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NATO, EU Integration, and the Struggle Against Russian Influence

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ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This policy paper, authored by Mariam Bitsadze and Dan Sandu — fellows of the Black Sea Security Conference organized by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus in Tbilisi (October 2024) — analyzes the evolving geopolitical significance of the Black Sea Region amid intensifying competition between Euro-Atlantic institutions and the Russian Federation. Through a regional lens encompassing Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, the authors examine how Russia employs hybrid tactics—ranging from disinformation campaigns to military aggression—to destabilize democratic institutions and obstruct Western integration. This paper looks at the state of affairs as it was towards the end of 2024. In response, NATO and the European Union are deepening engagement to reinforce collective security and democratic resilience. The paper argues that comprehensive integration into NATO and the EU remains the most sustainable route to regional stability and sovereignty. It concludes with a call for accelerated political commitment, institutional reform, and a cohesive transatlantic response to counter growing authoritarian influence and secure the future of liberal democracy in the Black Sea Region.

Keywords:

#BlackSeaSecurityConference #EU #Hybridthreats #NATO #SouthCaucasus

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1. EU & NATO Enlargement as a Security Tool

By Dan Sandu

1.1 Fighting for a fallen empire

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the former Eastern Bloc countries in the Black Sea Region gradually started to look towards the West for a provider of prosperity and security. For at least two decades, Western countries kept closer Euro-Atlantic integration on the table for Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia but, out of fear of angering Moscow, never proceeded much further. Ironically, this made Russia pursue a strategy of continuous destabilisation, aggressive posturing and interventionism in an attempt to make any Western integration of the region politically infeasible. It is no coincidence that Russia moved on to annex Crimea immediately following the Maidan Revolution that decisively put Ukraine on the European path. Nor that the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia happened only months after Georgia's eventual accession to NATO was confirmed at the Bucharest Summit. By starting up frozen conflicts in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, Russia ensured that these countries would not finalise the accession process of either the EU or NATO. Europe tacitly accepted this state of affairs, as it pursued appeasement as a feasible long-term means of turning Russia into a partner.

While Russia under Vladimir Putin has consistently interfered, militarily when it felt necessary, to stop potential further expansion of the Euro-Atlantic area, it has not yet dared direct provocation with already integrated states. For Moscow, stopping the integration process at its inception is crucial, because it perceives EU and NATO membership as a country's one way ticket out of its control. With this perspective, it is completely possible that the Ukrainian invasion itself was started because of existing anxieties towards imminent integration into either organisation. The war in Ukraine, however, was an enormous miscalculation from Moscow. What was intended to be a week-long intervention to get a favourable regime in Kyiv ended up as a conflict with no end in sight. Moreover, with Russia caught up in the war, Russia's capacity for direct intervention elsewhere decreased, creating a window of opportunity for countries of the region looking to escape its dominion.

Indeed, given Russia's current unjustifiable aggression, it is no surprise that littoral states have looked for ways to accelerate Euro-Atlantic integration. Moldova is pursuing EU membership, while Ukraine and Georgia intend to join both the EU and NATO. Türkiye stands as a notable exception to this trend, balancing its position and currently playing both sides (Coşkun et al., 2024).

Of course, Moscow will not stand idly by. Russia still perceives the integration of its former sphere of influence into the Euro-Atlantic community as akin to losing the prestige and authority it feels rightfully entitled to. Having lost the Baltic, Moscow is doing everything in its power to prevent being pushed to its border and out of the Black Sea. With its army blocked in Ukraine, attempts to stop this process through hybrid means have been substantially intensified, as we have already seen in recent weeks.

On 20 October, Moldova held a referendum to enshrine its EU path into the constitution. Earlier polls suggested a relatively comfortable lead for the European camp, but the vote only passed by a razor's edge: 50.35% in favour. Days before the election, Moldovan authorities had warned that millions of euros were being channelled from the Russian Federation to domestic actors who would use this money to buy over a hundred thousand 'No' votes (Joyner, 2024). In the end, the overwhelming 'Yes' vote from the large Moldovan diaspora living in the West managed to keep the country on its European path. The EU Commission's spokesperson called it 'unprecedented interference and intimidation by Russia and its proxies' (Reuters, 2024).

The 26 October Georgian parliamentary elections tell a similar, yet notably more drastic story, with the ruling Georgian Dream party claiming a 54% majority after a day filled with severe fraud and violation reports by international observers (DW, 2024). The party, known for leaning towards Russia, had promised to ban the pro-West opposition should they win the elections. Massive pro-European protests were held two days later, after the president, together with the entire opposition, refused to recognise the elections, describing them as 'a Russian special operation – a new form of hybrid warfare waged against our people and our country' (Dougherty, 2024). In an odd and hurried attempt to legitimise the contested government, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán congratulated the ruling party and immediately made a visit to Tbilisi.

Although Türkiye's accession talks with the EU have been blocked for quite a while, Russia has been recently redoubling its efforts to sway the country over to BRICS, as well as transforming the bloc into a credible alternative to the Western international architecture. The President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, even attended the October 2024 BRICS summit, held in Russia. Ankara has pursued closer economic, trade and energy ties with Moscow after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but has maintained its strategic and military opposition to Russia (Hayatsever and Spicer, 2024; Coşkun et al., 2024). It has refused to impose sanctions on the country, but has provided military drones to Ukraine, and has agreed to NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept in which the Russian Federation was declared 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area' (NATO, 2022). Türkiye has also shown interest in pursuing closer ties with Brussels, although its message is quite clear: 'We have other options'.

In Europe, multiple extremist parties with dubious connections to the Kremlin are gaining in popularity and

political power in a climate of extensive disinformation campaigns and societal polarisation. These same parties promote anti-EU stances or at least 'moderate' positions which interfere with EU integration and expansion. Viktor Orbán's recent endorsement of Georgian Dream serves as a drastic example of Russian interests pursued by internal EU actors.

1.2 Time for action

Fundamentally, the EU wants security and stability in the region. With the existing war on its borders already spilling out into Poland, Romania and the Black Sea, it is of great importance to avoid the spread of instability and conflict to neighbouring countries.

Moreover, as the continent is finally looking to address its energy dependence, security in the Black Sea has become a strategic priority (Gamkrelidze, 2024; Sabadus, 2021; Wani, 2024). The natural gas reserves found there are crucial for diversifying energy sources and for ensuring Europe's energy security during its transition to clean energy. Extraction projects such as Romania's Neptun Deep are already providing a significant share of Europe's energy requirements, but the Black Sea also serves as an energy corridor to Azerbaijan's offshore wind farms in the Caspian Sea, important for the growing clean energy needs of Europe. Furthermore, the Black Sea is also a crucial trade route, notably used by Ukraine, one of the world's leading grain producers, for a significant share of its grain exports. Secure trade routes here are essential for world food security and, thus, for global and European stability.

Europe's long-term goals of maintaining peace, security and stability in its immediate neighbourhood intrinsically clash with Russia's current tactics, as Moscow perceives the destabilisation of the region necessary to maintain its regional importance and keep Western influence away from its borders. Europe needs to understand that as long as Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia will be stuck between East and West, the region's security and stability will be at risk. Moscow will not stop until these countries are either irreversibly Russian or, on the contrary, irreversibly European. Türkiye, although at little risk of direct interference, is much in a similar situation from an economic and energy standpoint.

As long as the EU and NATO enlargement process is postponed, the region is condemned to a state of perpetual artificial instability. Since abandoning these countries to Moscow and accepting Russian dominion in the Black Sea is unacceptable for the West, Western institutions and political actors alike need to 'bite the bullet' and start real, deliberate, focused negotiations with them to facilitate integration into the Western economic, strategic, social and political architecture. Similar to the Baltic region, only transforming the Black Sea into an EU and NATO lake will successfully deter Russian interventionism and bring an end to Russian interference and destabilisation attempts.

Of course, this cannot and must not happen without strong public support from both sides.

1.3 A long road ahead

For the candidate countries, the argument for Western integration is convincing – one need only look at Romania and Bulgaria's economic progress since joining the European Union to see the immense advantages of membership, but EU integration is not a one-way street. The accession process is hard, long and demanding, and requires significant concessions from both the people and the government, including loss of sovereignty and credible commitments to the rule of law, civil liberties and European standards.

