

REPORT — WINTER 2022

Murky waters

The Black Sea region and European security



This report is part of Friends of Europe's Peace, Security and Defence programme. Written by Paul Taylor, it brings together the views of scholars, policymakers and senior defence and security stakeholders.

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Methodology and acknowledgments



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This is the ninth in a series of reports I have written for Friends of Europe on European defence issues. It follows country studies on France and Germany in 2017, the United Kingdom and Poland in 2018, Italy and Mediterranean security in 2019, as well as reports on transatlantic defence cooperation in the Trump era in 2020, the Arctic and European security in 2020, and Europe and the Sahel in 2021.

My research took place in a period of extreme tension between Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Belarus and several EU states. As I completed my study in late November 2021, the outcome of those tensions was uncertain and the risk of armed conflict could not be ruled out.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to travel to the region, but video conferencing made it possible to interview more than 40 current and former officials in governments, international organisations, politics, diplomacy, the military, the energy sector, think tanks and civil society in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, the United States, NATO, the EU and the OSCE. The interviews were conducted between June and November 2021.

Most of the serving officials, soldiers and diplomats whom I interviewed were able to talk only on condition they were not identified, due to the nature of their positions. Others, such as the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine, Olha Stefanishyna, the Deputy Secretary General of NATO, Mircea Geoană, and the Russian Ambassador to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov, agreed to on-the-record interviews, for which I am most grateful.

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Finally, my wife Catherine has been a constant source of patient support, love and good humour during my months of research and writing. I couldn't have done this without her.

Paul Taylor

Senior Fellow, Friends of Europe

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Taylor', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Preface

14 January 2022

Since this report was written in November 2021, events have accelerated, raising the risk of an armed conflict. The US informed European allies in November of its intelligence assessment that Russia might be planning to invade Ukraine in early 2022.

The Kremlin has sustained a military build-up with an estimated 100,000 soldiers around Ukraine's borders and issued a series of demands, formulated in draft treaties addressed to the US. It wants not only formal guarantees that Ukraine and Georgia will never join NATO but also to roll back the alliance's eastward enlargement and deployments in central Europe since 1997, when the NATO-Russia Founding Act was signed. The demands were so far-reaching as to be manifestly unacceptable to the West, which has offered instead talks on arms control, missile deployments in Europe, transparency of military exercises, and enhanced communications channels.

The US and the EU have warned Moscow it would face devastating economic consequences if it attacked Ukraine again. They have also made clear that NATO's mutual defence clause does not apply to Ukraine, a non-member, and have refrained from any talk of a direct military response.

Behind the sweeping demands, it was clear that Russia's red lines were no further eastward expansion of NATO and no deployment of NATO or Western forces or missiles in Ukraine.

After two video conferences between Presidents Putin and Biden in December 2021, and high-level US-Russia, US-NATO and OSCE meetings in January 2022, it seemed likely, though not certain, that the two sides would engage in further dialogue on mutual security assurances under the continued (though officially denied) threat of Russian military action. In parallel, a revival of talks on implementing the Minsk peace accord in the Donbas region seemed probable.

There is little chance that this diplomatic process will yield results in the near term. But maintaining dialogue and taking baby steps away from the edge could provide a face-saving off-ramp for Putin if he is not bent on military action but on demonstrating that Russia remains a great power on a level with the US. Meanwhile, Moscow is likely to continue hybrid and covert operations below the threshold of armed conflict to keep Ukraine and NATO off balance.

Russia has sought to drive a wedge between the US and its European allies, as well as within Europe, by treating Washington as its sole interlocutor and shutting the EU out of the negotiations. But Putin may have overplayed his hand. Russian sabre-rattling has had some unintended consequences, putting NATO back at the centre of European security, uniting its members in political support for Ukraine, and prompting Finland and Sweden to assert their right to join NATO if they so choose.

If Russia were to launch a major offensive against Ukraine, Europe would likely be divided on how far to go in painful economic sanctions against Moscow. In particular, Germany's new centre-left government would face a deeply divisive decision on whether to abandon the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Since European states do not agree among themselves on several key issues - whether or not Ukraine and Georgia should join NATO and the EU, how to handle relations with Russia, or how to deal with Europe's dependence on Russian gas - the EU can at most play a supporting role. It can help Ukraine build resilience and institutional capacity, fight corruption and attract investment. It can do more to promote economic integration in the Black Sea region, as advocated in this report. But despite its ambitions for 'strategic autonomy', the EU will not be the negotiator on the future of European security.

Nothing in recent events alters the central conclusions of this study that all sides will have to accept less than their preferred option. The heightened tension between Russia and the West simply makes it more urgent to implement these recommendations and pursue dialogue to prevent a conflict that would be devastating for all sides.

Executive summary

Long a geopolitical backwater, the Black Sea has become one of the most bitterly contested and dangerous strategic zones around Europe since the end of the Cold War.

It is the theatre not only of so-called frozen conflicts in breakaway areas of Moldova and Georgia, with the long-term presence of Russian troops, but also of conflicts over Crimea and Donbas, where Russian forces and proxies have seized and occupied territory internationally recognised as part of Ukraine since 2014. The region is also a playground for disinformation, sabotage and cyber warfare aimed at destabilisation and disruption below the threshold of armed conflict.

Russian and Western analysts agree that Moscow's actions are intended to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO, which the Kremlin regards as "the reddest of red lines", since allowing such accession is seen as threatening strategic encirclement of Russia.

Moscow seeks to keep its neighbours weak and poor, dependent and off balance to stymie their aspirations to Euro-Atlantic integration. This also applies to their drive for economic and political convergence with the European Union, seen as going hand-in-hand with NATO membership. All states in the region - including the EU members - are politically unstable to a greater or lesser extent, except for autocratic

Russia and Turkey. Most score poorly in corruption indexes.

The seizure and annexation of Crimea was launched in response to the toppling of an elected pro-Russian Ukrainian leader by peaceful pro-European mass demonstrations after he, under Russian pressure, backed away from signing a far-reaching Association Agreement that his government had negotiated with the EU. The overthrow of the former president, Viktor Yanukovich, prompted fears in Moscow that the new Ukrainian authorities would revoke the Russian Black Sea Fleet's long-term lease on the Crimean port of Sevastopol. Moscow's military and economic support for Russian-speaking separatists in the eastern Donbas region has sustained a smouldering conflict since 2014, in which more than 13,000 people have died, and which could be rekindled at any time.

Ideologically, Russian President Vladimir Putin defended the largely bloodless takeover of Crimea as a "reunification" and asserted his determination to protect Russians who ended up outside Russia's borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He followed that up with a 5,000-word essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" in July 2021, asserting that they were one people. Putin accused the West of enrolling Ukraine in an "anti-Russian project" and said "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia".

For its part, NATO denies any hostile intent towards Russia and continues to proclaim that its door is open, that Ukraine and Georgia will one day join the alliance and that all European states have a right to seek their own security arrangements. No third party may have a say in NATO's decision-making process, the alliance's leaders declared in a summit communiqué in 2021.

In practice, senior NATO officials and Western diplomats acknowledge that neither aspirant will be admitted for the foreseeable future, even if the alliance cannot say so publicly. Both have been given the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partners, already held by EU members Sweden and Finland. NATO is helping modernise their armed forces, but they do not benefit from the alliance's Article V mutual defence clause.

This perpetuates strategic ambiguity - some might say strategic hypocrisy - which fuels the geopolitical contest between Russia and the West and remains a source of tension inside the Atlantic alliance.

Fortress Crimea

The unresolved conflicts also have a maritime dimension. Upon annexing Crimea, Russia laid claim to its territorial waters and a vastly expanded exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the northern Black Sea. It created its own Flight Information Region to control the airspace around Crimea and built a road bridge across the Kerch Strait, preventing larger vessels from entering the Sea of Azov.

The Kremlin has fortified Crimea, modernising the Black Sea fleet and deploying air defence and anti-ship missile systems, strategic bombers, tanks, cruise missiles and possibly nuclear warheads, giving it the ability to interdict shipping and aircraft throughout the region, and to strike targets across much of Europe from the captured peninsula. It has used Crimean bases to support its military intervention in Syria since 2015 and to project power more widely in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

In spring 2021, Russia amassed 100,000 troops with heavy equipment around Ukraine's borders, leaving much of the weaponry in place after it announced the end of what it called a snap exercise. It renewed that mobilisation without explanation in November 2021. It issued notices of naval and air exercises covering swathes of the Black Sea for the summer months of 2021, warning foreign aircraft and shipping to keep out. Ukraine hosted a major multinational naval exercise in summer 2021 in areas that partly overlapped. Russian warplanes buzzed a British destroyer and a Dutch frigate that sailed through Crimean waters to assert freedom of navigation.

The West has responded to the Russian build-ups in Crimea by increasing its rotating naval presence and NATO air policing in the Black Sea, with bilateral American, British, Canadian and Turkish military assistance and arms sales to Kyiv, and by holding regular exercises with Ukraine and Georgia.

The United States has bilateral defence cooperation agreements with Romania and Bulgaria dating back to 2005 and 2006 that allow it to station forces, store equipment and have shared use of designated national air bases and training ranges. It can use them as a jumping-off point for missions in third-party countries - for example, in the Middle East and Central Asia - without requiring specific authorisation by the host government.

Romania, which has significantly modernised its own armed forces, also hosts a US Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defence (BMD) system designed to intercept missiles from Iran or North Korea, but - NATO insists - not from Russia. Moscow nevertheless sees the system as a threat.

In 2016, the alliance agreed to deploy a “tailored forward presence” in southeastern Europe that includes a nominally multinational brigade in Romania. The land component involves permanent units from Romania, a rotating Polish contingent and temporary reinforcements from Portugal and Spain, but none of the big Western allies. Bucharest has pressed for a higher NATO profile, comparable to the Enhanced Forward Presence of four combat-ready battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland, which are led by the US, Britain, Germany and Canada. NATO military staff advised at the time that a bigger land presence was not needed for deterrence and assurance, since there is no land border with Russia. The Romanian government argues that the massive military build-up in Crimea now poses such a threat.

Bulgaria and Turkey are more cautious about rocking the boat due to their historic ties and economic interdependence with Russia, a major source of energy and tourists. Ankara is engaged in its own geopolitical dance with Moscow - alternating tests of strength in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Syria with budding arms industry cooperation, to Western dismay.

Sphere of influence?

The Kremlin seeks to assert a sphere of influence in the former Soviet space, which it considers as vital to its interests as Central America is to the United States, or West Africa to France. The US and NATO reject the principle of spheres of influence. But they cannot ignore history, including their own.

Since they first declared in principle in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia would one day join the alliance, NATO nations have been unable to agree among themselves on when and how to admit the two former Soviet republics. France and Germany lead opposition to granting them a Membership Action Plan (MAP), a step they argue would be destabilising and provocative to Russia.

Poland, Romania and the Baltic states are energetic cheerleaders for eastward enlargement. Along with other former Soviet bloc countries, they joined together in 2015 in the Bucharest Nine grouping to act as a sort of pressure group for the eastern flank within NATO. Several other Western allies are content to hide behind the Franco-German blockade while paying lip service to the goal of eventual

Ukrainian and Georgian membership once the conditions are met.

NATO's enlargement policy states that its door is open to "all European democracies which share the values of our Alliance, which are willing and able to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership, which are in a position to further the principles of the Treaty, and whose inclusion can contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area".

NATO officials say that despite some reforms and valuable contributions to alliance missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, both aspirants are far from fulfilling the criteria, notably concerning the rule of law, democratic stability, reform of the intelligence services, the fight against corruption and, in Ukraine's case, civilian control over the military. Georgia, which was ahead of Ukraine, has regressed in its political and legal standards lately.

Since NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit declaration, Russia has waged two wars in Georgia and Ukraine to seize or buttress zones of rebel-held territory beyond the control of those countries' governments. Western countries have denounced the Russian actions and provided some training, weaponry and intelligence for the Georgian and Ukrainian armed forces but they made clear by their actions that they are not willing to go to war to defend either country.

Admitting a state without full control over its territory could immediately bring into play NATO's Article V mutual defence clause, unless

the allies agreed that it would not apply to the breakaway areas. Critics argue that such a carve-out would be tantamount to accepting de facto partition. NATO, Ukrainian and Georgian officials prefer not to discuss that conundrum.

Pipeline politics

The standoff is compounded by competing economic interests. The West is keen to develop an east-west energy and trade corridor from Central Asia to the EU that does not run through either Russia or Iran. Moscow, on the other hand, has built a network of pipelines across and around the Black Sea to export its natural gas to Turkey, Bulgaria and the Western Balkans, and to Moldova, Romania and central Europe via Ukraine.

While the Southern Gas Corridor from Azerbaijan across Turkey to southern Europe has provided some non-Russian supply since pumping began in 2019, volumes are relatively small and the only way to significantly boost deliveries via this route would be if Turkmenistan were to agree to supply gas through a pipeline across the Caspian Sea that has yet to be agreed or built.

Twelve central European states banded together in the Three Seas Initiative, launched by Poland and Croatia in 2016 and backed by the US, aiming to build north-south energy, transport and communications highways between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black seas. The Trump administration was an enthusiastic supporter, seeing it as a counterweight to German power in the EU, as well as an opportunity to export

US liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the region. Five years on, progress on defining projects and securing financing has been slow.

China, the rising global power, is seeking to penetrate the region with its Belt and Road Initiative, investing in industrial and infrastructure projects in Ukraine, Georgia and the Aegean and Black seas, and looking to extend its land trade routes via Central Asia into southeastern Europe. Bulgaria and Romania are members of China's 16+1 format for cooperation with central Europe.

China is now Ukraine's largest single trade partner, although the EU collectively far outstrips it. Under US pressure, Kyiv blocked a Chinese investment in Ukraine's strategic manufacturer of plane and helicopter engines. Beijing has also included Georgia in its New Silk Road initiative, opening a direct rail freight link from Xi'an to Tbilisi and aiming to develop a route from its industrial heartland to the Black Sea and Turkey via Georgia.

Energy exploration in the Black Sea began in the 1980s under the Soviet Union, but to date, no oil or gas has been extracted commercially from beneath the waters. The energy contest is fuelled by offshore gas discoveries by Turkey and Romania that have yet to be brought on stream, as well as Russia's capture and operation of Ukrainian drilling platforms off Crimea. It is not clear whether Black Sea gas will become economically viable in significant quantities given the long-term trend away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy sources to combat climate change. Demand

for natural gas is forecast to plateau in Europe from the early 2030s and decline thereafter.

To mitigate Europe's dependency on Russian gas and reduce the vulnerability of central and eastern European countries to sudden breaks in supply, the EU has invested in interconnectors and reverse-flow pipeline capabilities in Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine. But vested interests in local network operators and energy companies have slowed progress and so far thwarted their use.

An estimated 5% of the world's oil exports and up to 25% of wheat exports transit from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean via the Turkish-controlled Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits - two natural choke-points. Yet none of the littoral states has its capital, population centres or main economic production on the Black Sea. Land and river corridors are more important trade arteries than the sea itself for most littoral states except Ukraine. The riparian countries look inland rather than to their common waterway. You might almost call it the Back Sea.

Whose lake?

The Black Sea has been a crossroads for migration and commerce and a melting pot of civilisations for three millennia. Greek merchants established the earliest trading posts around its shores. The Romans colonised Crimea, Romania, Bulgaria and crossed Georgia to the Caspian Sea. Nomadic peoples from Central Asia and Iran then ruled its northern shores for centuries. Traders from Genoa and Venice plied the sea routes in the Middle Ages, while

the Byzantine Empire controlled the southern shore and access to the Mediterranean.

After the fall of Constantinople, the Black Sea was effectively an Ottoman lake from the mid-15th century until the late 18th century, when it became the theatre of rivalry between an expanding Russia and the declining Ottoman Empire. Catherine the Great captured Crimea from the Turks and a swathe of territory she named Novorossiya, or New Russia, building the port of Odessa. West European powers sent expeditionary forces to curb Russia's rising power in the mid-19th century Crimean War. The 1856 Paris peace treaty, which ended that conflict, banned Russia from having naval bases on the Black Sea, though it cast off those constraints in 1870.

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the defeat of Western-backed White Russian forces after World War One, the Black Sea became a Soviet-dominated lake with a Turkish cork in the bottle. Moscow controlled the northern and western shores either directly - as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia were part of the Soviet Union - or indirectly, since communist Romania and Bulgaria were members of the Warsaw Pact from 1955 until its dissolution in 1991.

However, Turkey controlled the strategic straits commanding access to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean under the 1936 Montreux Convention, which allows free commercial navigation but regulates the passage of warships. Non-riparian states are subject to strict limits on the number and size of naval vessels permitted there at any one time as well

as the duration of their stay. These limits tighten in wartime, when Turkey has the right to prohibit the passage of belligerents' warships between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

Among Black Sea states, Romania and Bulgaria have joined NATO since the fall of communism, while Ukraine and Georgia both have close partnerships with the alliance and aspire to membership. This raises the alarming prospect in Kremlin eyes of the Black Sea becoming a NATO lake, putting the main Russian population centres within near instant missile range. Moscow's seizure and militarisation of Crimea have tilted the balance of power in the region, restoring Russian maritime dominance.

Trade and joint economic projects among the Black Sea states are slight, apart from gas pipelines. Romania and Bulgaria are integrated into the EU single market, while Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have seen their economies turn towards Europe and away from Russia over the last decade. All three are members of the EU's Eastern Partnership and have Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with the Union. Their citizens enjoy visa-free travel to the EU's Schengen area.

