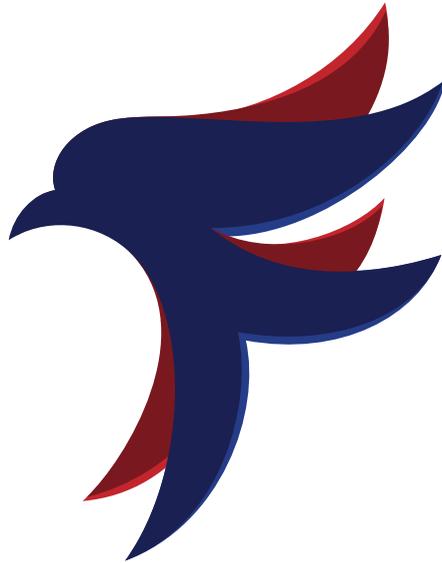


BLACK SEA STRATEGY PAPERS

BLACK SEA STRATEGIC VOLATILITY: PLAYERS & PATTERNS

Iulia Joja





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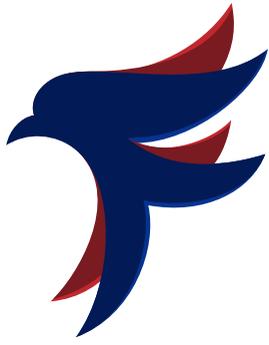
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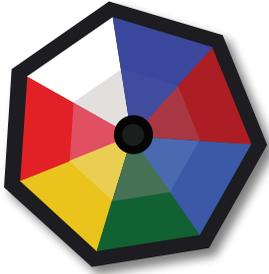
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INTRODUCTION



In the centre, Turkish frigate TCG Turgutreis during Breeze 19. The Bulgarian-led maritime exercise involving 12 NATO Allies and 27 ships, strengthened NATO's readiness in the Black Sea region. (Source: NATO)

The Black Sea has been called “the inhospitable sea”¹ because of the “savage” tribes living on its shores. Today, the region is inhospitable for Western countries as they struggle to provide security in the region. The primary cause of this insecurity is the Russian Federation. Moscow has been the primary source and perpetrator of conflicts in the region, occupying territories of neighboring countries, as it did in Transnistria (Republic of Moldova) in 1991, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008 (Georgia), and Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 (Ukraine).² Russia has used these territorial conquests to strengthen its military presence in the Black Sea and try to establish itself as a regional hegemon. Today, Russia uses its enhanced Black Sea capabilities not only to destabilize the region militarily, politically, and economically, but also to move borders, acquire territory, and project power into the Mediterranean. Thus, the Black Sea has become the theater for 19th century-style warfare, such as imperial expansion and land grabs.

It is easiest to understand Black Sea insecurity in

comparison to the Baltic Sea, where littoral states share a heightened threat perception of Russia. While not all countries on the Baltic Sea, namely the Kingdom of Sweden and the Republic of Finland, are members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), they nevertheless have robust regional cooperation. As a result, Baltic Sea states have succeeded in addressing the growing threat of Russia's military buildup in Kaliningrad, where the Kremlin has invested in Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities to deny adversaries access or to hinder freedom of maneuver.³ However, increased scrutiny of Russian military developments in the Baltic Sea serves Moscow's purposes by directing Western attention away from the Black Sea—where countries are threatened and even invaded by Russia.⁴

Despite this situation, in the Black Sea, even NATO members cannot agree on a security policy. Romania has declared the “Westernization” of the Black Sea—via NATO or other Western institutions—a security priority for over a decade.⁵ But the Republic of Bulgaria

1 Sabina Fati, “Ocolul Mării Negre în 90 de zile: Șapte țări, opt granițe și o lovitură de stat în prime-time [Around the Black Sea in 90 days: Seven countries, eight borders and a coup on prime time],” (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2017).

2 Nagorno-Karabakh, a region claimed by both the Republic of Armenia and Republic of Azerbaijan, is the exception.

3 Ian Williams, “The Russia – NATO A2AD Environment,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 3, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/>.

4 Sebastien Roblin, “The Suwalki Gap: The 40-Mile Line NATO is Ready to Go to War with Russia Over,” The National Interest, April 13, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/suwalki-gap-40-mile-line-nato-ready-go-war-russia-over-52172>.

5 Iulia-Sabina Joja, Romania's Strategic Culture, 1990-2014: Continuity and Change in a Post-Communist Country's Evolution of National Interests and Security Policies, (Stuttgart: ibidem Press, 2019).



(Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica)

wants to keep Russian “peace and love” in the region.⁶ Both Bulgaria and Republic of Turkey often side with Russia, though they are members of the NATO Alliance. Bucharest is joined by Georgia and Ukraine, which rejected their accommodating approach to Moscow after they were invaded. Now, both Georgia and Ukraine are at war with Russia on their own territory, whether in Ukraine’s Donbas or Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. Both Tbilisi and Kyiv are modernizing their militaries to boost their defenses—in an effort to increase their chances of joining NATO and to keep the West involved. They perceive cooperation with NATO as their path to joining the Western bloc, as the European Union is militarily absent from the region.

Beyond the conventional threat of Russian aggression and military expansion, Black Sea countries face two other threats: disinformation and corruption. Russia plays a hand in both. Through disinformation and control over media assets, the Kremlin has built a complex narrative of traditional values that feeds the conservative-leaning public in Black Sea countries and beyond.⁷ This has been so successful that

even traditionally Russophobic publics, such as in Romania, have started doubting Western values and are leaning towards the East.⁸ Russian meddling also exacerbates oligarchic state capture and corruption within the region. Oligarchs in Black Sea countries have siphoned off domestic and foreign funding—from the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF), for instance—intended to develop agriculture, industry, and infrastructure.⁹ This corruption fuels divisions between the rich and the poor and similarly sheds doubt on Western-backed democratization efforts.¹⁰ Thus, the Black Sea’s wars—against the Russian military, disinformation, and corruption—cannot be separated from one another.

Nevertheless, Black Sea states have failed to devise a coherent strategy toward Russia. On paper, three of six littoral states are NATO members and two are NATO partners, eager to join the Alliance. In practice, however, Russia’s “divide and conquer” policy has been so successful that the Black Sea is a major source of insecurity. Black Sea states agree on one thing: they want the region to develop and prosper, but their policies often divide the region.