These requirements, however, are not just abstract conditions imposed by Brussels. It is precisely the implementation of this process which ends up providing stability, security and economic prosperity to the member state. Accession to the Union without meeting the required criteria would have the opposite effect, putting at risk the cohesion, well-being, legitimacy and strength of the EU itself and, as a consequence, undermine the country's entire reason for EU membership. Thus, understandably, EU and EU member states are wary of unnecessarily speeding up this process and potentially skipping crucial reforms for the candidate countries. Joining the EU means more than joining an economic bloc. It means joining a community of countries guided by the same principles and sharing a common vision of the world. It is, thus, the responsibility of the candidate countries to prove their commitment to these principles and this vision.

Moreover, it is still unclear whether candidate states like Moldova and Georgia will even manage to keep steady on their pro-European path. The recent elections have shown that both countries still struggle with powerful pro-Russian domestic actors. On top of the expected significant reform necessary for accession, getting rid of the Russian influence that permeates the Georgian and Moldovan societies would be an absolute political, if not technical requirement for joining the EU.

The situation is somehow even more dire for Türkiye and Ukraine, both very large nations who would carry equally large amounts of political power within the Union. The former would even become the largest EU member by population and the second by size. At a time when even small Austria can cause headaches by blocking much needed Schengen accession for Romania and Bulgaria, there is not much hope for political support for their membership within the current structure of the EU.

1.4 The EU is slowly getting left behind

European political elites need to understand that EU integration of the countries in the Black Sea Region is not only beneficial for those states, but also an absolute priority for the continued security and prosperity of the Union. Apart from the already discussed direct increase in regional and, thus, European security, EU enlargement, if done properly, would make Europe stronger, more resilient, less dependent and less vulnerable to outside interference. A powerful Europe on the global scene is a more secure

Europe overall.

The rise of BRICS members like China, India and Brazil is in stark contrast to the EU's modest economic growth and stagnation in innovation (European Commission Newsroom, citing Die Welt, 2024). Coupled with the bloc's lack of a unitary foreign policy and ongoing reliance on the US for security guarantees in an already complicated security environment, Europe's continued relevance on the world scene comes under question.

EU enlargement in the Black Sea would address a lot of those concerns. The expansion of the market to Türkiye alone, but also to Moldova, Georgia and post-war Ukraine would dramatically increase the EU's economic power, as well as give even more weight to the Union's regulatory demands. 'The accession countries would increase the EU's labour force, investment opportunities, and raw materials resource base, as well as the bloc's voice and representation in global governance'(Braun et al., 2024). Security in the Black Sea would address Europe's energy diversification efforts and offer better or new alternatives for east-west Eurasian trade. And having a militarily-capable Türkiye as a committed member state would ease the prospects of achieving strategic autonomy for the Union.

1.5 Addressing the issues

As things stand, EU enlargement is poised to be blocked by Member States' anxieties towards potential political disputes and democratic backsliding within the Union, with Hungary serving as a convenient example of current limitations found in the EU's political and institutional architecture. Under the current circumstances, none of the Black Sea candidate states can offer, in the foreseeable future, the kind of guarantees EU members would need in order to overcome those anxieties.

But EU institutions are long overdue for reform. The context of a limited time-window for enlargement could provide the catalyst required for such a discussion. Most importantly, the EU seems to be at the limit of what it can achieve with unanimity. Every additional member is another possible blocking point in the already cumbersome political process and bureaucratic institutions. Is it time to accept that the Union has become too large to still allow any single member to block the will of all the rest? If member states are to have a voice on today's world stage, they may need to speak as one, regardless of inevitable individual disagreements.

But while disagreements are to be expected, the Union also needs to find mechanisms to address democratic backsliding and drifting away from EU values in member states. A common destiny cannot be pursued by countries with radically different world views. Alignment is crucial for the cohesion of the Union, and should that be lost, the European project loses the foundation on which it relies to survive.

With an EU that cannot be blocked by individual national

interests and that can assure the adherence of member states to the values on which the Union was founded, the enlargement process becomes much less concerning.

For candidate countries, the technical aspects of joining the EU are not the fundamental problem. Instead, they need to independently decide if the European path is truly the right road for them. For this decision to be legitimate, it needs to be taken in a secure environment, free from outside influence or interference. In this regard, NATO membership can act as a lower-commitment intermediary step before EU accession. There is a reason why Türkiye can consider its alternatives, while the other candidate states cannot, and that ability is desirable.

1.6 Security in the Black Sea Region

The start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the breakdown of ties between the West and Russia has significantly altered the existing dynamic and has transformed the Black Sea Region into an arena of clashing interests. With the two spheres colliding in the Black Sea, a fierce battle is waged on the status of the 'unaligned' countries of the region.

For both the West and the countries of the region, the only reliable mechanism for ensuring economic and political stability in the Black Sea is EU integration, and the only reliable mechanism for deterring aggression and preventing conflict is NATO integration.

In addition to supporting a Ukrainian victory, the West has the chance to double its EU and NATO enlargement efforts while Russia is unable to directly respond. For their part, candidate countries should quickly implement reforms that would allow them to pursue membership. In truth, both sides have blocking issues that need to be addressed, and the task of properly fixing them is a monumental political and societal challenge. However, the time to act is now, and the opportunity to do so will not last forever. Eventually, the war in Ukraine will end, and it would be naive to think that no more unprovoked Russian aggression will be coming. Only a united Black Sea Region, integrated with EU institutions and protected under NATO, will be properly prepared to deal with that.

2. The Role of NATO in the Black Sea Region

By Dan Sandu

2.1 Russia is not the Soviet Union

Looking at a map, the clash between Europe and Russia can be geographically anchored around two pillars: to the north – the Baltic Sea; to the south – the Black Sea. Indeed, the contact line between these two worlds has run from one sea to the other for more than 70 years, since Türkiye's

accession to NATO in 1952. Back then, Moscow's impunity in both regions could hardly be questioned, with Denmark and Türkiye serving as NATO's sole direct gateways to effectively Soviet spheres of influence (Joja, 2024).

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia relentlessly attempted to maintain the Soviet orbit and their regional dominion over the two seas (Joja, 2024), a matter which it considered of strategic importance to its security. Moreover, it perceived any pursuit of closer ties with the West by countries of the former Eastern Bloc to be a direct threat and took all possible measures to limit that process.

But Russia is not the Soviet Union, and their interference in domestic matters of neighbouring sovereign states merely increased pro-West attitudes. Slowly, but surely, the Iron Curtain moved eastward. By 2024, Poland, the Baltic states, as well as Finland and Sweden all joined NATO, effectively turning the Baltic Sea into a 'NATO lake', and firmly pushing out most, if not all Russian influence from the region.

Whereas in the north this step was a long time coming, with the Baltic already being an "EU lake" since 2004, Moscow has firmly shown that it is far less willing to concede its position in the Black Sea Region, going as far as militarily invading those who dare seek closer ties with the West. It is no coincidence that all three unaligned riparian countries have parts of their sovereign territory occupied by the Russian armed forces. Destabilising the countries of the region by deliberately initiating and actively perpetuating frozen conflicts ensured that neither the EU nor NATO seriously considered accepting them as full members.

Indeed, European states were reluctant to abandon their strategy of appeasement towards Moscow. At the 2008 Bucharest summit, NATO decided against offering a Membership Action Plan to Georgia and Ukraine, instead simply agreeing on eventual membership for the two countries (NATO, 2008).

2.2 State of affairs

The Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed this status quo. With one of the frozen conflicts in the region turning hot, it has become impossible for the West to ignore the elephant in the room. The Black Sea is now a conflict area between NATO and Russia. To dismiss this fundamental polarity is to ignore the Black Sea Region.

But the two sides are not alike. In fact, intrinsic asymmetries govern the dynamics of the region. NATO members have a combined GDP of 25 times that of Russia (Brzezinski and Arick, 2025) and, united, similarly dwarf the country in terms of military expenditure and capability. However, Russia is a single actor with unitary and coherent interests, policies and positions, while NATO, on the other hand, represents 32 allied countries with differing goals and priorities. Having to build consensus around each issue is cumbersome and is certainly one of the factors that have allowed Russia to impose its agenda on the region for so long. Even among the 3 littoral Allies, differing

attitudes prevail.