While low-level economic, environmental and civil society cooperation among countries of the region exists through the post-Cold War institutions of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the EU-led Black Sea Synergy initiative and the GUAM grouping of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, their achievements are modest, mostly in areas such as the environment, fisheries and

tourism. Businesses generally see more profit in interaction with the EU than with Black Sea neighbours. Non-government organisations are often too stretched with domestic struggles over civil rights, freedom of expression and fighting corruption to have the bandwidth for, or to see much benefit in, cross-border cooperation.

A better way

Stabilising the region durably and unlocking its economic potential will depend on finding ways to sidestep or defuse the central standoff over Ukraine's and Georgia's NATO ambitions.

To approach the issue as a zero-sum game between 'freedom' and 'autocracy' - the dominant perspective in Washington and much of eastern Europe - is to ignore history and carries a serious risk of further armed conflict in those countries. There must be a better way.

Despite Putin's aggressive actions of the last decade, the view in much of western Europe remains that the West should maintain dialogue with Russia - for economic, energy, geopolitical and cultural reasons - and avoid poking the Russian bear.

A grand bargain on the future of the Black Sea region and the security of the states between NATO and Russian borders seems unattainable. The countries concerned would reject any deal negotiated over their heads. Nor would they trust any security guarantees offered by Russia in return for military non-alignment. Central European countries that endured Soviet rule

and are now NATO members would denounce a betrayal, as would their friends in Washington.

Furthermore, it is by no means clear that Russia would be willing to make significant concessions to end the frozen conflicts under such an arrangement. Moscow may well feel it has achieved most of its goals in the region without suffering more than the inconvenience of limited economic sanctions. It may have squandered any chance of drawing the Ukrainian and Georgian peoples back into its orbit, but it has halted NATO's advance indefinitely. One thing seems certain: no Russian leader is likely to contemplate giving up Crimea.

In the absence of a comprehensive solution, this report will explore whether there is an alternative to escalating east-west tension in the region, which carries a non-trivial risk of armed conflict by accident, miscalculation or design.

Such a path would require reciprocal confidence-building measures, greater military-to-military dialogue and de facto great power understandings to put intractable issues on the back burner in the name of strategic stability. The closure of Russia's mission to NATO, and of NATO's office in Moscow, has dramatised the deterioration in relations. Their military commanders are still talking to each other to avoid incidents at sea or in the air, but that is not sufficient.

A fresh start should include more European political engagement with Black Sea states - a sort of 'Eastern Partnership Plus' for Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova - to accompany the

slow advance of the EU's magnetic economic and regulatory pull and spur the fight against corruption. Greater regional cooperation could unlock foreign investment and build mutual interests over time.

The EU has adopted integrated strategies for the Arctic and the Sahel, yet curiously no such comprehensive approach to the Black Sea. It needs one, which should cover a full range of engagement on investment, trade, energy, transport, shipping and fisheries, environmental protection, biodiversity and people-to-people contacts, as well as security.

While relations between Brussels and Ankara - and Washington and Ankara - will remain fraught and may deteriorate further as long as Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan holds power, the EU should make preparations to reset its political and economic relationship with a more cooperative Turkey and avoid slamming doors. Terminating Turkey's candidacy for EU membership, however unlikely it is to succeed, would be self-defeating.

Individual Western nations should continue to help the Ukrainian and Georgian military to reform, modernise and achieve interoperability with NATO forces, so that they build their own deterrence against further Russian aggression and intimidation, and societal resilience against hybrid warfare. But they should also counsel caution and not create illusions.

NATO can give them almost everything but membership - training, joint exercises,

interoperability, intelligence sharing, help with reforming the military and intelligence services, bilateral defence cooperation with individual allies - but not a mutual defence guarantee or a NATO base on their territory. The allies must balance prudent enhanced security measures with avoiding provocative steps that would unnecessarily inflame Russia.

Managing and stabilising the contest in the Black Sea may be unsatisfactory for all sides, but it would be better than the current trajectory.



View of the Dniepr river and the city skyline in Kiev, Ukraine

CHAPTER 1

THE BLACK SEA BACK STORY

Constant flux

Seen from the International Space Station, the Black Sea looks like an inland lake. On an atlas, as the journalist and historian Neal Ascherson observed in a seminal 1995 book, it appears as "a kidney-shaped pond, connected to the outer oceans by the thread-like channel of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles".⁽¹⁾

This almost enclosed salt-water sea - the Bosphorus is just 750 metres wide at its narrowest point - has been a crossroads for migration and commerce and a melting pot of civilisations for three millennia. It has witnessed the rise and fall of empires and the cross-fertilisation of peoples and cultures. The borders of its littoral states have been in near constant flux.

It is the watershed where Europe and Asia meet - one terminus of the Silk Road from China to the West. It is the basin into which the great fluvial arteries of the Danube, the Dniester, the Dnieper, the Don and the Kuban flow, disgorging silt and industrial waste, as well as the fresh water that makes the Black Sea less saline than the Mediterranean into which it feeds.

Too often, security issues in the Black Sea and southeastern Europe are debated as if history

had begun, or ended, at some arbitrary point in the 20th century - 1917 or 1945 for some, between 1989 and 1991 for others. To revisit the past of this region is not to digress from present-day struggles but to place them in their (often fiercely disputed) historical context. Nor does it legitimise the use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of any state.

Greek merchants established the earliest trading colonies around the Black Sea's shores in the 9th century BC. To the Greeks, Colchis (present-day Georgia) was the eastern edge of the known world. The descendants of these traders, speaking a dialect incomprehensible to modern Greeks, survived in northern Anatolia, Georgia and Ukraine until the 20th century when they were expelled by the Turks and deported to Central Asia by the Soviet Union, also known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The survivors mostly ended up in Greece.

At its peak in the reign of Emperor Trajan from 98 to 117 AD, the Roman Empire sprawled across territories that nowadays comprise Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, reaching all the way to the Caspian Sea and establishing colonies in Crimea.

1) Neal Ascherson, Black Sea, London, 1995

Then nomadic peoples swept in from the steppes of Central Asia and Iran - Scythians, Sarmatians, Khazars and Tatars - and ruled the northern shores for centuries. Traders from

Genoa and Venice plied the sea routes from the Middle Ages, while the Byzantine Empire controlled the southern shore and access to the Mediterranean.

Memory wars

Present-day Ukraine was not a fully sovereign, unitary and independent state until 1991, after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Perhaps more than any other Black Sea nation, its history remains a battleground of identity politics.

Scythians, Slavs and Vikings all settled parts of the Ukrainian lands. Viking settlers from Sweden created a loosely federated state known as Kievan Rus, with its capital in Kyiv, under Prince Olaf in the 9th century. The conversion of Vladimir I in 988 to marry the sister of the Byzantine emperor is widely regarded as a founding moment, launching the Christianisation of the previously pagan kingdom, according to the Orthodox rite.

Russia, Belarus and Ukraine all claim Kievan Rus, the first eastern Slavic Orthodox state, as their cultural and spiritual ancestor. A monument to Saint Vladimir stands on a hill overlooking the Dnieper in Kyiv, where he founded many churches, and his portrait adorns Ukrainian banknotes.

In 2016, Putin and Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox church inaugurated a giant statue of Vladimir the Great in a Moscow square beside the Kremlin walls. In his speech, the Russian president placed himself in Vladimir's legacy, hailing the moral foundation of the unifier who won "victories for the glory of the fatherland, making it stronger and greater with each generation".⁽²⁾

In his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021, Putin uses this historical narrative to underpin both a deep sense of grievance at the way that Ukrainian nationalists have built their state (and church) in opposition to Russia and claim to be the true defender both of Orthodox Christianity and of Russian-speakers in Ukraine.⁽³⁾

At its peak in the 11th century, Kievan Rus stretched from the White Sea on the Arctic Circle in the north to the Black Sea in the south. But the kingdom disintegrated into rival fiefdoms and was destroyed by the Mongol invasion

2) Official translation of Putin's speech: en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53211

3) Official translation of Putin's essay: en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181



Grain field in in Cassova Gora, part of Ukraine's Galician National Nature Park

in 1240. Northern and western Ukraine were taken over by Poland and Lithuania in the 14th century while the Mongol Tatars controlled Crimea. Cossacks, former serfs who had fled Polish landlords, settled in the central Ukrainian steppes, eventually forming a polity known as the Cossack Hetmanate which endured until the mid-18th century.

Ukrainian nationalists count Ivan Mazepa, the cultured hetman, or leader, who ruled from 1687 to 1708 and broke with Russian Tsar Peter the Great, as one of their heroes. Russia regards him as a traitor and has condemned modern Ukraine for honouring his memory.

From the 17th century, Poland and Lithuania dominated the western Ukrainian lands while Russia increasingly dominated the east.

When Poland declined and was partitioned, the Austrian Empire took over western areas while the Russian Empire incorporated the east and south.

After the fall of Constantinople, the Black Sea was effectively an Ottoman lake from the mid-15th century until the second half of the 18th century, when it became the theatre of rivalry between a rapidly expanding Russia and a declining Ottoman Empire. They fought 12 wars.

Empress Catherine the Great and her military overlord, Grigory Potemkin, captured Crimea and a swathe of present-day Ukrainian territory which they called Novorossiya, or New Russia, founding the port of Odessa and making Sevastopol the headquarters of its new Black

Sea fleet. From 1804, the Ukrainian language was banned from schools in the Russian empire.

West European powers sent expeditionary forces in the mid-19th century Crimean War to halt the expansion of Russian power around the Black Sea as the Ottoman Empire decayed. Historian Orlando Figes has shown how religious tensions between the Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim worlds, as well as rising nationalism, were drivers of that conflict. Those fault lines, frozen during the 20th century Cold War, have re-emerged in different forms in the 21st century. ⁽⁴⁾

In the 1856 Paris peace treaty that ended the Crimean War, Russia was forced temporarily to accept a humiliating demilitarisation of the Black Sea, barring it from rebuilding its Crimea-based fleet which British and French forces had destroyed. It cast off those restraints from 1870.

In the chaos at the end of World War One, Ukraine tried to break free from Russia as rival governments and foreign powers fought for ascendancy. Kyiv changed hands five times in a year. Eventually the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) became part of the Soviet Union. Ukraine suffered more than any other republic in the Great Famine of 1932-33, known as the Holodomor, caused by the forced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture and the confiscation of grain. Historians estimate that some five million people starved to death, most of them Ukrainians.

In 2006, the Ukrainian government officially declared the Holodomor to have been a deliberate act of genocide by the Soviet Union against the Ukrainian people. Putin disputed this account in his essay, saying “the common tragedy of collectivisation and famine of the early 1930s was portrayed as the genocide of the Ukrainian people”.

Soviet bottle, Turkish cork

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the defeat of Western-backed White Russian forces and their expeditionary Western backers after World War One, the Black Sea became a Soviet-dominated lake with a Turkish cork in the bottle. Moscow controlled the northern and eastern shores directly - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia became republics of the Soviet

Union - and the western shore indirectly after World War Two, when communist Romania and Bulgaria were members of the Warsaw Pact from 1955 until its dissolution in 1991.

Crimea had the status of an autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian SSR from 1921 until 1945, when it was incorporated as

4) Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade*, London, 2010

an oblast, or district, within the USSR. The peninsula was occupied by Nazi German forces until 1944. Stalin ordered the mass deportation of Crimean Tatars to Central Asia for allegedly having collaborated with the Nazis.

In 1954, Ukrainian-born Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev abruptly engineered a Supreme Soviet decree transferring Crimea to the Ukrainian SSR, although the district's population remained roughly three-quarters Russian. That sowed the seeds of Russia's illegal capture and annexation of the peninsula in 2014.

Even at the peak of Soviet power, Turkey always controlled the narrow strategic straits of the Bosphorus, connecting the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, passing through Istanbul, and the Dardanelles, between the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean and Mediterranean seas.

The 1936 Montreux Convention allows unlimited free merchant shipping but strictly regulates the passage of warships, particularly those of outside powers. Non-riparian states are subject to limits on the number, size and total tonnage of naval vessels permitted to enter at any one time, subject to prior notification, as well as capping the duration of their stay to 21 days. The rules permit capital ships and submarines of Black Sea states, subject to tonnage limits, but exclude capital ships and submarines of outside powers.⁽⁵⁾

The limits tighten in wartime, or even if Turkey feels threatened by “an imminent danger of war”, when Ankara has the right to prohibit the

passage of belligerents' warships or the naval vessels of a state by which it feels endangered.

The Soviet Union objected to the powers granted to Turkey under the Convention and proposed joint Turkish-Soviet control. Soviet leader Joseph Stalin complained to former US president Harry Truman that under Montreux “a small state [Turkey] supported by Great Britain held a great state [the USSR] by the throat and gave in no outlet”. The British would never accept such constraints on the Suez Canal or the Strait of Gibraltar, nor the US in the Panama Canal, he argued.⁽⁶⁾

Stalin returned to the offensive at the Potsdam Conference after World War Two, demanding that Turkey accept joint control, with Soviet access to bases in the straits. Moscow kept its own warships in the straits to block ships of nations other than Turkey from passing. Soviet pressure drove Ankara to abandon its military neutrality in 1947 and turn to the US for military and economic assistance. Turkey and Greece, historic adversaries, joined NATO together in 1952.

In fact, Montreux served Soviet interests rather than the West's during the Cold War, since it cemented Moscow's position as the only significant naval power in the Black Sea and imposed strict limits on any outside Western presence. Moreover, Turkey interpreted the terms liberally to allow Soviet submarines and aircraft-carrying cruisers through the straits while shutting out US aircraft carriers and submarines, to the irritation of some of its NATO allies.

5) English translation of Montreux Convention (original French): cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/formidable/18/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf

6) Wayne L. Chadwick, *Naval Tradition - A Russian Heritage*, in *Naval War College Review*, Vol 21, no. 10, US Naval War College, 1969

The convention's definitions of maritime vessels and tonnage limits reflect the military technology of the 1930s and have never been updated. It is ironic, though not surprising, that post-Soviet Russia has become the most ardent defender of the Montreux rules, which are a structural handicap for the West in the Black Sea.

In hindsight, Moscow's present-day elite regards that era as something of a golden age. "If you look back at the 20th century after World War Two, for decades the Black Sea was a bilateral basin, not only militarily between the Warsaw Pact and NATO but also economically and even in civilisational terms," says Vladimir Chizhov, the Russian ambassador to the European Union. ⁽⁷⁾

Divided Georgia, split Moldova

Like Ukraine, Georgia's history spans from medieval kingdom to fragmentation, then partial incorporation into the Ottoman Empire and conquest by Russia in the 19th century. A short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia established after World War One was snuffed out when the country became part of the USSR in 1921.

Civil strife erupted even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Historically, a distinct political and linguistic entity where the Caucasus mountains tumble into the Black Sea, Abkhazia joined the USSR before Georgia did and retained an autonomous status within the Georgian SSR during the Soviet era. The Abkhaz suffered disproportionately at the hands of Stalin and his fellow Georgian secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria during the Great Terror of the late 1930s.

As Moscow's authority crumbled in 1989, fighting broke out between Abkhazian nationalists and Georgian forces in the territory's capital, Sukhumi. When Georgia descended into turmoil in 1992 and abrogated its Soviet-era constitution, Abkhazia declared secession, triggering a bloody war in which first the Georgian army, then Akhaz fighters and their north Caucasian and Russian volunteer allies, gained the upper hand. Thousands died on both sides before the Abkhazians prevailed in 1993, killing many Georgian civilians and driving some 250,000 out of the territory.

The region of South Ossetia in central Georgia also declared independence after the authorities in Tbilisi abolished its Soviet-era autonomous status in 1991, sparking the first of three wars in which Georgia failed to regain control of the territory.

7) Interview with the author, September 2021

Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, responding to a series of provocations, launched an assault on the Moscow-backed separatists in 2008, triggering a Russian invasion and a five-day war in which Georgian forces suffered heavy losses before accepting a ceasefire brokered by French president Nicolas Sarkozy on behalf of the EU. Abkhazia opened a second front during that war. Russia officially recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008, but only a handful of states followed suit. The United Nations considers them Georgian territory.

Both Ukraine and Georgia have developed a strong national consciousness in opposition to Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each underwent a so-called ‘colour revolution’ - Rose in Georgia in 2003 and Orange in Ukraine in 2004 - in which pro-Western protest movements ousted Moscow-backed presidents. Ukrainians staged another peaceful revolt in Kyiv in 2014, known as the ‘Euromaidan’, to topple Russian-backed president Viktor Yanukovich after he reneged on a far-reaching trade and association agreement negotiated with the EU. Chizhov said Moscow had urged the Ukrainian leader, “Viktor, think twice”.

Putin blamed the US for the upheavals and voiced his determination to quash any such movement in Russia.

Although separated from the sea today by a wedge of Ukraine, Moldova is historically part of the Black Sea region. The medieval principality of Moldavia covered an area that included parts of present-day Romania and Ukraine, stretching

from the Carpathian Mountains to a Black Sea shoreline between the Dniester and Danube rivers.

A battleground between the Ottoman, Austrian and Russian empires in the 18th century, eastern Moldavia, known as Bessarabia, was annexed to the Russian empire in 1812. Briefly independent at the end of World War One, Bessarabia became part of greater Romania from 1918 until it was occupied and ceded to the Soviet Union in 1940 during World War Two. It became the Moldavian SSR, incorporating an industrialised strip of territory on the east bank of the Dniester known as Transnistria, with a mix of Russian and Moldovan speakers.