6 Victor Kotsev, “Bulgaria Pulls out of Joint Black Sea Patrol,” *BalkanInsight*, June 16, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/16/bulgaria-pulls-out-of-joint-black-sea-patrol-06-16-2016/>.

7 Iulia-Sabina Joja, *Why Putin’s Foreign Policy Is Not Rational*, (Bucharest: Experts for Security and Global Affairs, 2019), <http://www.esga.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Iulia-Sabina-Joja-Policy-Paper.pdf>.

8 Oana Popescu & Rufin Zamfir, ed., “Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence,” (Bucharest: GlobalFocus Center, 2018), <http://www.global-focus.eu/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>.

9 Lucy Papachristou, “EU Says Moldova ‘Trapped’ by Oligarchy, Cuts \$22 Mil. in Funding,” *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/27-ccwatch/cc-watch-briefs/8913-eu-says-moldova-trapped-by-oligarchy-cuts-22-mil-in-funding>.

10 Ernest Vardanean, “Moldova between Russia and the West: Internal Divisions behind the Commitment to European Integration,” *Russie.NEI. Visions*, No. 110 (August 2018), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rmv_110_vardanean_moldova_russia_and_the_west_2018.pdf.

SECURITY INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF BLACK SEA COUNTRIES

This section analyzes the policies and orientation of the Black Sea states and how allegiances have shifted during and after the Cold War.

Russia

Moscow's aim is to dominate as much territory surrounding the Black Sea as possible. The only Black Sea country with a truly comprehensive policy, Russia views the Black Sea as its own lake, populated by weaker actors who can do little to contest its regional hegemony. Russia's strategy towards Black Sea security is to negotiate, and if that doesn't work, to bully countries to bend to its will. Moscow looks to handicap Black Sea countries in the region by playing them against each other or even by physically invading them. Moscow put into practice the model of a "non-claimed" attack. Creating a precedent, it asserted its hegemony with the intrinsic terror of non-claimed attacks possible in extremis against NATO members, too. On the one hand, Moscow heavily militarized the peninsula asserting itself as hegemon through A2/AD capabilities. On the other, Russia has developed a working relationship with Turkey, recognizing its role in the Mediterranean with the price of alienating Ankara from NATO.

Until 2014, the Black Sea was a volatile region spattered with frozen conflicts, where neighboring states tried to keep the status quo and avoid stirring the bear. What changed in 2014 was not merely Russia's annexation of Crimea. True, in less than 48 hours, "little green men" seized the peninsula, establishing a model for a non-claimed attack that Russia could use on NATO territory since Article 5 is only triggered if all member states agree that a country was attacked. Rather, it was the subsequent massive militarization of the peninsula and the ongoing war in Donbas and now the Sea of Azov that truly transformed the Black Sea into a volatile region.¹¹

Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and the precedents Moscow created with its 2014 actions

have transformed the Black Sea from a semi-stable ex-Soviet lake with intrinsic mistrust into one of the most volatile regions in the world. Strategically, the annexation of Crimea has ensured Russia's regional hegemony. Through its subsequent militarization of the peninsula, Russia has increased its military capabilities in the Black Sea. Russian defense forces in Sevastopol, a Russian naval base for which Moscow paid an annual lease to Kyiv since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, were operationally limited prior to the annexation. After annexation, Moscow increased the military capabilities in Sevastopol and built an A2/AD bubble. This weapons system enables Russia to monitor the entire Black Sea; attack NATO territory by land, sea, and air; project power into the Mediterranean; and deny access to enemy militaries. In case of a conventional attack on a Black Sea NATO member, Alliance forces would not be able to retaliate or even access the A2/AD zone by air or sea. It would take land forces deployed from Federal Republic of Germany weeks to get to the Black Sea coast. In case of a far more likely non-claimed attack—when little green men with unmarked uniforms invade—the attacked country would have to fend for itself against an incapacitating A2/AD that can now cover large segments of Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey.¹²

Russia's militarization of the Crimean peninsula since 2014 has enabled Moscow to deny Black Sea access to enemy powers and to project its own military power deep into the Mediterranean.¹³ As a result, Russia has become even stronger in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Levant than the Soviet Union ever was. Before 1990, Turkey's staunch pro-Western stance limited the USSR's ability to project power from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Today, Turkey enables Russia by tolerating its hegemonic position in the Black Sea and by allying with Moscow in Syrian Arab Republic.

Recognizing that Turkey gatekeeps the Black Sea through the Montreux Convention, and thus can limit Russian access to the sea, Moscow grants Ankara preferential treatment. Towards all other Black Sea countries, Russia adopts a confrontational policy, whether by invasion, such as in Moldova, Georgia, and

11 Gustav Gressel, "Occupational hazards: The Russian military in Crimea," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 17, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_occupational_hazards_the_russian_military_in_crimea.

12 Jesse Johnson, "Russia sends 'squadrons' of nuclear-capable bombers to Crimea in response to U.S. missile shield in Romania," Japan Times, March 19, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/03/19/world/russia-sends-squadrons-nuclear-capable-bombers-crimea-response-u-s-missile-shield-romania/#.XZpj5UZKiUm>.

13 Sergey Sukhankin, "Russia Pours More Military Hardware Into 'Fortress Crimea,'" Jamestown Foundation, 14, no. 147 (2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-pours-military-hardware-fortress-crimea/>.



(Source: kremlin.ru)

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(Source: Anton Holoborodko)

Ukraine, or by threats, like those directed at Bulgaria and Romania. The rare carrots Moscow offers, such as access to energy through new pipelines and lower gas prices, are rarely implemented and often come with heavy strings attached. In the case of Moldova, Georgia, or Ukraine, Russia's carrots are usually unrealistic: take the encouragement of Bulgaria's illusion to become a regional energy hub (because Russia will not support additional energy flows through Greece), or let Ukraine believe that it has a chance to maintain its strategic advantage as key energy transit country. Towards Ankara, Russian carrots also have caveats. They serve to incentivize Turkey to accommodate Russian security policy and to minimize Western influence in Turkey, thus presenting a stick to the West. The most prominent example Moscow's sale of its S-400 anti-aircraft system to Ankara. NATO argues that the purchase will make the Alliance, particularly its new F-35 fighter jets, vulnerable to Russia, leading the U.S. to cancel the delivery of F-35s to Turkey.¹⁴ Another example is the newly completed Turkish Stream pipeline, which will deliver gas from Russia to Turkey through the Black Sea. Just months away from operation, the new pipeline impedes the top priority of EU's Energy Strategy: diversifying energy sources away from Russia.

