

UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 1 (19), 2020

ENERGY TURKEY
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The Black Sea

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Publisher:

Published by NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation" (Ukraine), Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the Representation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine, the Black Sea Trust.

UA: Ukraine Analytica is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed for experts, diplomats, academics, students interested in the international relations and Ukraine in particular.

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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE BLACK SEA: PERSPECTIVE FROM REGIONAL PLAYERS

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In the aftermath of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the Black Sea region has changed dramatically. Primarily due to changes in Russian, American, and NATO's policies, the region has become much more militarised, and the level of tensions has significantly risen. The analysis of regional players' positions proves that economic, energy, and infrastructure cooperation in the Black Sea is possible, but on crucial issues, the region remains deeply divided. The lack of a uniform approach among the Black Sea NATO members adds even more uncertainty to the puzzle.

Introduction

Importance of words in determining policy rationale is often underestimated. Official statements by high-level officials are a valuable source of information. This study analyses statements of the key policy-makers of the regional players (Russia, Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, and Moldova, as well as the US, the EU, and NATO)¹ in order to examine their interests. Drawing on this analysis and taking into account actions of these players over the last years, I will present a wider view on the situation and perspectives in the Black Sea that can be helpful for the development of a reasonable policy towards the region by the Ukrainian government.

Views from the Capitals

Russia can justly be called the main rule-breaker in the region. After breaking old rules, the Kremlin seemingly wants to establish new ones. Moscow dismisses any discussions about the status of Crimea and would like everybody to ignore the fact of illegal annexation and treat the peninsula as Russian territory. While understanding that this is not going to happen anytime soon, the Russian government prepared the ground for taking the maximum advantage of the resources and geographic location of the peninsula. Russian President Putin claims that Moscow is free to increase military capabilities in Crimea to a sufficient level² and the

1 All relevant statements that have been analysed can be found under the following link: https://docs.google.com/document/d/110KzCaQqT0aKx_YnNE1F6e_kePZNoSWC_XMGLM3Yi1U/edit

2 *Большая пресс-конференция Владимира Путина (Vladimir Putin's Big Press-conference)*, Kremlin, 2018 [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59455>, access: 2 March 2020].

Russian parliament adopted legislation to facilitate the extraction of resources from what it considers to be Russia's exclusive economic zone. Similarly, Moscow strives for maintaining its dominance in the Azov Sea. It reiterates that its status should be determined by the Treaty on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait³, signed in 2003, which excludes the navigation in the Azov Sea from the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to the disadvantage of Ukraine.



Although Romania does not devote as much attention to BSEC as Russia or Turkey, it still supports economic and infrastructure regional projects

One of the cornerstones of the Russian approach to the region is the idea that only littoral states should guarantee stability and security in the Black Sea. Therefore, Russia strongly opposes both NATO and the US presence in the region – in all domains, from training and patrolling of their navies to the location of a ballistic missile defence system in Romania. Along these lines, Moscow argues that already established formats of cooperation are sufficient for the development of the region and promotes the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) as a counterweight to possible new projects, especially those initiated by the European Union.

In the Kremlin's view, BSEC should serve as a platform for implementation of joint

economic and infrastructure projects. Russia also encourages BSEC to improve ties with non-Western international organisations, e.g. the Silk Road Fund, Asian Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Apart from this, in bilateral meetings Moscow tries to convince leaders of the countries from the region that anti-Russian sanctions should be lifted and, instead, economic cooperation should be boosted. The main Russian offer to these countries is energy projects – not only well-known ones like TurkStream, but also the construction of nuclear plants (Rosatom is already building one in Turkey, while Russia's former Head of Government Medvedev received the assurance from the Bulgarian prime minister that Russia "will have a role in construction of the nuclear power plant"⁴). Last, but not least, Russia actively promotes infrastructure projects, including the Black Sea Ring Highway around the coast of the Black Sea that would connect all countries of the region.

