



# THE GLOBAL ACTORS AND THE BLACK SEA'S GEOPOLITICS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Valentin Naumescu

This work has been funded by the REMIT project, funded from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101094228.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores the issue of the tensions and diverging geopolitical stances of the global actors in the Black Sea area, in the context of the war in Ukraine. In a period of major turbulences in the system of international relations, the crossroads region of the Black Sea represents a growing stake between Russia (and the other authoritarian revisionist regimes in Asia) and the West. The analysis comes with a recommendation of a common, unified strategy of the democratic great powers (the USA, Germany, UK, France) and Western organizations (NATO and the EU) to ensure the security and freedom of the Black Sea democratic nations.

## CONTENTS:

- A very short history of “Putin’s War against the West” and the geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region
- The geopolitical relevance of the Black Sea for reshaping the European and global order
- Why not a common Western strategy for the Black Sea region? Building the “Black Sea Freedom Strategy”
- Conclusions

## **A very short history of “Putin’s War against the West” and the geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region**

The war in Ukraine did not start on February 24, 2022, as it is usually assumed in European and global mass-media. It started as a matter of fact ten years ago, in March 2014, with the Russian annexation of Crimea, the small but geopolitically important Black Sea peninsula, transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954, within the Soviet Union. The war in Ukraine escalated a few months after the annexation, with the first separatist fighting in Donbas (2014-2015), obviously fueled by Russia. After the Minsk Agreement II<sup>1</sup> As of February 2015, although the “hot war” stopped, the conflict continued as a *hybrid war* between Russia and Ukraine, often presented in international media as a “frozen conflict” of seven years.

Nevertheless, neither the annexation of Crimea nor the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was the real beginning of the revisionist confrontation started by the Kremlin, which I define as *Putin’s War against the West* (Naumescu 2023). Russia’s attempt to dismantle the post-1991 European and global order started in August 2008, including in the Black Sea region, with the Russian invasion of the pro-West Georgia. Russia’s contestation of the post-Soviet borders in Eastern Europe, Moscow’s opposition to the enlargement of NATO close to its frontiers, and the revisionist war against the post-Cold War European security order were launched by Vladimir Putin 16 years ago.

Georgia was therefore the Kremlin's first test to assess the Western reaction, and nothing serious happened. The Russian troops invaded Abkhazia and South Ossetia just four months after US President Bush proposed addressing official invitations for Ukraine and Georgia to join the Alliance at the NATO Bucharest Summit. The immediate accession of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO was unfortunately rejected in April 2008 by France and Germany, which meant missing the last opportunity to avoid future wars in the region and to secure the two post-Soviet republics. Ukraine and Georgia did not have the chance that the post-Soviet Baltic States had in 2004. The postponement of inviting Kyiv and Tbilisi at the Bucharest NATO Summit to join the North-Atlantic Alliance gave Putin time to prepare the invasion(s), making Georgia and Ukraine vulnerable in relation to Russia and then non-eligible for NATO accession, because of the occupied territories. There have already been *16 years of war in the Black Sea region* and ten years since the beginning of the Russian assault over Ukraine.

The geopolitical relevance of the Black Sea and the growing threats from Russia have been emphasised by Romania, the largest EU and NATO member state in the region, since 2005. Bucharest insisted, without much success, on the idea that the EU and NATO should develop coherent and effective strategies and security initiatives in the

---

<sup>1</sup> A ceasefire agreement negotiated in the “Normandy Format” of France-Germany-Ukraine-Russia was a failed European initiative to resolve

the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. The Minsk Agreement I of September 2014 failed quickly, while the Minsk Agreement II of February 2015 lasted seven years.

Black Sea region. A few years before the start of the visible war, numerous warnings regarding Russia were formulated from the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, referring not only to the Black Sea area but to the entire *Intermarium*, the North-South corridor between the Baltic and the Black Seas. The geopolitical tension consists in diverging visions of maintaining *Intermarium* as a buffer-zone or “grey zone” between Russia and the West (Moscow’s vision) versus the integration in the EU and NATO, according to the democratic will of these sovereign states.