As the Soviet Union broke up, Transnistria declared independence from the newly formed Republic of Moldova, fearing that Moldovan nationalists planned unification with Romania. That sparked a war in which the Russian 14th army intervened on the Transnistrian separatists’ side in 1992, forcing an end to the fighting. The ceasefire left Transnistria independent *de facto* from Chişinău but not recognised by the international community.

A ‘peacekeeping’ force of 1,500 Russian soldiers has been stationed there since 1992 as part of a tripartite Joint Control Commission, despite Moscow’s pledge at a 1999 summit of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to withdraw the troops by the end of 2002.

The conflict remains frozen. Western intelligence officials accuse Russia of using its foothold in

Transnistria for activities to destabilise Moldova. The election of a resolutely pro-European president, parliament and government in Chişinău in 2021, committed to breaking

the power of pro-Russian oligarchs, has aroused fears that Moscow may rekindle the Transnistrian conflict.

Post-Cold War glow

After the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, efforts were launched to build cooperative economic and security structures among the Black Sea states. As we shall see in Chapter 3, they created more institutional structures than substance and failed to assuage Russian fears of creeping military encirclement.

A treaty on Black Sea Economic Cooperation was signed in Istanbul in 1992, giving birth to a regional economic organisation in 1999, which continues today. Ukraine agreed to renounce its Soviet-era nuclear weapons and transfer them to Russia under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in return for security guarantees from Moscow, the US and the UK. Russia and Ukraine signed a friendship treaty in 1997 agreeing to respect each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity and delimiting their land and maritime borders.

They also signed treaties in 1997 to settle disputes over the Soviet Black Sea Fleet,

which both countries claimed. In return for payments, Russia obtained 81% of the fleet and a 20-year lease on the Sevastopol naval base, which was extended in 2010 until 2042 in return for energy contracts at favourable prices. Moscow was also allowed to retain land forces in Crimea with up to 25,000 troops, 132 armoured combat vehicles and 24 artillery pieces. These standing units, reinforced covertly by special operations forces, enabled Russia to take control of the peninsula within a few days in February and March 2014, securing bases, key lines of communication and access points, and surrounding Ukrainian units without firing a shot.

Russia and Ukraine also signed an agreement in 2003 on cooperation on the use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, giving it the status of a shared internal waterway and delimiting their common maritime border. Both countries' merchant ships and state vessels had the right of free navigation.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia claimed the peninsula's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Sea of Azov and built a road bridge across the Kerch Strait that restricted the height of shipping that could transit. In 2018, it detained three Ukrainian naval patrol boats and their crew for almost a year and asserted the right to inspect and hold up commercial shipping to Ukraine's ports on the Sea of Azov. In April 2021, it barred entry to the Sea of Azov to Ukrainian naval vessels for six months, ostensibly due to planned military exercises.

Ukrainian officials say the 2003 agreement was signed under duress and some want to denounce it. However, doing so could give Russia a pretext for action to close the waterway permanently. A Ukrainian complaint to the Permanent Court of Arbitration challenging the legality of Russian actions under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea is grinding its way through the legal process. The tribunal ruled Ukraine's claim against Russian measures in the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait admissible in 2020 but has yet to decide on the merits of the case. However, it upheld Russia's argument that it had no competence to rule on the sovereignty of either party over Crimea, and hence of the related coastal waters.

Turkey signed agreements with Bulgaria and Georgia in 1997 on delimitation of their maritime borders and EEZs in the Black Sea. The only maritime dispute between Ukraine and Romania over the northwestern continental shelf was resolved by an International Court of Justice ruling in 2009 fixing the sea border and EEZs.

Yet despite this network of agreements, relations between Russia and the other Black Sea states grew gradually more tense due to their aspirations to leave Moscow's orbit and integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions. These tensions were manageable in the 1990s when Russian president Boris Yeltsin pursued friendly relations with the US and signed the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, providing a theoretical platform for cooperation between former adversaries.

But they became progressively more severe after Putin succeeded him, determined to rebuild Russian power and consolidate a sphere of influence in the former Soviet space.



View from a Ukrainian BTR-80 vehicle during the confrontation with Russia in the Donbas region

CHAPTER 2

BLACK SEA GEOPOLITICS

Main event or sideshow?

The strategic importance of the Black Sea region depends on where you sit.

“The main reason why we have the present situation is the significant differences in views of the strategic importance of the Black Sea region between the Kremlin and the rest. Almost nobody else in Europe or the United States cares in the strategic sense,” said Ben Hodges, US army commander in Europe from 2014 to 2017, who is now Pershing Chair in Strategic Studies at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in Frankfurt. ⁽¹⁾ “To me, this is a more likely flashpoint than the Baltics.”

Seen from Moscow, the Black Sea is of existential importance to Russian security and economic interests. The dominant view among Russian security professionals is that controlling the Black Sea is essential to prevent the US and NATO from posing an imminent threat to the heartland. The West denies any such intention.

The Black Sea is where Soviet leaders went on holiday, and where Vladimir Putin still goes.

In Russian eyes, the Black Sea is also key to projecting power into the Balkans, the Middle

East, the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, levelling the strategic playing field with Washington and Brussels. The militarisation of annexed Crimea provided a platform for Moscow’s intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 to rescue President Bashar al-Assad and to secure expanded Russian naval and air bases on the Eastern Mediterranean shore. It also helped extend Russian supply lines and influence into Egypt, Libya and Algeria.

Two of Russia’s four so-called anti-access area defence (A2/AD) zones - an integrated system of air defence and anti-ship and surface-to-surface missiles, aircraft and warships - have been established in Crimea and in its Syrian base in Tartus in the Eastern Mediterranean. The other two are in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea and on the Arctic Kola Peninsula, home base of the Russian second-strike nuclear submarine force.

From a Russian perspective, NATO’s expansion around the Black Sea is unwelcome and worrying in an area where Moscow has vital economic and energy interests as well as a blue-water fleet. It also threatens to rob Russia of the strategic depth that enabled it to defeat

1) Interview with the author, June 2021

two Western invasions in the last two centuries - Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler between 1941 and 1944.

“For Russia, the geopolitical situation has been getting worse, not better, from the point of view of military planning,” said Alexey Gromyko, Director of the Institute of Europe at the Russian Academy of Sciences. “We have two exclaves - not just Kaliningrad but Crimea.”

In the 1980s, Gromyko recalled, the deployment of US Pershing-2 intermediate-range missiles in West Germany had put the western Soviet Union within a few minutes of a nuclear strike until they were removed under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The US withdrew from the treaty in 2019, accusing Moscow of violating its terms by testing missiles with a prohibited range.

With today’s technologies, missiles that could be deployed in the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine or Georgia could strike Russian nerve centres within seconds, Gromyko said. “That would be a very substantial shift in the military planning of Russia. So the Black Sea could become an additional source of huge tensions.”⁽²⁾ NATO currently has no plans to deploy such missiles, but it had deployed anti-missile systems in Romania which Russia resents, and the collapse of most arms control agreements fuels suspicion on both sides.

Asked to define Russia’s “red lines” in the region, Chizhov, Moscow’s ambassador to the EU, said in an interview: “As far as I understand, and this is my personal view, a) that no new NATO members appear in the area, and b) that the Montreux Convention is maintained.”⁽³⁾

Igor Yurgens, Chairman of the Institute of Contemporary Development in Moscow and a liberal advisor to previous Russian leaders, offered a similar view. “For Russia, the real big red line would be if they take Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. Then NATO facilities would be all over. Imagine what would happen when Odessa and Batumi would become NATO strongholds,” he said.⁽⁴⁾

As far as Moscow is concerned, the Crimea issue is closed. “Crimea is ours. Don’t imagine Russia will ever start talking about it,” he said.

Russia has used the chaotic US exit from Afghanistan in 2021, which caused tension among NATO allies and damaged the alliance’s credibility, in its propaganda in Black Sea countries, suggesting that America is an unreliable ally and would abandon them as it had the Afghans.

2) Interview with the author, June 2021

3) Interview with the author, September 2021

4) Interview with the author, July 2021



Russian helicopter fires warning shots at British destroyer HMS Defender off the coast of Crimea

Frontline of freedom

While liberal internationalists in Washington see the Black Sea as the frontline of freedom in Europe, it looks to many hard-nosed US realists like a sideshow. In their view, Russia can be deterred from further aggression at relatively low cost in a region they think is unlikely to engender a major east-west conflagration. The issue is relatively low on the radar screen, at a time when a war-weary America is pivoting its strategic focus to Asia to contain the fast-rising power of China.

The political cause of bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the Atlantic alliance, promoted by neo-conservatives in the George W. Bush

administration, culminating in NATO's 2008 Bucharest decision, is still held high in parts of the foreign policy establishment and in Congress. "Georgia should be a member of NATO; the country has fulfilled all the criteria," said Matthew Bryza, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council who was a key artisan of the policy in the Bush-era State Department.⁽⁵⁾

The Biden administration has trodden a fine line, recognising the strategic importance of the Black Sea region and sending Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to Georgia, Ukraine and Romania in October 2021 to deliver messages of political support and sign agreements on

5) Bryza comments at European Policy Centre online policy dialogue, June 2021: www.epc.eu/en/events/NATO-Georgia-partnership-Engagement-without-3f8d88

enhanced military cooperation and training, without making any specific commitment on a path to NATO membership.

President Biden has tried to stabilise strategic relations with Russia and reshape the US force posture to focus on the Indo-Pacific and China rather than on Europe and the Middle East. The US Global Posture Review completed in November 2021 left the main European deployments intact. While talking firmly with Moscow and maintaining Western economic sanctions over Russian actions in Ukraine, Biden is not looking actively to advance NATO's frontier in the Black Sea.

"We don't want to provoke a war with Russia. We're not trying to roll them back, but we don't want to see them encouraged or rewarded," said Leo Michel, Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council who was a long-time US defence official specialising in NATO and Europe. He sees a link to Washington's standoff with China. "What you let Russia get away with in the Black Sea on freedom of navigation has a read-across as an international precedent to the South China Sea. So it's of great interest to the United States and to some extent to France and the UK."

That also explains why Japan and Australia, concerned about freedom of navigation in Asia, sent naval vessels to the Black Sea to participate in Ukraine's Sea Breeze international naval exercise in 2021 alongside US and NATO warships.

"We could still end up with a confrontation provoked by a Russian onslaught on Ukraine," Michel cautioned. "But the Black Sea is a lake and there would be lots of ways of plugging Russia in and bottling it up."⁽⁶⁾

After the Afghanistan debacle and the loss of Bagram airbase near Kabul, which was a major hub, southeast Europe has location advantages as a bridge for US operations into Central and Southern Asia and the Middle East. Washington has secured unconditional use of airbases, storage and training areas in Romania and Bulgaria and upgraded its defence cooperation agreement with Greece in 2021, gaining access to four additional bases and building up its use of Alexandroupolis port in far northeastern Greece to project power into the Black Sea region.⁽⁷⁾

Georgian officials debated internally a plan to offer the US use of a military base in Georgia in advance of a visit by former secretary of state Mike Pompeo in November 2020, according to former presidential foreign policy advisor Tengiz Pkhaldze, but there was no official negotiation on the idea. "Our American partners were not ready then," Pkhaldze said.⁽⁸⁾

Host nations get US equipment on advantageous terms and an extra level of bilateral reassurance that may feel more tangible than NATO's mutual defence guarantee. But former US officials say the American presence is as much about long-range power projection to the east and south as about security in the Black Sea region.

6) Interview with the author, September 2021

7) greekreporter.com/2021/11/28/port-of-alexandroupolis-greece-hosts-us-largest-ever-military-landing/

8) Interview with the author, June 2021



Russian BMD-4M vehicles participate in the Zapad-2021 Exercises, which took place in September on Russian and Belarussian training grounds

“In the Black Sea, the old war college question applies: why should I care?” a former senior Pentagon official said. “There’s plenty of possibility for low-level conflict of limited scope that would barely make the news. There’s less scope for greater conflict that would make the news.”⁹⁾

One significant US concern is about the reliability of Turkey as a major regional ally, given President Tayyip Erdoğan’s unpredictable course. Erdoğan’s ambiguous ‘frenemy’ relations with Russia, including the purchase of S-400 air defence missiles, as well as sharp differences with the US over its support for Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq, and its sheltering of dissident Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen, have raised doubts about Ankara’s future course.

In October 2021, Erdoğan threatened to expel 10 Western ambassadors, including the envoys of the US, France and Germany, after

they issued a joint statement voicing concern over the continued detention without trial of Osman Kavala, a philanthropist businessman and rights activist branded a ‘terrorist’ by the Turkish leader. He backed down rapidly but relations with both Washington and the EU remain fraught and combustible.

Some US experts see upgraded military ties with Greece and Romania as insurance in case Erdoğan were in some future crisis to bar US use of the crucial Incirlik air base in southern Turkey, a key gateway to the Middle East and the Gulf, and reported storage site for US nuclear weapons.

The former Pentagon official said Washington would go to great lengths not to “lose Turkey”. “Think about the position we’d like to see Turkey in post-Erdoğan in the context of the broader Black Sea region - the return of Turkey to the Western fold.”

9) Interview with the author, August 2021

Keeping the backyard quiet

For its part, Turkey has a strong interest in keeping the Black Sea quiet and maintaining a robust but cooperative relationship with Russia. While it considers itself a loyal and important member of NATO, with the alliance's second largest army, Ankara would prefer to preserve the status quo on its northern shore and not see a substantially increased NATO presence - just enough to give itself a collective shield.

"Looking at Turkey's borders on land and sea, the Black Sea is viewed from Ankara as the least unstable. Unlike in the Aegean or the [Eastern] Mediterranean, there are no issues with delimitation of maritime rights. It's not an area that nurtures conflict, unlike the land borders with Syria, Iraq and Armenia," said Sinan Ulgen, Chairman of EDAM, a European policy think tank in Istanbul, and a former Turkish diplomat. ⁽¹⁰⁾

"The singularity of the Black Sea is that it's a zone of stability ensured by a Turkish-Russian condominium, with the Montreux Convention as the key instrument. Turkey doesn't want to be seen to take any action that could potentially unbalance the situation. Here, the Turkish position occasionally clashes with the United States and NATO push to acquire greater influence in the Black Sea," he said.

Turkey seeks to leverage its control of access to the Black Sea to buttress its ambitions as a regional power and capture the attention of the US and the EU.

It has been sharply critical of Russian actions in Ukraine and supports both Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations to join NATO, with the caveat that there should be a political settlement of the conflicts on their territory first. It has angered Russia by supplying armed drones to Ukraine, of a type that proved effective in Libya in 2020 and in Azerbaijan's 2021 offensive against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. The first use of one of those Bayraktar drones against rebel gunmen in eastern Ukraine in October 2021 drew angry warnings from Moscow to Kyiv and Ankara, as well as mobilised Russian military near the Ukrainian border.

Erdoğan and Putin have repeatedly tweaked each other's tail in their rivalry, but each seems to know when to stop to avoid an all-out confrontation. Russian and Turkish diplomats fret that this is an unstable equilibrium, too dependent on personal relations between the two strongmen.

In Libya, Turkey used drones, arms supplies and proxy land forces to tilt the balance of

10) Interview with the author, September 2021



Russian tanks in South Ossetia

power in favour of the Tripoli government, which had been under siege from rebels aided by mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group. In Syria, Russian planes bombed Turkish troops when they crossed the border to support Syrian rebels in the Idlib region. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey used the same tactics to help Azerbaijan recapture territory occupied by Armenia, which hosts a Russian base. It fell to Moscow to broker a ceasefire and send in more Russian peacekeepers. Neither the US nor the EU played a role. Ironically, the outcome of the conflict may open up economic ties between Turkey and Armenia, increasing Ankara's influence across the South Caucasus.

A crisis flared between Ankara and Moscow in 2015 when a Turkish fighter shot down a Russian warplane over Syria after it allegedly entered Turkish airspace. Russia broke off military ties, ended visa-free travel and imposed sweeping economic sanctions on Turkey, including a ban on tourism. Yet within seven months the row abated and the Russian president was the first foreign leader to voice support for Erdoğan when elements of the Turkish military tried to oust him in a coup attempt in 2016. Moscow may even have tipped off Erdoğan to the coup plot. Turkish officials were infuriated by the silence of EU and US leaders.

Turkey is building up its naval power but focused overwhelmingly on the standoff with Greece and Cyprus over maritime rights and offshore drilling in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, not on the Black Sea. That has prompted Athens to sign defence cooperation agreements with France as well as the US in 2021, the former including a hard mutual defence commitment in return for the acquisition of fighter aircraft and submarines.

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said after signing the US deal that “if the American presence is not manifested, some countries may have clever ideas about their role”, envisioning themselves as “local superpowers. I am sometimes afraid that Turkey may be falling under that category,” he said. ⁽¹¹⁾

“Extremely vulnerable”

For Ukraine, retaining access to the Black Sea is a matter of survival as an independent nation. Kyiv’s central objective is to keep Russia at bay and build its military capabilities, economic and societal resilience so that it might one day restore its territorial integrity.

The de facto loss of the southeastern Donbas region to pro-Russian separatists, and of Crimea to Russia, amputated the country of its most industrialised zone outside Kyiv, and of its orchard. Ukraine has also suffered major cyber-attacks attributed to Russia, including two that shut down parts of the electricity grid around Kyiv in 2015 and 2016.