Turkey has lost its military dominance in the region over the past years. Besides, the main focus of its foreign policy is on the Middle East. Nevertheless, Ankara cannot afford to ignore a region where it plays such an important role.

In 2016, Turkish President Erdogan famously stated that due to NATO's inaction the Black Sea had nearly become a Russian lake and called for enhanced Allies' presence⁵, including in the form of a permanent NATO's Black Sea Fleet, proposed by Romania. Since then the situation has changed drastically – Turkey now finds itself in conflict with all major Western players, while drifting closer to Russia, trying to shape post-war

3 Ibid

4 *Медведев към Борисов: Изтребители винаги ще има, важно е да дойде газ и да има електроцентрали (Medvedev to Borisov: There Will Always Be Fighter Jets, It Is Important to Have Gas and Power Plants), "Свободна Европа", 4 March 2019.*

5 S. Jones, K. Hille, *Russia's Military Ambitions Make Waves in the Black Sea*, "Financial Times", 13 May 2016.

arrangement in Syria in its favour. In the security domain, Ankara wants to keep its dominance over the Turkish Straits and reiterates the inviolability of the Montreux Convention, even though it is an obstacle for naval presence of their NATO Allies. Turkey does not recognise the annexation of Crimea and presents itself as a protector of the Crimean Tatars, but not at the expense of its cooperation with Russia.

In general, Turkey emphasises the need to boost economic cooperation in the region. It supports all energy projects that could help the country to become a gas hub for the region – including TurkStream and Southern Gas Corridor. Ankara also wants to boost exports to the littoral Black Sea states and build new infrastructure to this end. As well as Russia, Turkey is keen on empowering BSEC and is using it as a platform for joint infrastructure projects (such as the Black Sea Ring Highway).

Volatility of Turkish foreign policy over the recent years should be taken into account. Although there are some long-term reasons for Ankara's drift from the West towards Russia, one cannot exclude the possibility of a 180-degree reversal of Erdogan's position in the future. One of the pretexts for this can be the conflict over Syria, which is already apparent in 2020 with Russia and Turkey accusing each other of violating the agreements and with the fighting between pro-Turkish forces and Syrian government forces backed by Russia.

Romania is a staunch supporter of NATO's enhanced presence in the region. Bucharest perceives Russian threat very seriously and therefore sees powerful Western states

as guarantors of its security. As a result, Romania hosts an American ballistic missile defence system, proposes the establishment of a permanent NATO's Black Sea Fleet, and advocates for a more active involvement of NATO, the US, and the EU in the region. Holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2019, Romanian officials emphasised the need for a better coordination of the European Union and NATO efforts⁶.

Bucharest advocates for a strong deterrent approach towards Russia – in their view, sanctions must be kept in place, while the West should force Russia to withdraw from Crimea and Donbas and should counter Russian militarisation of the Black Sea. One of the important points is the support of NATO's open-door policy towards the Balkan countries, Ukraine, and Georgia. Romania also advocates more Western support for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as targets of Russian coercion. Bucharest actively develops cyber security cooperation with Kyiv.

Although Romania does not devote as much attention to BSEC as Russia or Turkey, it still supports economic and infrastructure regional projects. Bucharest promotes better maritime connectivity with Georgia, backs the Black Sea Ring Highway, and together with Turkmenistan has initiated the Caspian Sea–Black Sea Freight Corridor. Akin to many other countries of the region, Romania has plans to develop nuclear energy. However, the Romanian approach is different from that of other countries, as Romanian officials have never mentioned Russia as a potential partner in this sphere; instead, President Klaus Iohannis promotes

6 *Address by the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, at the Munich Security Conference, President of Romania, 2019* [<https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/speeches/address-by-the-president-of-romania-mr-klaus-iohannis-at-the-munich-security-conference>, access: 2 March 2020].

cooperation in the peaceful atom with the US – Russia’s main competitor⁷.