For many years, the West used to minimise the concerns of the Central and Eastern European countries. The governments of the main EU economies preferred the “business as usual” way of relating to Russia, based on either naïve or financially interested considerations, having behind huge oil and gas contracts, and giving political credit to Vladimir Putin. A large number of former high dignitaries from EU countries such as Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Finland etc. got hired in the Boards of Russian oil and gas giants after retiring from politics (Warsaw Institute/Kuczyński 2019).

The old German approach of *Wandel durch Handel* (“Change through trade”), developed in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the West Germany’s *Ostpolitik* initiated by Egon Bahr and Willy Brandt and continued after the Cold War by Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel, finally proved to be a lamentable failure in relation to Moscow. It needed to be dramatically changed with a new vision that “can only be organized against

Moscow, while Berlin needs to forge closer ties with its Central and Eastern European neighbours” (Roth 2022). This new vision of Germany was encapsulated in the famous speech *Zeitenwende*, delivered by the Chancellor Olaf Scholz before the German Parliament in February 2022, just a few days after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

NATO’s and the EU’s main vulnerability regarding the escalation of *Putin’s War* was the lack of a clear, firm and powerful response of the West in the first phases of aggression. After the Russian invasions of Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014), just some timid condemnations and soft sanctions from the US and the EU *could not deter Putin from advancing with his aggressive plans*. On the contrary, the observation that “the West is weak” and not committed to defend its pro-EU and pro-NATO non-integrated partners from the Eastern neighbourhood encouraged Putin to “think bigger”.

It was only after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that the West finally realized the amplitude and severity of Putin’s revisionist war against the post-Cold War European security order. The US, the EU and the UK started to provide substantial financial and military support for Ukraine and impose more powerful sanctions against Russia. With this massive western support and the heroic fight of its troops, Ukraine succeeded in resisting in the first two years against the Russian troops of occupation, and it has maintained its political pro-West orientation.

## The geopolitical relevance of the Black Sea for reshaping the European and global order

Although small and almost enclosed between Europe and Asia, the Black Sea basin is a mosaic of different cultures, civilisations and political traditions. It is already commonplace to say that the Black Sea works as a “crossroads for the main West-East and North-South strategic corridors connecting the European peninsula with the Eurasian bloc, as well as with the Middle East” (Naumescu 2017). Charles King explains that there is “no specific identity of the region”, other than the diversity itself and the variety of multiple identities, values, norms, practices etc. Everything here is dynamic, relative and volatile, and even the “identities are negotiable” (King 2004) in the sense that the peoples and minorities of the wider Black Sea area lived for centuries at the periphery of three old empires (Habsburg/Danubian, Russian and Ottoman), combining in different proportions the characteristics of these three political and cultural spaces.

Even nowadays these nations continue to shape and delimitate fluid regional *borderlines* between three different ethos: the *liberal democratic* ethos of the EU and the West, the Turkish ethos of *illiberal democracy and authoritarianism*,

and the Russian ethos of *autocracy/dictatorship*.

The issue of hegemony in the Black Sea region has deep historical roots in the modern era and it is once more essential nowadays in this dynamic regional system of international relations, as it seems to have become in the global one. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 was a first major sign of the interest of European great powers to avoid the Russian hegemony and expansionism in the region, fixing the fault lines between the Russian Empire and the West (Figes 2012).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Russia pretended to be the hegemon of the region, as the main military power, but Turkey is also there with its significant geopolitical role in the south, the opening to the Middle East and Mediterranean area, and with its control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, according to the Montreux Convention of 1936.<sup>2</sup> After the Cold War, in the 1990s and 2000s, the EU, the US and NATO came in and diluted the idea of the Russian hegemony, with the former communist countries (Soviet or non-Soviet) joining or aspiring to join the Western organizations.

---

<sup>2</sup> The “Convention regarding the Regime of the Straits” (known as the Montreux Convention) was signed on July 20, 1936. The original signatories are (in alphabetical order): Australia, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, United Kingdom, Turkey. The Convention guarantees complete freedom of passage for all civilian vessels in times of peace. In peacetime, military vessels are limited in number, tonnage and weaponry, with specific provisions governing their mode of entry and duration of stay. If they want to pass through the Straits, warships must provide advance notification to the Turkish

authorities, which, in turn, must inform the parties to the convention. In wartime, if Turkey is not involved in the conflict, warships of the nations at war may not pass through the Straits, except when returning to their base. When Turkey is at war, or feels threatened by a war, it may take any decision about the passage of warships as it sees fit. The USA did not sign the Montreux Convention, but it complies with it. Although they signed it initially, Stalin and the Soviet Union contested the Montreux Convention, both during the WWII and after, during the Cold War, when Turkey joined NATO.