Turkey

In the Black Sea, Turkey has maintained its interwar policy for the last 80 years. The constant in Turkey's regional policy has been to keep the Black Sea "internal"—that is, to minimize NATO and non-littoral states' access. When Turkey obtained sovereignty over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits in 1936, it was non-aligned. During the Cold War, however, pressure from the Soviet Union induced Turkey to join the NATO in 1952. Consecutive governments have left the "keep internal" policy towards the Black Sea unchanged and unchallenged by following a policy which has become known as "zero problems with neighbors." In the early 1990s, after having been stronghanded by the Soviet Union from non-alignment to joining NATO, Ankara attempted to assert itself as regional leader by forming Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), without significant success. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's grip on power and subsequent urge for international recognition following the 2016 attempted

coup has caused Turkey to warm up to Russia. Moscow has offered Turkey recognition as regional power in exchange for cooperating in Syria and buying Russian military capabilities. Renewed strategic relations with Russia have translated into leaving Russian hegemony unchallenged. Simultaneously, Ankara invests in the Istanbul Canal, which will enable increased control over the sea.

Ankara hasn't updated its Black Sea security policy since the end of the Cold War. The Montreux Convention was created to give Turkey control over its straits and thus to balance Soviet/Russian forces in the Black Sea given Turkey's NATO membership. However, the annexation of Crimea and multiplication of Russian forces in the region has not led Turkey to reconsider its Black Sea strategy. On the contrary, Ankara remains highly resistant to any increase in NATO forces in the region. This is unsurprising, as the majority of Turks see the United States as their main security threat, a belief fueled by the regime's anti-American rhetoric following the 2016 coup attempt.¹⁵ After parts of the Turkish military attempted the coup to oust President Erdogan, over 70,000 people were arrested¹⁶ and 160,000 lost their jobs for alleged ties to Fetullah Gülen, a Turkish businessman living in the U.S. whose movement is designated as a terrorist organization by Ankara.¹⁷ Erdogan remains convinced that Washington was behind the 2016 event and accuses the United States of harboring alleged coup initiator Fetullah Gülen. Through a series of trials against military leaders, a strong secular force in Turkey, Erdogan has since tightened his grip on power, most prominently through the disputed 2017 constitutional referendum that abolished the parliamentary system in favor of super-presidentialism.¹⁸

Instead of attempting to balance Russian power in the Black Sea and Middle East, Ankara has begrudgingly opted to cooperate with Moscow, accepting its dominance. It seems that President Erdogan, in fact, seeks to balance Western power with Russian forces. In recent years, Turkey has focused its limited resources on the conflict in Syria, thus reducing its presence in the Black Sea. While tensions between Ankara and Moscow erupted after the Turkish military downed a Russian fighter jet in 2015, relations have since been mended and cooperation revamped. In 2014, President Erdogan refrained from expressing anything more than "concern" regarding the violation of Crimean Tatars' minority rights in Russia-occupied Crimea, but

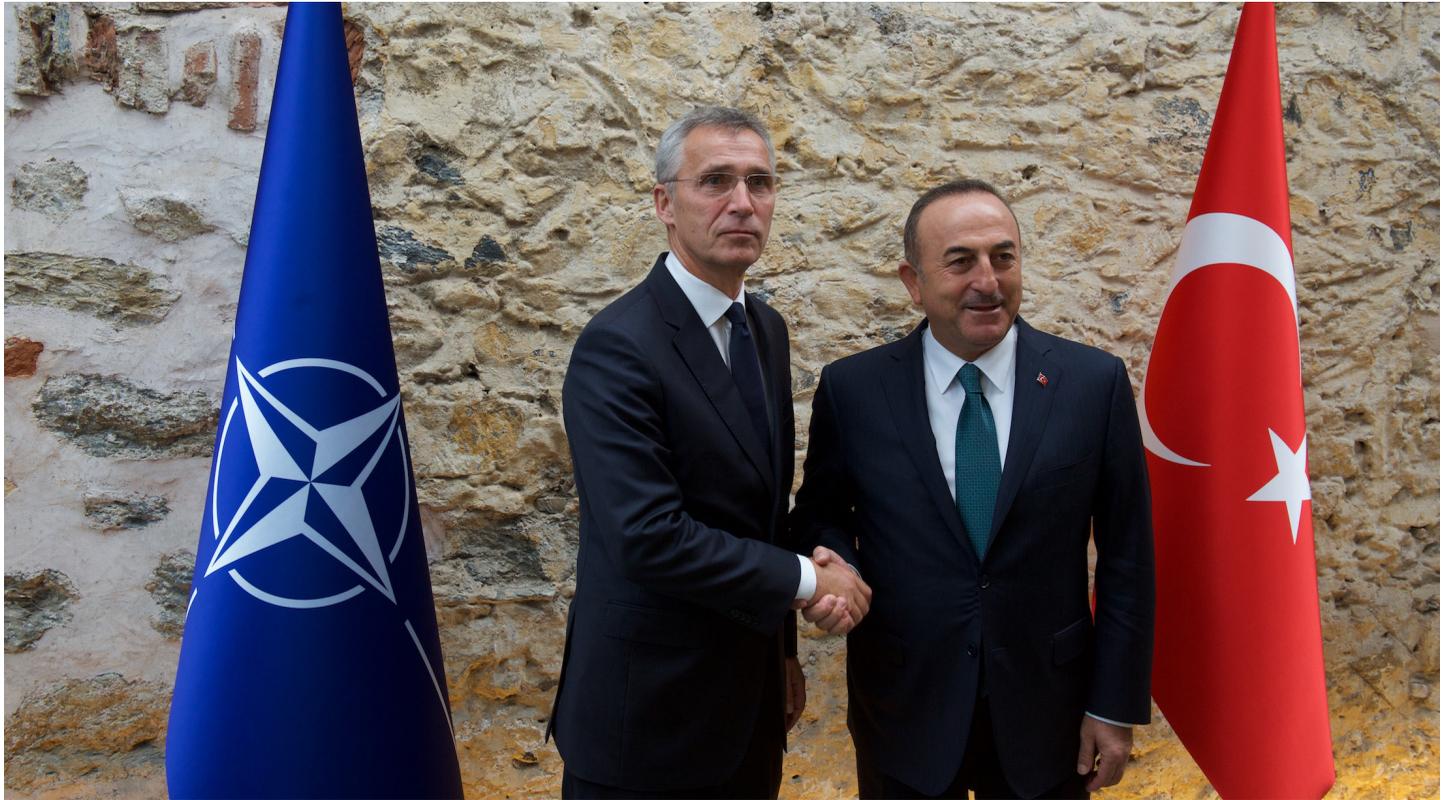
14 Valerie Insinna, "Turkish suppliers to be eliminated from F-35 program in 2020," Defense News, June 7, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2019/06/07/turkish-suppliers-to-be-eliminated-from-f-35-program-in-2020/>.