Bulgaria also participates in NATO’s Tailored Forward Presence programme and implements the NATO Black Sea Package. In particular, it contributes to the multinational brigade stationed in Romania, conducts exercises together with American soldiers on its territory, and even hosts NATO’s Naval Force Coordination Center. At the same time, unlike Bucharest, Sofia is not an ardent supporter of NATO’s and American naval presence in the region. In December 2018, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Georg Georgiev declared that the Black Sea should remain the sea of peace⁸. Although this call was not addressed directly to either NATO or Russia, Bulgaria’s actions tell us that Sofia would prefer not to provoke Russia with more Allies’ combat ships coming to the Black Sea. Bulgaria blocked the creation of the NATO Black Sea Fleet at the time when even Turkey supported the idea. Besides, Bulgaria maintains a much more friendly approach towards Russia than Romania, NATO, or the US.

Bulgaria promotes economic cooperation with all, but emphasises strongly the need to cooperate with Russia and Turkey, primarily in the energy sphere. It supports both TurkStream and Southern Gas Corridor in hopes to have the extension of both pipelines going through its territory. Also, it welcomes Russian interest in building a nuclear plant and would probably support

the revival of the Southern Stream project if the EU wouldn’t block it. Bulgaria deems Georgia to be another vital partner; it supports its integration to NATO and transport connectivity projects between the two countries and in the region at large.

Sofia has a pragmatic approach towards BSEC and believes that it has to concentrate on fewer priorities, but achieve tangible results. However, it does not want to limit multilateral cooperation in the region solely to BSEC and supports the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as well as the revival of the Black Sea Synergy programme.

Deepening cooperation with NATO and the US is the main focus of Georgian policy in the region, aimed at greater naval presence of the Allies, more exercises, more military aid, and more political support⁹. Despite having 20% of the territory occupied, Georgia constantly reiterates its commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration. For example, during a meeting with Mrs. Rose Gottemoeller, Deputy Secretary General of NATO, in April 2019, President Zourabishvili stated, “There is no alternative to nation’s commitment to join NATO and the EU”.¹⁰

In line with all other Black Sea countries, Georgia supports enhanced economic and infrastructure cooperation in the region but puts more emphasis on EU member states, Romania and Bulgaria. At the 13th Annual Georgia Defence and Security Conference in Batumi, President Zourabichvili mentioned

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- 7 *Press Statement by the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, Following His Visit to Washington, D.C., United States of America*, President of Romania, 2019 [<https://www.presidency.ro/en/media/press-statements/press-statement-by-the-president-of-romania-mr-klaus-iohannis-following-his-visit-to-washington-d-c-United-states-of-america>, access: 2 March 2020].
 - 8 *Bulgaria and the USA Are Strategic Partners on a Number of Regional and Global Matters*, Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018 [<https://www.mfa.bg/en/news/20237>, access: 2 March 2020].
 - 9 *Georgia’s President Aims to Deepen NATO Ties on Black Sea Security*, President of Georgia, 2019 [<https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/pressamsakhuri/interviuebi/%E2%80%8Bsaqartvelos-prezidenti-miznad-isakhavs-nato-stan.aspx>, access: 2 March 2020].
 - 10 *President Zourabichvili: “No Alternative to Nation’s Commitment to join NATO, EU”*, President of Georgia, 2019 [<https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/pressamsakhuri/siakhleebi/%E2%80%8Bsalome-zurabishvili-natosa-davrokavshirshi-gace.aspx>, access: 2 March 2020].

the role of the Black Sea as a hub between the EU and Asia and highlighted the need for “new projects of infrastructure, transport and connectivity linking Georgia more and more directly to its EU partners on the other shore”¹¹. Georgia is eager to take advantage of its status of a transit route from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and therefore supports all projects that fall within this framework, e.g. Baku–Tbilisi–Kars (inaugurated in 2017), Southern Gas Corridor, and the Black Sea–Caspian Sea Freight Corridor.

