



Bucharest Papers

The Black Sea – A Regional Approach

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Preamble

Black Sea has been consecutively a theater of war and area of good economic potential. The litoral presence of Russia and Turkey and their sinuous relation, as well as the interest in the region of geopolitical actors of the time imprinted its instability and created the cycle of peace and military actions. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 it was believed the geopolitical balance around the Black Sea had been finally and permanently achieved, giving the region the much needed stability. The potential of the region has been immediately acknowledged by the creation, in 1992, of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)¹, as an inter-governmental body whose mission, plausible at that moment, was regional cooperation. This period of harmony ended, declaratively, with President Putin's speech in Munich in 2007², and, factually, with Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. Russia's interest in the entire region and its stated and manifested intention to keep it as a buffer zone between her and the West, represented by NATO and the EU, has been consecutively ignored and underappreciated. Repeated attempts to discuss a Strategy of the Black Sea, either within NATO or within the EU, have been blocked by the lack of convergence of interests and perceptions

¹ Black Sea Economic Cooperation has been created in 1992 by the governments of the countries in the Black Sea region, together with Albania, Serbia and Macedonia, in order to promote regional cooperation. It has to be noted the strategic breadth of the organization that includes Western Balkans <http://www.bsec-organization.org/>

² In 2007 at the Munich Security Conference President Putin revealed Russia's new foreign policy, evoking the dissolution of USSR as the "greatest geopolitical tragedy of the century". [Putin speech Munich security conference 2007 - Bing video](#)

on the region of member states. The Black Sea region comprises the littoral states, and Armenia and Azerbaijan. The region has been defined as such when BSEC was created, and the definition has been renewed in early 2000, when the United States understood the importance and potential of the region.

The war in Ukraine has been a brutal and definite reminder of the strategic importance of the Black Sea region and of the imperative of a **regional approach** to its stability and development. In the 10 months of war, Ukraine has been supported by countries in the region, both in transportation of its products, notably grains, to foreign markets, and in logistical support of its military actions. Romania plays an important role in Western support to Ukraine, and, together with Bulgaria, in enhancing NATO's regional defense capabilities. Joint sea and air exercises, with the participation of NATO partners in the region, notably Georgia, contribute to NATO's regional deterrence posture. While this has not prevented the war in Ukraine, it undoubtedly prevented its escalation, at least to this point. Furthermore, Azerbaijan becomes again an important source for gas for Europe, which also requires, and has, the cooperation of Georgia and Romania¹. The regional dimension of security, in both its military and economic dimensions, becomes obvious yet again, and both the United States and the European Union need to integrate this dimension in designing and achieving security, stability and development in the Black Sea.

The war in Ukraine continues and the duration of its military component is still difficult to predict. Nevertheless, it is not too early to start designing and preparing for the peace to follow, for the post-conflict security and development. To this end it is important to maintain and enhance the regional dimension of both military security and post-conflict reconstruction. A strategy of the Black Sea region needs to be finally designed, with two main components.

I. Military security

Over the last three decades Russia revealed its interest in maintaining the entire Black Sea region as a buffer between her and the West, initially through maintaining and

³ Azerbaijan-Romania-Georgia (AGRI) inter-connector is a project for the transportation of natural gas from Azerbaijan to Romania and onwards to Europe. It was launched in 2010 and revitalized in 2022.

fueling protracted conflicts (Transnistria, Nagorno Karabach, Abkhazia and South Ossetia), then through military aggressiveness and offensive. The military dimension of Russia's presence in the region and its strategic intentions have been revealed in 2008 and culminated in 2014, with the invasion of Georgia and annexation of Crimea, respectively. From then on, the military paradigm of NATO has fundamentally changed, as the Alliance adapted to Russia's threats and aggressive actions. The Alliance converted its posture from defensive to deterrent, extending its ability to react, and consolidating its technical, human and logistical operations in the region.