Türkiye's relationship with Russia is complicated. Although historical rivals, the countries have always found ways to cooperate on pragmatic matters. In the past few years this tactical cooperation was mostly seen in the energy sector, as well as with deepened economic ties between the two. The Russian invasion changed this, bringing strategic security concerns back into focus, but Ankara has still been careful about taking steps that could completely shut the door to either Moscow or Washington. Finding itself in a less-than-ideal economic situation, Türkiye has refused to impose sanctions on Russia, choosing instead to leverage Moscow's need for an energy market to its advantage. Politically, cooperation with Moscow also plays in favour of president Erdoğan's domestic rhetoric of energy independence and overall autonomy from the West. Strategically, Türkiye's interests are unaligned with those of Moscow, and deep distrust with regards to security permeates the relationship, but the country's long term solution to this is unclear. Erdoğan's government would have Türkiye reaffirm its greater position and autonomy in the region. However, finding itself threatened by Russia's unpredictable and destabilising plans, Ankara seems to be open to deeper cooperation with both Brussels and Washington, although existing divergences need to be addressed. For the moment, Türkiye plays a balancing act between the role of a NATO ally and its own pursuit of regional dominance. (Coşkun et al., 2024)

Romania stands firmly pro-EU and pro-NATO, with the public sharing general anti-Russia sentiments similar to Poland. This, coupled with Romania's recent economic growth, special bond with Moldova, as well as good bilateral relations with both Türkiye and Bulgaria make it an important strategic partner for the West. However, although Bucharest could take the lead on significant action in the region, it seems to be opting instead for a slow and safe foreign policy. Still, good progress has been made since the start of the war and, for both the EU and NATO, Romania remains the most reliable partner in the Black Sea Region.

Bulgaria has strong societal and cultural ties with Russia. Even though recent coalition governments have taken significant steps to move away from Russian influence, and Sofia has adopted a firm pro-NATO, pro-Ukraine attitude following the start of the Russian invasion, Moscow continues to exert its influence over domestic attitudes. As Bulgaria goes through a prolonged political crisis, these ties to Russia become of great concern to NATO and put into question the security of the region. (Atlantic Council Task Force on Black Sea Security, 2023)

And then, of course, there is the growing disparity between European and American interests and security concerns. While Europe is slowly waking up to the reality of war on the continent, US attention has shifted to China and the Indo-Pacific. Paradoxically, with Russia stuck in a costly war, China has taken the lead on the US's list of strategic threats. Although the world's strongest military power does have, for now, both the capacity and the will to address Russia and China at the same time, Europe is getting increasingly wary of the United States' commitment to Eastern Europe.

Considering these different positions among Allies, there is a real concern of opposing interests ending up blocking NATO action in a crisis, similar to the CSTO's refusal to assist Armenia in the September 2022 clashes with Azerbaijan. Is it legitimate to compare the two organisations, and can there be a scenario where NATO stops working because of differing interests within the Alliance?

It is of fundamental strategic importance to understand and mitigate any risk that could compromise the cohesion of NATO and, in turn, endanger the security of the Euro-Atlantic area. Conflict between Allies could, potentially, fall into this category. However, while the CSTO's agenda is fundamentally dictated by Moscow's interests to the detriment of member states, NATO has an organisational history of consensus-building and collaboration. Moreover, members have worked for decades on building a general shared sentiment of 'common destiny'. Taking this into account, as well as the deeply rooted, institutional aspect of NATO's Article 5, it is unlikely the organisation would ever forgo its duty to defend an Ally or Allied territory. Nevertheless, the organisation can certainly become inefficient and reactive if opposing agendas prevent a consensus from being reached.

Getting everyone on the same page can be challenging but, as things stand, NATO Allies generally agree with the big picture. In Europe, the Black Sea has become a crucial connection point, an essential alternative route for trading and energy supply, as well as a key area for energy production, especially considering Europe's efforts towards diversifying its energy sources (Gamkrelidze, 2024; Sabadus, 2021; Wani, 2024). For the West, it is also clear that whoever controls the Black Sea controls the Black Sea Region. With an aggressively expansionist Russia, actively attempting to maintain its sphere of influence by destabilising the region, Russian dominion of the Black Sea is in stark opposition to both littoral states' and European interests (Dalay and Sabanadze 2024). The war in Ukraine serves as an extreme example showing the degree to which regional instability can have wide and drastic effects on the whole continent – security in the Black Sea Region matters for Europe and for European Security.

Crucially, in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept (NATO, 2022), the Allies have agreed to declare the Black Sea Region of strategic importance to the Alliance, as well as naming the Russian Federation 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area'.

2.3 No country was ever forced to join NATO

In his infamous 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Putin calls out the eastward expansion of the Western sphere of influence as a direct security threat to Russia, denouncing the unipolar world led by the United States and demanding a return to a multipolar world, in which the security concerns of major actors are respected and enforced.

Putin's worldview, probably shared by Moscow elites, is dissonant with modern reality. It is not Washington or Brussels expanding eastward but Bucharest, Sofia, Kyiv, Chisinau and Tbilisi that are moving westward. In Moscow's view, only major powers have the right to sovereignty, while smaller states are there to be shared and traded between spheres of influence.

But it is exactly this framework and its resulting manifestations, that have pushed Russia's neighbours away and seeking outside protection. After 2022, with Moscow proving that it does not shy away from direct conflict to maintain dominion over the region, its former allies in the Black Sea strongly positioned themselves pro-West and pro-NATO. After all, Russia has shown time and time again that its security guarantees are not trustworthy, thus making any kind of long-term negotiation unfeasible.

As a result, the countries bordering the Black Sea currently fall into 3 distinct categories: NATO members, aspiring NATO/EU members, and Russia.

For Ukraine, Western aid and possible future NATO membership are lifelines saving the country from brutal Russian occupation. Should Kyiv still stand after the war, there is no doubt which direction it will look towards for strategic partnerships and security.

Although Georgia has previously been committed to its NATO path, the country is currently facing a political crisis. After the Russian-aligned Georgian Dream secured a parliamentary majority, the president and the entire opposition refused to legitimise the elections, calling out serious electoral violations throughout the country. While Georgian Dream has run on a platform of Russian appeasement, the nation has clearly previously shown its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. Only time will tell if the likely Russian interference will have managed to derail this process.

Moldova does not directly border Russia, and with Russian troops still present on its territory, it fears confrontation with Moscow more than it feels threatened by direct military intervention. Therefore, its approach to NATO is different, opting instead to keep its constitutional 'neutrality'. However, politically, Moldova has clearly positioned itself towards Europe, having just passed a historic referendum that enshrines the national goal of EU accession into the country's constitution.

Throughout the region, the West, embodied militarily by NATO, has become the symbolic protector of security and stability. Russia – the symbol of war and occupation. Even Armenia, having been abandoned by Russian-led CSTO when it needed it most, has deemed Russia to be a weak partner, and is attempting to move away and look westward. (Trofimov, 2023; Dupuy, 2023)

From dominating the Black Sea and the region, Russia has ended up on the verge of being pushed back to its own shore, just like in the Baltic. NATO needs to be aware that Russia will do anything in its power to prevent this from happening, from its obvious goal of occupying Ukraine, to interference in Moldovan, Georgian and even US elections, to intimidation and maritime escalation in the Black Sea, to

sponsoring extremist parties throughout Europe and anything else in between (Joja, 2024).

2.4 In theory, guarantor of security

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has served as a wakeup call for the West, and a decisive turning point in NATO's attitude towards Russia. In 2023, the Biden administration outlined the Department of State's new strategy for 'Security in the Black Sea Region', aimed at protecting the region from the 'malign influence' of Russia and China (Congress.gov, 2023). Similarly, at the 2024 Washington Summit, in line with its 2022 Strategic Concept NATO expanded on the Alliance's strategic goals and commitments in relation to Russian aggression (NATO, 2024a). Indeed, NATO seems to have shifted focus from appeasement to containment, directly addressing Russia's destabilisation efforts.

This type of consensus on high level strategy is crucial for the Black Sea Region, and NATO wants to prove that it is more than just words. Through its Steadfast Defender 24, the Alliance conducted its 'largest military exercise since the Cold War', incorporating all now thirty-two members of the Alliance and focusing on rapid reinforcement of eastern Allies that might be subject to Russian aggression (NATO, 2024b).

In the Black Sea, NATO is maintaining Italian and French-led multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria and Romania (NATO, 2024c), with the latter also hosting a significant US force, as well as expanding the Mihail Kogălniceanu base to become the largest NATO military base in Europe. In 2025, France will hold exercises in Romania to test its capability to rapidly deploy a brigade (RFI, 2024). By 2027, it intends to extend these capabilities to deploying a war-ready division within 30 days. These, combined with Türkiye's significant military force, seem to be enough to provide deterrence from any direct Russian attack. Indeed, after 2022, all three littoral Allies have substantially increased their respective defence spending (Metodieva and Keranov, 2024). Together, they have also established a joint demining initiative (Romania's Ministry of National Defence, 2024), with Bulgaria and Romania also establishing a regional command component for NATO special forces in the Black Sea Region (AGERPRES, 2024).

