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The balance of strength in the Black Sea region and Georgia's current challenges

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A regional prologue

Security in the Black Sea region has become a very popular topic these days, but the often purely theoretical nature of the interests of various actors is insufficient to motivate them in practice. This question and the practical solutions it calls for are directly linked to Georgia's security and development as well as to the stability of the region as a whole, and it is therefore

vital that Tbilisi seek to forecast developments and prepare both preventative mechanisms and timely responses to the risks and challenges.

In general, the Black Sea's importance derives not only from the countries that lie along its shores, which is only natural, but also from its history—particularly for several global actors with regional interests. The Black Sea itself and the wider region around it have throughout history been the arena for a variety of goals, the foremost and most decisive of which was trade. The shift away from purely commercial interests to a larger 'Great Power' confrontation truly began when Russia established herself along the Black Sea's shores, and from 1853 onwards Russian interest in the region has been invariably high.

The Crimean War and the later replacement of European interests with those of the United States and NATO progressively increased the perceived importance of achieving and maintaining an influence over the Black Sea region. NATO has repeatedly stated the region's geopolitical and geo-economic significance 'in terms of Euro-Atlantic security', most notably at its summits in Warsaw in 2016 and in Brussels in 2018. In contrast, the London summit of 2019 can be said to have caused some dissatisfaction in this regard, although a meeting of the joint NATO-Georgia Commission subsequently held in Batumi pointed out the need to define 'priorities for the coming period'.

The Black Sea region's growing role is not at all surprising if we consider some of the Western or Russian doctrines and theories that describe it as a 'rampart' or even as a dividing line between democracy and authoritarianism. Many current developments in the region are indeed tantamount to the erection of a New Iron Curtain that cuts right through the Black Sea.

Regional geopolitical contours

The geopolitical contours of the Black Sea region are relatively amorphous, but this is not only the result of regional specificities: this amorphousness can be seen in almost every one of the world's 'centres of gravity', and the wider region that encompasses both the Black and Caspian Seas is indeed the centre of gravity of the Eurasian continent. Instead, we should search for the reasons of this geopolitical amorphousness and uncertainty among various global processes linked to the Cold War and the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre.

These existing challenges have more recently been worsened by Russia's aggressive acts in the region, particularly against Georgia and Ukraine; these have brutally ignored the established norms of behaviour between countries and have led to a many-faceted international crisis.

These challenges which have been building up in the region have since been compounded by the current coronavirus pandemic, which threatens to fundamentally rearrange many things. As a result, we are now facing many critical questions whose answers are scattered around the region and indeed around the globe as a whole.

There is very often talk of a so-called 'Grand Strategy' whose definition has almost become an end in itself. The desirability of having such a 'grand' plan is of course perfectly understandable—we all want to know how to get from point A to point B, how long it will take and how much it will cost—but it is also important to remember that this journey must not involve unpredictable risks. One of the main problems, however, is that when an attempt is made to commit such a 'Grand Strategy' to paper, one often loses sight of the initial goals. This loss of the fundamental issues is frequently due to the absence of a common understanding of the 'Grand Strategy' and to the emergence of variations upon the same theme, every one of which is based upon the divergent expectations of individual countries at different times. The Germans, for example, believe first and foremost in 'strategic patience', i.e. not involving themselves in matters beyond their direct interests; the French, on the other hand, have always preferred a 'strategic autonomy' that aims for the establishment of a European political and military identity; and Poland (as a last example) follows a policy of 'strategic embrace' that involves maintaining direct contacts with the United States that bypass European structures.

This great diversity of national strategies precludes long-term planning in practice and thereby limits any 'Grand Strategy' to short-term goals and tasks that are more tactical in nature than strategic. I therefore believe that it would be more desirable to talk of an 'emerging strategy' rather than a 'grand' one, particularly as this concept allows for greater flexibility when seeking to overcome current risks and challenges. An 'emerging strategy' is also more practical as its approach is based upon 'realistic' and rational assessments rather than ideological considerations, enabling greater caution to be taken and increasing the chances of avoiding the occasionally catastrophic results of new confrontations.

In Georgia's case, following strictly rational and realistic approaches gives us the ability to adapt to uncertain processes, and in the wider Black Sea region will help us to better combine elements of competitiveness and co-operation.

How reliable is regional security?

When considering the reliability of existing security mechanisms in the Black Sea region, it is vital to initially identify precisely 'who is who?' It was no accident that I mentioned Russia

early on in the conversation. Russia's influence and the West's position in the region reflect a Kremlin doctrine that was mostly developed under Yevgeny Primakov; this, the so-called Primakov Doctrine, aims to prevent neighbouring countries from leaving Russia's sphere of influence and establishing themselves as independent, self-sufficient countries, and indeed even to prevent any opportunity to do so from arising.

In practice, the Primakov Doctrine was used to apply different kinds of pressure on the countries Russia sees as belonging to her 'Near Abroad'—from hybrid war to direct and open aggression. In reality, however, this Russian approach was nothing new and had already been employed immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it lacked spontaneity and theoretical 'justification' for quite some time. Since Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, annexation of Crimea and recent attempts to turn the Black Sea into a Closed one, however, Moscow's 'Near Abroad' policy of maintaining areas of influence has become much more systemic in nature.

When considering the Black Sea, the important point is that, besides its geopolitical significance—enabling Russian access to the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa—the region also bears an internal political dimension for Moscow. By maintaining maximal strategic depth along the country's federal borders, Russia is trying to prevent 'harmful' foreign influences from penetrating their inner state space. According to their own perception, this enables Moscow to act according to the requirements of Russia's choice of 'sovereign democracy'.