The trans-Atlantic community understood, and consequently adapted to, the regional dimension of security only after Crimea's invasion in 2014. Once Romania and Bulgaria joined the Alliance, in 2004, the region seemed to have reached stability, which increased its economic attractiveness and raised hope for a western future for littoral states. Russia's invasion of Georgia broke the regional balance, but the international community understood the irreversibility of this new reality only six years later. The anti-missile shield the US proposed and, eventually, placed in Romania and Poland, became the backbone of regional security. European countries came to accept the installation of the shield only when Russia's increasing aggressivity became evident.

In 2015 Romania and Poland initiated the B9 group¹, whose achievement of imprinting a regional approach within NATO is recent evidence of the success of regional formats. It is important to mention, nevertheless, that the southern component of the Eastern flank (Romania, Bulgaria and the entire Black Sea region, respectively) has been less attended to and secured than its northern part (Poland and the Baltic states), which proved more vocal in promoting its security interests.

The regional dimension of security in the Black Sea region remains key to both address the challenges of the war in Ukraine and to preserve peace and stability once the conflict is over. Learning from the success of various regional formats, both recent and historical², better cooperation between member and partner countries, in different setups on different issues would better put forward security needs and solutions. On these two dimensions, regional security would be enhanced by:

⁴ B9 or Bucharest 9 format brings together the countries on the Eastern flank of NATO (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary). The format is a joint initiative of Romania and Poland.

⁵ Little Entente (1920-1938) and Balkan Pact (1934-1942) are the small formats which the countries in the region initiated and maintained between the two WW. For as long as they existed these alliances contributed to maintaining peace and security in the region, and to preservation, albeit temporary, of the borders agreed upon at the end of WWI.

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- » Ensuring a lasting military presence of NATO on the south of the Eastern flank. Peace and stability in the region will only be achieved when all conflicts, open and latent, will be finally solved, and until then enhanced deterrence is needed. When the war in Ukraine started, the Alliance and its member states acted promptly and deployed troops and equipment along the flank, including Romania and Bulgaria. The presence of these troops and further provision of modern equipment should remain part of a medium-term plan of the Alliance to maintain its posture in the region.
 - » Maritime security and freedom of navigation should become priorities. Excessive militarization of the Black Sea, started once Russia annexed Crimea, has become a threat not only to security, but also to freedom of navigation by large. The grain crisis, started this summer and still unfolding, revealed the limits to this freedom that Russia can and does impose, and the economic impact this has. Romania and Bulgaria have poor military fleets, and, with all the effort the two countries are making to modernize them, it will be a few years before situation substantially improves. Until then, there are two actions that could increase security of the sea: 1. In 2022 the Alliance continued its naval exercises, as the war was unfolding in the northern part of the sea¹. Nevertheless, the Alliance should increase the number of its maritime exercises, such that the presence of NATO ships in the Black Sea extends to the most. Georgia's continuous participation in these exercises, as a NATO partner, would extend the geographical reach of the deterrence posture. 2. Collaboration with Turkey, the country that controls access in the Black Sea through the Straits and has a modern and strong fleet, remains key to security in the area. The idea of a Romanian-Bulgarian-Turkish flotilla, that did not see fruition in 2016, deserves reconsideration, despite political difficulties of the current context.
 - » Military mobility within and between littoral states requires serious attention. Infrastructure of both Bulgaria and, especially, Romania remains unfitted for prompt transportation of military personnel and equipment. Despite various plans unveiled over the last two decades, connection between these two countries and other countries on the Eastern flank is still difficult. The Three

⁶ None of the official texts of the Alliance includes references to a Black Sea strategy, although they do include references to the region. [NATO 2022 - Strategic concept](#), [NATO - Official text: Madrid Summit Declaration issued by NATO Heads of State and Government \(2022\)](#), 29-Jun.-2022

Seas initiative and European funds should be used to modernize the terrestrial infrastructure and adapt it to the military needs, and the Alliance should make military mobility on the entire Eastern flank, north and south, a priority¹.