While the country has improved the training and equipment of its armed forces with US, British, Turkish and NATO assistance, it has a tiny

navy and remains vulnerable to a short-notice Russian military offensive, sabre-rattling for political intimidation or disruption of commercial shipping. Almost two-thirds of Ukrainian exports go by sea. Losing Black Sea access would cripple the economy.

“Ukraine is extremely vulnerable to maritime threats and might face grave consequences as a result of Russian actions at sea that might be considered below the threshold of military aggression,” the Centre for Defence Strategies (CDS) in Kyiv said in a 2020 report. ⁽¹²⁾

Alina Frolova, a former Ukrainian deputy defence minister who co-authored that report as Deputy Chair of the CDS, said Russia was deploying the capacity to close the narrow shipping routes to the ports of Odessa and

11) www.apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-france-greece-turkey-42d87c27ebdf0bc8302163637fe151ed

12) www.defence.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CDS_Maritime-Security-Report_2020.pdf



Two Ukrainian navy Island-class patrol boats prepare to depart a pier in Odesa, Ukraine, during Exercise Sea Breeze 2021

Mykolaiv, formerly known as Nikolayev, by laying modern mines. It had seized and was using Ukrainian gas exploration platforms in Crimea's EEZ in the Black Sea. And it was gradually taking over more of the Sea of Azov each year and restricting access by international merchant ships to that waterway. ⁽¹³⁾

"Ukraine unfortunately does not have the naval capability required to stabilise the situation," Frolova said. She advocates a permanent international naval presence in the Black Sea to patrol, conduct mine-sweeping and escort commercial vessels to and from Ukrainian ports. Britain signed an agreement in 2021 to help build up the Ukrainian navy.

Frolova said she was "99% sure" that Russia had nuclear weapons in Crimea, since it had

reactivated a former Soviet warhead storage site, known as Feodosia-13, and deployed a unit which in the Soviet era was used to guard atomic munitions. NATO officials declined to comment but noted that Russia had deployed dual-use missile systems in Crimea. Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Olha Stefanishyna, said: "I cannot confirm that with the information I have." ⁽¹⁴⁾

The CDS report laid out a range of scenarios for potential further Russian action against Ukraine that keep policymakers in Kyiv awake at night, from sabotage operations by special forces to sea closures, a full-scale naval blockade and an offensive to cut a land corridor from Donbas to Crimea and/or seize the western Ukrainian coastline and the ports of Odessa and Mykolaiv.

13) Interview with the author, June 2021

14) Interview with the author, October 2021

NATO officials see a pattern of Russian encroachment in the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. “The point they are trying to make is that the Sea of Azov is theirs,” a senior NATO official said. “If that creeping militarisation

remains unchecked and continues to expand, we could eventually see such assertions about the Black Sea altogether, which is far more concerning.”¹⁵⁾

Bridge between troubled waters

Georgia’s position as a bridge between the Caspian Sea energy basin and the West makes it strategically important for Europe, the US and potentially China, but its small population and economy make it less of a geopolitical prize than Ukraine.

Having lost control of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, populated mostly by ethnic and linguistic minorities, after the Georgian government launched ill-fated military offensives following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia underwent a pro-Western transformation following the Rose Revolution of 2003. US-educated, former president Mikheil Saakashvili presided over a sweeping clean-up of corruption, a complete renewal of the police force and rapid economic development as he tried to fast-track his country into NATO, counting on influential supporters on both sides of the aisle in Washington.

But he miscalculated in thinking the US would intervene on his side when his offensive to reconquer South Ossetia by force after a spate of separatist attacks triggered war with Russia. When Putin unleashed an assault to crush the Georgian army in August 2008, just a few months after the NATO Bucharest decision that Georgia and Ukraine would one day join the alliance, Washington sat on its hands.

After that military disaster, Georgia made a unilateral commitment in 2010 not to try to regain control of the breakaway territories by force.

Georgia’s domestic politics have become more opaque and polarised under the Georgia Dream – Democratic Georgia party of billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili which defeated Saakashvili in 2012. The rule of law and the intelligence services have been politicised, and

15) Interview with the author, July 2021



Russian Kilo-class submarine passes through the Bosphorus

opposition parties have complained of abuses of power and electoral fraud. Saakashvili was prosecuted and sentenced in absentia after fleeing the country and settling in Ukraine. When he returned secretly just before municipal elections in 2021, he was jailed and went on hunger strike. His party lost the elections.

At his Senate confirmation hearing in 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said: “Important work remains to strengthen Georgia’s institutions and processes ... The United States is urging Georgia to prioritise the key electoral and judicial reforms that are necessary to help Georgia achieve its aspirations to closer integration with the West, stimulate foreign investment in Georgia and increase trade with the United States.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Economically, Georgia has sought to attract Chinese investment as well as Western funds. Beijing was Georgia’s biggest export market in 2020 and third-largest trade partner after Turkey and Russia. The collapse of a project, backed by US investors, in 2019 to build a deepwater port at Anaklia on the Black Sea coast, close to the separatist-held region of Abkhazia, was a setback for hopes of expanding trade and providing facilities to Western navies. The project may yet be revived but the country needs to settle related legal disputes and attract new investors.

A new Georgian national security concept, due to be adopted at the end of 2021, is expected to emphasise intensifying joint exercises and training with NATO and Western militaries as well as seeking deeper regional economic and security cooperation with like-minded Black Sea states.

16) www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-117shrg43890/html/CHRG-117shrg43890.htm

Fortunate states

In many ways, Romania and Bulgaria are the most fortunate Black Sea states because they managed to join NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, gaining a double layer of Euro-Atlantic insulation. They have yet to join the EU's Schengen zone of passport-free travel and the euro currency because of persistent problems with the rule of law and corruption, on which they remain subject to special monitoring by the European Commission.

Due to both history and geography, Romania feels more threatened by Russia than Bulgaria does. "The Romanians are not Slavs. They expected the United States after World War Two and now we're there, they don't ever want to let us leave," a former senior Pentagon official said.

Bucharest's security headaches include the continued Russian military presence in the breakaway Transnistria region of neighbouring Moldova, a country with which Romania has historical and linguistic ties, and the proximity of Russia's fortress in annexed Crimea, which commands the northwestern shores of the Black Sea.

"The accumulation of military forces and capabilities in Crimea raises great concerns with regard to their purposes," said Romania's

presidential national security advisor, Ion Oprisor. Another concern was Russia's aggressive behaviour in the Black Sea towards aircraft and ships of visiting NATO nations participating in routine exercises. "If neither NATO nor Romania or any other riparian country has ever been a threat towards Russia, the main question should be what the purpose is for the military build-up in Crimea, and who the enemy is," he said.⁽¹⁷⁾

Romania had campaigned to secure a more robust, permanent NATO presence on its soil and in the Black Sea to deter what it sees as Russian threats to itself, as well as to Ukraine and Moldova. "The measures we have implemented together within NATO to create Allied units and command structures on Romanian territory, and to set up a constant presence of allied aircraft and ships in the Black Sea are for defence purposes and in accordance with international law," Oprisor said. "All these measures have a reactive character, as they were established as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict fuelled by Russia in eastern Ukraine."

Allied military commanders see no need for a bigger land presence but Bucharest is pressing for a tripwire force akin to the Enhanced Forward Presence that NATO has deployed in the Baltic

¹⁷⁾ Statement to the author in response to written questions, September 2021

states and Poland, led by major Western allies. In parallel to its campaign with NATO, it has actively sought a greater US military footprint on its territory, notably with the missile defence base, and established a Euro-Atlantic Centre for Resilience in Bucharest in 2021 with NATO and EU backing. The Mihail Kogălniceanu airbase near the port of Constanța, under Romanian command, hosts the US Black Sea Area Support Group headquarters and is the biggest US facility in the region.

Bulgaria, dependent on Russia for 80% of its gas supplies, has taken a very different approach from Romania, while quietly pushing back against Russian penetration of its intelligence services, business and politics. The Balkan

country has historical and linguistic affinities with Russia and has maintained strong commercial ties. “It is closer to Germany’s approach - talk to Russia, continue cooperation on energy, have your cake and eat it,” said Dimitar Bechev, a visiting scholar at the politics department of Oxford University. ⁽¹⁸⁾

NATO diplomats say Bulgaria, along with Turkey, has been less enthusiastic about a high-profile increase of NATO presence in the Black Sea area. But Sofia renewed its bilateral defence cooperation agreement with the US in 2020 under which up to 2,500 US troops can be deployed across four military bases in the country, with use of the key Novo Selo live-fire military training area.

China - geoeconomic engagement

While China has no military presence in the Black Sea, it is increasingly present as an investor and economic actor, notably in Ukraine and Georgia. The Kyiv government blocked a Chinese state-linked company’s effort to purchase the country’s major aircraft engine manufacturer, Motor Sich, in 2021 on national security grounds. But it is keen to attract other Chinese industrial investment and infrastructure. Beijing has included proposed multi-modal

trade routes in Ukraine, Georgia and Turkey into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in addition to taking a controlling stake in Greece’s giant Piraeus port.

In its quest for geoeconomic engagement with the region, China has avoided recognising Russia’s annexation of Crimea or joining Moscow in recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. In a

18) Interview with the author, September 2021

telephone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping in July 2021, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said his country could become “a bridge” between China and Europe. Beijing is eager to use Ukraine as an alternative northern corridor for the BRI due to the current political crisis in Belarus, its original gateway of choice, which is subject to EU sanctions.

China’s diplomatic footprint includes the 17+1 initiative to build relations with central and eastern European countries, of which Romania, Bulgaria and Greece are members, as well as mask and vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, those countries’ attitudes are shifting in line with the EU’s greater caution towards Chinese strategic investments. For example, Romania barred Huawei from competing for its 5G network infrastructure and chose a US over a Chinese state company to complete a major nuclear power station.

There often seem to be more project announcements than substance to China’s engagement in the Black Sea region, and actual investment flows are meagre so far. However, the promise of investments has helped Beijing to peel countries away from critical UN and EU resolutions on its behaviour in the South China Sea, in Hong Kong and on human rights, including the treatment of the Muslim Uighur minority.

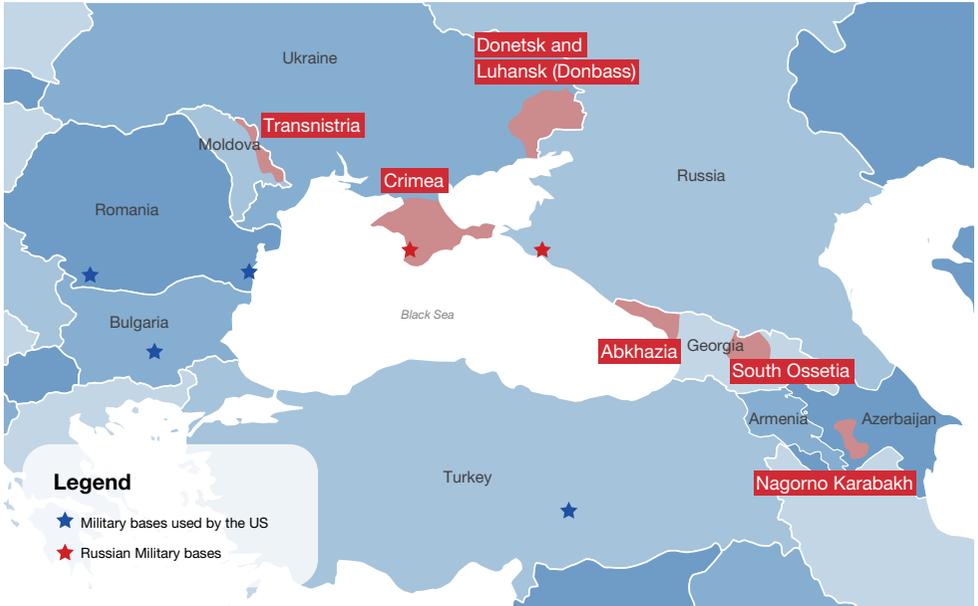
Conversely, Turkey’s rhetorical support for and granting of political asylum to Uighur activists has chilled relations with China. While Ankara has a big need for foreign capital to fund its ambitious infrastructure and energy projects, both countries are wary of financial entanglement.

Risk of incidents, escalation

Strategists in Washington, Brussels and Moscow differ on how stable or dangerous the Black Sea region is. There is general agreement that the risk of armed incidents is high, given the open disputes over territory, maritime rights and EEZs. How likely such incidents are to escalate into a wider conflict is much more uncertain.

Given Russia's military culture of using concealment and surprise, probing for weakness and seizing the initiative, there are many possible scenarios for either accidental or deliberate incidents involving NATO countries' or partners' warships or aircraft in the region. Here is an attempt to categorise such risks, based on conversations with diplomats and military analysts:

SECURITY RISK	LIKELIHOOD	RISK OF ESCALATION
Air/sea incident by accident or miscalculation	Medium	Medium
Deliberate armed incident triggered by Russia/proxy	Medium	Medium
Major sabotage/cyber-attack attributed to Russia	Medium	Low
Ukrainian military attack on Donbas separatists	Medium	High
Russian offensive to take more territory in Ukraine	Low	High
Armed incident over offshore gas exploration	Low	Medium
Flare-up of frozen conflict in Moldova or Georgia	Low	Medium
Sudden cut-off of gas supply/transit to Ukraine	Medium	Low



Overview of the conflict zones and military bases located in the Black Sea region

Some Western military strategists are concerned that Putin may try to press Russia's advantage in Ukraine to completely take hold of the northern coastline of the Sea of Azov and create a land bridge to Crimea. That would entail a major military offensive, even if Moscow has enough equipment in place to mount such an operation at short notice.

"No doubt, Putin has a maritime version of this playbook," James Stavridis, former NATO supreme allied commander Europe and dean emeritus of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, wrote in 2021. "The objective would be to neutralize the Ukrainian naval forces, gain complete sea control in the northern Black Sea,

cut off Ukrainian military forces from their supply lines, and obtain dominance over a section of land that could connect Russia with Crimea." ⁽¹⁹⁾

"An offensive would probably include deploying a mix of fast patrol boats with surface-to-surface and land-attack cruise missiles; helicopters based on amphibious ships to transport special forces; diesel submarines attacking Ukrainian military and civilian targets; cyber-attacks to shut down Ukrainian command and control; and amphibious assaults at key strategic crossroads behind Ukrainian lines. The Russians would overwhelm the Ukrainians, and NATO couldn't get there fast enough, even [if] it was willing to do so," he said.

19) www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-05-06/black-sea-is-the-next-battleground-for-russia-ukraine-and-the-u-s



Russian President Putin and Turkish President Erdoğan sign the Agreement on TurkStream project, October 10, 2016

Yet despite Russian sabre-rattling, such a full-scale assault seems unlikely, given Ukraine's improved defence capabilities and the high political and economic risks to Russia of ending up in a wider confrontation with the West.

Yurgens, the former Russian presidential advisor, said: "The [Russian] political leadership will definitely stop on the brink of something bad, but you know how unexpected incidents happen. We now know that we were on the brink of nuclear war [during the Cold War] because of radar incidents."

Western strategists, focused on Russian capabilities and intentions, tend not to evoke the possibility that Ukraine might trigger an armed incident in an attempt to change an unsatisfactory status quo, in response to domestic political pressures or to grab international attention. The consensus is that Ukraine is too weak to take such a risk - and too aware of what happened when Georgia tried that in 2008. However, the acquisition of

armed drones from Turkey may lead in time to nationalist pressure in Kyiv to use them to try to break the stalemate in Donbas, or in response to separatist provocations.

Michel, the former US defence official, said his biggest worry was that a bold, young Russian pilot might trigger an unintended clash by locking onto or firing at a Western aircraft or warship off Crimea. Just imagine what might have happened if a Russian pilot had hit rather than deliberately avoided the British destroyer HMS Defender that sailed through Crimean waters in June 2021, carrying a BBC broadcasting crew, to demonstrate the "right of innocent passage".

"I'm worried about miscalculation as the highest risk," Michel said. "There's also a risk that Putin will seek to create an international incident when it is convenient as a diversion from his domestic problems. The same risk applies to Erdoğan, though not necessarily in the Black Sea area."



View of the Black Sea from the Pioneering Spirit, world's largest construction vessel, used to build TurkStream gas pipeline's offshore section

CHAPTER 3

ECONOMY, DEMOGRAPHY, ENERGY - A REGION BATTLING DECLINE

Treading water, bleeding workers

Economically, most Black Sea countries are at best treading water. Demographic decline, political instability, entrenched corruption, weak rule of law and unresolved conflicts have created an often-difficult environment for business and a hazardous investment climate.

To be sure, the eastward enlargement of the EU and steps to extend the EU's regulatory reach beyond its eastern border through association agreements and deep and comprehensive trade pacts with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have raised the prospect of closer economic integration with the Union. But daunting hurdles remain, including the opaque power of local oligarchs.

Most states in the region except Turkey have suffered severe depopulation since the collapse of communist rule in 1990 and 1991. Over three decades, a wave of emigration of working age people has robbed the region of much skilled labour and brain power, and hence, of part of its growth potential. It has also weakened public services such as healthcare and education. And it has affected those countries' politics.

The former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have been hardest hit by the

combination of demographic decline and the economic impact of wars and frozen conflicts.

