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BLACK SEA IN BLACK AND WHITE COLOURS

TEONA LAVRELASHVILI

82

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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In ancient times, the Greeks and the Romans referred to the Black Sea as *Eúxeinos Póntos* or the Hospitable Sea although at some other more difficult times, it was also called (by Pindar, among others) *Póntos Áxeinos* or the Inhospitable Sea. Indeed, the gods of history have apparently not granted the Black Sea an easy role to play throughout the millennia; that is, one of being a perennial witness and a meeting place of competing imperial ambitions and bloody confrontations, rarely replaced by pauses of relative peace. Now once again, after a relatively short hiatus on a historical time scale, this geopolitical pattern seems to be coming back to the sad old rut.

The Black Sea region, strategically located at an intersection between Europe, Russia and the Greater Middle East, is one of the most important and, at the same time, explosive areas bordering Europe and one that only lately has attracted significant international notice. Since January 2007, when Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU, they also brought EU access to the Black Sea while together with Turkey, they make up three littoral states that are NATO members. Integration of the Eastern European countries stretching between the Baltic and the Black Seas into the Euro-Atlantic community has marked the end of the Cold War and changed the geopolitical map of Europe's eastern frontiers and, for a couple of decades, was believed to have brought a final peace to the region.

However, not everyone appeared to be happy with such a development and Moscow lay in waiting with a wary patience as to when to be strong enough to strike. Already in September 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin referred to the Azov-Black Sea region as a "very important zone for Russia. Essentially, its zone of strategic interests ... the region where Russia's Black Sea Fleet is based, responsible for Russia's security in the south-western direction"¹ and, in the same speech, he mentioned Ukraine as Russia's "close partner." And Russia did proceed with achieving its far-reaching ambitions, neglecting any considerations of international law or its own agreements whenever these would contradict its national interests as perceived by the Kremlin. A series of unprecedented developments in the region mainly related to Russia's aggressive actions – the 2008 war against Georgia, the annexation and subsequent militarization of Ukrainian Crimea and Georgia's secessionist territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as the never-ending hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine – have resulted in the worried attention of the West towards this historically volatile region.

By annexing Crimea, Russia reached an immense level of control over the Black Sea. It has begun investing heavily in modernizing its Black Sea fleet at Sevastopol. It is also expected that Russia will claim large parts of not

just Crimea's but also Ukraine's continental shelf and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) which may seriously complicate the division of the Black Sea continental shelf and EEZs with Romania and Turkey. With all of this, Russia has officially signaled its return to the Black Sea's littoral states.

Further on, Moscow supports secessionist regimes that can be heated up at any time. These "grey zones," notably, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Donbas, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, play a key role in Moscow's "near abroad" chessboard. Even in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia maintains no troops, the state of 'no war, no peace' between Armenia and Azerbaijan with sporadic flare-ups (as in April 2016) enables Moscow to project power over the region. Russia's conduct in Syria or now also in Montenegro where it has allegedly masterminded an anti-governmental coup attempt or cyber-attacks against Western institutions have aggravated worries over multiple threats emanating from Russia.

Currently, the Black Sea region is turning into an area saturated by advanced military systems with the balance leaning greatly to Moscow's advantage. The rapidly changing relationship between Russia and another increasingly authoritarian and unpredictable littoral state – Turkey – brings in additional uncertainty. Turkey is becoming a worrisome unknown in the equation partly due to its disquieting rapprochement with Russia (for example, the plan declared on February 22 to purchase Russian anti-aircraft S-400 missiles) that may further weaken NATO's positions in the region and its missile defense shield. There are more reasons for the West to be concerned with developments in Turkey after the infamous July 2016 coup attempt triggered widespread arrests, disruption of the rule of law and rapidly advancing economic difficulties. The results of the recent historic referendum on a controversial package of constitutional amendments has set a further split between Turkey and its European allies.