- » A Black Sea Strategy. The regional approach to security in the Black Sea region should find its realization in a Black Sea Strategy of the Alliance. This strategy should be closely linked to, yet distinctive of, the Eastern Flank. First, the Eastern Flank does not include Turkey, which is key to security in the Black Sea. Second, security interests of Moldova and Georgia, as littoral states and NATO partners, are not sufficiently represented in the Eastern flank format. Third, and maybe most importantly, the Black Sea is shared with Russia, a reality that offers the region both strategic weight, and a particular aspect that cannot be addressed in a larger format.
- » Moldova and “frozen conflicts”. Security of Moldova is an integral and important part of regional security, and, through Transnistria, of direct relevance to Ukraine. Various solutions to the Transnistrian conflict advanced over the years either by Russia or by other countries, and at times supported by the international community, proved inefficient. Currently, Moldova’s security is seriously threatened by Russian troops and equipment positioned in or transiting Transnistria, which remains the main leverage Russia has over the country, both security-wise, economically and politically. Until and unless a solution to the Transnistrian situation is found and Moldova’s security is enhanced, mainly through improving the country’s defensive capabilities, there will not be security and stability at Ukraine’s border.

2. Economic security and regional reconstruction

The conference in Lugano in July this year shaped the idea of reconstruction of Ukraine through the collective effort of the trans-Atlantic community. A few months later in Berlin discussion continued around the cost of the reconstruction, without much clarity on the sources of funds and conditions this would come with. Ideally these will be clarified in a third conference, to be held in London next year. The

¹ [The CEPA Military Mobility Project - CEPA, Military Mobility Project Appendix 3: Focșani Gate - CEPA](#)

generosity of the objective and the solidarity the euro-Atlantic community manifested in its achievement are not enough to ensure a successful reconstruction, which requires a strategic, yet realistic, design, of both the sources of funds and the efficiency of their investment¹. For the latter there are two aspects that contribute to its irreversible sustainability:

- » A regional approach is required, that would create the synergies indispensable to a successful reconstruction.
- » A sustainable reconstruction requires stability not only of Ukraine, but of the entire Black Sea region.

The effort to reconstruct Ukraine is paralleled with the Marshall Plan for reconstruction of Europe at the end of the WWII. This historical equivalent is relevant not only through the contextual similarity, but also through the approach it implies. As the Marshall plan would have not been possible before the end of the war, so the reconstruction of Ukraine will not have the desired amplitude and solidity absent a minimal stability offered by the end of the military conflict. Currently an important component, both tactical and financial, of the reconstruction plan as it is being discussed, is in fact much needed support for the country to wither the war, and not reconstruction *sensu stricto*. Nevertheless, it is indeed prudent to start discussion about reconstruction at this stage, and finalize political, financial and technical difficulties by the time peace/truce is achieved and conditions are met for a real reconstruction.

The Marshall plan has been offered to Europe to assist the continent in its economic and societal reconstruction – although the latter is less talked about, it has been an important pillar of the plan². 17 European countries were covered by the plan, which promoted the “necessary stability” for economic recovery and the survival of their democratic institutions. “Necessary stability” has a regional, not only national, dimension. There cannot be a stable Ukraine in an unstable region, positioned around an excessively militarized sea with limited freedom of navigation, and permanently

⁸ [Designing Ukraine's Recovery in the Spirit of the Marshall Plan | Strengthening Transatlantic Cooperation \(gmfus.org\)](#) ; [A Marshall Plan for Ukraine with a Regional Vision | Strengthening Transatlantic Cooperation \(gmfus.org\)](#)

⁹ Marshall plan has been announced by the Secretary of State George C. Marshall in its speech on June 5, 1947 at the Harvard University [116183.pdf\(wilsoncenter.org\)](#)

threatened by conflicts. For a sustainable reconstruction of Ukraine a regional approach to security, infrastructure and energy is imperative.