Ukraine's population fell from close to 52mn in 1991 to an estimated 43.6mn in 2021. Some 3.8mn people emigrated permanently between the last official census in 2001 and the most recent national estimate in 2021, according to the government, with an estimated 3mn working in the EU or Russia. Deaths have outstripped births for the last three decades. The annual rate of population decline was 6.6 persons per 1,000 in 2019. If Crimea and areas of Donbas no longer under government control are excluded, the population is just 37.3mn, Dmytro Dubilet, member of the Cabinet of Ministers, said in 2020. ⁽¹⁾

Georgia's population peaked at 4.9mn in 1993 but has fallen to 3.7mn today. More than 10% of Georgians emigrated in the decade from 2000 to 2010. Moldova's population has dwindled from just under 3mn in 1992 to 2.6mn in 2020 - the same level as in 1975. Russia's death rate has exceeded its birth rate since the 1990s; the population fell from 148mn in 1991 to 143mn in 2013, but the slow decline was statistically masked by the annexation of Crimea with its 2mn residents.

1) www.rferl.org/a/ukraine--population-shrinks-23-percent-2001/30393838.html



Russian President Vladimir Putin driving the leading vehicle during the opening of Russia's Kerch Strait bridge.

The demographic crisis also affects Romania and Bulgaria, the two Black Sea states which joined the EU in 2007. Both countries have lost almost a quarter of their population since the end of communist rule. “Bulgaria has the fastest shrinking population in the world in the absence of war or natural disasters,” says Ivan Krastev, a Bulgarian political scientist, who argues that “demographic anxiety” has been a major driver of illiberal politics across eastern Europe. “People start asking themselves: ‘is our country going to disappear?’” ⁽²⁾

Despite the westward drift of workers, Romania and Bulgaria have enjoyed a significant boost in living standards due chiefly to their EU membership, which has attracted foreign investment and provided access to EU funds to modernise infrastructure and agriculture.

Remittances from nationals working abroad have also supported both economies, accounting for some 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) until the COVID-19 pandemic forced some workers to return home.

Nominal GDP per capita, denominated in US dollars, grew by 50% in Romania and more than 40% in Bulgaria between 2007, when they joined the EU, and 2020. The World Bank classified Romania as a high-income country for the first time in 2019, although it fell by a notch the following year due to the impact of the coronavirus. Calculated by purchasing power parity, Romanians now enjoy the highest average standard of living in the region, ahead of Turks and Russians. However, Bulgaria remains the poorest country in the EU. Both countries have been severely hit by the

2) Krastev lecture series at College de France, Paris, October 2021; www.college-de-france.fr/site/samantha-besson/guestlecturer-2021-10-06-17h00.htm

COVID-19 pandemic. Bulgaria has the world's second highest death rate proportionate to its population after Peru.

Turkey was long an exception to the Black Sea economic blues. An emerging economy on the hinge of Europe, the Middle East and Asia, connected to the EU by a customs union, it enjoyed a decade of spectacular growth and widening middle-class prosperity after Erdoğan's conservative AKP party came to power in 2003. However, the dollar value of Turkish GDP has shrunk from \$957.8bn in 2013 to \$720.1bn in 2020 due mostly to precipitous depreciation of the lira currency. Living standards have been eroded by inflation, running at an annual rate of about 20% in 2021, unemployment and the collapse of tourism due to the coronavirus. Foreign investment in Turkey has stalled due to the currency crisis, economic mismanagement and political risk.

Several of Erdoğan's grand projects, including a third bridge over the Bosphorus, a third major airport for Istanbul and a railway tunnel under the Bosphorus have been completed, with mixed economic results, but there are big doubts about what he calls his 'crazy project' - a plan to build a shipping canal between the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, bypassing the Bosphorus.

The planned 45km waterway west of Istanbul - intended to relieve congestion, reduce the risk of accidents in the Bosphorus and earn transit fees - is fiercely contested by environmentalists and the mayor of Istanbul, who say it will

damage the city's fragile ecosystem and increase earthquake risk. Erdoğan staged a ground-breaking ceremony in 2021 but experts question whether Kanal Istanbul, due to open in 2026, will ever be completed due to escalating cost estimates - now officially \$15bn - and a dearth of willing investors.

Russia is keeping a wary eye to make sure the project does not undermine the terms of the Montreux Convention and open a side-door for NATO ships to enter the Black Sea without restriction. Turkish authorities arrested a group of retired admirals who criticised the canal and warned against undermining the Montreux regime. Turkish officials say in practice the waterway could not circumvent the convention, since ships would still be regulated in the Dardanelles Strait.

Turkish President Erdoğan during the launch event of Turkey's planned Kanal Istanbul



Running out of gas

Ukraine's economic output has still not recovered to the level it reached before the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea and destabilisation of eastern Ukraine. GDP hit an all-time high of \$183.3bn in 2013 before halving to \$90.5bn in 2015. It has gradually recovered to \$155.6bn in 2020 as the economy has been reoriented towards trade with the EU instead of Russia. Ukraine sent 26% of its exports to its eastern neighbour in 2012 but only 9% in 2018, a remarkable about-turn in such a short period, partly due to Russian economic pressure. During the same period, the EU's share of Ukrainian exports of goods rose from 25% to 43%.⁽³⁾

However, Ukraine is heavily reliant on gas and oil product imports. Kyiv severed economic ties with the rebel-held Donbas region in 2017, cutting itself off from a former industrial powerhouse with coal mines and metal industries that accounted for about a quarter of Ukrainian GDP before 2014 but have gone downhill since then.

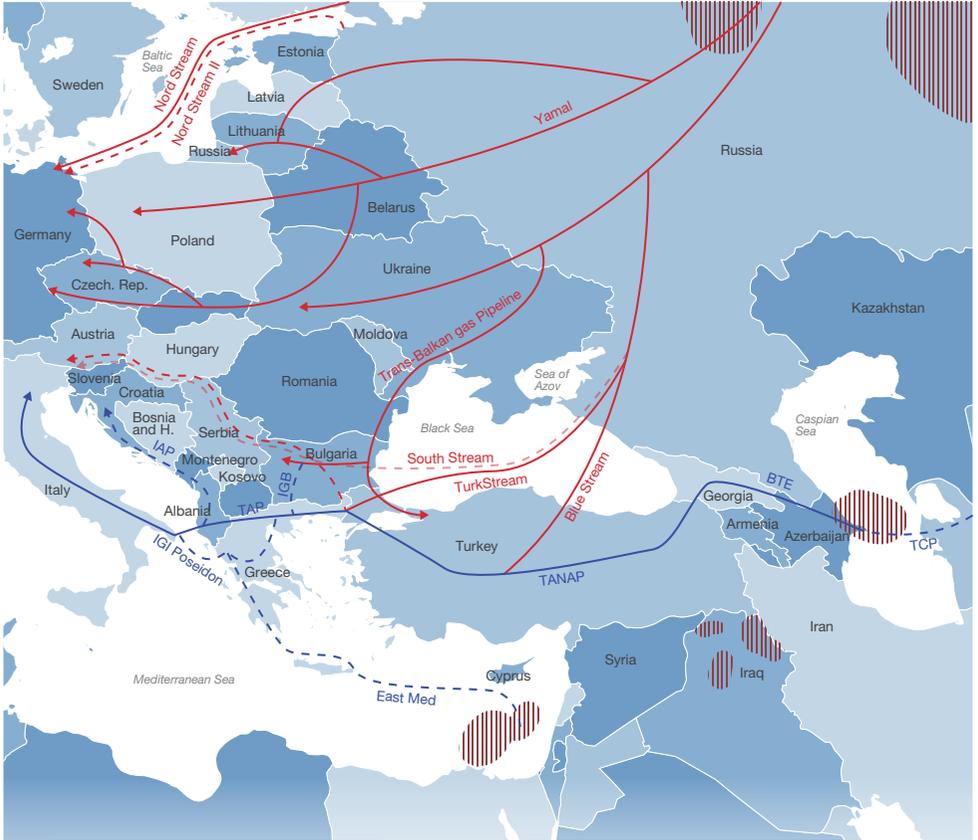
While it remains the biggest single transit country for Russian gas exports to Europe, deliveries via Ukraine have fallen steadily from 90% in the 1990s to around 35% today. Russia and Ukraine signed a five-year, \$7bn gas transit

agreement in late 2019. The TurkStream pipeline under the Black Sea from Russia to Turkey and thence to Bulgaria and Hungary, which went live in 2020, took 15bn m³ per year of gas that used to transit through Ukraine. Kyiv fears that once the now completed Nord Stream 2 direct pipeline from Russia to Germany, running under the Baltic Sea to bypass eastern Europe, comes into service with a capacity of 55 bn m³ per year, probably in 2022, Moscow will be well placed to cut off Ukraine as a transit route for Russian gas.

Ukrainian President Zelensky had hoped that European pressure and US sanctions would force Germany to abort the completion of Nord Stream 2. But Biden decided after taking office that the pipeline was a fait accompli and agreed to waive the sanctions to repair Washington's damaged relations with Berlin in return for commitments.

Under an agreement reached in July 2021, Germany and the US declared that any attempt to cut Kyiv out of gas transit or to use energy to coerce Russia's neighbours would lead to national and European sanctions against Moscow. If Russia attempted to "use energy as a weapon or commit further aggressive acts

3) www.bruegel.org/2020/07/ukraine-trade-reorientation-from-russia-to-the-eu/



EU-supported gas projects



Russia-supported gas projects



Energy Structures



Glossary

- TANAP:** Trans-Anatolian pipeline
- TAP:** Trans-Adriatic pipeline
- IAP:** Ionian Adriatic pipeline
- IGI Poseidon:** Interconnector Greece-Italy
- IGB:** Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria
- TCP:** Trans-Caspian gas pipeline
- BTE:** Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline

Overview of the energy politics in the Black Sea

against Ukraine”, Berlin would take steps on its own and push for actions at the EU, including sanctions, “to limit Russian export capabilities to Europe in the energy sector”, a joint statement said. ⁽⁴⁾

The efficacy of such threats was cast in doubt by the behaviour of Russian state gas monopoly Gazprom in 2021, when it withdrew gas from its own storage sites in western Europe in what many European officials saw as a pressure tactic to force up gas prices to persuade Germany and the EU into granting the final operating licence for Nord Stream 2. Gazprom also abruptly hiked gas prices to Moldova and threatened to cut off supply in a dispute about renewing their contract, prompting the pro-EU government in Chişinău to seek emergency assistance from Brussels and announce it had bought gas from other European neighbours for the first time. The contract was renewed at a higher price, though still less than Moldova pays for gas from Europe. In both cases, Moscow denied Western accusations of manipulating gas supplies for political blackmail.

Russia twice cut off gas transit through Ukraine in mid-winter in 2006 and 2009 to apply pressure in disputes with Kyiv over contract terms and political issues. It also temporarily turned off the taps to Ukraine in June 2014 while continuing transit supplies to Europe in the crisis that followed the seizure of Crimea. The European Commission brokered a deal to end that dispute, under which Ukraine paid off debts to Gazprom in instalments and the

EU agreed to underwrite future Ukrainian gas purchases from Russia.

Transit fees account for 1.3% of Ukraine's GDP today, but Zelensky says the country's ability to transition to a low-carbon energy mix depends on that \$2bn in annual revenue. “For us, these are not just words - energy security...\$2bn, and part of this money we spend on infrastructure, on our army, on changing the energy infrastructure of Ukraine,” he told journalists in July 2021.

Kyiv needed about “10 to 15 years of guaranteed stable gas supply for the population, since the volume of Ukrainian gas production is insufficient”. ⁽⁵⁾

The US, EU and Germany are working to help Ukraine wean itself off dependence on imported Russian gas by diversifying its energy supplies and developing renewable sources including wind, solar, and in the longer run, green hydrogen power. The International Energy Agency says Kyiv has plenty of room to increase its energy security by improving energy efficiency, putting in place emergency demand restraint measures and diversifying rapidly to domestic energy sources. ⁽⁶⁾

One looming issue is that Ukraine's current energy mix is so carbon-intensive that about one-third of its exports could become subject to the EU's proposed carbon import levy - the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism - if and when it comes into force.

4) www.state.gov/joint-statement-of-the-united-states-and-germany-on-support-for-ukraine-european-energy-security-and-our-climate-goals/

5) iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/7a32f045-c834-4189-a0da-3598763e79b5/HarnessingEnergyDemandRestraintInUkraine_ARoadmap.pdf

6) en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/755370.html

Pipeline politics

Ukraine is the centrepiece in a broader struggle over control of gas and oil supplies to Europe.

While the EU has tried to diversify its energy sources and suppliers and reduce the vulnerability of central and eastern Europe, Russia has steadily consolidated its grip by expanding the Soviet-era pipeline network through the addition of two direct undersea Nord Stream pipes to Germany and two sub-Black Sea pipelines to Turkey - Blue Stream and TurkStream.

In the 1990s, the top US priority was to contain Iran and Iraq rather than Russia. Washington invested money, diplomatic effort and political capital in backing the construction of an oil pipeline from Baku in Azerbaijan via Georgia to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Since then, the priority has been to build a southern gas corridor independent of both Russia and Iran to pump gas from the Caspian basin to southern and southeastern Europe.

An EU- and US-backed project called Nabucco, intended to reduce dependence on Gazprom by pumping Azeri gas across Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary to the biggest European gas hub in Austria collapsed in 2013 when Azerbaijan decided to export its gas through a cheaper Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) across Greece and Albania to Italy instead.

That southern gas corridor eventually became a reality when the TAP was completed and connected in 2019 to the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) pipeline across Turkey and Georgia from Azerbaijan. However, the 16bn m³ per year capacity is not large enough to be a game changer and potential sources of additional supply are few unless Turkmenistan were to export gas via this route, which would require laying a pipeline under the Caspian Sea - at most a very long-term prospect. Caspian neighbours - Russia and Iran - have made clear their opposition to such a trans-Caspian pipeline.

“They talk about expanding the southern corridor, but where is the gas to come from?” said Aura Sabadus, a senior journalist specialising in energy markets and Research Fellow at King's College London. “Azerbaijan is already getting some of its gas from Gazprom. Turkey and Greece are major importers of liquefied natural gas [LNG]. Turkey has expanded its import capacity so that almost 90% of domestic gas consumption could be covered by LNG. But Turkey does not allow other countries to buy imported LNG from it.”⁽⁷⁾

Interconnecting existing pipelines in the Balkans and central and eastern Europe, and using them more flexibly with reverse-flow technology to pump gas from West to East when needed,

7) Interview with the author, June 2021, see also Sabadus article for RUSI: www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/black-sea-energy-supply-risks-must-be-counterered-coordinated-regional-response/



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic attend ceremony to mark the launch of the TurkStream gas pipeline, January 8, 2020

faces entrenched resistance. For example, construction of a 182km interconnector from Greece to link Bulgaria to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline and help wean it off Russian gas, has faced repeated delays on the Bulgarian side.

“To allow the free flow of gas requires local Transmission System Operators (TSOs) either to sign interconnection agreements, like Turkey’s Botas with Greece, or the Romanian operator with Ukraine. But they still haven’t had much success,” Sabadus said. “A couple of interconnectors have been built using

EU money between Romania and Bulgaria, and Romania and Moldova, but they are not being used. EU money has been wasted due to a combination of factors, including price issues. The Romanian TSO Transgas is being particularly difficult.”

Russia is still winning. The geopolitical objective of reducing dependency on Gazprom has been thwarted by a combination of economics, local vested interests and Moscow’s string-pulling. Only the transition away from fossil fuels appears to threaten its hold in the long term.

Black Sea gas bonanza?

Several littoral states, especially Turkey and Romania, are hoping for a substantial contribution to their energy mix in the medium term from offshore Black Sea gas deposits. International energy experts are sceptical, despite the proven existence of large quantities of gas.

Erdoğan announced in 2021 that Turkey had discovered some 540bnm³ of gas at two wells in the Sakarya field in its EEZ, 160km north of its coastline. Ankara aims to start pumping the first gas into its national grid in 2023, the year it celebrates the centenary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic by Kemal Atatürk. However, the finds will require major investment and advanced technology to develop commercially, at a time when Turkey is struggling to attract investors for big infrastructure projects.

“There’s a lot of talk of the Black Sea’s potential but most investors, for a variety of reasons, are not excited. The fiscal regimes in Romania and Ukraine are not that attractive and it’s unclear how much investment banks and companies are prepared to allocate to gas, given the green energy transition,” a senior international energy official said. She noted that the intergovernmental European Bank for Reconstruction and Development had said it would no longer fund fossil fuel projects, sending a strong signal to the market. ⁽⁸⁾

Romania, which generates 25% of its electricity in coal-fired power stations, is counting on tapping offshore reserves as part of its national strategy to diversify energy sources and transition to cleaner energy. Onshore gas production is dwindling, forcing it to import Russian gas through Ukraine. But Bucharest’s high effective tax rate on offshore gas production has deterred investors. ExxonMobil pulled out in 2021 after more than a decade of exploring and appraising a joint deepwater project with Austrian-owned OMV Petrom. The Neptun Deep project remains stalled, and promised tax and regulatory changes have been held up by a political crisis.

Russia captured roughly half of Ukraine’s natural gas deposits including its most promising Black Sea oil and gas acreage west of the Crimean Peninsula when it annexed the region. It has continued to operate captured Ukrainian drilling platforms in the zone. But Western energy conglomerates ExxonMobil and Shell have pulled out of Ukrainian exploration projects.