15 Selim Sazak, "The U.S.-Turkey Relationship is Worse Off Than You Think," Foreign Policy, September 11, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/11/the-u-s-turkey-relationship-is-worse-off-than-you-think/>.

16 "Turkey: 32,000 jailed for links to group 'behind' coup," Al Jazeera, September 28, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/turkey-32000-jailed-links-group-coup-160928090832760.html>.

17 s "Turkey elections: Six arrested for 'insulting Erdogan' on social media head of major national polls," The Independent, June 24, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkey-elections-arrests-insulting-president-erdogan-opposition-a8414146.html>.

18 "Turkey coup trial: Court to jail 104 ex-military for life," BBC, May 22, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44204634>.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlut Cavusoglu. (Source: NATO)

he refused to recognize the annexation. Nevertheless, Ankara decided not to join its Western allies in imposing Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia. This policy of looking the other way when it comes to the Tatars reflects Turkish government's mindset of "zero problems with neighbors," as well as accommodation towards Russia.

Ankara's policy towards Russia in the Black Sea framework has evolved from Cold War containment to contemporary alignment. Turkey's interests in the Black Sea region are limited compared to the resources Ankara has directed in recent years to the Middle East, where Ankara faces a migrant crisis and a war on its borders.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia's attempts to maintain a foothold in neighboring countries via intervention created frozen conflicts and ungoverned areas throughout the Black Sea. Responding to the region's volatility, littoral states created a series of regional cooperation formats aimed at the Black Sea's stabilization. The most prominent of these initiatives is the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), created by Turkey in 1992. BSEC hosts regular high-level meetings and features various working groups. A Black Sea Trade and Development Bank and a think tank called the International Centre for Black Sea Studies also grew

from this framework. BSEC currently includes 12 member states and just as many observers. Despite setting high aims of increasing regional stability by boosting entrepreneurship, the results of BSEC remain limited.

Ankara is open to cooperating with other countries in the region, particularly Georgia and Romania, and still seeks to keep "extra-regional powers" out of the Black Sea. The Istanbul Canal project, which Ankara says will not be subject to the Montreux Convention will bolster Turkey's control over the region.¹⁹ No military vessels will pass through the canal without good relations with Turkey. Ankara sees no allies, just threats—both from the West and from the East. Though regional bilateral cooperation outside the NATO framework with its partners are constructive, they will not lighten the burden of NATO isolation. Nevertheless, deep-seated threat perceptions of the West, fueled by government propaganda, deter Turkey from challenging Russia in the Black Sea and thus from a stronger position in the region.

Today, Turkey seems to have forgotten the support it received from the West for regional security cooperation. Ankara has sided with Moscow militarily, by acquiring the S-400 systems, and on energy issues, through the almost finalized Turkish Stream project. Both decisions will further alienate Turkey's Western

¹⁹"Turkey to Start Work on Kanal Istanbul This Year," World Maritime News, January 16, 2018, <https://worldmaritimeneews.com/archives/240783/turkey-to-start-work-on-kanal-istanbul-this-year/>.



Eight Allies join forces in Romania for Exercise SCORPIONS FURY 18. (Source: NATO)

allies: Washington has cancelled the delivery of F-35 jets and is looking for strategic alternatives to Turkey in the region. The United States, forced by Ankara's pivot, is now considering investing in Greece instead, which is just as reluctant towards American power. This will leave Turkey out of the loop in Western Russian policies and isolated from its Western allies. A softening of Ankara's approach towards NATO military capabilities and knowledge transfers outside the Alliance would alleviate Turkey's deepening isolation.

Romania

Romania sees itself as the key promoter of Western values and institutions in the Black Sea.²⁰ Bucharest placed Black Sea security high on the agenda during Traian Basescu's presidency from 2004-14. Under his leadership, during which Romania joined the EU, the government adopted a proactive foreign policy, prioritizing Black Sea security. Bucharest's policy was to portray itself as a stability factor in the region and, at the same time, put the Black Sea on the Western agenda. Romania launched its most notable regional security initiative, called the Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Cooperation (BSF), which aimed to establish regular high-level consultations among countries in region—with the notable exclusion of

Russia—and the EU. Following the annexation of Crimea, Romania's government adopted aggressive rhetoric towards Russia, calling for harsh sanctions and arming Ukraine with lethal weapons.²¹ However, Romania's attention has been turned away by corruption problems. Both Romania's rhetoric and efforts to Westernize, democratize, and securitize the Black Sea region have been muted since President Klaus Iohannis' took office. The government's current struggles with corruption have also contributed to its reduced attention towards the region. While Romania currently holds the EU presidency, Bucharest has not put Black Sea security on the EU agenda.