The Allies are also attempting to signal to Russia that they will keep supporting Ukraine's war effort indefinitely, with a new €40 billion aid commitment decided at the Washington Summit, and promises for more to come. NATO also appointed a Senior Representative in Ukraine and created structures to coordinate provision of military equipment and training, as well as joint analysis of the war.

For both NATO members and non-members of the Black Sea Region, these actions show a clear shift in NATO's stance towards Russia and are making credible NATO's commitment to peace and security in the region.

2.5 In practice, NATO needs to step up

As Nino Kalandadze, former deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, said in the Tbilisi 2024 Black Sea

Security Conference, 'time has passed, and time has been lost' with regards to Russia.

NATO is a large and slow-moving machine, and while building strategic consensus between the Allies is an important step forwards, the Alliance needs to quickly recover the decades spent on Russian appeasement. Having recently agreed to define the Black Sea Region to be of strategic importance, NATO has yet to come up with a dedicated strategy for the region, and operational planning is lacking (Joja, 2024).

For the moment, Russia is busy with the war in Ukraine, but, sooner or later, one way or another, this war will end, and Moscow has more control than the West over when and how it ends. There is no doubt that the Kremlin is already considering its post-war strategy, and the West should do the same. For NATO, the best time to take back initiative and gain the strategic edge in the Black Sea is now.

As things stand, NATO is unable to provide adequate security in the Black Sea. The Alliance needs to quickly find a solution for ensuring freedom of navigation rights, as well as protection of trade routes and critical energy infrastructure. Russia cannot be allowed to dominate the Black Sea. As there is very little or no chance for the Montreux Convention to significantly change in the foreseeable future, steps need to be taken to reinforce and expand the weak navies of Romania and Bulgaria so that they can work together with Türkiye on enforcing NATO's objectives. The littoral Allies should also expand their cooperation efforts to include a joint maritime NATO force, responsible for such tasks and for ensuring general security in the region.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO and western states have mostly been reactive in their relationship with Russia, fearing taking any action that could upset what they saw as, at worst, an unnecessary enemy and, at best, a potential partner. Now, with European and Russian interests in the Black Sea Region in direct opposition, NATO needs to take active steps towards keeping in check Russia's destabilisation attempts, expansionist tendencies and aggressive posturing.

To that end, NATO needs to redouble its efforts to integrate Georgia into the Alliance. Resolving the territorial disputes of the country should also be considered, if this ends up being a blocking issue. In the same spirit, NATO member states, as well as the EU, should take an active role in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Türkiye's influence in Azerbaijan and Armenia's recent warming up to the EU should facilitate this process. Of course, for this, Türkiye itself needs to be brought on board.

Even if Russia is strategically stopped from taking any conventional action towards the rest of the Black Sea Region countries, the Allies need to be ready for any hybrid or cyber means of destabilisation. In the recent referendum in Moldova, Russia is presumed to have bought between 100,000 and 300,000 votes, in an attempt to politically keep Moldova out of the EU and, thus, out of the Western family. In Georgia, we have seen the tragic

effectiveness of electoral interference. Without strong support to keep elections free and fair, Russia can potentially beat the West at their own game because it is not bound by the same rules. Hybrid threats need to be taken seriously and be addressed.

NATO, and especially its European members, need to also be prepared for the very real possibility of American isolationism. In the short term, there is no guarantee that, with a Republican win, the US will keep the same level of commitment to defending Eastern Europe and continued aid to Ukraine is even less likely. Should this happen, Black Sea Allies, as well as partners in the region, need to stand together. While Russia would no doubt gain a significant advantage, following the Baltic model of regional cooperation on security might be sufficient to deter Russia and maintain peace in the region.

In the long term, Europe at large needs to become more strategically independent. The US is an important ally, but with such an unstable political climate, it cannot remain Europe's only provider of security. This will imply additional economic pressure on the Union at a time when Europeans have already been struggling for the past few years in the wake of both the pandemic and the start of the war.

Finally, Europe also needs to rethink and revamp its relationship with Türkiye. Better economic cooperation and stronger ties between Brussels and Ankara will be necessary for the continued security of the region. Türkiye's frustration with the dried-up EU accession process has led the country to pursuing BRICS membership, a move which could put into question the interests of one of NATO's most important Allies. Ankara has signalled that it is open to warming up to the EU, and Brussels needs to address this. For Europe, a good relationship with Türkiye would improve its economy, reduce dependence on China, improve strategic autonomy and mitigate the effects of potential isolationism from Washington. If NATO's trust in Türkiye could be restored, Ankara could also provide an important diplomatic gateway for conflict resolution between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as a negotiation channel with Moscow at the end of the war in Ukraine. (Aydıntaşbaş, 2024; Coşkun et al., 2024; hurriyetdailynews.com, 2024)

2.6 The future of the Black Sea is NATO

Russia wanted to avoid losing its influence over the Black Sea Region the same way it lost the Baltic, but exactly these destructive attempts set into motion an irreversible shift westward for the region. As things stand, the Black Sea is poised to also become a NATO lake. There is no doubt that Russia's efforts to stop this will double, taking on any dimension necessary, including political, cyber or even military.

Whereas in the past Europe had potential reasons for appeasement, now it does not. Russia has proven time and time again that it is unpredictable and dangerous regardless of western concessions, so Europe must stand firm. Historically, there is only one thing that has never failed to keep Russia at bay: NATO.

At the end of the day, we live in democracies and the extent to which NATO is able to act depends on the political will of the member states. Thus, the biggest challenges NATO Allies face in the Black Sea Region are, fundamentally, political. In the next few years, political elites will have the crucial task of finding both the internal and external consensus NATO needs to keep Russia at bay and ensure continued peace, security and prosperity in the region.

3. Hybrid War and Geopolitics: Black Sea Region

By Mariam Bitsadze

3.1 Introduction

The Black Sea Region (BSR) has long been a geopolitical crossroad, connecting the East and West, North and South. Its significance has only grown since the 1990s, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union when the region became a flashpoint for rising tensions and power struggles (CSIS, 2017). In recent years, the area has become a testing ground for hybrid warfare – a form of conflict that blends conventional military tactics with cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns and economic coercion. Russia's invasions and annexation of Georgian and Ukrainian territories highlight the importance of fighting against Russia's hybrid war in reshaping its geopolitical map.

This paper examines the intersection of hybrid war and geopolitics in the Black Sea Region (BSR), analysing key case studies, regional responses, and broader implications for global security. It argues that hybrid warfare has become a dominant tool for strategic influence, challenging the stability of the region and necessitating stronger defensive and cooperative measures among NATO, the European Union, and Black Sea states. Propaganda and disinformation have become strategic tools used to destabilise Western democracies in the Black Sea Region (BSR). While exploring the various methods employed from traditional war to state-controlled media outlets, 'troll farms', and cyber-attacks, this paper examines the impact these tactics have on public opinion and political decisions. Additionally, this essay discusses the use of soft power to discredit the Western states (NATO and/or EU member states) and gain influence over liberal democratic states. It further discusses the challenges of combating disinformation, emphasizing the need for policies that respect individual freedoms.

3.2 Overview of the Black Sea Region – Historical and Strategic Significance

The Black Sea region geographically encompasses six principal states – Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Türkiye, and Ukraine – which collectively shape the region's geopolitical and economic landscape. However, Ambassador Valeri Chechelashvili (2024) highlights Moldova as an indirect yet significant actor within this strategic area. Despite its lack of direct access to the Black Sea coastline, Moldova asserts its regional presence through the Giurgiulești International Free Port, situated on the Danube River. Under the administration of the Moldovan government, this port alone provides the country with maritime connectivity and access to international trade routes, thereby strengthening its economic and geopolitical role in the region.

Given the increasing geopolitical importance of the Black Sea region, a diverse array of state and non-state actors has become directly or indirectly involved in shaping its strategic dynamics. While the political landscape has evolved over centuries, one enduring and dominant presence in the region has been Russia, whose imperial foreign policy has consistently sought to assert influence and expand territorial control. Another influential power has been Türkiye over centuries, contesting with Russia over the influence in the Black Sea Region. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Russian ambitions transformed the Black Sea into a theatre of intense geopolitical competition, culminating in significant conflicts such as the Crimean War (1853–1856). In the 20th century, the region remained a geopolitical centre for contestations during both World Wars and later, the Cold War, as it became a frontier between NATO and the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created new dynamics as former Soviet republics along the Black Sea sought independence, economic stability, and regional cooperation (ESaTDOR, 2013).