8) Interview with the author, September 2021

“Grand corruption”

Ukraine's economic development, and its hopes of moving closer to the EU and NATO, have been hampered by systemic corruption, the tentacular power of oligarchs estimated to control 27% of the country's GDP, and a weak and cowed judiciary. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has repeatedly delayed disbursements to Kyiv to demand firmer action against corruption. It finally released a delayed tranche in November 2021.

A report by the EU's Court of Auditors in September 2021 found that EU support for Ukrainian anti-corruption efforts had not been sufficiently effective.⁹⁾

“While the EU has helped to reduce corruption opportunities, grand corruption remains a key problem in Ukraine. Judicial reform is experiencing setbacks; anti-corruption institutions are at risk. Trust in such institutions remains low, and the number of convictions resulting from grand corruption is small,” the auditors said. “The Commission and the European Advisory Mission in Ukraine have provided intensive assistance for judicial reform. However, a substantial number of judges, prosecutors and members of judicial governance bodies still need to undergo integrity vetting.”

Stefanishyna, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, said the report confirmed the importance of legislation adopted in 2021 opening the way for the re-selection of judges with the participation of international experts with voting rights. “This was a game-changer. We need not only expertise from Europe, we need joint ownership,” she said. But she acknowledged that the process would take time.¹⁰⁾

The government has also pushed a law intended to curb the power of oligarchs through parliament. The legislation creates a compulsory register of multi-millionaires' economic and media interests and political activities where they hold monopoly power or market dominance and bars them from making political donations or taking part in privatised enterprises.

Opposition politicians say the law gives the presidential National Security and Defence Council sweeping power to determine who is an oligarch and creates huge scope for corruption. Other critics question how effectively or selectively the law will be implemented. Pro-Russian business magnate and parliamentarian Viktor Medvedchuk was arrested before the law came into force on charges of treason and

9) www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=59383

10) Interview with the author, October 2021

attempting to plunder national resources. The Council has also imposed sanctions on Dmitry Firtash, a Vienna-based Ukrainian tycoon fighting extradition to the US. But little action has been taken so far against other oligarchs.

Ukraine is by no means the only country in the region plagued by corruption. Almost 15 years after they joined the EU, Bulgaria and Romania are still subject to special monitoring by the European Commission.

In a 2021 report, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which rarely criticises its members in such blunt terms, said: “Detection, enforcement and awareness raising of foreign bribery are severely lacking in Bulgaria and need to be significantly improved. Extensive changes to the legislation concerning the liability of legal persons are also required.”⁽¹¹⁾

In the anti-corruption campaign group Transparency International’s annual index of corruption perceptions for 2020, Georgia was ranked as the cleanest country in the Black Sea region in 45th place, level with Poland and ahead of several EU member states, including Italy. Armenia ranked 60th out of the 180 countries assessed - ahead of Bulgaria and Romania, tied in 69th place. Turkey came 86th, while Ukraine was in 117th position. Russia and Azerbaijan were seen as the most corrupt states in the region in joint 129th place.⁽¹²⁾

Georgia was long regarded in the West as a poster-child for business-friendly governance. It is still ranked 7th in the World Bank’s ‘Ease of Doing Business’ index in 2020, ahead of all EU countries except Denmark.⁽¹³⁾

But there has been some backsliding on democracy and politicisation of the judiciary, and the country has shot itself in the foot on some major economic projects. An \$800mn Turkish investment in hydropower broke down and the Turkish company pulled out after big environmental protests against the construction of the Namakhvani Dam prompted the government to suspend work on the project in 2021. “The government was scared of the protests,” said Margarita Antidze of the Georgian Institute for Public Affairs.⁽¹⁴⁾

Another fiasco was the US-backed project to build a deepwater port at Anaklia, close to the ceasefire line with rebel Abkhazia, that could have expanded cross-Black Sea commercial traffic and accommodated NATO warships. The project was cancelled in 2020, to Russia’s quiet satisfaction, after the Georgian government refused to guarantee loans and US investors pulled out. Experts questioned the project’s commercial viability. The affair tarnished Georgia’s image with Western investors, as did opaque government manoeuvres to block a plan to build a fibre-optic network between Europe and Asia across Georgia and Azerbaijan.⁽¹⁵⁾

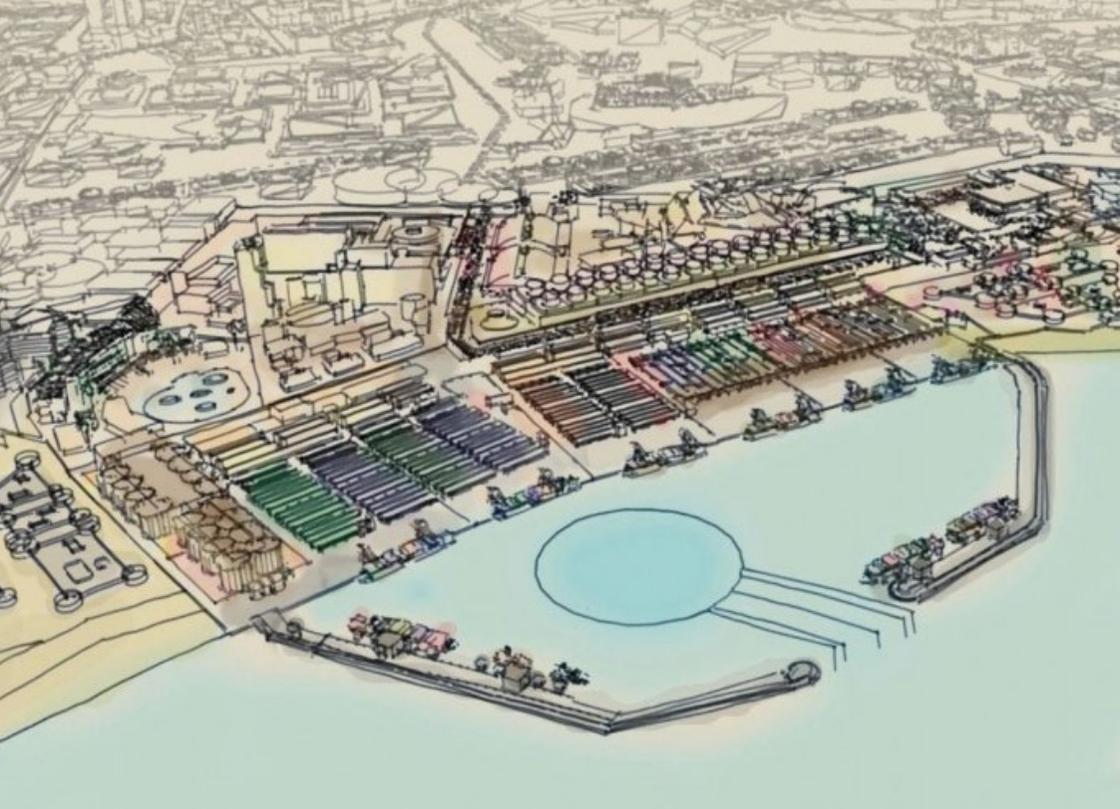
11) www.oecd.org/corruption/anti-bribery/Bulgaria-phase-4-report-en.pdf

12) www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/table

13) www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings?region=oeecd-high-income

14) Interview with the author, August 2021

15) www.ft.com/content/aca1bb20-0eb3-4af5-bbbb-b4c6eb5f4e31



Artist's impression of the now cancelled Anaklia deep sea port in Georgia

“We did not get a result that strengthens our national security interests,” a Georgian official said. “Anaklia still has the potential to be a deep sea port, which the Black Sea region lacks, and to improve Georgia’s connections. The US government remains very interested but any revival of the project will need new money and political will, the official said.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Glimmers of cooperation

After the end of the Cold War, agreements were made to promote economic, environmental and people-to-people cooperation among Black Sea states, giving birth to regional institutions. The theory was that creating economic ties and spreading prosperity could have a positive impact on security and help solve or at least ease political disputes. In practice, achievements have been modest.

The 13-member Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), based in Istanbul, still exists, as do an 11-nation Black Sea Trade and Economic Development Bank, based in Thessaloniki, Greece and the BSEC Business Council. But these bodies have struggled to promote trade, transport links and cross-border projects because of the protracted frozen conflicts, political tensions over the ‘colour revolutions’ and the wars in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. Like the Arctic Council and the Council of Baltic Sea States, established in the same period, they are intergovernmental organisations that operate by consensus. They have survived acute geopolitical tensions by avoiding politics as far as possible and focusing on practical issues.

“The idea that stronger economic ties among Black Sea countries would foster stability and prosperity is the underlying philosophy behind this organisation,” said Lazar Comanescu, a

former Romanian foreign minister and veteran diplomat and economist, who became Secretary-General of the BSEC in 2021.⁽¹⁷⁾

Expert working groups focus on common interests such as environment protection, climate change, trade, agriculture, culture, science, education, tourism and pandemic health security rather than the sensitive political and security issues. As an example of practical improvements that could be achieved, Comanescu cited a drive to develop digital permits for truck drivers, ease border crossings and provide basic facilities at border posts. Another project, co-sponsored with the EU and the World Bank, focuses on fighting climate change and supporting restoration of coastal ecosystems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a BSEC information platform shared a set of safety, health and security protocols to facilitate a gradual reopening of tourism in the region.

“The organisation was set up in a region where there have been and continue to be persistent sensitivities. We try to enable continuing dialogue and contacts so these kinds of activities go on advancing projects,” Comanescu said. “Things can advance in these areas and leave the solution of complicated situations to other multilateral and bilateral fora. We are here to plant seeds that may develop into much larger projects.”

17) Interview with the author, September 2021



Turkish Marmaray rail tunnel under the Bosphorus, built with Chinese investment

He is aiming for a high-level political impulse for regional cooperation at a summit in 2022, marking the 30th anniversary of the original

BSEC agreement, but the event is not yet confirmed.

Civil society under pressure

Civil society groups are active across the Black Sea region to promote democracy and women's rights, education, environmental causes, culture, LGBTQ and minority rights, and to expose corruption and combat fake news and disinformation. Grassroots pro-democracy and anti-corruption movements have toppled unpopular governments in

Ukraine, Georgia and Romania in the last two decades and contributed to the fall of Bulgaria's long-standing prime minister.

But civil society is under growing pressure from governments, extremist groups and organised crime in most countries in the region. Despite efforts, such as the Black Sea NGO Forum and

the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, there is relatively little cross-border collaboration among citizen groups.

“The main obstacle is that civil societies are very much consumed with internal political developments. Most of their resources go to trying to fix problems in their respective countries and there [is] very little time or resource left for cooperation with organisations in neighbouring countries,” says Alina Inayah, Founding Director of the Bucharest-based Black Sea Trust, and a former civic activist in her own country, Romania, in the 1990s. ⁽¹⁸⁾

In countries such as Turkey, Russia and Azerbaijan, democracy activists and civil society groups are struggling to survive as authoritarian governments crack down on activists and independent media, leaving little room for civic organisations. A report presented to an online conference of the Black Sea NGO Forum in October 2021 lamented the “shrinking civic space post-COVID-19 in the Black Sea region”.

In Georgia, previously something of a democratic haven with a vibrant civil society, far-right militants attacked LGBTQ activists and beat up journalists outside parliament in July after Prime Minister Irakli Garabishvili and the conservative Georgian Orthodox Church condemned a planned Pride march. The government has done nothing to bring the perpetrators to justice.

In Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova, the struggle against the nexus between politics, corruption and organised crime has been the biggest focus of civil society activism.

Months of rolling anti-corruption protests from 2020 led to the fall of Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borissov’s centre-right GERB party government and three general elections in a year in 2021. In Romania, sporadic protests against the Social Democratic government, which had attempted to water down anti-corruption laws and undermine the independence of the judiciary between 2017 and 2019, culminated in the imprisonment of party leader Liviu Dragnea, for a long time believed to be the country’s most powerful politician, on corruption charges.

Citizens across the Black Sea region have demonstrated courage and determination to combat corruption, whether on the streets or at the ballot box. Yet, lacking strong institutions to uproot deep-seated corruption networks, even the success stories are vulnerable to reversal.

18) Interview with the author, September 2021



Demonstrators marching during the Euromaidan pro-EU protests in Kiev, Ukraine, in late November 2013

CHAPTER 4

THE EU AND NATO

The two Western organisations that have the Black Sea as part of their eastern frontier - the EU and NATO - struggle to pursue a coherent policy towards the region.

This is chiefly because the enlargement policy that was the most effective tool for aligning central and eastern Europe with EU standards has broken down. Political support for further enlargement has dried up in western Europe, especially in France. The virtuous circle of

convergence and conditionality has faltered, or gone into reverse, in the Western Balkans and Turkey with the realisation that EU membership is a remote or non-existent prospect. That leaves more distant aspirants such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova further adrift.

Russia, meanwhile, has turned its back on rapprochement with the West under Putin and now seeks to undermine the EU and NATO and prevent their eastward expansion.

The EU - unrequited love

When Ukrainians took to the streets to protest against Russian-backed president Viktor Yanukovich in late 2013, they carried the flag of the European Union. The movement became known as the ‘Euromaidan’ because demonstrators occupied the central Maidan square in Kyiv for weeks to demand that the government sign a far-reaching agreement negotiated with the EU, leading to the president’s fall.

“EU integration is the religion in our country,” says Olha Stefanishyna, Ukraine’s Deputy Prime Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration. “We’re doing a lot to advance our integration. Ukraine is one of the biggest European countries with one of the largest

markets and huge potential. It’s very important that the EU should not be a club for select luxury players.”⁽¹⁾

In Georgia, an opinion poll in 2021 showed 82% of voters support the government’s stated objective of joining the EU. The country’s most liberal reformist political party calls itself European Georgia – Movement for Liberty. “We are a clearly European nation which unfortunately happens to be on the wrong side of the Black Sea,” jokes Sergi Kapanadze, an academic and politician who was deputy speaker of the Georgian parliament from 2016 to 2020 and is a leading member of the European Georgia party.⁽²⁾

1) Interview with the author, October 2021

2) Interview with the author, September 2021

Voters in Moldova, the poorest country in Europe, gave a resounding majority in the 2021 parliamentary elections to President Maia Sandu's pro-European party, which says it aims to apply for EU membership within five years.

Yet their yearning for the EU - seen as the guarantor of democracy, the rule of law and prosperity - is not widely reciprocated in western Europe. There is much sympathy for their pro-democracy movements, but few west Europeans see Ukraine or Georgia as potential members of the Union.

Poland, the Baltic states and Romania frequently press their EU partners to do more to embrace and support those Black Sea nations that face military and economic pressure from Russia, but many western European governments are keen to avoid either a further deterioration of ties with Moscow or taking on new commitments.

'Enlargement fatigue' is rife in France, Germany, the Benelux countries and Italy, aggravated by backsliding on democracy and the rule of law in some of the central European countries that joined the EU in the 2000s. When member states came to ratify the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2016, Eurosceptic populists in the Netherlands circulated a petition to force a referendum. The deal was defeated by 61% to 39% on a turnout just above the 30% threshold for validity. The vote was not really about trade with Kyiv, and it did not prevent the deal entering into force, but it expressed broader anxieties about immigration, globalisation and a sense that the EU was eroding national identities.

France's decision in 2019 to block the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania and demand a wholesale revision of the enlargement process sent a more powerful negative signal to eastern Europe. President Emmanuel Macron's move reflected a widespread view in Paris that enlargement has gone too far and diluted the Union, that the newcomers are not living up to EU standards, and that an EU of 27 member states armed with national vetoes is unmanageable.

The absence of progress with most Western Balkan countries, to which EU leaders first promised membership back in 2003, or with Turkey, which opened accession negotiations in 2005, reflects the same political reality. Scalded by their voters, the governments of France and the Netherlands, among others, are determined to prevent or delay any significant step on that path.



The leaders of Belarus, Russia, Germany, France and Ukraine pose for a group picture during the 2015 Minsk II summit

One region, four categories

From EU headquarters, the Black Sea region is part of Europe's 'eastern neighbourhood' that needs to be stabilised with the EU toolkit of trade, regulatory convergence, financial assistance, institution building and regional cooperation. The EU's objectives mostly reflect domestic rather than geopolitical priorities - keeping irregular migrants out, combating terrorism, smuggling and cybercrime, and securing reliable and diversified energy supplies.

In 2021, the EU officially adopted an updated strategy for the Arctic and an integrated strategy for the Sahel. It has a special representative for both those regions. Yet it still has no

comprehensive policy or point person for the Black Sea. As a result, no single department of the European Commission is responsible for the region as a whole. That is largely because it has four different categories of relationship with the countries of the region:

- Romania and Bulgaria are EU member states and hence by definition not an object of its external policies.
- Turkey is a candidate country, although its long-running accession negotiations are going nowhere. It has a customs union with the EU, but its citizens do not

enjoy visa-free travel to the Union. The relationship is mostly managed by DG NEAR, the Commission department in charge of enlargement negotiations and neighbourhood policy.

- Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have association agreements that include a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement. All three enjoy visa-free travel but are not recognised as candidates for EU membership. Along with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, they are members of the EU's Eastern Partnership, which promotes cooperation with and among EU neighbours. Those relationships are also managed by DG NEAR.
- Russia's relationship with the EU is completely separate from the others. A strategic partnership agreement signed in 2011 effectively collapsed after Moscow's seizure and annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since then, high-level political dialogue and cooperation with Brussels has ceased with very narrow areas left for selective engagement, such as on climate policy, the Iran nuclear negotiations and counter-terrorism. The relationship is managed chiefly by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission's Directorate-General for Trade. Moscow prefers to deal bilaterally with the main EU powers - Germany, France and Italy - and with a few friendlier states - Austria, Hungary, Greece and Finland.