One of the key external players of the region is **NATO**. In the aftermath of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the organisation reconsidered its role in the Black Sea region. The Alliance has put much effort into strengthening the Eastern Flank through various initiatives, Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea being probably the most important one. NATO officials in their speeches have advocated for more involvement of both NATO and the US in the region¹². At the same time, the Allies want to allocate their resources smartly, which is proven by the fact that NATO for some time has ignored Bulgaria’s request for stationing the Naval Force Coordination Center in this country.

NATO defines deterrence of Russia and support of Allies (Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria) and partners (Ukraine and Georgia) as its main goals in the region. During the meeting with Ukraine’s President Zelenskyy, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg made it clear that “NATO

has increased its presence in the Black Sea in response to Russia’s illegal actions” and that the “Allies will continue to make clear to Russia that it has to comply with international obligations and its international commitments”.¹³ Despite apparent deterioration of relations with Turkey, the Alliance promotes deeper military cooperation with Ankara. Respecting Turkey’s interests in the region, NATO leadership does not raise the issue of revising the Montreux Convention, even though the treaty is rather an obstacle for the Alliance’s presence in the region. NATO also supports energy cooperation in the region, primarily as a means to reduce dependence of the Allies and partners on Russia.

The **United States’** position regarding the security arrangement in the region mostly coincides with the one of NATO. The US promotes enhanced presence of their and NATO’s navy in the region, invests resources in deterring Russian aggression, and advocates for the support of Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia, first of all in military and energy domains. The relations with Turkey are at their low due to a number of reasons, with divergence of interests in Syria, Ankara’s purchase of Russian S-400 anti-missile system, and the construction of TurkStream being probably the most important ones. Back in 2018, Wess Mitchell from the Department of State said that the US opposed the TurkStream pipeline, as that would give Russia the means to continue its monopoly on gas

11 *President Zourabichvili’s Address at the 13th Annual Georgia Defence and Security Conference in Batumi*, President of Georgia, 2019 [https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/pressamsakhuri/siakhleebi/saqartvelos-prezidentis-salome-zurabishvilis-gamo.aspx, access: 2 March 2020].

12 *NATO Deputy Secretary General: Stability in the Black Sea Is an Important Component of Euro-Atlantic Security*, NATO, 2016 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_130342.htm?selectedLocale=en, access: 2 March 2020].

13 *Joint Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy*, NATO, 2019 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_166602.htm?selectedLocale=en, access: 2 March 2020].

imports to Southeastern Europe¹⁴. This statement was followed the next year by President Trump threatening to “obliterate Turkish economy”¹⁵ and bipartisan congressional bill to punish Ankara for S-400 purchase¹⁶.



Moscow has not converted the Black Sea into their own lake and is unlikely to do so, but it strives for establishing dominance in the areas adjacent to their territory, including occupied Crimea and the Azov Sea

So far, the **European Union** does not break with the position of other major Western powers regarding Russian aggression in Ukraine and Georgia, militarisation of the Black Sea, and other crucial issues. However, when speaking about the Black Sea region, Brussels mostly emphasises the need for cooperation with all countries, including Russia. To this end, they suggest reviving the Black Sea Synergy and promote cooperation with BSEC. Besides, in 2019, the European Union facilitated the signing of the Common Maritime Agenda, which envisages sustainable economic development of the region and especially of the coastal regions¹⁷.

Future of the Black Sea Region

The analysis of the statements and actions of the important Black Sea powers shows that the region is deeply divided and the

situation is not likely to alter in the years to come. Any major changes are not looming ahead; therefore, the security arrangements in the region will probably remain the same. The regime of the Turkish Straits and of the naval presence in the Black Sea will be defined by the Montreux Convention, as no major power raises the issue of its overhaul, not even NATO or the US, the most disadvantaged players in the peacetime by the treaty.