Based on a 2007 Bucharest proposal in partnership with Bulgaria and Greece, the *Black Sea Synergy*<sup>3</sup> was officially adopted by the European Union in February 2008. With the launch of *the Eastern Partnership (EaP)* in May 2009, the initiative, initially intended for drafting a special EU strategy for this region, unfortunately lost its distinctive character and melted into other regional initiatives. The EaP included three partners from the Black Sea region: Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia.

In addition to the EaP initiative of the EU, other regional formats included some of the Black Sea riparian states.

*The Three Seas Initiative (3SI)*<sup>4</sup> a forum of cooperation established in 2016 with the EU countries located between the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic Sea, includes Romania and Bulgaria from the Black Sea area.

Last but not least, established in 2015, the *Bucharest 9 (B9)*<sup>5</sup> is a regional format for collaboration in the field of security, with nine allies from NATO's Eastern Flank, also including Romania and Bulgaria. In the near future, Finland will

probably join the B9 format as the tenth member of the Eastern Flank, completing the old geopolitical representation of *Intermarium*.<sup>6</sup>

From a strategic and geopolitical perspective, there are at least five categories of states in the Black Sea region. Currently, Romania and Bulgaria are both *EU and NATO* member states, Turkey is a *NATO* country with an old and frozen candidacy to EU accession, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have already opened *negotiations with the EU* for their accession, while Ukraine and Georgia officially *intend to join NATO as well*. And there is also the Russian Federation, a fierce enemy of the West and of the values of the liberal democracies.

The EU has a strong geopolitical presence in the region, with two full members and four candidates (Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and formally Turkey), in different phases of integration. NATO has three full members (Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey) and two candidates, even though Turkey is not a credible ally anymore, because

---

<sup>3</sup> Initiated in 2007, "the Black Sea Synergy encourages a bottom-up approach to project development, identifying and supporting the needs, priorities and aims of partners in the region, and what they want to do together. The key elements of the Black Sea Synergy include building confidence, fostering regional dialogue and achieving tangible results for states and citizens in the region. A stable, secure, resilient and prosperous Black Sea region is in the direct interest of its citizens and of the EU overall" (EEAS/EU).

<sup>4</sup> With 12 member states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria) and 3 partners (USA, Germany, the European Commission), the Three Seas Initiative aims to promote cooperation in three main fields:

new investments, economic growth, and energy security.

<sup>5</sup> Established on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015, B9 is an organisation formed by Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, aiming to enhance the defence cooperation of the NATO allies on the Eastern Flank and to strengthen the NATO military deployment of troops and capabilities in these countries, following the growing threats of Russia.

<sup>6</sup> "Intermarium" was a geopolitical concept and project proposed by the Polish leader Józef Piłsudski in the 1920s, initially meant to form a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, rather than a political entity (federation) of states located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas, in order to build a regional force capable to resist both German and Russian expansionism.

of its post-2016 anti-Western stances and the Erdoğan-Putin rapprochement.

The Black Sea “lost its hegemon” but it has not yet found its place in a new, stable, and democratic order, continuing to represent a *geopolitical periphery and a conflictual fault line* between the West, Russia, and a changing and oscillating Turkey. Neal Ascherson noticed even before the war that the tensions and conflicts in the past decades increased the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea region, and “because of this rivalry, the Black Sea is no longer considered ‘peripheral’ by European and American leaders” (Ascherson 2007).

The US and France have increased their military presence in Romania, within the NATO structures. Although the American troops remain by far the most important Western military presence in Romania, it is suggestive that even France, who did not have the Black Sea on its map of geopolitical priorities for quite a long time, decided to assume in 2022 the leadership of the new NATO battle group located in Romania.