Between 1921 and 1991, the Black Sea Region was politically represented by mainly four states: Türkiye, Bulgaria, Romania, and the USSR (which included Georgia, Ukraine and Russia). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant geopolitical shift, leading to the emergence of newly independent states and altering the regional balance of power. However, Russia's continued adherence to its imperial foreign policy remains a concern for Western democracies. In the 21st century, Russia's strategic approach to the BSR has exhibited continuity, reflecting President Vladimir Putin's broader ambition to reassert Russian dominance and restore elements of Soviet-era influence. Russia's longstanding geopolitical objective has been to secure access to warm-water ports, as its northern coastline remains icebound for much of the year, significantly limiting its maritime capabilities. Without such access, Russia would be largely confined to a land-based power, not only due to the persistent ice coverage in the north but also because the Baltic states and their strategic positioning effectively constrain Russia's expansion westward. As a result, Russia has historically lacked control over key trade and economic routes and has consistently sought to capture Constantinople and

dominate the Bosphorus—an aspiration that has remained unfulfilled. Putin's strategic ambitions remain closely aligned with these longstanding geopolitical objectives. Not surprisingly, he calls the collapse of the Soviet empire 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century' (NBC, 2005). This agenda, often characterized by military interventions, political coercion and hybrid warfare tactics, has fuelled tensions and instability in the region. Russia's war in Georgia in 2008, then annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its involvement in Eastern Ukraine exemplify this approach, reinforcing fears of further attempts to expand its sphere of influence and challenge the sovereignty of neighbouring states. If Russia loses war in Ukraine and Georgia, it effectively loses access to the Black Sea, leaving Novorossiysk as its only remaining, limited maritime outlet in the region.

On the other hand, the interests of NATO and the EU in the BSR are to protect its member states and liberal democracies, ensuring trade security and access to natural resources. Three out of six states in the BSR are members of NATO, and Ukraine and Georgia cooperate very closely with the two organisations. "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO" (Bucharest Summit Declaration, 2008).

While Russia has occupied territories in the Black Sea Region, NATO's response has primarily focused on strengthening cooperation with countries in the area. In its 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO officially recognized the BSR as a region of strategic importance, a designation influenced by years of evolving geopolitical dynamics and, most notably, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, despite this recognition, NATO has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy to effectively address the security challenges along its southeastern flank.

Ambassador Chechelashvili (2024) identifies Russia as the primary threat to the BSR's stability and security. Marija Golubeva of the ZINC Network at the USAID Information Integrity Program echoes this view, emphasizing that Russia bears responsibility for the majority of hybrid threats and attacks in the region. Their assessments highlight the urgent need for coordinated efforts to counter Russia's destabilising activities and to bolster regional resilience against hybrid warfare tactics.

While Russia's conventional warfare strategies are widely known, it is equally crucial to examine its modern and unconventional methods of conflict. These methods primarily manifest through information manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation – tools central to Russia's efforts to destabilize adversaries and expand its influence to maintain regional dominance and project power beyond its borders. Such tactics reflect a continuation of the country's imperial ambitions, albeit adapted to contemporary hybrid warfare strategies.

The following chapter will delve into these mechanisms in greater detail, analysing how they are employed to exploit vulnerabilities, sow division and erode trust in democratic

institutions.

3.3 Analysing Russian Disinformation Tools

To strategically counter Russian disinformation at any level, it is crucial to understand what, how, where and when it is disseminated. A detailed study of the subject could help us find long-term dealing mechanisms.

After the war in Ukraine in 2014, Russia extensively became a subject of interest for the whole of Europe. In 2022, we have a bigger scale of interest and war crimes that Russia committed against Ukraine. Russia's foreign policy has consistently evolved from a relatively moderate approach, progressively enhancing its stature in the international arena. Ukraine and other post-soviet European states have been subject to Russia's imperial interests, which has been clearly seen in policies and official announcements of high-ranking Russian politicians. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens have found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory (Karagianni, 2013). Russian imperialism began to show itself from 2008 with the August War and occupation of South Ossetia by the Russian Federation. Georgia and Ukraine are good examples of Russia waging traditional military activities and practicing conventional interstate warfare (Sirbiladze, 2019). Russia gradually developed new tactics and tools to combine hard and soft power to fulfil its foreign policy goals. "This mixture of hard and soft power instruments has come to be known as Hybrid Warfare" (Hoffman, 2007).

Russia uses disinformation as one part of its soft power projection. It is alleged that Russia uses a variety of methods to create and disseminate disinformation. One way is through state-controlled media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, which are accused of spreading false or misleading information to audiences outside of Russia. Telegram and other social networks are also widely used as Russian propaganda tools. These outlets are said to produce content designed to influence public opinion and political decisions in Russia and other countries, and they are accused of selectively reporting facts and events to fit a specific narrative. Another way Russia is alleged to create disinformation is using 'troll farms', which are facilities where individuals are paid to develop and disseminate content on social media platforms. These troll farms aim to spread false or misleading information, sow discord and create confusion among target audiences. The content produced by these troll farms is said to be designed to influence public opinion, and it is often spread through social media platforms, news outlets and messaging apps. In addition to these methods, Russian intelligence agencies are alleged to have used hacking and cyberattacks to gain access to sensitive information, which can then be used to create and spread disinformation. These are known as "active measures" in intelligence terminology. It's important to note that the exact extent of Russia's involvement in these activities is a matter of ongoing debate and investigation, and some of the information regarding the Russian disinformation campaign is alleged and not confirmed. The aims of Russia's disinformation campaigns include 'sowing

confusion, stoking fears and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions' (Helmus, 2018).

Russian soft power practice mainly aims to discredit the West (Europe and the USA) to gain more control over the European states. Russia has been fighting the same war since the collapse of the USSR, and its existing core strategies and tactics have remained almost the same over time. The primary objective of Russian propaganda, disinformation, and information warfare is very much the same today as it was during the Cold War: to destabilize Western democracies and undermine their alliances, potentially creating space for the Kremlin's ambitions. With disinformation, the Kremlin aims to 'exacerbate existing divides, subvert international institutions, and help create a world where its form of corrupt authoritarianism flourishes' (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014, 24). This claim is also highly connected to the Russian Military Doctrine, which defines the means of fighting the war. Surprisingly, 'the Russian doctrine defined after the fall of the Soviet Union is called Deep Battle. It anticipates Russian combat at any level of warfare. The goal is to go as deeply and quickly into the enemy as possible. To do this, there must be intense coordination at all levels of the battle and also between levels' (Friedman 2022, 1). The deep battle strategy is used for both military warfare and the spreading of Russian propaganda by the pro-Kremlin forces.

3.4 Fighting Russia's Hybrid Warfare

The Black Sea Region represents a highly heterogeneous geopolitical space characterized by diverse political histories, varying levels of economic development and distinct domestic and foreign policy orientations. While Russia continues to pose the greatest threat to democratic stability within the region, the degree of vulnerability to Russian influence and aggression varies significantly among BSR states. Conventional warfare necessitates traditional military responses; however, when combined with propaganda, information manipulation and disinformation, it transforms into a multi-dimensional conflict, requiring equally multifaceted strategies for defence and resilience. Notably, Russia has engaged in direct military aggression against its immediate Black Sea neighbours, Ukraine and Georgia, demonstrating its willingness to exploit hybrid tactics alongside conventional force. In contrast, the remaining three Black Sea states – Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye – are NATO members, providing them with collective defence guarantees under Article 5 of the Alliance. These states also benefit from more substantial economic resources and institutional capacities, enabling them to counter hybrid threats and bolster regional stability more effectively. Nonetheless, the asymmetry in vulnerabilities across the region underscores the need for a coordinated approach to address both conventional and hybrid security challenges Russia poses.

The previous chapter examined how Russia disseminates propaganda relatively uniformly across multiple countries. However, this does not imply that the content and messaging of propaganda are identical in all contexts.

Instead, Russian propaganda is often adapted and tailored to align with each target country's specific socio-political and cultural dynamics. Despite these contextual modifications, there are identifiable patterns in Russia's tactics and strategies, the 'Kremlin playbook', which provide valuable insights into its broader approach. For instance, one recurring theme in Russian propaganda is the promotion of anti-Western narratives aimed at undermining trust in democratic institutions and Western alliances. Additionally, Russian messaging frequently discredits liberal ideologies, portraying them as destabilizing forces, while emphasizing traditional values to resist globalization and preserve national identity (Media Development Foundation, 2022).