Within the EU framework, Romania also launched Black Sea Synergy, a forum to develop an EU security strategy for the region. Romania's results on both fronts remain uninspiring: the BSF has not convened since its inauguration, and the EU hasn't launched a Black Sea strategy. For the past years, several governments changes and corruption scandals have turned Bucharest's attention inwards and have left its regional foreign policy void. Romania participated in the Three Seas initiative, a regional forum of twelve EU member states aimed at inter-state cooperation around investment in infrastructure and business, and the Romania-launched B9, which is a consultation platform of the nine eastern flank NATO member

²⁰ "Iohannis: Romania -- reliable ally, promoter of NATO values, stability pillar in Black Sea region," ACTMedia: Romanian News Agency, April 3, 2019, <https://actmedia.eu/daily/iohannis-romania-reliable-ally-promoter-of-nato-values-stability-pillar-in-black-sea-region/80345>.

²¹ Alexandra Vlădescu and Cătălina Mihai, "Băseșcu: Armata ucraineană riscă un măcel dacă nu este sprijinită de NATO. Ucraina s-a săturat de câști și arme neletale [Băseșcu: The Ukrainian army risks a slaughter if it is not supported by NATO. Ukraine is tired of headphones and non-lethal weapons]," Mediafax, August 29, 2014, <https://www.mediafax.ro/politic/basescu-armata-ucrainean-a-risca-un-macel-daca-nu-este-sprajinita-de-nato-sustin-trecerea-la-o-noua-etapa-de-sanctiuni-impotriva-rusiei-live-text-13166684>.

states aimed at increasing regional security dialogue.²² Apart from these two projects that limit themselves in reach to dialogue and consultation, Romania has not put constructive proposals on the table. Furthermore, a regional Black Sea cooperation format that transcends NATO and EU membership status to include Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine hasn't been initiated. In order to stabilize and "democratize" the Black Sea, Bucharest will have to step up its game and draft inclusive security projects.

The United States remains the country's most important security partner. Romania hosts American ballistic missile defenses and an American Black Sea naval base. The country has a bipartisan treaty in place to maintain the defense budget at 2% of GDP for 10 years, per NATO requirements. Bucharest has promoted NATO among neighbors by pushing for their membership at the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2007 and has attempted to get support among members states for a Black Sea fleet before the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw. The strategic partnership with the United States helps Romania feel relatively safe as Russia issues existential threats, expands its Anti Access/Area Denial²³ to increasingly cover Romanian territory, and possibly already station nuclear weapons in nearby Crimea.²⁴ But this is hardly enough towards the aim of becoming a "regional stability factor."²⁵ Over the last few years, Romania has fallen short in its efforts to match Bucharest's rhetoric of acting as a stabilizing factor in the Black Sea region.

However, Romania is a Black Sea model. A bipartisan agreement proposed by President Iohannis in the aftermath of the 2014 Newport NATO summit established 2% of the national defense budget to be attained in 2017 and maintained for the next decade. Though the short lifespan of governments over the last few years and a very bureaucratic process has prevented the Ministry of Defense to spend the entire 2% (in 2018 1.8% were spent) on acquisitions, Bucharest is determined in its quest to boost national defense with modern, interoperable capabilities.²⁶

Romania's current Black Sea security strategy is limited

to minimal NATO promotion—that is, cooperating with the U.S., the only NATO member with a notable presence on the Black Sea—and passive cooperation in regional formats. The discrepancy between Romania's rhetoric and actions becomes visible in its relations with Black Sea neighbors. Bucharest engages with Ukraine, Georgia, and even Moldova only in the context of EU and NATO discussions, refraining from most bilateral cooperation.

In the case of Ukraine, disagreements over Ukrainian language laws have compelled Bucharest to block bilateral cooperation in other sectors for years. Though Bucharest prides itself for having been the first country to recognize Ukrainian independence in 1991 and the Association Agreement in 2014, Bucharest has yet to match words with actions. Instead of drawing neighbors into Western institutional structures, Romania rather seems to enforce oligarchic and corrupt structures in the region. Most recently, in a political scandal which involved the existence of two parallel governments in Moldova, Bucharest initially refused to recognize the democratically formed one, despite recognitions from both the West (the EU and the U.S.) and the East (Russia).²⁷ Romania continued to support the government of Moldovan oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc for several days after the new government formed.

Ironically, despite Romania's perceived role as the "Westernizer" and stabilizer in the Black Sea, its bilateral efforts are lackluster. Foreign and security cooperation between Turkey and Georgia or between Georgia and Ukraine significantly exceeds Bucharest's engagement with these countries. The same goes for energy: though energy independent itself, Bucharest has not been able to help its neighbors decrease their dependence on Russian gas. Energy-wise, Bucharest also has a problematic track record, delaying the necessary interconnectors with neighboring Moldova, Hungary, and Bulgaria to the extent that the EU Commission had to intervene to push Bucharest towards conforming to EU energy policy.²⁸ Creating energy interconnectors would enable a vital degree of autonomy from Russian gas flow dependency for the region.

22 "3 Seas Initiative Summit," 3 Seas Initiative Summit, three-seas.eu, <http://three-seas.eu/>.

23 Octavian Manea et. al, "NATO Warsaw Summit & Beyond: Special Report," Romania Energy Center, 2016, https://www.roec.biz/wp-content/uploads/output/2016/10/ROEC_NATO_WARSAW_SUMMIT_BEYOND_Oct_2016-__output.pdf.

24 Daniel Boffey, "Russia may have nuclear arms in Crimea, hacked EU cables warn," Guardian, December 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/dec/19/hacked-eu-cables-hailed-trump-meeting-as-success-for-putin>.

25 "President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, met with President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Mr. Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, in the margins of the EU-League of Arab States Summit," Office of the President of Romania, February 23, 2019, <https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-releases/president-of-romania-mr-klaus-iohannis-met-with-president-of-the-arab-republic-of-egypt-mr-abdel-fattah-el-sisi-in-the-margins-of-the-eu-league-of-arab-states-summit>.

26 George Vişan, "The Known Unknowns of Romania's Defense Modernization Plans," Romania Energy Center, March 2019, https://www.roec.biz/wp-content/uploads/output/2019/03/ROEC_George_Visan_The_Known_Unknowns_of_Romanias_Defense_Modernization_Plans_EN-__output.pdf.

27 Victor Lupu, "R. of Moldova Crisis: Romanian Foreign Ministry Does Not Formally Recognize the Gov't of Maia Sandu," Romania Journal, June 10, 2019 <https://www.romaniajournal.ro/politics/r-of-moldova-crisis-romanian-foreign-ministry-does-not-formally-recognize-the-govt-of-maia-sandu/>.