The EU, the USA, NATO and Russia are not the only geopolitical players in the wider Black Sea area. China has its own strategies and formats, mainly based on economic expansion. The “*Belt and Road Initiative*” (BRI) and the “*17+1 Initiative*” are just two of the main projects through which China approaches the region (Martin 2021). The economic achievements of these two strategic Chinese projects in Central and Eastern Europe are rather modest. Only Hungary and Serbia, both politically isolated from the West and fuelled by historic frustrations, seem interested in this partnership with China, as well as in maintaining good relations with Russia.

The war in Ukraine put the Black Sea region on the centre stage of European and even global politics.

In 2023, the US Congress adopted the bipartisan *Black Sea Security Act*. However, in December 2023, due to the political disagreements with the Republicans in the House of Representatives and with Viktor Orbán at the European Council, both the US and the EU had difficulties in adopting new support packages for Ukraine.

### **Why not a common Western strategy for the Black Sea region? Building the “Black Sea Freedom Strategy”**

The idea that the main global actors of the Western world (the USA, the EU, France, Germany, the UK), G7 and NATO have understood the necessity to deter Russia and adopted distinct postures with regard to the developments in the Black Sea region is *a positive beginning, but it is not enough*. What is still questionable is the multitude of approaches, initiatives, strategies and

policies which are not always articulated and coherent. The resources, instruments and objectives are currently not coordinated under a single, effective strategy, capable of stopping the Kremlin from aggressing its European neighbours in the region. So far, any attempt to merge the forces and resources has failed.

In 2016, for example, the failure of the idea of establishing a Black Sea NATO fleet was notorious. Visiting Sofia and trying to convince the then populist Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borisov about the necessity and benefits of a Black Sea NATO fleet for the security of the region, President Klaus Iohannis of Romania was met with a lamentable negative answer from the Bulgarian government (Gotev/Euractiv 2016), despite the support of the outgoing President of Bulgaria. Borisov said he wanted to see tourists with yachts and jolly boats sailing on the Black Sea, not corvettes and military ships. Most probably, Romania came up with the proposal after consultations with the US authorities.

Just a few months before the presidential visit to Sofia, the US Ambassador to Romania suggested publicly the necessity of strengthening the allied naval presence in the Black Sea, to face the growing military capabilities of Russia in the Black Sea (Napoca News 2016). This episode is a disappointing moment revealing the disagreements and divergences that plagued even the NATO Black Sea riparian allies in relation to Russia.

Currently, the most advanced (in terms of ambitions and coherence) Black Sea strategy belongs to the United States of America. The *Black Sea Security Act* is a bipartisan law adopted by the Congress in 2023. It is still nascent and growing in substance and projects, but it has the most robust structure, the clearest objectives and the biggest potential, being assumed by the US legislative.

Building a common Western strategy for the Black Sea region would involve mainly the USA, the EU and NATO, and other possible interested actors such as Germany, France or the UK as national governments. The umbrella of a *Black Sea Freedom Strategy* would provide an ideal integrated framework to combat the Russian aggressiveness, expansionism and dominance in the region. The strategy is needed to provide answers and feasible solutions to all challenges related to the Russian hybrid war, military threats, intelligence, cybersecurity and combating disinformation, economic environment, technologic competition, energy security etc.

For many reasons, merging all initiatives and strategies into only one could bring more credibility, accuracy and effectiveness. The common goals would be clarified. The resources would be much better identified, planned and used. The instruments would be specifically defined, with clear responsibilities.

A strategic partnership between the USA, the EU and NATO dedicated to a common *Black Sea Freedom Strategy* would also send a strong, united political message throughout the region. Especially for countries which are struggling as candidates for the EU or NATO membership (Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia), such a major signal would bring a “breath of fresh air” and encourage these societies to follow their aspirations in a period of instability, threats and uncertainty.

## When and how?

2024 is a full electoral year. The main western powers (USA, EU, UK) have crucial elections. NATO also expects a change at the level of Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General by the end of the year. It is difficult to envisage that anything more than a common political statement and opening a framework for future strategic discussions could be achieved this year, at the end of the current terms of office. But once the elections are over, *starting with the next year*, the West can engage in preparations to successfully confront the Russian threats.