- » The sine qua non condition for stability is security, and *Ukraine's security* depends on cooperation with countries in the region, NATO members and partners. The regional aspect of security has been discussed above. Long term NATO presence in littoral member states in air, land and sea, together with improved military mobility, and preservation of freedom of navigation are essential for regional post-conflict security of Ukraine itself.
- » *Ukraine's economic recovery* involves close economic relations with the countries in the region, at least on commercial transportation, as the grain crisis proved earlier this year. Freedom of navigation in the Black Sea will remain limited in the immediate term, so Ukrainian products will continue to reach Europe on land, using terrestrial infrastructure (roads and railroads) of neighboring countries – both Romania and Bulgaria. Over the summer, as the grain crisis was unfolding, it was Romania's far from perfect roads, railroads, fluvial and maritime transport capabilities that were used to get Ukrainian products to the center of Europe. Under the pressure of increased volumes to be transported, both Romania and Bulgaria have asked for funding to improve their railroad systems and increase their fleet of trains cars and locomotives. Port of Constanta, potentially the second in volume in Europe, can become the focal transit point from and to Ukraine, should investments into the port infrastructure materialize. Moreover, the Danube, which is still insufficiently utilized despite its enormous potential, would help bypass some of the restrictions and difficulties of navigation in the Black Sea, and increase the volume of goods transported westwards. Increased synergies between available and planned funding, better political cooperation between riverane states in the maintenance of the river, and more determination in promoting the strategic importance of the Danube on political agendas would benefit the region, and implicitly Ukraine. The Three Seas initiative, which has infrastructure development as one of its main goals, should also include the Danube and its potential as one of the projects.
- » *Ukraine's energy diversification* also requires strong cooperation with neighboring countries; in particular, to move away from dependence on Russian

gas. Now connected to the European electricity grid, Ukraine receives 2,000 megawatts per day from Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. It also relies on reverse gas flows from these three countries and supplements its gas imports with US liquefied natural gas shipped to Swinoujscie, Poland. Ukraine will continue to rely energetically on neighboring countries in the immediate to mid-term. Development of these countries' ability to deliver electricity and gas to Ukraine leads to a faster recovery of the latter. There are regional developments meant to increase the region's energetic independence and also contribute to Europe's: the recent invigoration of Azerbaijan Georgia Romania Interconnector (AGRI), meant to transport gas from Azerbaijan to Romania and onwards, and Romania's long awaited start of exploitation of its offshore gas fields, among others.

- » It would simply be a major strategic mistake if trans-Atlantic community would not use reconstruction of Ukraine to better support and anchor Moldova, both economically and security-wise.

The war in Ukraine allowed for a re-discovery not only of the strategic importance of the Black Sea, but also of the regional dimension its security, stability and economic development entail, in times of war as in time of peace. A strategic look at the region, and consequent strategies are required to manage both the conflict and its aftermath.

3. Danube – Europe's commercial lung

Strategic priorities in the Black Sea region and at the Mouth of the Danube shifted briskly with the conflict in Ukraine. In general, conflicts are approached through both short term and medium-long term solutions. The first are needed to address immediate crisis, while the latter are genuine strategies articulated to avoid the impact of regional open and protracted conflicts.

Allowing Ukraine to breathe economically while fighting a war has become a regional endeavor ever since the military phase of the war started. Adaptation of the local railway structure in Romania between the border with Ukraine and the port of Galati, on the Danube, so Ukrainian grains could be embarked on ships during the grain crisis

this summer is a prime example of a short-term solution. It also suggests a long term approach that could alleviate the economic suffocation of Ukraine sustainably.

Modification of Romanian local railway opened a paradigm that should be the backbone of a long-term strategy – reconstruction and development of infrastructure in areas of conflict as in the ones adjacent (neighboring countries), so the latter can absorb the economic traffic and reduce blockages. The reconfiguration and reconstruction of infrastructure during and after the war can only be approached considering the connections needed for an efficient, constant commercial trade.

A clear proof is the current situation, when infrastructures of neighboring countries - Romania, Poland and to a less extent Moldova - are suffocated in their effort to maintain traffic to and from Ukraine. *Reductio ad absurdum*, investments in reconstruction of Ukrainian transport capacity would render themselves inefficient should neighboring infrastructures be ignored, just as Ukrainian grains would have been left in storage if not for the rapid adaptation of the 12 km of Romanian railway. The impact of the war is larger than just Ukraine, so reconstructive solutions should have the same breadth.