28 "Antitrust: Commission invites comments on Transgaz commitments concerning natural gas exports from Romania," European Commission, September 21, 2018, https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-5861_en.htm.



Extinguishing a simulated fire as part of the Bulgarian-led maritime Exercise Breeze 2019. (Source: NATO)

The 2016 Bucharest-promoted Black Sea fleet failed because of Bulgaria's change of heart. This shows the lack of consensus and coordination even among NATO members and neighbors in the Black Sea. Romania should not remove this concept from the NATO agenda. Bucharest's diplomatic efforts can play a bigger role. Bucharest could act as a stabilizing actor by bringing fellow NATO members Turkey and Bulgaria closer through regional security cooperation projects, as well as through creating a cooperation framework with Ukraine and Georgia as NATO partners.

Bulgaria

Though a member of both NATO and the EU, Bulgaria often acts as a spoiler for NATO's security priorities in the Black Sea region. Sofia has historically had strong relations with Russia and the Soviet Union, acting as the USSR's "16th republic" during the Cold War.²⁹ Since the annexation of Crimea, the Bulgarian government has repeatedly threatened to veto sanctions against Russia.³⁰ Energy dependent on Russia, Sofia has supported

energy projects that increase Europe's dependence on Russian gas, such as Turkish Stream, South Stream, and now Turkish Stream 2. Over the last decade, Bulgaria has increased its overall economic dependence on Russia, attracting large Russian investments in energy, finance, telecommunications, real estate, tourism, and industry.³¹ Most of the population has favorable views of Russia, previously Bulgaria's largest, and now its second largest, trading partner.³² This combination of Bulgarian dependence and Russophilia enables Moscow to pressure the Sofia government to support Russia's interests within the EU and NATO.

Russia's "Trojan horse" in NATO, Bulgaria is restrained from inflicting real damage on Western institutions because of its weak economy.³³ Yet, in the Black Sea, where Bulgaria has adopted a strategy of playing the West and Russia off one another, it often succeeds in obstructing NATO efforts. At the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, Romania proposed creating a regional naval force, the Black Sea Force. The initiative was promptly suspended when then-Bulgarian President Boyko Borisov announced at a press conference with Romanian President Iohannis, without prior warning, that Bulgaria would not participate in the Black Sea Force because it wants "peace and love" in the region.³⁴

²⁹ "Is Bulgaria a 16th Republic or a 51st State?" noinvite.com, April 8, 2015, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/167792/Is+Bulgaria+a+16th+Republic+or+a+51st+State%3F>.

³⁰ "EU Sanctions Against Russia Should be Lifted, Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev," noinvite.com, October 5, 2017, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/183942/EU+Sanctions+Against+Russia+Should+be+Lifted%2C+Bulgaria%27s+President+Rumen+Radev>.

³¹ "Bulgaria Most Dependent on Russia Among Central, Eastern European Countries," noinvite.com, November 28, 2016, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/177685/Bulgaria+Most+Dependent+on+Russia+Among+Central%2C+Eastern+European+Countries>.

³² "Bulgaria," Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/bgr/>.

³³ Michael-Ross Fiorentino, "PM Borissov assures NATO Bulgaria is not Russia's 'Trojan horse,'" euronews, March 2, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/03/02/pm-borissov-assures-nato-bulgaria-is-not-russia-s-trojan-horse>.

³⁴ Victor Kotsev, "Bulgaria Pulls out of Joint Black Sea Patrol," BalkanInsight, June 16, 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/06/16/bulgaria-pulls-out-of-joint-black-sea-patrol-06-16-2016/>.

In other words, it did not want to make Russia unhappy.

Bulgaria's frequent support for Russian positions precludes security cooperation with other Black Sea countries, such as Ukraine or Georgia. Even joint Romanian-Bulgarian military training and maintenance of American F-16 fighter jets was cancelled after Sofia changed its mind. Initially interested in buying American fighter jets, Bulgaria is currently considering buying Swedish Gripen jets instead. This is a courtesy to Moscow, which sees nuclear-capable F-16s as a threat.³⁵ Bulgaria's relations with Turkey vary from poor to hostile, meanwhile, as disagreements over migration, border control, and minority rights strain ties. This, too, makes NATO cooperation in the Black Sea difficult. By blocking cooperation with non-NATO members and bickering with its allies, Bulgaria adds little positive to regional cooperation in the Black Sea.

However, Sofia's strategy of appeasing and conciliating Russia in reality makes Bulgaria irrelevant as a regional player. Bulgaria is one of the smaller Black Sea countries. To be taken seriously in Black Sea security discussions, Sofia needs to lose some of its fear of Russia and trust in its NATO membership. It does not share borders with Russia and can rely on the EU in case of pressure from Moscow over energy. There's no reason that Bulgaria can't lean in at NATO and, following the model of Romania, start investing in territorial defense and becoming an active contributor to NATO collective defense. Now that Turkey is sidelining itself in NATO, Bulgaria's voice in the Black Sea will get more weight, if Sofia wants to use it. It has many options: increasing defense cooperation with Romania, supporting a NATO presence in the Black Sea, investing in energy interconnectors to guarantee supply, and starting security cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine.

Georgia

Georgia's approach to Black Sea security is informed by its experience in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Despite Moscow's aggression, which intensified two more frozen conflicts in the region, the West's

response was lackluster. The West imposed sanctions on Russia, and did little else in response. Later that year, Russian President Vladimir Putin showed up to the NATO Summit to oppose Georgia and Ukraine's accession to the Alliance. Georgia now understands that it must tackle the Russian threat on its own. Tbilisi has launched a comprehensive modernization program of its military, aiming to match NATO standards should the Alliance decide to consider its membership bid.³⁶

It's hard to find fault in Georgia's defense policy. Tbilisi's institutional resilience to Russian disinformation is comparable with that of Romania, a traditionally Russophobic society and one of Washington's staunchest allies in Europe.³⁷ With NATO help, Georgia has stuck with dedication to the membership action plan criteria and managed to overhaul and reform its armed forces over the last decade to achieve interoperability. Because of its demonstrated commitment towards NATO integration, Tbilisi obtained a substantial NATO-Georgia package in 2014, which includes interoperability and defense support. Recently, Tbilisi has been pushing for an increased NATO presence in its territory, as well as more EU trade in the Black Sea.³⁸ The Georgian Parliament also adopted a new law on military reserves last year, reforming them after the Baltic model to deter possible future Russian aggression. The Georgian population strongly supports NATO membership, with polls suggesting that around 75% of the population wants to join the Alliance.³⁹ But it's unlikely that NATO will agree on Georgian membership anytime soon, especially given the energy stick Moscow holds over many NATO members.

