

Following Russia's war in Georgia (2008) and the illegal annexation of Crimea (2014), Moscow has benefited from the Western strategic passiveness to question European integrity and stability. Russia's struggle to maintain a status quo in the Black Sea and its effort to avoid falling into geopolitical isolation shows amplified aggressiveness against its Western neighborhood.

This new reality poses challenges to European stability and security. While the Black Sea has not benefited from so-called maritime internationalization, the region has always been subject to abuse by Russia.

In a space with a high concentration of international actors and conditioned by the region's geography, the Black Sea area presents the valence of a geopolitical node. The Black Sea's regional dynamic is not disconnected from the global security context; therefore, a comprehensive approach is essential for shaping coherent development and stabilization actions.

The volume emphasizes lessons learned and a strategic understanding of how the challenges in the Black Sea region should be contained.

Editura Top Form

Proiectul Emerging Importance of Wider Black Sea Area Security a implicat experți și reprezentanți instituționali din România, Europa, Statele Unite și vecinătatea estică pentru a dezbate și prezenta analize, cu scopul identificării de soluții durabile pentru Regiunea Extinsă a Mării Negre



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Challenges and Development Paths for a Cooperative Identity in the Black Sea Region

UNIVERSITATEA
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— DIN SIBIU —



CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT PATHS FOR A COOPERATIVE IDENTITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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GLOBAL STUDIES CENTER

**CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT
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CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT PATHS FOR A COOPERATIVE IDENTITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION*

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**THE BLACK SEA FACTOR:
FROM WORDS TO DEEDS - LIKE NEVER BEFORE
(Essay)**

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The Black Sea factor has become a typical topic in talks about the geopolitics and security of our region in the past few years, which is perfectly understandable, needing no additional explanation as to why.

However, while the standard is to speak about the importance of the abovementioned factor, the less-standard is a full and timely implementation of it within the pan-Western security configuration with the aim of a full-fledged and fast integration of Black Sea democracies. The war being waged in Ukraine has once and for all left no room for pointless theorization of discussions about the practical benefit and purpose of the Black Sea, and has exposed the need for concrete, result-oriented solutions.

The attempt by the Russian Federation to turn the Black Sea into a zone of its exclusive influence, into a sort of “Black Sea Kaliningrad,” by introducing anti-access/area denial systems, makes it incomprehensible and even harmful for the Western partners of Georgia to still not have a comprehensive strategy for the Black Sea region. In the light of events unfolding in and around Ukraine, it is also a fact that what is to be said has to be said openly, not shyly or by using empty phrases. Openly because the sharply deteriorated security situation in the greater Black Sea region makes leisurely talks at academic conferences absurd: these very real threats to Georgian national interests, along with many other urgent issues, require a meaningful discussion.

This is not the first article about the importance of the Black Sea,

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as a geopolitical and geo-economic bridge, for Georgia; in the distant and recent past, we have spoken repeatedly about this topic in various formats, but since that cardinal transformation process started in Europe on 24 February, this is the first talk about this crucial nautical artery of our region. The war in Ukraine, which by its result and impact is way broader than the war itself, as well as the mistakes which were made after the Cold War and led us eventually to this war, urges maximum openness and frankness in such talks.

BROADER ALLIANCE IN THE REGION

In the past, the North Atlantic Alliance was represented on the Black Sea by limited potential and resources, and rightly so. This shortage on the Eastern flank of the Alliance's perimeter - from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, inclusive, was exacerbated by an apparent asymmetry or inequality. The result was and continues to be relative. Namely, against the inequality between the tailored forward presence on the Black Sea and the enhanced forward presence on the Baltic Sea, NATO's approach is unexplainable because today, the security of Black Sea requires, at least an approach of a standard similar to that applied to the northern part of the Eastern flank. Although the decision to deploy an additional contingent in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was taken at the recent extraordinary NATO summit, this still does not answer several key questions: How is the balance of power being changed (or it can it be changed) on the Black Sea? How secure can Georgia feel, and owing to which concrete measures? What are the practical steps that would further convince Georgian society that threats have decreased and at times of possible threat, that the Western unity will provide Georgia with effective and instant support?