Commercial breathing of Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova in European context is secured not only by roads and railway, but also by river. To this end, the Danube remains an ignored alternative. This geographic opportunity of the entire region should finally be converted logistically.

The Danube was and must become again the commercial lung of Eastern Europe, especially as the safety and freedom of commercial navigation on the Black Sea are limited, leading to the rational reaction of insurance and maritime transportation companies to oppose engaging commercially in the area.

A brief historic look allows us to remember that the Danube has represented for centuries the main channel of transportation of grains from the region to Europe, and the ports in Romania and Bulgaria have been consequently developed to allow for a sustained and constant traffic. Europe has been constantly interested in maintaining navigation on the river. The European Commission of the Danube¹, which reunited the

¹⁰ *European Commission of the Danube was created in 1856 and it activated until 1938, its activity frozen during the WWII. It restarted in 1948, and in 1954 headquarters were relocated from Galati to Budapest. [Danube Commission – Donaukommission – Commission du Danube – Дунайская Комиссия](#)*

the main powers of Europe, regulated navigation and commercial traffic in the area so the port of Sulina became a real gate between Middle East and Europe. English engineer Charles Hartley, who had previously managed constructions in the Channel of Panama, the Suez, and the Mississippi river, has been involved in modernization of the port of Sulina. Furthermore, during WWII, Germany initiated a plan for a Danube-Black Sea channel, as well as a Danube-Bucharest channel, so the products in the entire Black Sea region could be transported to Germany. Detailed plans to extend the navigability on the Danube have also been developed during that time, so the river would have been connected to the rivers of Rhin and Main. This brief history outlook is meant as another proof that the Danube represented a real, efficient and viable alternative to transportation on the Black Sea and through the Straits, when these were militarily insecure.

Consequently, a discussion about reconstruction must take into consideration transportation routes in neighboring countries. This involves investments in upgrading terrestrial and river infrastructure, so both a constant commercial exchange with Ukraine and an alternative access to the Black Sea are secured.

Currently, however, there are three limitations to this approach:

- » The technical limitations of river navigability, mainly on the Romanian-Bulgarian sector, must be solved. There are plans designed and funds available to this end, and they must be accessed and used in a regional, hence efficient, approach to reconstruction.
- » Political reluctance of some Danube countries to improve navigability on the river is to be addressed. A comprehensive approach that includes alternative or compensatory benefits, on a case by case basis, could overcome current situation.
- » There may be a certain dissonance of German interests regarding navigation on the Rhin and the one on the Danube. This is to a certain extent justified by the economic importance of the Rhin for Germany. The current context, however, highlights the benefits a direct connection Black Sea - Center of Europe (Danube-Rhin-Main) would bring to the whole of Europe, and to its Southern neighborhood.

We must bring to attention the European Commission Strategy of the Danube¹¹, adopted in 2011. The strategy generously approaches and provides for several developmental areas (navigability, connectivity, development of multi-modal ports), yet to this date most of the projects it generated and supported focus on ecological preservation of the river. The latter is unequivocally an important aspect, but in itself and especially in the current context it represents only a counterproductive limitation of the economic potential of the Danube. Implementation of good strategic intentions clearly requires political agreements more difficult to construct than the ecological consensus, yet the current context should have already taught us that avoiding them is never a good solution.

In times of war military maneuvers, destruction, and bellicose declarations are the immediate we all need to deal with. However, and by no means minimizing the catastrophe of the Ukrainian war, we need to think beyond the cease of conflict, and design the peace, or at the least the cease of conflict, that will follow. We need to embark on a regional approach to stability, so we can reconstruct, and then consolidate.

This whole concept of stability and reconstruction we hereby analyzed, and which involves a high degree of solidarity with those peoples and nations that share common European values, has been inspirationally stated by the Romanian diplomat Nicolae Titulescu in his reference to “spiritualization of borders”. One more reminder that Romanian politicians accessed Europeaness even before its legal maturization through the Lisbon Treaty.

¹¹ [EUSDR\(danube-region.eu\)](https://danube-region.eu)