Tbilisi has also engaged in regional cooperation with NATO neighbors Romania and Turkey. Yet, limited willingness from Turkey and especially Romania to engage in security cooperation has left Georgia largely on its own. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Tbilisi has lent security advice to Kyiv.⁴⁰ Lastly, Georgia has pursued bilateral security cooperation with Azerbaijan on the basis of the countries' shared threat assessment regarding Russia. But Tbilisi also realizes that the U.S. is its most powerful partner, and Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili wants to discuss Black Sea security with Washington "as soon as" she is invited.⁴¹

35 Borzou Daragahi, "Are Bulgaria's strings still being pulled by the Kremlin?" *The Independent*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentminds/long-reads/bulgaria-russia-moscow-kremlin-influence-oligarchs-nato-us-west-cold-war-a8864136.html>.

36 Eugene Kogan, "Georgian Military Modernization: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back," *Georgia Today*, January 8, 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/8708/Georgian-Military-Modernization%3A-Two-Steps-Forward%2C-One-Step-Back>.

37 Popescu & Zamfir, ed., "Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence."

38 "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia," Center for Insights in Survey Research, April 10-22, 2018, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf.

39 Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Georgia and Black Sea Security," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/bp_1812_black_sea_georgia_0.pdf.

40 "Azerbaijan and Georgia Increase Bilateral Security Cooperation," Foreign Military Studies Office, <https://community.afmso.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/w/o-e-watch-mobile-edition-v1/22557/azerbaijan-and-georgia-increase-bilateral-security-cooperation/>.

41 John C. K. Daly, "China and Georgia Deepen Transit Cooperation," *Jamestown Foundation*, 15, no. 63 (2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/china-and-georgia-deepen-transit-cooperation/>.

On top of this, Georgia is looking further afield for friends. To supplement Western economic support, Georgian policymakers are increasingly turning to the People's Republic of China, which is seeking a foothold in the region by investing in critical infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative.⁴² However, there is risk that deepening bilateral cooperation with China might discourage further Western involvement. Furthermore, the oligarchic structure of Georgian politics is supported by Chinese investment and could intensify the country's corruption problems. In sum, Tbilisi's strategy is to modernize both militarily and economically and to increase cooperation with everyone—except Moscow.

Ukraine

Ukraine's strategic aim in the region does not extend beyond its national territory. After losing the Crimean peninsula to Russia, for the last five years, Ukraine has waged war in the Donbas region, receiving very little Western support. Profoundly challenged internally, in foreign policy, Kyiv has adopted a constant strategy of ensuring Western support in its fight against Russia. Until recently, Western powers refused to supply lethal weapons to Ukraine.⁴³ Despite Russian maritime aggression in 2018 at the Kerch Straits in the Black Sea, many NATO and EU member states have continuously questioned the sanctions, and Ukrainian diplomacy has aimed at keeping them in place and highlighting Russian aggressions. Adding to the unequal military conflict, Moscow has mobilized significant resources on disinformation and propaganda,⁴⁴ fueling social divisions between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, which poses additional challenges for Ukraine.⁴⁵

Ukraine will continue to face Russian aggression in the future. Moscow continues to support separatists in the Donbas. And it is now claimed the Sea of Azov for itself by building the Kerch Strait Bridge, which

limits commercial vessels' access to Ukrainian ports; by delaying civilian and military ships' access to the sea; and by firing on Ukrainian military vessels and seizing their personnel. Grabbing the Sea of Azov further strains Ukraine's economy and fuels social unrest. Most importantly, it is an act of war. November's clash in the Kerch Strait marked the first open and conventional attack by Russia on Ukraine since the conflict's began. Further conventional escalation cannot not be ruled out.

Over the course of the war, Ukraine has undertaken comprehensive military modernization. After Russia seized most of its naval forces in 2014, Kyiv slowly invested in its navy and formulated a naval strategy via consultations with civilian experts and foreign advisers.⁴⁶ Given the country's poor financial situation, its military reform process has been a tremendous success. Ukraine pursues all Western support available, including American military aid and diplomatic backing from Brussels and Berlin. Ukraine has also called for a greater NATO presence in the Black Sea via a Black Sea strategy, but this has so far fallen on deaf ears.⁴⁷

Regionally, Kyiv has tried to engage all possible partners, with mixed results. An annual foreign policy assessment gives the Ukrainian government's commitment towards Black Sea regional security a B-.⁴⁸ Ukraine adopted a long-term strategy for developing its navy, and has tried to create regional cooperation forms to diminish Russian influence. Ukraine deserves more credit for building international support to counter Russia, though Ukrainian diplomacy fails to influence powers such as China and the Republic of India. Ukraine has, however, successfully worked with Georgia, with which it signed a strategic partnership in 2017, and it is looking to expand both economic and military cooperation.⁴⁹ Kyiv recently initiated defense cooperation with Turkey.⁵⁰ In bilateral cooperation with Moldova, Ukraine has closed the previously porous border with Transnistria; previously, the Russian troops illegally stationed since

42 Mikheil Saakashvili, "The oligarchs are suffocating what's left of democracy in Eastern Europe," Washington Post, March 21, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/03/21/oligarchs-are-suffocating-whats-left-democracy-eastern-europe/>.

43 "Ukraine expects lethal weapons from U.S. in 2019 -- Chaly," UNIAN, January 3, 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10398078-ukraine-expects-lethal-weapons-from-u-s-in-2019-chaly.html>.

44 Vladimir Sazonov, Kristiina Muur et al. "Russian Information Warfare Against Ukraine I: Online News and Social Media Analysis," <https://www.ksk.edu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/RUSSIAN-INFO-WARFARE-AGAINST-UKRAINE-koolon-I-ONLINE-NEWS-AND-SOCIAL-MEDIA-ANALYSIS.pdf>.