Of course, this perspective depends on the outcome of the elections. The ideological orientation and political goals of the new leaders in Brussels, Washington and London will determine how this process will move forward. Ideally, *each of these entities would*

## Conclusions

He who controls the Black Sea controls the south-eastern gates of Europe towards the Middle East and South Caucasus. The geopolitical and hybrid competition for pre-eminence in the “crossroads region” of the Black Sea is decisive for the future of the European security order. If Russia wins the war in Ukraine, the threat of conflict escalation and Russian expansionism will firstly affect the Republic of Moldova, then Georgia, then possibly even the EU and NATO countries from the Eastern Flank. High military commanders and intelligence services from the US, UK, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Poland,

*assume certain and complementary responsibilities*, according to their specific strengths. Policy making skills and normative power, defence capabilities, energy infrastructure, technologic competitiveness, cybersecurity, communication and hybrid techniques, civilian and military naval expertise etc. would be put together by the global actors involved in maintaining the Black Sea security.

An intergovernmental *Agency for the Black Sea Security*, obviously located in a Black Sea EU and NATO riparian state, would serve as the integrated management structure for the projects and activities conducted in the region.

the Baltic States etc. warn about the scenario of a Russian attack against Europe in the following years (Alipour and Michalopoulos 2023).

The West, “reinvented” as a strategic concept after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, must now deliver a firm, credible, powerful answer, reassuring democratic states and nations in the region about its capacity to guarantee their security. Adopting a common *Black Sea Freedom Strategy* is the right thing to do by the allies and partners from the Euro-Atlantic community. The clock is ticking.

## References:

Alipour, Nick and Michalopoulos, Sarantis. "Berlin Says EU Should Prepare for War by End of Decade". Euractiv, December 18, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/berlin-says-eu-should-prepare-for-war-by-end-of-decade/>, accessed in January 2024.

Ascherson, Neal. *Black Sea: Coasts and Conquests: From Pericles to Putin: The Birthplace of Civilisation and Barbarism*. London: Vintage, 2007.

Figes, Orlando. *The Crimean War. A History*. London: Picador, 2012.

Gotev, Giorgi. "Bulgaria refuses to join NATO Black Sea fleet against Russia". Euractiv, June 16, 2016. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bulgaria-refuses-to-join-nato-black-sea-fleet-against-russia/>, accessed in January 2024.

King, Charles. *The Black Sea. A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Kuczyński, Grzegorz. "Follow the Petro-roubles: European Officials Go Into Russian Business". Warsaw Institute, 25 March 2019. <https://warsawinstitute.org/follow-petro-roubles-european-officials-go-russian-business/>, accessed in January 2024.

Martin, Alexandra (Ed.). "China in the Broader Black Sea Region". Globsec Report, March 2021. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/China-in-the-Broader-black-sea-region-ver7-nonprint.pdf>, consulted in January 2024.

Napoca News. „Ambasadorul Statelor Unite, Hans Klemm, la Cluj-Napoca: Navele militare americane din Marea Neagra nu pot rivaliza cu cele ruse” (US Ambassador Hans Klemm in Cluj-Napoca: the US ships in the Black Sea cannot counterbalance the Russian ones), February 26, 2016. <https://www.napocanews.ro/2016/02/ambasadorul-statelor-unite-hans-klemm-la-cluj-napoca-navele-militare-american-e-din-marea-neagra-nu-pot-rivaliza-cu-cele-ruse.html>, accessed in January 2024.

Naumescu, Valentin (Ed.). *Great Powers' Foreign Policy: Approaching the Global Competition and the Russian War Against the West*. Brill: Leiden & Boston, 2023.

Naumescu, Valentin. "Stability, Ambiguity and Change in the Discourses of NATO Allies in the Black Sea Region: The Cases of Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey". *Croatian International Relations Review*, XXIII (80)/ 2017, 187-209.

Roth, Michael. "Op-Ed: A New Ostpolitik for the "Watershed Moment". *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 15 July 2022. <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/op-ed-new-ostpolitik-watershed-moment>, accessed in January 2024.

About the author:



Valentin Naumescu is Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca.

Alongside his academic role, he is the president of the think tank Initiative for European Democratic Culture and serves as the director of the Centre for the Study of the EU's External Relations and Global (EUXGLOB).