By analysing these strategies across different countries, policymakers and analysts can better anticipate and counteract disinformation campaigns, ultimately enhancing societal resilience against hybrid threats. By examining Russia's propaganda strategies across various countries, policymakers and analysts can gain critical insights into the patterns and methods employed, enabling them to anticipate, counteract and neutralize disinformation campaigns more effectively. Such analysis strengthens societal resilience and equips governments and institutions with tools to address the broader challenges posed by hybrid threats. Marija Golubeva, from the ZINC Network at the USAID Information Integrity Program, emphasizes that combating propaganda and other forms of information manipulation requires a coordinated and systematic approach. She advocates for enhanced cooperation among states, comparing propaganda techniques and identifying manipulation tactics to develop targeted strategies for countering misinformation. Golubeva highlights the importance of building collaboration networks between governments, civil society and media organizations to detect and disrupt disinformation efforts at their source.

Combating Russia's hybrid warfare in the Black Sea Region requires a comprehensive and adaptive approach that addresses political, military, informational and regulatory dimensions. One of the most effective strategies involves fostering closer political cooperation between the states in the region. Given the heterogeneous nature of the Black Sea Region, stronger regional alliances can help create a unified front against hybrid threats. These efforts could be supported by bilateral and multilateral agreements aimed at intelligence-sharing, law enforcement coordination and cyber defence measures. Additionally, greater economic integration among the BSR states would strengthen their resilience against Russian economic coercion, particularly by promoting trade diversification and reducing reliance on Russian energy resources. Programs that focus on democracy promotion, including anti-corruption measures and institutional reforms, are also critical to safeguarding these states from internal vulnerabilities that Russia exploits.

In tandem with political cooperation, strengthening NATO's presence in the region is essential to deterring Russian aggression and enhancing defence capabilities. Expanding naval patrols, conducting joint exercises and maintaining rotational deployments of NATO forces in the

Black Sea are necessary to project readiness and provide security assurances. Military drills, such as Sea Breeze and Defender-Europe, should incorporate scenarios that simulate hybrid threats, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns, to better prepare forces for multi-dimensional conflict. Furthermore, intelligence-sharing networks and cybersecurity alliances should be developed to counter Russian efforts to disrupt infrastructure and communications systems. Pre-positioning military equipment and resources in vulnerable areas would also enable faster responses in times of crisis, further enhancing NATO's deterrence posture.

To address the informational dimension of hybrid warfare, strategic communications initiatives must be prioritized to counter Russia's propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Launching public awareness programs to improve media literacy can help citizens identify and resist false narratives. These programs should be accompanied by fact-checking platforms that operate in multiple languages to debunk misinformation in real-time. Leveraging digital tools and social media campaigns to promote factual reporting while challenging Russia's narratives is another critical step.

In addition to strengthening communications, regulatory measures to ensure transparency of foreign-sponsored content are vital for curbing disinformation. Introducing policies that require clear labelling of media content funded by Russian-affiliated outlets can help audiences distinguish between independent journalism and state-sponsored narratives. Establishing independent regulatory authorities to monitor foreign media activity and enforce content disclosure requirements would add another layer of protection. Developing AI-based verification tools could further enhance media monitoring capabilities, identifying manipulated content and reducing its influence. Restrictions on state-controlled Russian broadcasters, such as RT and Sputnik, may also be necessary, provided such measures align with the principles of freedom of expression. Cross-border cooperation between BSR states in regulating media activities and sharing intelligence on Russian information operations would further reinforce these efforts.

3.5 Conclusion

The Black Sea Region remains a critical geopolitical and strategic area, deeply affected by Russia's hybrid warfare tactics, which combine conventional military aggression with cyberattacks, propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Russia leverages these tools to destabilize democratic institutions, exploit vulnerabilities, and assert influence over the region, reflecting its broader imperial ambitions. In response, NATO and the European Union have acknowledged the strategic importance of the BSR, but it requires a more comprehensive and unified approach to counter hybrid threats effectively and more active engagement in the process. While NATO's military presence and joint exercises have strengthened deterrence, more coordinated policies, intelligence-sharing and resilience-building measures are required. Addressing Russia's hybrid warfare necessitates multifaceted

strategies, including closer political cooperation among BSR states, enhanced defence capabilities, strategic communication initiatives and regulatory frameworks for media transparency. Strengthening regional alliances, promoting media literacy and countering disinformation are critical to safeguarding the region's stability and democratic values.

Ultimately, securing the BSR against hybrid threats demands sustained collaboration, adaptability and innovation, ensuring that both military and non-military dimensions of warfare are addressed. The region can resist Russian influence and protect its sovereignty in an increasingly complex global landscape by building stronger defences and fostering societal resilience.

4. Connectivity: Trade and Energy Routes in the Black Sea Region

By Mariam Bitsadze

4.1 Introduction

Hybrid The Black Sea Region (BSR) holds a rich, multifaceted identity that has shaped the lives of its people for generations. From an early age, children in the region are introduced to their cultural heritage, traditions and collective sense of identity through a distinctly regional perspective. This deep-rooted connection to history and geography plays a fundamental role in shaping their worldview.

The region's geographic location is not only significant but also pivotal in defining its historical, economic and strategic importance. Situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Black Sea has played a crucial role in regional and global affairs. Throughout history, it has served as both a gateway and a strategic focal point, facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and geopolitical competition.

The importance of the Black Sea Region extends beyond geography, encompassing energy security, economic stability, political influence and cultural diversity. Key players in the region include traditional actors such as Russia and Türkiye; western-oriented democracies like Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Georgia; supranational organizations such as the EU and NATO; and global powers like the United States. Meanwhile, countries like China and Iran are gradually expanding their influence in the area (Tsereteli, 2021). 'In fact, the theoretical paradigm best suited to explain the external behaviour of these countries in the post-independence period is that of small nations situated in a zone of great power competition. Because they are surrounded by larger and stronger neighbours, this paradigm operates both at the regional

and international levels' (Hunter, in Bertsch, 1999:26). And by small nations, Hunter means South Caucasus states that are important for the connectivity of the Black Sea Region.

To fully grasp the concept of connectivity in the Black Sea region two key dimensions must be explored: political and economic. Connectivity extends far beyond mere infrastructure projects and energy corridors; it encompasses the broader dynamics that shape regional interactions. The political dimension examines the institutional and geopolitical landscape in which these connections evolve, while the economic dimension delves into the trade, investment and infrastructural linkages that drive regional integration.

The existing dynamics of cooperation in the Black Sea Region is largely influenced by the intersecting interests of major global powers. These interactions are shaped by a combination of historical ties, regional security concerns, economic interdependencies and geopolitical rivalries. Key actors – including regional states, international organizations and external powers – take their roles in shaping these cooperative frameworks. Additionally, there are a number of challenges and opportunities associated with fostering sustainable partnerships in this strategically significant area. Ultimately, future connectivity must be strengthened, enhancing economic collaboration and promoting regional stability in the Black Sea Region.

4.2 Contesting Global Powers

The insufficient response of the international community to Russia's military actions in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014, 2022) has significantly reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea Region over the past seventeen years. The lack of decisive deterrence measures has emboldened Russia, fostering an expansionist agenda that has, in turn, heightened global interest in the region's power dynamics. This evolving geopolitical environment poses substantial challenges to the stability and sovereignty of emerging liberal democracies in the Black Sea Region. The increasing strategic significance of the region has drawn attention from a wider array of international actors, recognizing the potential consequences of continued instability. As Romain Le Quiniou (Euro Créative) highlighted in his speech, 'After 2022, I think there is an acknowledgment [in the EU] of this strategic importance of the Black Sea Region and the South Caucasus but still very few concrete steps.' He argues that, despite a general consensus on the strategic importance of the Black Sea Region, the European Union has failed to formulate a clear, cohesive strategy while EU policymakers acknowledge the geopolitical and economic significance of the area, their response has remained fragmented and reactive, lacking a long-term vision for addressing security challenges.

The European Union's cooperation framework in the South Caucasus is primarily shaped by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP 2004), with a specific focus on the Eastern Partnership Program (EaP), established in 2009. The EaP aims to strengthen political and economic

ties between the EU and six post-Soviet states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – while promoting democratic governance, economic integration and regional stability. However, according to Romain Le Quiniou, the EaP has largely failed due to its inconsistency and lack of clear incentives for deeper integration. The absence of a guaranteed EU membership perspective for participating states has undermined the program's effectiveness. 'The region [South Caucasus] gained importance for the EU due to its energy resources and as a transportation corridor between East and West, North and South, as well as for security purposes in terms of building a "ring of friends" outside the EU borders' (Anapiosyan, Chapichadze, Öztarsu F., & Gafarlı, 2016).