These and other similar questions gain urgency considering the difficulties of NATO's Eastern enlargement, which have been made even more apparent by the war in Ukraine and the negotiation process. The problem acquires extraordinary urgency also because we, in the absence of NATO's collective security umbrella, cannot hear talks, from any of the parties, about other, similarly effective "compensation models" for the security of our country in exchange for the postponement of speedy membership to NATO. Meanwhile, the aggression in Ukraine continues and, hearing the Russian rhetoric, it becomes clear that the revisionism

with its brutal force is not going to stop at Ukraine.

For the sake of fairness, it must be said that the failure to form a common Western vision has its objective reasons. In particular, the “fragmentation” of the of Black Sea and Black Sea coast policy may be explained by various historical-geographic and foreign policy layers which exist within the region, namely: the relative isolation of Romania and Bulgaria; the harsh present reality of Georgia and Ukraine determined by a common “post-Soviet” past; “abstract specificity” in Turkey’s approach to regional processes, etc.

Of course, such a geo-polyphony has also impeded the emergence of the above-mentioned strategic vision. At the same time, it is also a fact that the existing challenges can no longer justify references to the past, while future risks nudge Georgian and Western leaders towards making “harsh assumptions” and taking clear-cut political decisions. If anything can be found positive about the situation created in the region, it is precisely the effect by which it can galvanize processes in a proper direction and at a proper rate.

“CONSOLIDATION” OF BLACK SEA COASTLINE COUNTRIES

For the countries of the Black Sea region, located at the geocrossing between the East and West, the policy of balancing, sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful, is not, historically, strange.

However, the 20th century and the post-Cold War period uncovered an acute shortage of knowledge and skills needed for a proper and wise balancing which, primarily, implies prevention or minimization of threats. This, however, has become a very serious challenge for those countries, including Georgia, which had and have to realize their civilizational choice in parallel with handling threats coming from the neighborhood. Balancing and at the same time, heading towards a set aim have become more difficult in a situation when international norms in the region lost ground to naked aggression, and a lawless infringement of borders and sovereignty for the redistribution of spheres of influence has openly confronted a lawful containment. All this created an inevitable necessity to swiftly and adequately adjust “lawfulness” to the tactics of “lawless” fight.

This topic is multifaceted and we have discussed its separate aspects in various publications in the past.

This time around I will focus on a few aspects that will better highlight the greater Black Sea region within the so-called regional hub-and-spoke structure of the new world order / disorder. It should be noted that the formation of the greater Black Sea region as a new gravitational center in the global system cannot materialize only with the efforts of strategic allies or partners: a large part of this work must, primarily, be done by the countries of the region and its leaders with the support and involvement of societies.

It is also essential that such “free unity” built on a healthy foundation of the Black Sea region will over time help the region break one important stereotype, bringing to an end the association of the region with conflicts, destruction and confrontation; instead, revamping it and gradually associating it with development, stability and peace. In this rather difficult and long process, the abovementioned platform must be properly adjusted to existing and expected challenges and be distinguished for the flexibility and mobility of multilateral approaches. Furthermore, a Black Sea declaration would emphasize the unity of interests of countries of the Black Sea region as well as firm and unwavering interest of collective West in the region. As a result, the regional Black Sea unity, its prospects and competitiveness, would be determined by renewed principles - *modus operandi*.

To be more concrete, the consolidation of free nations of the greater Black Sea region, in our opinion, depends on two main things: one of them is *a policy geared towards a greater synergy and better coordination of common regional interests*, the second is *the introduction of new mechanisms of cooperation in the field of defense and security*.

FOR BETTER COORDINATION IN THE REGION

We would like to put again forwards the initiative of framework declaration which would serve a political and economic integration of regional countries, including serve a modern consultation format adjusted to the time and need of new communication channels.