The EU's main policy instrument for addressing the region as a whole, including Azerbaijan and Armenia, is the Black Sea Synergy, adopted in 2007, just as Romania and Bulgaria joined the bloc. The objective was to promote flexible cooperation among countries around the Black Sea, with EU seed money to encourage projects on energy, transport, trade, environment and democracy building. The policy set guidelines for projects in the areas of democracy, human rights, good governance, border management, frozen conflicts, energy, transport, environment, maritime policy, fisheries, trade, migration, development, education, research and development.

The Black Sea Synergy - for which a very modest €100mn was earmarked for the period between 2014 and 2020 - has yielded scant results, due to geopolitics. A 2019 Commission review cited progress on "blue growth", maritime policy, marine research and innovation, fisheries, environmental protection and climate change, border facilitation and civil society engagement.

More ambitious projects such as a "middle corridor" multi-modal transport route from Central Asia to central Europe via Georgia and the Black Sea have been mooted but not given priority in the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) cross-border connectivity programme. A fiber optic cable link to Georgia under the Black Sea and a maritime route from Georgia to the EU have been included in the next seven-year programming period, which began in 2021.

Officials at the EEAS insist that the Black Sea Synergy is meeting its objective of bringing countries together to work on practical projects to improve life and biodiversity for people around the shores, within the limits of a complex security situation. For example, Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine jointly adopted a common maritime agenda for the Black Sea with the EU after the Crimea crisis. The EU is also working at people-to-people level, notably by funding the Black Sea NGO Forum that brings together civil society groups from around the region, including Turkey and Russia. “We do a lot but it’s not that visible,” an EEAS official said.

Russia’s relations with the EU have turned increasingly confrontational since Brussels imposed targeted financial and technological sanctions on Moscow and key Russian officials over the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine. Little remains of the ambitious agenda for cooperation in four ‘Common Spaces’ adopted in 2005, or the EU-Russia ‘Partnership for Modernisation’ agreed in 2010, when the former president Dimitry Medvedev was trying to diversify the Russian economy away from hydrocarbons towards technology and innovation.

Since 2016, EU policy has been based on five principles set out by High Representative Federica Mogherini: full implementation of the Minsk agreements; closer ties with Russia’s former Soviet neighbours; strengthening EU resilience to Russian threats; selective engagement with Russia on certain issues such

as counter-terrorism; and support for people-to-people contacts.

Her successor, Josep Borrell, was subjected to humiliating treatment on a visit to Moscow in 2021. During his stay, Russia expelled three European diplomats who had observed protests against the arrest of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, while at a joint press conference Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov branded the EU “an unreliable partner” subservient to the US.

In Moscow’s eyes, the EU is a permanent hostage to eastern members bent on settling historical scores, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, which use their veto power over EU decisions to block any advance with Russia. Moreover, the European Parliament is consistently critical of Moscow’s human rights record. Hence the Kremlin sees more value in dealing with EU states individually to maximise its leverage rather than working with the Union’s institutions.

Toolbox exhausted?

With enlargement off the menu and the self-declared “geopolitical Commission” that took office in 2019 under Ursula von der Leyen focused primarily on Africa and Asia, the Black Sea region has slipped down the radar screen since it last loomed large during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The region feels neglected.

“The EU has been extremely absent in the last 4 to 5 years in the region. There has been little talk about the Eastern Partnership. At least the EU used to have a strategy that covered the entire region. That has more or less gone,” said Alina Inayeh, Director of the partially EU-funded Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation. “Even on fighting disinformation in this region, the EU is doing very, very little.”⁽³⁾

Brussels officials acknowledge that engagement with Black Sea states has stagnated somewhat, although they say that partly reflects the fact that the EU has already given Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova most of the benefits it can offer to non-candidate countries - deep and comprehensive free trade agreements (DCFTAs), far-reaching association agreements, visa-free travel for their citizens and membership of the Eastern Partnership.

“The problem is that in terms of our toolbox, we’ve already given them everything. Formally,

we can’t give them anything more,” said a senior Commission official who has dealt extensively with the region. “What we could and should give them is more political presence and support.”⁽⁴⁾

The official acknowledged that the EU’s economic approach to the region was problematic because it front-loaded demands on partner countries before they are strong enough to withstand competition from Europe. “The flaw of the DCFTAs is that synchronised market-opening overwhelms weak and uncompetitive Ukrainian and Moldovan companies.”

The Eastern Partnership, a joint initiative by Poland and Sweden launched in 2009 to build political and economic ties with the EU’s eastern neighbours that Russia regards as its “near abroad”, has also fallen victim to geopolitics. It lumps together countries with very different political systems.

Autocratic Belarus and Azerbaijan are far from EU standards of democracy, human rights or freedom of expression. Armenia chose to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2013 rather than enter into an association agreement and DCFTA with the EU. It has since concluded a more limited partnership with Brussels. Belarus, which has close ties

³⁾ Interview with the author, September 2021

⁴⁾ Interview with the author, August 2021

to Russia, is a pariah subject to EU sanctions over the repression that followed a flawed presidential election in 2020, and more recently over its weaponisation of migrants on the EU's border.

Even among the pro-European partners, there has been some backsliding. Georgia turned down an EU loan in July 2021 when the ruling Georgia Dream party pulled out of an EU-mediated package of electoral and judicial reforms with the opposition, designed to resolve a political standoff over abuses in the 2020 parliamentary election.

Partly as a result of this divergence of values, but also due to the COVID pandemic, there has been a four-year gap in summits of the grouping since 2017. EU leaders were set to meet five Eastern Partnership countries without Belarus in Brussels in December 2021.

“The Eastern Partnership displays both the good side and the bad side of the EU,” says Heather Grabbe, Director of the Open Society European Policy Institute and a former advisor to the EU's Enlargement Commissioner. “The money keeps flowing with European Parliament support but it's basically free money without influence. It's budget support and probably helps prop up modest regional economic cooperation but it's small beer in geopolitical terms. It is enlargement in homeopathic doses, without the lever of a membership perspective.”⁽⁵⁾

While neither the Black Sea Synergy nor the Eastern Partnership have yielded impressive

results, a creeping Europeanisation of the economies of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova is under way due to the DCFTAs. Trade flows have shifted towards the EU, most sharply in Ukraine due to Russian boycotts, and economic regulation is slowly aligning with EU standards.

The EU has scope for more high-level political engagement with the three most pro-European partners, whose governments have banded together as the ‘Associated Trio’ and whose citizens need reassurance and incentives if they are to stay the hard course of economic convergence with the EU without the golden horizon of membership.

The EU needs to pay more attention and devote more resources to the Black Sea region, not least because strategic rivals are doing so. A recent study of China's role in the broader Black Sea region by the Brussels-based centre-right Wilfried Martens Centre think tank outlined ways in which the EU could better use its own instruments to counter Beijing's growing influence through infrastructure projects in its Belt and Road Initiative.

“Additional efforts and funds should be dedicated, boosting the Trans-European Transport Network [TEN-T] which aims to foster better connectivity ... The long-term European budget should be leveraged to support EU's strategic eastern partners, while financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development can provide valuable credit lines for connectivity projects,” the report said.⁽⁶⁾

5) Interview with the author, July 2021

6) www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/China-in-the-Broader-Black-Sea-Region.pdf

NATO - promising the moon

Having promised Ukraine and Georgia eventual membership in 2008, NATO has sought to keep that perspective alive while helping them reform and align their armed forces and security sector with alliance standards, but without setting any timetable or roadmap for accession.

The divisions within NATO that prevented the US-led defence pact from offering a Membership Action Plan to the two aspirants at the Bucharest summit have not eased with time. On the contrary, officials from several western European governments privately say they do not expect either country to join NATO in their lifetime, barring some major event like the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In the Biden administration, supporters of bringing the two aspirants into the alliance any time soon are in a minority, as they were under Donald Trump's presidency. Officials of both teams said the issue was too hard to handle. Leo Michel, a former senior Department of Defense official, said there were deep misgivings about the move inside the George W. Bush administration in the run-up to Bucharest, but the president made it his personal cause.⁽⁷⁾

The EU's decision to admit a divided Cyprus as a member in 2004 after the ruling Greek

Cypriots rejected a UN-brokered reunification deal, accepted by the Turkish Cypriots, was "an example of the kind of mischief you get into when you bring a divided country into an international organisation", Michel said. A 1995 NATO study on enlargement noted that ongoing territorial disputes could be an issue when deciding whether a country was invited to join the alliance.

President Biden made clear when he attended a NATO summit in June 2021 that the prospect of Ukrainian membership was in a deep freeze. "School's out on that question. It remains to be seen," he told journalists when pressed for a yes-or-no answer on Kyiv's chances of joining. He said the country still had to meet a series of criteria, including cleaning up corruption.⁽⁸⁾

Mircea Geoană, Deputy Secretary-General of NATO, acknowledged in an interview that there was no agreement for now on bringing Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance. "NATO functions by consensus. We need all allies on any decision, including enlargement," he said. "We must combine consensus and the level of structural reforms in the aspirant countries."⁽⁹⁾

Geoană said both candidates still had work to do to meet the conditions, and Ukraine

7) Interview with the author, September 2021

8) www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/14/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-3/

9) Interview with the author, July 2021

had only upgraded its relationship with NATO to Enhanced Opportunities Partner in 2020. That status - shared with Australia, Finland, Georgia, Jordan and Sweden - allows Partner countries to attend some North Atlantic Council meetings by invitation, to participate in NATO crisis management, peacekeeping missions and operations, to take part in joint exercises including Article V drills to develop interoperability with NATO forces, and to share classified information.

Asked what measures Ukraine needed to take, Geoană cited “reforms on judicial issues, continuing to fight corruption, continuing to reform and modernise the armed forces and a complex reform of the intelligence services”. Other NATO officials added that Kyiv did not yet meet NATO standards of civilian control and parliamentary oversight over the armed forces.

“Irresistible tendency”

Geoană, a former Romanian foreign minister, rejected the idea that NATO should heed Russian security interests and refrain from expanding to Russia’s borders in the Black Sea region. “I came from a country that was behind the Iron Curtain and had a not very probable road from the Iron Curtain. We say that the era of spheres of influence and the vision of Europe along sphere of influence lines is over.”

“Even if it takes time, the irresistible tendency of sovereign nations towards the destiny they embrace is unstoppable. If Ukraine and Georgia decide in a sovereign way to choose the path towards the West, we shouldn’t deny it,” the Deputy Secretary-General said.

Asked whether those countries could join NATO without full control over their territory, and if so,

where NATO’s Article V mutual defence clause would apply, Geoană declined to speculate, saying: “We know Russia is using frozen conflicts to prevent these countries joining the West.”

Former NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen caused a stir on a visit to Georgia in 2019 when he suggested that the precedent of West Germany’s accession to NATO in 1955 could offer a way forward for Tbilisi’s stalled bid.

“The way to move beyond that stalemate is to discuss in Georgia whether you will accept an arrangement where NATO’s Article V covers only that Georgian territory where the Georgian government has full sovereignty,” Rasmussen told Voice of America’s Georgian service. “I don’t see huge political costs. The fact is that

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are de facto occupied by Russia. So, without giving up those territories that have been recognised internationally as part of Georgia ... you could move forward in the discussions on a future NATO membership." ⁽¹⁰⁾

"Eastern Germany was not covered by NATO's Article V during the Cold War, and it wasn't until the reunification of Germany after the end of the Cold War that NATO rules also applied to East Germany," Rasmussen continued. "Exactly the same arrangement could be considered in Georgia."

However, a NATO official said there was "zero discussion" or such options in NATO. Georgian and Ukrainian officials have so far rebuffed such talk, either because they fear it would seal the permanent partition of their countries, or because they are not willing to speculate about such issues until they have a much clearer prospect of reaching the finishing line for membership.

"As Deputy Prime Minister, I could only dream that this discussion could at least take place because so far we have only the commitment that Ukraine will one day become a member, but so far there is a huge gap in the middle between Ukraine's aspirations and this promise," Stefanishyna said. "We're unfortunately not even at the stage of starting to think about that." ⁽¹¹⁾

Tengiz Pkhaladze, a political scientist who served as advisor and foreign affairs secretary to the President of Georgia from 2014 to 2018, said Georgia had given unilateral undertakings in 2010 to the UN Security Council, NATO and the European Parliament that it would never use force to restore its territorial integrity. "What kind of guarantees do our partners need to be sure Georgia doesn't regard NATO as a military solution, that we are not going to use force?" he asked. Pkhaladze said the debate about where Article V would apply was a "pretext" for opponents of his country's NATO bid. "It's a kind of rhetorical argument because when it comes to a real discussion, I've never heard any real response from the sceptics." ⁽¹²⁾

10) www.voanews.com/a/europe_former-nato-chief-suggests-german-model-georgia-join-alliance/6175632.html

11) Interview with the author, October 2021

12) Interview with the author, June 2021

Ukrainians divided, Georgians eager

Another reservation raised by critics of Kyiv's NATO campaign is that Ukrainians remain deeply divided about whether they want to join the alliance. Although the country's political leadership requested an invitation in 2008, opinion polls showed that only a minority of voters supported the idea prior to the 2014 Russia military action in Ukraine. A survey conducted in 2012, for example, found just 12% regarded NATO as the best security option, with 31% preferring an alliance with Russia and another 31% favouring non-alignment.⁽¹³⁾

Former president Yanukovich changed Kyiv's policy to military non-alignment when he was elected in 2010. Parliament passed a bill excluding the goal of "integration into Euro-Atlantic security and NATO membership" from the country's national security strategy. Instead, Ukraine pursued a partnership that included participation in NATO-led peacekeeping missions and operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as joint training and strategic consultations. After he was ousted, the interim government led by former prime minister Arseniy Yatsenuk initially said it did not intend to pursue NATO membership.

However, former president Petro Poroshenko had the constitution amended in 2018 to declare accession to NATO and the EU a central goal of Ukrainian foreign policy. A poll taken in November 2021, during a period of heightened tension with Russia, showed that 58% of voters supported NATO membership, with 35% opposed. Support was strongest in western and central Ukraine and weakest in the more Russian-speaking south and east. Another poll by the International Republican Institute earlier in 2021 found 48% in favour and 28% against.^{(14) (15)}

Support for membership in Georgia is much higher. Surveys regularly show about three-quarters of Georgians want to join NATO, although even larger numbers back EU accession.

13) www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=888

14) www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3349221-poll-58-back-ukraines-accession-to-nato-62-want-ukraine-to-join-eu.html

15) www.iri.org/resource/iri-poll-ukraine-finds-continued-support-european-integration-against-backdrop-covid-19

Indefensible?

An objection raised by some Western critics is that NATO would be unable to defend Ukraine and Georgia if they did join and came under Russian attack, undermining its own credibility and possibly lowering the threshold for nuclear confrontation.

A 2016 study by the RAND Corporation - a leading US defence consultancy - concluded that despite NATO's deployment of small multinational ground units in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, an invading Russian force would reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga within at most 60 hours of launching an assault. That would present NATO with "only bad options" to avoid the rapid defeat of its Baltic allies. ⁽¹⁶⁾

"As currently postured, NATO cannot successfully defend the territory of its most exposed members," the RAND report said, arguing that the alliance would have to deploy a much bigger and heavier force of about seven brigades, including three heavy tank brigades, supported by air power and land-based missiles to prevent the rapid overrun of the Baltic states. The alliance has not changed its posture since then.

NATO officials contend that the current Enhanced Forward Presence of four battalion-sized units led by Canada, Germany, the US and the UK is a sufficient tripwire for deterrence, since it would force a Russian invader to confront NATO forces immediately, internationalising the conflict.

If the Baltic states are indefensible with current NATO resources in the region, how much more so would that apply to Ukraine and Georgia? Despite a tripling of its naval patrols in the Black Sea since 2018, the alliance has far fewer air, land and maritime assets in the theatre than in the Baltic.

"If you extend security guarantees to prospective members, you have to be able to defend them against any threat. Russia is already there and has shown it is prepared to act in defence of its privileged security interests. Putin is not bluffing. The Russians have shown they are willing to use military force," says Henrik Larsen, Senior Researcher at ETHZ, the Center for Security Studies in Zürich and a former EU political advisor in Ukraine. "There's a strong doubt about our current ability to defend member nations if you extend NATO territory to Donbas and Georgia." ⁽¹⁷⁾

16) www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf

17) Interview with the author, June 2021



Ukrainian President Zelenskyy meets President Biden at the White House

Slow-motion map

The structure of the NATO accession process could heighten the risk of conflict. Under the procedure adopted in 1999, aspirant countries first receive a Membership Action Plan and undergo an annual assessment of progress in meeting the criteria. Previous candidate countries spent between 6 to 11 years in the MAP process before being invited to join.

The categories include the rule of law and human rights, willingness to solve international, ethnic or territorial disputes by peaceful means, the ability to contribute to alliance security and missions, the level of defence spending, information security and the compatibility of domestic legislation with NATO cooperation.

“Giving Ukraine or Georgia a MAP is a red line for Russia. If NATO were to take this step,

it would almost certainly increase the risk of conflict,” Larsen said. He noted that the first of two massive Russian military build-ups around Ukraine in 2021 came after President Zelenskyy publicly asked Biden: “Mr President, why are we not in NATO?”⁽¹⁹⁾

NATO officials agree that a lengthy time lag would raise the risk of Russian spoiling actions without giving either country more security in the near term. However, both aspirants already have annual national NATO preparation programmes, with Georgia already well advanced on all criteria. So the MAP phase might be reduced to a very short period just before membership.⁽¹⁹⁾

Nevertheless, it would be a window of vulnerability that Russia would be bound to exploit.