The conflict between NATO and Russia will continue. Moscow has not converted the Black Sea into their own lake and is unlikely to do so, but it strives for establishing dominance in the areas adjacent to their territory, including occupied Crimea and the Azov Sea. To this end, the Kremlin will continue to invest in the Black Sea fleet, militarise Crimea, and extract all possible resources from the sea, including the zone surrounding the occupied territories. In its turn, the Alliance will carry on with its military build-up in the region and enhanced naval presence. We should expect NATO's continuing support not only for the members but for Ukraine and Georgia as well, through joint exercises, military aid, and political support.

However, the degree of NATO's presence also has its limits – because of the Montreux convention, but even more so due to different approaches within the Alliance. On the one hand, Romania and the US are keen on deterring Russia and think that the more NATO in the Black Sea, the better. On the other hand, Bulgaria wants to deepen cooperation with Russia in a number of

14 *Remarks at Bucharest University by A. Wess Mitchell, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, Department of State, 2018* [<https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-bucharest-university/>, access: 2 March 2020].

15 *Turkey-Syria Border: Trump Threatens to 'Obliterate' Turkish Economy*, “BBC”, 8 October 2019.

16 *Congress to Launch Sanctions on Turkey As Trump Measures Deemed Ineffective*, “The Guardian”, 15 October 2019.

17 *Black Sea Ministers to Endorse Common Maritime Agenda*, European Union, 2019 [https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/black-sea-synergy/62871/black-sea-ministers-endorse-common-maritime-agenda_en, access: 2 March 2020].

spheres, despite the row between Moscow and the West, and Turkey's volatile foreign policy jumps between the ardent support of NATO presence and deterrence of Russia to a clear shift from the West towards Moscow. Since all decisions in NATO are a matter of consensus, the NATO Black Sea Fleet is unlikely in the nearest future.

Quite warm relations with Bulgaria and, partly, Turkey do not help the Kremlin with what it perceives as the biggest threat to its security in the region – NATO's open-door policy, which has support in both Sofia and Ankara, let alone the capitals of other regional powers-members of NATO. Similarly, the annexation of Crimea is not likely to disappear from the agendas of the regional powers, although they assign to this issue a different level of importance.

Intense competition in the energy sphere will remain. In the first place, it concerns gas transit routes. Romania, the US, and Georgia will push for initiatives that reduce energy dependence of the region on Russia (Southern Gas Corridor, liquefied natural gas from the US). Russia will advocate for projects that bypass Ukraine and increase its share on the European market. Bulgaria and Turkey will support the construction of all pipelines, regardless of the owner, if they run through their territory or the extension of these pipelines can be built on their territory. Of at least the same importance is the development of nuclear facilities in these countries. Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania are going to build new nuclear plants or reactors. Rosatom is already building one for Turkey and will participate in constructing another one in Bulgaria. However, in Bulgarian case, they are likely to face competition from many, and they will certainly not be allowed

to operate in Romania. Another side of the issue will be the competition between Russian and American suppliers of nuclear fuel to the new and existing plants.

BSEC is unlikely to gain more prominence in the region, as its members have too diverse visions for this organisation, while only Russia and Turkey declare high interest in its development. Nevertheless, numerous declarations regarding the cooperation within BSEC, as well as in the implementation of the Common Maritime Agenda and revival of the Black Sea Synergy are likely. However, it will be a surprise if these frameworks will bring something more tangible than statements and communiqués.

At the same time, economic, transport, and infrastructure cooperation in the region will be boosted. There are plenty of projects supported by many countries that are likely to be implemented – better ferry connectivity of Georgia with Romania and Bulgaria, the Black Sea Ring Highway, the Caspian Sea–Black Sea Freight Corridor. However, the implementation of these projects can be delayed due to the political tensions. Primarily, projects that involve many countries are at risk – such as the Ring Highway and the Freight Corridor.

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UA: UKRAINE
ANALYTICA

Issue 1 (19), 2020

ISSN 2518-7481