Such declaration would highlight the importance of Black Sea region for the world and regional peace and stability. Alongside a number of urgent topics, such declaration would: (1) underline the partnership of parties for regional security; (2) view the region as the area free from corrupt influences and “zones of special interest;” (3) emphasize the

necessity to mobilize means for the diversification of regional infrastructure as well as the need to implement socially and environmentally sustainable projects in the region; (4) note frozen seemingly ethnic, but in reality geopolitical conflicts, also, express support to sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries in the Black Sea region; (5) ensure a platform for discussing issues of regional security, for example, terrorism and challenges of illegal migration; (6) identify areas of free trade agreements and trade blocks of the regional scale.

At the same time, to ensure necessary coordination, one should consider a regular conduct of high-level summits with the participation of leaders of declaration member states, high-ranking representatives of US, UK, EU and other strategic partners. The main purpose of regular summits would be the support of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of regional countries; topics of discussion at summits should be truly geopolitical (not so-called “ethnic”) conflicts in the region, regional security in general, international terrorism, cybersecurity, illegal migration and other pressing issues and challenges.

As noted above, we deem it a necessary objective to draw declarants’ attention to the necessity to attract additional investments to the region. In our opinion, one of concrete initiatives could be the announcement in the declaration of a large regional project, for example, under the name of “Black Sea Welfare (Development) Belt.” The aims of the project would include the mobilization of financial resources for the development of regional infrastructure, reduction of dependence on certain energy sources, implementation of targeted social and environmental programs, etc.

In terms of economic sustainability, characteristics of the Three Seas Initiative needs to be scrutinized for the aim of projecting it on the Black Sea. Naturally the specifics of our region differ from that of the Baltic Sea. However, considering an organic interconnection of security and economy, a greater deal of attention should be paid to modernization of energy and transportation routes running across the Black Sea region, creation of necessary infrastructure, including digital. Otherwise, talks about defense and other alliances will not be sufficient for regional stability and true global competitiveness.

FOR HIGHER SECURITY IN THE REGION

At the beginning of the article, we mentioned only one concrete

NATO-related aspect of the systemic flaw of regional security. There are other aspects too, of course.

In any case, the key message of adjusting this or that security to the region should be dispelling doubts of our strategic allies and partners about a “peripheral” or “second-rate status” of the region. The Black Sea paradigm for Georgia, however, is that the region for us is simultaneously a potential of national development and a source of threats. This strange equation can be explained by the location of the country in the mega-conflict zone between two large political and social formation. Towards this very important cause, the Georgian state and political circles must arm themselves with “realism.” Time of “love” and “hate” in geopolitics is passing into oblivion and will be and has been already replaced by “need,” “necessity,” “tailoring to oneself,” and “use.”

As geopolitical “taste” and paradigm of vision change, so do behavioral rules and constructs in the security field. One of such fundamental changes is compact alliances (in modern vernacular - clusters) of several participants (something between narrow bilateral formats and large alliances), which offer member states an improved mobility and optimal use of resources for attaining a set goal. Such alliances are sometimes dubbed as “small NATO” though this comparison is not adequate.

In any case, the abovementioned trend is of practical interest for governmental, specialized and analytical circles of Georgia. Research and modeling in this area may help us eradicate flaws, and in certain cases, even anachronisms, existing in security models or approaches established long ago: help in obtaining a necessary support for the statehood of Georgia, to the maximum possible extent, in reality, in the form of deeds, not words.

In reality, the essence of above-mentioned “cluster” (so-called “small NATO”) system is the coherence and overlap of factual, not declarative, interests of member countries. Such coherence may develop from several areas of cooperation into a broader agenda. Consequently, real effective security is ensured precisely by those liberated-from-idealism “clusters” in which countries unite naturally.

As a concrete example, I will name the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving the United States, Japan, Australia and India. This project is noteworthy for us so much so that it provides very practical material for the discussion of the topic described in this article. Yet

another very interesting precedent is AUKUS which was created a bit later. To cut a long story short, the process of regional hub-and-spoke of security has been launched. It is also a fact that the accession to NATO with the aim to create more guarantees for our country requires the determination of clear timeline and shortest procedures, but the situation in this regard is unsatisfactory for the time being.