This paradox can be attributed to the complex nature of the EU's foreign policy decision-making process, which is heavily influenced by the divergent political priorities and interests of its twenty-seven member states. Unlike centralized political entities, the EU operates through a consensus-based approach, where major foreign policy decisions require unanimous agreement among all member states. The need for full support from all member states frequently leads to compromised policy measures, as national interests and differing threat perceptions shape each country's stance. Consequently, the EU's ability to act decisively in response to regional crises or external pressures is often hindered. As a result, the EU's engagement in the Black Sea Region remains fragmented and inconsistent, failing to counterbalance Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and Georgia or China's expanding economic influence.

Alongside Russia's growing strategic interest in the Black Sea Region, China has been expanding its influence through economic partnerships, infrastructure investments and diplomatic engagements. While traditionally less involved in the region's security dynamics, China has increasingly aligned with Russia on geopolitical and economic interests, particularly within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This collaboration has allowed China to strengthen its presence in key sectors such as trade, transportation and energy infrastructure, positioning itself as a significant actor in the region's evolving power balance. China's engagement in the Black Sea and South Caucasus reflects a broader strategy of economic expansion without direct political confrontation. By investing in port developments, railway networks and energy projects, Beijing has sought to enhance regional connectivity while maintaining a neutral stance on political and security conflicts. However, its deepening cooperation with Russia raises concerns among policymakers, as it may contribute to a reduced Western influence and a shifting regional order that favours authoritarian-aligned economic models over democratic governance structures.

Another emerging political actor in the Black Sea Region is Iran, whose engagement is closely tied to its national interests. Historically, Iran has aligned itself with Russia in response to Western policies in the region, forming a Moscow-oriented strategic approach (Anapiosyan, Chapichadze, Öztarsu, & Gafarlı, 2016). However, in recent years, Iran appears to have adopted a more comprehensive and independent policy, seeking to expand

its influence beyond a Russia-centric alignment. Iran's geopolitical positioning in the South Caucasus is shaped by its rivalry with Azerbaijan, which Tehran perceives as a potential threat to its national security (Anapiosyan et al., 2016). This perception has contributed to Iran's closer political ties with Armenia, particularly in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By contrast, Iran has pursued a relatively normalized relationship with Georgia, particularly following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

Beyond politics, Iran plays a significant role in the energy sector of the South Caucasus, leveraging its oil and natural gas resources to enhance its economic presence. Through energy trade and infrastructure projects, Iran seeks to counterbalance Western-backed energy routes while securing its own strategic foothold in the region.

The United States is another significant actor in the region, particularly from the Western geopolitical sphere. The South Caucasus' geographic proximity to the Middle East plays a crucial role in shaping US strategic interests, as regional developments can directly impact Middle Eastern security dynamics and broader power balances. As Hunter notes, 'In practical terms, this situation has led major international actors, most notably the United States, to approach the Transcaucasus from the vantage point of the impact that events there might have on Middle East politics and balances of power' (Hunter, in Bertsch, 1999:28). The U.S. has historically maintained strong political ties with the South Caucasus states, a relationship that Charles King (2008:245) describes by stating, 'Politically, if not geographically, all of the South Caucasus capitals have remained far closer to Washington than to Brussels.' While the European Union's engagement in the region has been inconsistent, US involvement has been more direct, particularly in security and defence cooperation. A key pillar of US influence in the region is its close partnership with NATO, which plays a vital role in security and military cooperation. The strategic objectives of the US and NATO in the region are closely intertwined, making it difficult to separate Washington's policies from those of the alliance. Through military assistance programs, defence cooperation and political engagement, the U.S. seeks to counterbalance Russian influence, support democratic institutions, and secure energy transit routes that are vital to both regional and global markets.

As a key political and economic player, Türkiye significantly influences the geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea Region. Notably, it is the only NATO member state within the region and, while its foreign policy decisions are often influenced by its membership in NATO, Türkiye's political positioning cannot be easily defined. Dr. Filiz Katman, from the Energy Politics and Markets Research Center at Istanbul Aydin University, characterizes Türkiye's approach as a '4-Dimensional Balance Policy-Active Neutrality' which connects the North to South and East to West. Dr. Katman believes this positioning allows Türkiye to mediate between Russia and other countries in the region, leveraging its strategic role to balance competing interests.

The energy sector forms the cornerstone of the bilateral

relations between Türkiye and Azerbaijan, with Georgia serving as an essential transit hub that facilitates the flow of energy resources between these two nations. The regional cooperation between Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Georgia is widely regarded as a success in Turkish foreign policy, particularly in the context of energy security and economic integration. This collaboration, often referred to as the 'trilateral partnership', has proven instrumental in advancing regional stability and fostering greater economic ties. As Anapiosyan, Chapichadze, Öztarsu and Gafarlı (2016) note, this model of cooperation has been successfully replicated in other contexts, underscoring Türkiye's strategic use of multilateral partnerships to both enhance its geopolitical positioning and expand its influence across the region. It is important to note that Turkish-Azerbaijani relations are also shaped by the principle of "one people, two states," a concept articulated by Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev. This principle emphasizes the shared cultural, linguistic, and historical bonds between the two nations, serving as a foundation for their close political and economic ties (Erdogan, 2010).

4.3 Energy Corridors Connecting East to West and North to South: The Black Sea Region and South Caucasus

Having established a foundational understanding of the political dynamics in the Black Sea Region, it is now pertinent to examine the interconnectedness of states within the region. Analysing the economic, infrastructural and energy linkages will provide a comprehensive perspective on the mechanisms that drive regional cooperation, strategic alignments and geopolitical competition. A thorough assessment of these connections is essential for understanding the broader implications of regional integration and stability.

The greater Black Sea region serves as a crucial intersection for major east-west and north-south energy transit routes, facilitating the movement of oil and natural gas. Perhaps the most visible representation of the geopolitical competition unfolding in the area is the extensive pipeline network that spans across the region and beneath its waters. However, these energy corridors are not merely transportation infrastructures; they also function as strategic instruments of power politics, used to either exert influence over other states or to counterbalance such influence, depending on the geopolitical context (Armonaite, 2020).

It is important to highlight that political leadership in individual states plays a crucial role in shaping economic cooperation and partnerships. Leadership decisions and policy shifts can significantly influence bilateral and multilateral relations, often resulting in rapid changes in regional dynamics.

A notable example of how political decisions influence regional connectivity is the Anaklia Black Sea Port project in Georgia. This initiative, envisioned as a key strategic infrastructure project, was intended to enhance Georgia's role as a transit hub between Europe and Asia. Previously

known as a US funded initiative, in 2020 the Georgian government decided to terminate consortium contracts with Western companies and started cooperation with a Chinese company. 'The consortium selected for the port's construction includes the Chinese state company, China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC), and China Harbour Investment Pte. Ltd, which is registered in Singapore, but is a subsidiary of the same Chinese state company. In addition, subcontractors of the consortium are China Road and Bridge Corporation and Qingdao Port International Co.' (Transparency International, 2024).

It has been included in the consolidated sanctions list (Non-SDN List) of the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) of the U.S. Department of the Treasury due to its being a part of the Chinese military-industrial complex. Changing political dynamics have been clear since this decision among the Georgian government.

There are many more interesting projects and energy corridors that have been discussed during the Black Sea Security Conference reflecting the evolving dynamics of political cooperation in the region.

Those energy routes and corridors usually are led by one of the big political powers present in the Black Sea Region, strengthening their presence and political cooperation.

China's influence has been expanding through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the world. It is one of the most ambitious global infrastructure projects, aiming to establish new trade routes and strengthen economic ties across Eurasia. The Black Sea Region plays a crucial role in the BRI's Middle Corridor, which provides an alternative to the Northern Corridor (through Russia) and the Southern Corridor (through Iran). Through investments in railways, ports and energy infrastructure, China has sought to expand its footprint in the region.

Despite the participation of several European states in the BRI, the initiative has sparked concerns among Western powers over debt dependency and strategic influence, leading to increased scrutiny and geopolitical competition.

Romain Le Quiniou (Euro Créative) mentions that "China is the strategic rival [to the EU], I have to say it, we cannot build strategic infrastructure together". On the other hand, for China "the BRI serves as pushback against the much-touted US 'pivot to Asia', as well as a way for China to develop new trade linkages, cultivate export markets, boost Chinese incomes, and export China's excess productive capacity" (David Sacks, an expert on US-China relations). (McBride, 2023).

These power dynamics significantly shape the Black Sea Region, where Western countries actively engage through political, economic and security initiatives. Concurrently, the European Union seeks to deepen its cooperation with neighbouring states through EU-led infrastructure projects such as the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) and the Black Sea Submarine Cable project (BSSC).