It is clear that outside observers have no right to question the choices a country has made to ensure its national development—unless of course these choices involve a disregard for international law and order and regional security, and the occupation and annexation of neighbouring countries. Russian policy towards the Black Sea 'aquarium' and neighbouring countries, according to their own logic, is precisely that: Moscow openly imposes its rules of the game, and is committed to achieving maximum results for itself as a 'regional super-state'.

And so what has the West's collective security response been to Russia's approach? Unfortunately, this 'response' could at the very least be described as irrelevant and inadequate in the face of reality, and given Russia's blatant disregard for the integrity of Georgian and Ukrainian territory and indeed their occupation, this irrelevance becomes even more prominent.

At cause is the Alliance's lack of focus on its eastern flank. Compared to the Baltic Sea's intensified security system, which according to NATO terminology constitutes an 'enhanced

forward presence', the Alliance's security component in the Black Sea region is of a relatively lower quality, as indicated in the somewhat humbler term 'tailored forward presence'. This asymmetry could be explained 10-12 years ago, but through the prism of recent developments, the Alliance's security model in the Black Sea region urgently needs to be reviewed and readjusted.

More and better regional security

The lack of balance along the Alliance's eastern flank could be corrected in several ways. Directly linked to Georgia, one of these ways would involve developing and following various specific approaches within both multilateral as well as bilateral formats, as I have often explained over the years.

Since we are now discussing collective security and NATO's eastern flank, we should also mention that, if the Alliance truly intends to create an effective security system in the Black Sea and support its regional partners, then the existing system requires significant rearrangement. Georgia's goal in this regard would be, at the very least, the Alliance moving to establish an 'enhanced forward presence'; if this is not done, it will very soon become difficult for NATO to ensure complete security in the region simply based upon the Alliance's Romanian and Bulgarian fulcrums. It is therefore time for our Western partners to develop a common view of Black Sea security based upon important Eurasian geopolitical and geo-economic factors. The fact that Western analysts frequently discuss our region entitles us to a certain degree of cautious optimism, but the greatest support must be given to the idea of drafting and applying a new Eastern European strategy according to the principle of 'One Flank, One Threat, One Presence'.

The asymmetry between the northern and southern halves of NATO's eastern flank could also be corrected by establishing a system for rapid situational assessments and timely reactions to hybrid threats; but Western analysts readily admit that the Alliance is lagging behind in this concrete matter. We also believe that the West should demonstrate its support for its Black Sea partners by carrying out a new Marshall Plan of economic and investment projects in the region.

A complex, multifaceted approach would enhance the region itself and, by representing the West in a tangible way, accelerate the complete integration of 'this side' of the Black Sea region into the civilized world and enable the West to better project its interests across the wider Black and the Caspian Sea region. It would be no exaggeration to say that Georgia's role has so

far been major: from the moment we recovered our independence and freedom, we have claimed to be a guide on the path to integration with the Western civilized world, and continue to do so even now, and our security and development is the ultimate test of the West's real interest in the Black Sea region.

The Georgian case in greater detail

Georgia's complex political geography has been mentioned many times, and this will always be the case and is simply a reality that we cannot avoid. The global changes that the coronavirus pandemic has now caused will of course add themselves to this reality, and their nature and possible impact has been discussed in several previous publications.

To Georgia, the Black Sea region is a source of both opportunities for national development as well as threats. The reason for this unusual equation is Georgia's location between two large political and socio-economic actors in an enormous zone of conflict, one of whom considers human rights to be superior to the state, whereas the other prefers the practically unlimited power of the state over the person. This circumstance alone is enough to demonstrate the causticity of the conflict between the two.

History is replete with examples of nations caught between two sides that were forced by one to reject the prospect of becoming an independent, self-sufficient country; and Georgia will not have the luxury to refuse: neither our historic past nor present circumstances would enable this, although they do suggest quite a few interesting developments and original solutions.

Be that as it may, and regardless of the global or regional context, constant domestic reform and a growing relationship of mutual dependence with our allies remain the two most important and invariable components of Georgia's agenda. The first is vital if we are to become a competitive state, whereas the second will give us the security we need to ensure our development. If they are to act responsibly, however, the Georgian government and political circles should become realists: the time for 'love' and 'hatred' in geopolitics is long gone, and these terms will be replaced with 'need', 'necessity', 'adaptation' and 'use'. The Black Sea is already a region in which this replacement is taking place.

Russia will of course continue her attempts to maintain Georgia as a measure of 'strategic depth', shielding her 'sovereign interests' from Western 'expansion'. In response, the main goal of the West in the Black Sea region should remain proving the advantages of Western principles with the successful example of Georgia. This is the current situation that will remain

with us for the foreseeable future; its objective result is a Black Sea analogue to George Kennan's 'Restraining Line' that crosses our country, thanks to which the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts are in reality geopolitical rather than ethnic.

Of course, instead of limiting ourselves to the reality we have described here, we would also wish to discuss different scenarios—for example the Black Sea region as a centre for dialogue between civilizations and cultures, or as a platform for the de-escalation of conflicting interests and the promotion of co-existence. These are obviously very desirable goals towards which we should strive, but Georgia's time and resources should for the time being be directed towards more vital and down-to-earth priorities.

We should also not forget that identifying, analysing and seeking to forecast regional risks could serve as our main intellectual trump card, and we could not dream of doing better than that. One of the main conditions for the effective use of this trump card would be to share information and experience with our allies: our region and the developments that concern it require real security and actions from each one of us that are oriented towards self-sufficient development.

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