Also, a sort of “spare” option, in our opinion, would be a discussion with the key strategic partner of an issue of transfer onto a strategic contractual alliance in the field of defense and security. Likelihood, as well as the “experimental” nature of this in the light of Black Sea regional context, has been discussed in several previous publications. It is worth noting that this option, even in case of protraction or even postponement of NATO membership for an indefinite time, can be regarded as an effective “compensation model” for the enhancement of Georgian security.

TRENDS, TENDENCIES...

Prospects of this or that security model on the Black Sea must be, of course, assessed within the context of ongoing and global processes. The aim of this article is not and cannot be the discussion of all events or circumstances related to the greater Black Sea region, but we would mention some of them.

If we agree that Georgia needs the engagement of the USA as a strategic partner for ensuring lasting and effective regional security on the Black Sea, then it is equally necessary to be aware of its vision of the current distribution of powers in the world and corresponding emphases. In this regard, the national defense strategy of the US represents a useful source for drawing certain conclusions.

The most recent version dates back to 2018 and alongside mentioning Russia, it mainly focuses on China. It should be also noted that the strategy pays little attention to so-called local wars or military operations against revolts and is mainly focused on rivalry and confrontation between large states. It is clear that the war in Ukraine will have its effect on the future national defense strategy of the US and will make it more “Europe-centric.” A new redistribution of emphases between Asia and Europe must affect the defense budget of the country and logistics and deployment of the army. It is a fact that a distribution of defense resources according to the priorities of the USA is a logical response to the threat

that has emerged in Europe since 24 February of the current year.

We have already talked about a special role which the Russian Federation attributes to the Black Sea and the attempt of Russia to turn it into its “internal sea.” Consequently - and this was mentioned repeatedly too - that is up to the Western security system and effective implementation of this system in the region through deeds, not words. Frankly speaking, at this stage, the Black Sea region is an integral component of the Eurasian security context as it is simultaneously connected to Europe as well as the Middle East and Asia. It is also a fact that two “capping” infrastructures of interest for the Alliance in the Black Sea - one in Romania and another in Turkey, would have fallen short of the demand of that time even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Thus, in parallel with the war in Ukraine as well as the formation of final position about the geopolitical fate of the entire post-Soviet space, several necessary working directions have already been identified. List of them, of course, requires greater systematization, but it is already possible to identify needed actions such as the deepening of cooperation in the field of intelligence between relevant countries of the Black Sea region, strengthening of armed forces of vulnerable countries by providing relevant armament and training, training of national personnel for neutralizing hybrid risks and establishment of special centers. For this and along with the enhanced forward presence on the Black Sea better coordination, it would be logical to create a regional leadership center. This and other steps taken by the West will have the meaning of true recognition of the Black Sea region and actual support to the regional countries. A political message will also be clear and comprehensible: a united consolidated flank against common threats.

WAITING FOR CLARITY

There is virtually no doubt that the war in Ukraine will result in a new iron curtain descending in Europe and drawing dividing lines again. On the path towards that reality, the priority of Georgia is to ensure, to the extent practicable, that discussions about Georgia are not held without us, that Georgia’s fate is not decided without our involvement and without hearing the opinion of Tbilisi. In the light of created circumstances this is the most difficult but necessary objective which must be achieved by any means.

Against the created ambiguity which is further exacerbated by political events unfolding around Ukraine, the official Tbilisi must find power and resources to avoid facing an unpleasant fact as a result of rearrangement of great powers. Modern politics seems to have freed itself from flirting and hypocrisy once and for all and we must not shy away from asking, inquiring and demanding, because although the rhetoric about norms of international law and rules of civilized behavior are pleasant to hear, it is intended only for ignorant and impatient audience. Fortunately, we are none of that and therefore, let us ask for more details and demand concrete deeds. Georgian public and social sphere, united by common national efforts, must today take efforts to prevent a total loss by the Georgian side, a total “removal” from the country of Georgia’s present and future levers, while at the same time, to use modest means available to us as effectively as possible for the preservation and development of the identity of Georgian nation and statehood.