The BSS, introduced as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), aims to strengthen regional cooperation in key sectors, including transport, energy and security. It reflects the EU's strategic interest in fostering stability and connectivity within the Black Sea Region (EU External Action, 2024). However, the initiative faces critical challenges, primarily due to the lack of a long-term strategic vision, a weakness that characterizes the broader European Neighbourhood Policy, as discussed in the previous section. This absence of a clear roadmap limits the EU's effectiveness in counterbalancing competing geopolitical influences.

The EU's policy in the Black Sea Region is shaped by a variety of factors, with one of the key drivers being the decreasing energy dependence on Russian sources. In recent years, specifically after the 2022 war in Ukraine, the EU has prioritized energy diversification and the transition to renewable energy sources as part of its broader strategy to enhance energy security and reduce reliance on external actors, particularly Russia. This shift has led the EU to pursue alternative energy supply routes and collaborative energy projects with countries in the Black Sea Region. The Black Sea Submarine Cable (BSSC) project is one of those initiatives, crucial for Georgia as it connects Tbilisi to Romania with 1155 kms long cable through the Black Sea. The project will contribute to the strengthening of energy security in Europe and the South Caucasus region, the development of the renewable energy sector and the increase of transit opportunities (Gutbrod, 2023).

Despite its potential to significantly contribute to the EU's energy diversification policy, the Black Sea Submarine Cable Project has attracted sceptical opinions due to several concerns related to its scale, financial viability and long-term sustainability. These concerns primarily stem from the complexities involved in the implementation of such an ambitious infrastructure project, as well as the geopolitical challenges that it faces in a region marked by high political tensions.

One of the most prominent challenges is the geopolitical risk associated with the proximity of the cable to the Russian-occupied Crimea (Gutbrod, 2023). Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the region has become a politically sensitive area, and any infrastructure project that crosses or nears this territory is inherently vulnerable to political disruptions or even military intervention. Given that Russia has historically shown a willingness to exert control over regional energy projects as a means of exerting influence and asserting its geopolitical dominance, the Black Sea Submarine Cable may face significant hurdles in terms of security.

Ioseb Berikashvili, a researcher at the Security, Policy & Nationalism Research Center at the University of Georgia, highlights the importance of a clearer understanding of the financial profitability of the Black Sea Submarine Cable Project for Georgia. According to Berikashvili, while the project holds great potential for fostering regional cooperation and strengthening Georgia's strategic position, the long-term economic benefits and viability requires more clarity. For Georgia, it is essential to fully

assess how the project will contribute to the country's energy security, economic development and regional integration.

The BRICS initiative, established in 2009, represents an ambitious geopolitical and economic coalition aimed at counterbalancing Western dominance in global affairs, particularly within institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Initially led by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, the group is centred around the idea of fostering cooperation among emerging economies to create an alternative global governance model and strengthen the influence of non-Western countries. This initiative reflects the broader geopolitical ambition of Russia and China to challenge the prevailing influence of Western democracies in global decision-making processes, positioning BRICS as a bloc that could reshape international power dynamics (Ferragamo, 2024).

Surprisingly, despite the anti-Western nature of the BRICS platform, several countries from the Black Sea Region and the broader South Caucasus have expressed a keen interest in joining this organization. Both Türkiye and Azerbaijan have applied for BRICS membership (Lezhava, 2024). Their interest in joining BRICS may stem from a desire maintaining a strategic balance between the West and the Russia-China axis, signalling to Western powers that alternative geopolitical alignments remain viable options. In addition, Armenia has received a formal invitation from Russia to join the BRICS group.

As Ioseb Berikashvili notes, he does not foresee Georgia aligning itself with BRICS or the Customs Union – a reflection of the country's clear stance on its geopolitical trajectory. He addressed this issue prior to the Georgian parliamentary elections in October 2024. Georgia's foreign policy has consistently focused on deepening ties with the European Union and NATO, prioritizing integration into Western institutions rather than seeking alliances with groups such as BRICS or Russia-led organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union. Within Georgia's new government, deteriorating relations with the West could significantly influence its geopolitical alignment, potentially pushing the country closer to BRICS. A shift in this direction may reflect a strategic recalibration. So far, Georgia stands as the only state in the South Caucasus that has not expressed an interest in joining the BRICS initiative.

Regional cooperation in the South Caucasus has been significantly disrupted by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This longstanding territorial dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan but has a predominantly ethnic Armenian population, has not only caused deep political and military tensions but has also hindered potential cooperation and regional integration efforts. Over the years, these tensions have complicated various connectivity projects and infrastructural initiatives. Energy transit projects such as the Zangezur Corridor have been repeatedly delayed or obstructed by the political and security concerns

stemming from the conflict. The Zangezur Corridor, a strategic transport route designed to connect Azerbaijan with Türkiye via Armenia, has become one of the most contentious projects, with Armenia's reluctance to grant Azerbaijan access through its territory acting as a major roadblock. Armenia is backed by Iran in opposing Zangezur corridor development due to political reasons (Aguar, 2025).

The Zangezur Corridor is expected to have profound implications for regional connectivity, serving as a crucial component of the Middle Corridor initiative – a rapidly growing trade route linking China, Central Asia and Europe. Positioned as a strategic alternative to northern trade routes, which have faced significant disruptions due to ongoing geopolitical tensions, particularly the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Zangezur Corridor has the potential to reshape the economic and geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus (Urciuolo, 2024).

Despite its immense value and importance, the corridor is particularly challenging due to its political complexities. First resolution for the problem will be a reconciliation between Armenia and Azerbaijan which still poses security concerns to the project.

There are a multitude of factors influencing both multilateral and bilateral cooperation among states in the Black Sea Region. Given the region's geopolitical complexity and the competing interests of numerous external actors, achieving a unified framework for cooperation remains highly challenging. Rather than fostering large-scale collaboration, the region is characterized by a competitive dynamic between states, driven by their divergent political, economic and cultural priorities. These variations, coupled with historical tensions and external pressures, make comprehensive regional integration an elusive goal, reinforcing the strategic contestation that defines the Black Sea and South Caucasus. Despite the complex geopolitical landscape, cooperation can still be enhanced at various levels through targeted efforts and increased investment in the region. Strategic infrastructure projects, economic partnerships, and diplomatic initiatives have the potential to foster greater regional connectivity. By prioritizing pragmatic collaboration in areas such as energy security, trade, and transportation, states in the Black Sea Region can navigate existing challenges and create opportunities for mutual benefit, even in the face of political and economic divergence.

4.4 Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

To enhance connectivity in the Black Sea Region, it is essential to strengthen political and institutional frameworks. The European Union should move beyond fragmented policies and adopt a cohesive regional strategy that prioritizes connectivity, security and economic development. This unified strategy would provide a clear direction and ensure that efforts are coordinated and effective. Additionally, NATO should expand its security cooperation, particularly in maritime

and cyber security, to counterbalance external influences from countries such as Russia, China and Iran, thereby ensuring regional stability. Promoting regional diplomatic dialogues is also crucial. Trilateral and multilateral discussions between key regional actors, including Türkiye, Georgia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, should be fostered to address security and trade barriers collaboratively.

Trade and energy connectivity in the Black Sea Region can be significantly enhanced by diversifying energy corridors. Supporting alternative energy supply routes, such as the Black Sea Submarine Cable (BSSC), would reduce reliance on Russian energy and increase energy security. Accelerating strategic infrastructure projects is another key recommendation. The EU and international financial institutions should fund high-priority infrastructure projects. Promoting transparent investment policies is also vital. Establishing clear regulatory frameworks would help avoid over-reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative and encourage diverse, competitive investments in the region.

Strengthening economic partnerships is essential for the development of the Black Sea Region. The EU should bolster the Eastern Partnership by offering clearer economic incentives, such as trade liberalization and funding, to address the current shortcomings of the EaP. Supporting public-private partnerships is another key step. Encouraging joint investments between regional governments and international businesses in sectors such as transport, digital infrastructure and renewable energy would drive economic growth. Leveraging digital and technological integration is also crucial. Expanding digital trade and cybersecurity cooperation by integrating the region into the EU's Digital Single Market would enhance economic connectivity and security.

Finally, to increase security and stability in the Black Sea Region, it is important to strengthen maritime security. Establishing a Black Sea Maritime Security Initiative, involving NATO and regional navies, would help counter hybrid threats and maintain open sea lanes. Resolving regional conflicts is another critical recommendation. The EU and NATO should take a more active mediation role in conflicts with Russia (Russo-Georgian and Ukraine-Russian war), Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). Expanding counter-disinformation efforts is also necessary to weaken Russian influence in the region.

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