While having suppressed its own conflict in Chechnya with unrivaled cruelty and apart from conducting the bloody hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, Moscow supports secessionist regimes in Transnistria in Eastern Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia while maintaining the situation of contested sovereignty and frozen conflicts that can be heated up at any moment. At the same time, Moscow increasingly uses these territories for strengthening its own military presence and influence over its respective neighbors and regions. As renowned Russia expert at the American Foreign Policy Council, Dr. Stephen Blank, has recently noted: "Moscow has built a combined arms force of land, sea, air and electronic forces that NATO leaders admit is fully capable of denying access to NATO forces seeking to enter the Black Sea during a conflict. It has also deployed nuclear-capable

weapons to the Black Sea area and is apparently building a similar network of anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities against NATO in both the eastern Mediterranean around Syria and in the Caucasus.”²

Government affiliated research centers and think-tanks such as the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), which is believed to have prepared the plan for the annexation of Crimea, openly publicizes its strategic designs for Russia to carry out aggressive plans redrawing the state borders of its neighbors. Just very recently, Vladimir Putin signed an executive order releasing the retired Lieutenant General of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, Leonid Reshetnikov, from his duties as Director of RISS, appointing instead another intelligence bigwig, Mikhail Fradkov, the former Prime Minister of Russia (2004-2007) and the former Head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (2007-2016). While it is a bit early to interpret the real consequences of this appointment, it is obvious that the bureaucratic weight of RISS is on the rise as is the influence of its ambitious and aggressive designs.

The recent Turkish-Russian rapprochement, if only of a temporary and tactical nature, makes it clear that Russia’s military warships will not find any difficulty with using the Turkish Straits in order to reach the Mediterranean, at least for the time being. On top of this, Turkey has somewhat lost its full credibility as a reliable partner of the EU in the region and it currently looks as if Turkey is more comfortable in finding a common language with Russia than with the West. While Turkey possesses vested interests in the Black Sea region, and while a NATO member, it shares a certain commonality with Russia – in addition to its dependency on Russian energy – in that both countries are loath to see any external military presence in the Black Sea. One would hardly expect the Turkish-Russian rapprochement to be a long-living one due to irreconcilable differences over Syria and some other issues but, at the same time, its vacillating foreign policies bring additional unpredictability to the region’s future.

This all stated, not everything is so black in the world or in the Black Sea region. While Russia remains the biggest threat to stability in and around the sea, its resources are not unlimited, its military capacity seems to be overstretched and its economy is struggling. The government has had no choice but to use its reserve funds which have decreased from USD 87 billion³ to barely USD 16.18 billion.⁴ The consequences are already there as the World Bank reports that 21.4 million or 14.6 percent of the population now lives below the national poverty line.⁵ The Ministry of Economy predicted that there would be no improvements to average living standards before 2035.⁶

At the same time, the West has finally realized the dangers emanating from Russia's actions either in the field of cyber-security or in a propaganda war and is slowly preparing to respond to the challenge.

Now, after decades of virtual neglect, NATO has turned its attention to dangerous developments in the Black Sea region. The final communiqué of the July 2016 Warsaw Summit stated: "Russia's recent activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability and changed the security environment... We condemn Russia's ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea and are concerned by Russia's efforts and stated plans for further military build-up in the Black Sea region." Later, NATO defense ministers approved a maritime coordination function between NATO's Standing Naval Forces and NATO allies in the Black Sea region. However, now as the new US President Trump has revealed some glimpses toward his foreign policy vision, its unpredictability and incoherence prevails. The key policy questions after his 100 days remain unresolved. In a situation where the destination of Trump's foreign policy remains unknown, one might wonder what will happen to a coordinated Western action, *inter alia* regarding the Black Sea. As a precautionary measure, the EU has decided to create a joint command center but such a move could undermine cooperation and coordination within NATO even further.