45 Corina Rebegea, "Black Sea Strategy Papers: The Black Sea as a Battleground for Information Warfare: A View from Bucharest," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 23, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/black-sea-battleground-information-warfare-view-bucharest/>.

46 Hanna Shelest, ed., "Naval Forces of Ukraine: Strategic Appraisal," Naval Forces of Ukraine, 2018, http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Ukrainian_Navy_PRINT.pdf.

47 Brooks Tigner, "Ukraine calls for 'comprehensive' security strategy for Black Sea, but options are limited," Jane's 360, December 7, 2018, <https://www.janes.com/article/85062/ukraine-calls-for-comprehensive-security-strategy-for-black-sea-but-options-are-limited>.

48 Nadiia Bureiko et al., eds., "Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2018," (Kyiv: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Office in Ukraine, 2019), <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/15376.pdf>.

49 Service of the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine, "Ukraine and Georgia to hold the next meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation in June," Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Secretariat, April 5, 2019, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-ta-gruziya-provedut-nastupne-zasidannya-mizhuryadovoyi-komisiyi-z-ekonomichnoyi-spivpraci-v-cherwni>.

50 "Ukraine, Turkey sign bilateral cooperation documents," UNIAN, November 3, 2018, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10324128-ukraine-turkey-sign-bilateral-cooperation-documents.html>.



Ukrainian ships detained in Kerch port. (Source: rk.gov.ru)

Moldovan independence in Transnistria were deployed via Kyiv. Cooperation with Moldova has been so far limited to this issue, which Moldova chose to address by unofficially letting Russian soldiers illegally stationed on Moldovan territory to rotate through Chisinau. Among other neighbors, Ukraine's cooperation with Romania takes place strictly within the Alliance's framework, though Bucharest supports Kyiv's cyber security efforts and sends advisers.⁵¹ With NATO member Bulgaria, cooperation is very limited.⁵²

To stabilize its internal situation and boost its security, Ukraine must ensure international support for sanctions, modernize its military, and develop institutional and societal resilience to non-kinetic threats. For international support, Ukraine has to develop its soft power via a united and professional diplomatic corps. To modernize its military, Kyiv should implement the Georgian model and learn lessons from Georgia about overhauling a military even with parts of its territory under occupation. Georgia may also provide lessons about how military modernization can

avoid angering Russia. Perhaps the most difficult of these tasks is increasing resilience to disinformation. Since its independence, Ukrainians have been subjected to continuous propaganda, affecting threat perceptions. Recently, an anonymous amateur video suggested that Romania will invade Southern Ukraine in October 2022. This generated a call for a National Security Council meeting.⁵³ The country's oligarchic politics makes developing resilience difficult, though the recent electoral victory of President Volodymyr Zelenskiy suggests that Ukrainians are despairing of the political status quo and in an anti-oligarchic mood. Nevertheless, changing public perception will be a difficult long-term process in Ukraine.

51 Tomasz Dąbrowski and Tadeusz Iwański, "Breaking through distrust in relations between Romania and Ukraine," Centre for Eastern Studies: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, April 27, 2016, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2016-04-27/breaking-through-distrust-relationships-between-romania-and-ukraine>.

52 "Bulgaria announces support for Ukraine's European integration," UAWire, March 30, 2019, <https://www.uawire.org/bulgaria-announces-support-for-ukraine-s-european-integration#>.

53 Marin Gherman, ed., "Video amatoricesc despre ocuparea regiunilor Cernăuți și Odesa de către România în 2022 – tema reuniunii serviciilor speciale și armatei în Ucraina [Amateur video about the occupation of Chernivtsi and Odessa regions by Romania in 2022 - the meeting topic of Ukraine's special services and army]," BucPress, June 2, 2019, https://www.bucpress.eu/politica/video-amatoricesc-despre-ocuparea-regiunilor-9559?fbclid=IwAR0cRQA6S-1Hkf2gYL3h15NITzqHBf3jpERzzwyxgqzHHB4-UiqNSF_dA.

THE BLACK SEA: STRATEGIC VOLATILITY



Exercise Scorpion's Fury in Romania in 2018. (Source: NATO)

While it receives little attention, the Black Sea region is one of the world's most complex security regions. Russian expansionism presents the greatest threat to regional security, but other countries in the region have differing threat perceptions. Except Russia, Black Sea states are weak. They could be natural allies against Moscow, but they fail to cooperate. Instead, they rely on external powers and non-strategic, circumstantial regional alliances among Black Sea states for their security. This volatility regarding strategic orientation adds to the region's instability.

Just over a decade ago, the Black Sea was divided between two poles: NATO and Russia. The region's NATO members—Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey—were staunch U.S. allies, supporting the Black Sea's democratization and Westernization. Georgia and Ukraine were friendly to Russia and considered joining the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Community and the Eurasian Customs Union. Five years later, allegiances shifted. Having fought a war with Russia, Georgia prioritized joining the EU and NATO, and Ukraine was invaded by Russia after protests ousted the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich for refusing to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. While Ukraine and Georgia turned West, Turkey and Bulgaria have turned East. Bulgaria refused to

join Western regional security structures, increased its economic cooperation with Russia, and protested sanctions against Russia for its aggression in Ukraine.⁵⁴ Turkey, meanwhile, began blaming the United States for its domestic problems and has pursued rapprochement with Russia since 2015.

Now, many Black Sea countries have changed their orientation, NATO membership notwithstanding. Ukraine and Georgia are staunchly pro-Western; Turkey and Bulgaria are increasingly pro-Russian. Romania remains the West's strongest ally in the region, but its inactive Black Sea policy and internal problems prevent it from playing a significant regional role. Unable to agree that Russia is a shared threat, Black Sea countries neither cooperate nor attract outside support to deter Russian aggression. A common threat assessment of NATO members and partners is the key to a stable Black Sea. Only by exploring common ground and working towards shared deterrence can they enhance regional security. 

⁵⁴ "Bulgaria says it is suffering from EU sanctions on Russia," EURACTIV, December 5, 2014, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/bulgaria-says-it-is-suffering-from-eu-sanctions-on-russia/>.

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