While the EU member states are finally realizing that they need to rely more on their own efforts, NATO remains indispensable. There is no future for an isolationist Europe in an increasingly multi-polar world. At the same time, Europe's eastern periphery is perhaps the most important area with its existential challenges to the continent's future. While the overall picture looks somewhat bleak, in reality both the EU and NATO possess immense resources at their disposal that can and should contribute to security and stability. It is unity, vision and commitment that are needed although the vital or even existential importance of these dimensions go far beyond any regional scale. Concerning the Black Sea, there are several interlinked challenges that need urgent attention: containment of Russian expansionism and hybrid actions, re-orienting Turkey towards democratic values and a pro-Western path, stabilizing and securing key non-EU allies in the region – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – which are also associated countries of the EU and, last but certainly not the least, re-establishing a military-strategic balance in the Black Sea toward a firm Western advantage.

There exists an opinion that increased Western military presence in the Black Sea may just escalate confrontation but such argumentation follows

the long tradition of the toothless appeasement of any potential or actual perpetrator that would only strengthen its appetite, aggressiveness and the sense of impunity. The only effective response would be strengthening military capabilities and, in particular, the maritime power of the allies. Increasing maritime power is particularly difficult, however, due to the closed nature of the Black Sea and the 1936 Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits. According to this agreement, Turkey oversees the traffic through the Straits. It restricts the duration of the navy presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea. Therefore, the main effort should be oriented toward strengthening the navy of littoral states that are NATO members – Bulgaria and Romania as well as Ukraine and Georgia whose navies have suffered losses due to Russian aggression. On the military front, while European states need to revive and strengthen their military capacity, it should also be understood that Romania and Bulgaria provide a unique possibility to strengthen European and NATO military presence in the Black Sea as they are not restricted by the 1936 Montreux Convention regulating access to the Black Sea. Strengthening the Black Sea navy under the Romanian and Bulgarian flags may appear as a strong counteraction to the Russian militarization of the region. An additional and very important possibility is military cooperation with Georgia as a longtime aspirant of Euro-Atlantic integration but lacking the resources for building its own navy or other military capacity along the eastern Black Sea coast. Assisting Ukraine in building its military capacity is still another opportunity for military deterrence and is long overdue.

Assisting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as well as other EaP states in building the efficiency of their economies is another imperative for re-establishing European influence in the region. The association process is the most important leverage of the EU in the region and it contains plenty of opportunities for all sides. These opportunities should not be wasted. Given the dangers related to the future of the Black Sea region, it is high time to turn the risks into opportunities and realize the ‘stabilizer’ and ‘consolidator’ potential of the EU’s Eastern Neighborhood policy through a wide range of economic, political and military assistance tools. While being careful to avoid dangerous escalation, it should be remembered that the economic or technological potentials of Russia and the NATO allies are incomparable. Hence, there is no way that the security dilemma and the arms race play into Russian hands.

Close EU-NATO cooperation is crucial for providing security in Europe and in the region in order to tackle issues such as hybrid warfare and propaganda – by working together on analysis, prevention and early detection, timely information and intelligence sharing, and cooperating on strategic

communication and response. Special steps should be designed to closer involve the two littoral associated countries in the NATO institutional arrangement, possible without formal membership and along the path that has already led to the creation of the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center.

In the situation when neither NATO nor the EU possess any coherent long-term strategy for the Black Sea region and while states like Ukraine and Georgia probably have next to no realistic prospects to join these institutions any time soon, balanced *ad hoc* regional efforts supported by the West will lead to both the stabilization and the Europeanization of the region. However, the need for a thorough, dynamic and flexible regional strategy is an absolute necessity for Brussels and other EU capitals if the EU is to live up to its proud ambitions and not roll back to a loose association of nation-states. However, implementing any such strategy against the background of a diminishing world order, multiplying crises and threats, and the Damocles' sword of economic difficulties and slowdown is the real challenge. Nevertheless, there is no other way for the Black Sea to again become the Hospitable Sea along European borders and a sea that unites and not divides.

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