¹⁹⁾ CEPA report

Agenda for competition

Veteran retired NATO commanders agree the alliance has been more focused on the Baltic and the High North, where Russia has its main nuclear submarine fleet, than on the Black Sea. Ben Hodges, who was commander of the US Army Europe from 2014 to 2018 argues that NATO must develop a single strategy for the entire eastern flank and do much more to compete against Russia in the Black Sea and improve its military mobility to reinforce the region in time[s] of crisis.

“The Black Sea is a cauldron of competition with Russia. In the Baltic, geography and numbers are in our favour. In the Black Sea, geography is in Russia’s favour and the numbers are not in our favour because it’s not a priority,” Hodges said. The Russian fleet had effectively shut down the northern tier of the Black Sea and denied access to and from the Sea of Azov. “This region must now be where NATO and the West compete.” ⁽¹⁸⁾

“We need to make sure it’s nobody’s lake ... We have to make it a priority to have more of a NATO naval presence of non-littoral states,” Hodges continued. “This is not about NATO moving closer to Russia. It’s about all Russia’s neighbours trying to put a fence between themselves and Russia.”

In a 2021 strategy paper for the Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Hodges set out a 12-step programme for a Western politico-military fight-back against Russian objectives in the region. He advocated for an immediate invitation for Georgia to join NATO, and putting Ukraine on a fast track to membership, with accelerated training and modernisation support from the US, UK and Canada for both countries’ armed forces. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Other proposed measures included making the Russian fleet vulnerable in Crimea by deploying drones and cruise missiles with a 500km range to NATO nations around the Black Sea and deploying mine-laying capability to counter Russia’s threat to neighbours’ coastlines, harbours and waters; expanding NATO’s Maritime Unmanned Systems programme to complement the navies of Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Georgia; amplify the annual Sea Breeze exercise hosted by Ukraine to include ground deployment of US and allied units from Poland and Romania, through Moldova into Ukraine; ensuring a continuous naval presence of non-littoral NATO states in the Black Sea; and upgrading air and missile defence in the region.

Hodges’ agenda is one of the boldest among Western strategists but he rejects suggestions

18) www.president.gov.ua/en/news/intervyu-prezidenta-ukrayini-programi-axios-sho-vihodit-na-p-66313

19) CEPA report

that it is a recipe for war. “We have to start competing with Russia to avoid conflict,” he said.

Some of the steps he advocated are already being implemented. For example, in early 2021 the US established a squadron of lethal MQ-9 Reaper drones at Câmpia Turzii air base in northwestern Romania, near Ukraine and Moldova - the first time these unmanned surveillance and strike vehicles have been deployed in the Black Sea theatre. ⁽²⁰⁾

Ukraine’s 2021 Sea Breeze exercise was the largest so far, with 2,000 forces and 30 ships from 14 NATO members and partners participating. The exercise took place partly in areas of the Black Sea where Russia had declared an exclusion zone for its own naval exercises. Both the UK and the US signed upgraded training agreements with Ukraine in 2021.

However, the continuous naval presence of outside NATO powers advocated by Hodges would bump up against the Montreux Convention constraints, and key ally Turkey is not keen on a much bigger NATO footprint. Above all, fast-forwarding Georgia’s and Ukraine’s accession processes would be a reckless way of testing whether Putin is bluffing.

20) www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2495031/mq-9s-execute-new-mission-in-romania/

21) Interview with the author, September 2021



President Putin announcing the annexation of Crimea during a speech held at the Kremlin's Grand Hall

Avoiding accidents

Even with the current level of NATO and Western nations' naval and air presence, military commanders assess the risk of accidents or incidents due to gamesmanship or miscalculation as high. One NATO official said Crimean territorial waters, the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov are the most sensitive areas "where we think there could be an incident". There is anecdotal evidence that the young Russian pilots who shadow NATO warships and fighters have some leeway for individual interpretation of their rules of engagement.

"If a Russian pilot momentarily illuminates a NATO aircraft or ship with their radar, that is

a legitimate ground to open fire [under NATO rules of engagement]," the NATO official said. "Normally both sides back off, but at that moment a fight would be justified." ⁽²¹⁾

One way to minimise the risk of such incidents, which might escalate, is regular military-to-military dialogue, including at regional level between NATO and Russian commanders. However, NATO suspended all practical civilian and military cooperation after Moscow's annexation of Crimea.

Geoană said top-level dialogue between NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe

and Russia's Armed Forces Chief of the General Staff still took place regularly to discuss professional conduct and deconfliction. However, lower-level contacts remain in the freezer and political dialogue is at an impasse despite allied requests for Moscow to return to the NATO-Russia Council, a consultation forum which has not met for more than two years. Russia says the format does not permit a dialogue of equals and prefers to talk directly to the US.

Asked how seriously he assessed the risk of military incidents in the Black Sea region by accident or miscalculation, Geoană said Russia was harassing not only NATO ships but commercial shipping in the region. "There is no way that NATO will not continue to respect freedom of maritime passage," he said. Such maritime patrols might lead to "interaction with Russia, but it is not for us to concede to Russia illegal rights".

Some NATO officials say privately the alliance is punishing itself rather than Russia by shutting down most channels of military-to-military dialogue. An east-west expert panel convened by the European Leadership Network (ELN) - a pan-European network of some 300 past and present security leaders - produced a series of practical recommendations on NATO-Russia military risk reduction in Europe in late 2020. They have so far remained a dead letter. ⁽²²⁾

22) www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Statement-on-Russia-NATO_English-Russian.pdf



Seaside Ferris wheel in Batumi, second largest Georgian harbor and most important holiday resort

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Grey sea at best

The future of the Black Sea is neither black nor white, but at best grey and at worst blood red. If a potential armed conflict is to be avoided in the coming decade, and perhaps even in the coming months, all sides will have to accept less than their preferred option.

The contest between Russia and the West over Ukraine and the former Soviet space cannot be resolved by some formal diplomatic grand bargain on neutrality, as suggested by Michael O'Hanlon, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, ⁽¹⁾ and it must not be resolved by war.

It can only be managed by a mixture of deterrence, dialogue and risk reduction.

Ukraine and Georgia should accept that they are unlikely to join NATO or the EU for a very long time, if ever. Instead of waiting for the US or Europe to defend them, they should pursue practical strategies to build their own security and defence capabilities, enhance societal resilience against Russian hybrid efforts to destabilise them, and enhance their ability to profit from the EU market by regulatory convergence and tackling corruption to make themselves more attractive to foreign investment.

Armed with US anti-tank missiles and Turkish drones in small numbers, Ukraine's armed forces are better trained and organised than in 2014, though their mostly Soviet-era equipment is still technologically and numerically inferior to Russia's modern army. Like Finland or Switzerland, Ukraine should develop a whole-of-society 'hedgehog defence' model that would raise the cost to an aggressor of any offensive military action.

Russia should accept that Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are independent, sovereign states and will not return to its geopolitical orbit because its own actions have alienated a large majority of their population. Moscow may be able to prevent them joining NATO, but it cannot make them love Russia or want to join its Eurasian Economic Union.

Putin and his successors may cling to Crimea for reasons of history and prestige, but they will continue to pay a significant political and economic price for doing so. Moscow faces unattractive choices in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine, where its military support for Russian-speaking separatists is costly and will remain an obstacle to any easing of Western sanctions.

1) www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/full-text_-beyond-nato.pdf

In Ukraine as in Syria, the ‘Pottery Barn’ principle applies - you break it, you own it.

Whether the Kremlin eventually annexes Donetsk and Luhansk, as the distribution of an estimated 500,000 Russian passports to their residents suggests it may, or recognises their independence from Ukraine - as a single entity or the current two self-declared “people’s republics” - it is lumbered with keeping them afloat at substantial cost with no prospect of the region becoming a viable, self-sustaining entity. But their re-integration into Ukraine with a self-governing status under the terms of the 2014 Minsk agreement has been obstructed by both sides, ostensibly over disputes ranging from ceasefire terms to the conditions for local elections and language rights. Neither trusts the other sufficiently to make the first move.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that Putin does not want a solution but a permanent lever over Kyiv and the West, while Zelensky would find any formula conceding substantial autonomy to Donbas difficult to impose on hardline Ukrainian nationalists.

Russia’s massing of troops on Ukraine’s borders twice in 2021 has fanned concerns that it may be preparing further military action. Western governments must balance efforts to bolster Kyiv’s ability to defend itself and deter Putin from aggression with exercising and counselling restraint to avoid escalation.

The US and its NATO allies need to accept that they promised something they cannot deliver - membership for Ukraine and Georgia - even

if they cannot unpromise that now. Whatever the advocates of the ‘freedom versus tyranny’ school of thought may proclaim, neither Americans nor Europeans are prepared to risk war with Russia in Ukraine to test whether Putin is bluffing. They must not mislead Ukraine’s leaders into believing otherwise.

The Biden administration is more concerned with domestic problems and containing China’s security challenge in Asia. While US forces are still present in Europe, including in the Black Sea region, and support for NATO remains strong, American public and political willingness to employ those forces in Europe is ebbing, especially among Republicans.

However, the US and European nations can spell out the high economic and political price that Moscow would pay for any further military action against Ukraine.

The EU, for its part, needs to develop a more holistic and ambitious strategy for the Black Sea region, treating it as an integral part of Europe instead of as an outer fringe. Brussels must rethink the way it uses its toolbox to provide stronger incentives for Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova to reform, fight corruption and develop their own economies. It must also prepare to reset political and economic relations with a more cooperative Turkey when the opportunity arises.

Recommendations

To Ukraine:

- Continue to strengthen the quality, training and equipment of the Armed Forces and intelligence services under democratic civilian control in cooperation with Western partners; develop a whole-of-society territorial defence and resilience to hybrid attacks, while committing not to use force to regain territory beyond central government control.
- Stop agitating for rapid NATO membership and focus on practical cooperation making the most of the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership.
- Fully empower the fight against grand corruption with independent law enforcement, specialised prosecutors and judges vetted with EU assistance. Implement transparent, even-handed measures to curb the power of oligarchs.
- Revise language and minority laws along the lines recommended by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission to avoid discrimination against Russian and Hungarian speakers.

- Pursue the implementation of the Minsk accords on Donbas in good faith, accepting an autonomous status for the region under Ukrainian sovereignty in return for an end to the conflict and the withdrawal of foreign forces and militias.

To Georgia:

- Implement electoral reforms recommended by the EU and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission to overcome political deadlock.
- Fully implement judicial reforms in partnership with the Council of Europe to ensure independence and impartiality of the judiciary.
- Ensure a fair trial for former president Mikheil Saakashvili with international observers.
- Stop agitating for rapid NATO membership and focus on practical cooperation with the alliance through the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership.
- Develop whole-of-society resilience to counter Russian destabilisation and hybrid disinformation efforts.

Annex - Black Sea timeline

Antiquity	Settlement of Greek colonies	Greek colonies settle on the coast of the Black Sea.
8th – 7th century BC	Settlement of Scythians	The Scythians, nomadic tribes originally from southern Siberia, expand their influence to the north of the Black Sea. They drive out the Cimmerians, an ancient people who controlled the region north of the Caucasus and the Sea of Azov, and establish an empire around what is now Crimea.
4th – 2nd century BC	Succession of Scythians by Sarmatians	The Sarmatians, originally from the Iranian steppe, succeed the Scythians. They seize control of the northern Black Sea region, including today's Ukraine, Southern Russia and some parts of Moldova. They become a significant influence in the Black Sea steppe.
117 AD	Roman Empire	Greek colonies become Latin colonies. Under Emperor Trajan, the Roman Empire controls the Black Sea by holding modern day coasts of Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia and part of Russia.
395 AD – 1453 AD	Division of the Roman Empire	With Arcadius as Emperor, the Eastern Roman Empire becomes the Byzantine Empire and controls the southern part of the Black Sea.
1071	Battle of Manzikert	The Byzantine Empire loses Anatolia – Asia Minor, part of modern Turkey – to the Seljuk Turks.

14th – 15th centuries	Byzantine-Ottoman wars	The conflict between the Ottoman and Byzantine empires results in large parts of Byzantine territory being annexed by the Ottomans.
1441 – 1783	Establishment of Crimean Khanate	The Crimean Tatars, of Turkic origin, establish a Khanate and take control of the northern part of the Black Sea.
1453	Fall of the Byzantine Empire	The Ottomans take Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and key point of passage from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. With the Crimean Khanate – an Ottoman vassal – in control of its northern part, the Black Sea becomes an ‘Ottoman lake’.
18th century	Russian Empire	The Russian Empire appears for the first time in the Black Sea region.
1768 – 1774	Russian-Ottoman wars	Conflict arises between the Ottoman and Russian empires. The 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca grants the Russian Empire direct access to the Black Sea via the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov, and recognises the independence of a Crimean Tatar state.
1783	Annexation of Crimea to the Russian Empire	Under Catherine the Great, the Russian Empire annexes Crimea. Crimean Tatars emigrate en masse to other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Russia makes Sevastopol a major naval base for its Black Sea Fleet – founded in this same year.
1792	Treaty of Jassy	The Treaty of Jassy ends the Russian-Ottoman conflict, formally recognising Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

1794	Founding of Odessa	By Catherine the Great's imperial decree, the city of Odessa is founded. The Tatar Fortress of Khadzhibey, established there in the 14th century, is stormed by the Russian Empire in 1789 and ceded by the Turks in 1792.
1819 – 1858		Odessa is a free port and a free economic zone.
1853 – 1856	Crimean War	An alliance formed by France, the Ottoman Empire, the United Kingdom and Sardinia defeats Russia. In 1854, the alliance attacks Sevastopol. The Treaty of Paris puts an end to the war and forbids Russia from having naval bases and warships in the Black Sea.
1914 – 1918	First World War	The Turkish Straits – Bosphorus and Dardanelles – are of strategic importance for the Triple Entente as they allow the circulation between the western and eastern fronts and weaken the Ottoman Empire. Anglo-French naval forces' multiple attempts to seize control of the straits are unsuccessful. The 1917 revolution halts similar attempts by Russia.
1918 – 1920	Russian Civil War	Civil war breaks out after the Russian Revolution. The anti-communist White Army confronts the Red Army on several fronts. After losing in the south, the Whites retreat to Crimea. In October 1920, the White Army loses its last stronghold in southern Ukraine and is evacuated via the ports of Kerch, Feodosia, Yalta, Sevastopol and Novorossiysk using ships from the Black Sea Fleet and Western navies.
1920	Treaty of Sèvres	The Treaty of Sèvres is signed between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, which must cede part of its territory.

1922 – 1991	Establishment of USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is established as a political union of several Soviet republics – including the Moldovan SSR, the Ukrainian SSR, and the Georgian SSR. With Romania and Bulgaria as satellite states of the USSR after 1945, the Black Sea becomes a ‘Soviet lake’. Odessa becomes a key trading hub and a Soviet naval base.
1923	Treaty of Lausanne	The Treaty of Lausanne, signed between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, redraws the European map and forms the basis for modern Turkish territory.
1936	Montreux Convention	The Montreux Convention, signed by Bulgaria, France, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, the UK and the USSR, guarantees the free passage of civilian vessels and limits the presence of military vessels from non-coastal Black Sea states and the passage or warships of belligerent states. Turkey is custodian of the straits.
1939 – 1945	Second World War	
1944	Deportation of minorities in the USSR	Stalin orders the deportation of thousands of Crimean Tatars to Central Asia on the grounds of alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany. Crimean Tatars are eliminated from Crimea, and the Crimean Autonomous SSR is abolished and annexed to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). During the same period, around 60,000 Meskhetian Turks from Georgia are resettled to the Fergana Valley in Central Asia, and 40,000 ethnic Greeks are relocated from the Black Sea region to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

1946	Turkish Straits crisis	The Soviet Union strengthens its military presence in the Black Sea and demands that Turkey renegotiate the Montreux Convention to allow Soviet ships to pass freely through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits and to establish Soviet bases on Turkish territory. Turkey turns to the United States for support, and the Americans send ships to Turkish waters.
1947	Truman Doctrine	Under the Truman Doctrine, Turkey is designated special recipient of anti-Soviet aid and renounces its policy of neutrality.
1952	NATO membership	Turkey and Greece become members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, created in 1949 to counter Soviet power in Europe.
1954	Annexation of Crimea to the Russian SFSR	Crimea is transferred from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR by order of the Supreme Soviet Presidium with great influence from Nikita Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Soviet Union Communist Party, as a 'gift' to honour the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's unification with Russia.
1955	Warsaw Pact	The Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states – Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania – sign the Warsaw Pact in an attempt to counterbalance NATO both militarily and ideologically. The Black Sea is encircled by Warsaw Pact signatory countries. Albania withdraws in 1968 and the Warsaw Pact breaks up after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.
1973	Soviet-Turkish maritime agreement	Turkey and the USSR sign an agreement on maritime boundaries in the Black Sea.

1978	Soviet-Turkish maritime agreement	Turkey and the USSR sign an agreement on the delimitation of the continental shelf in the Black Sea. This agreement remains valid for modern Georgia, Ukraine and the Russian Federation.
1986 – 1987	Soviet-Turkish EEZ agreement	The USSR and Turkey exchange notes constituting an agreement on the delimitation of their respective exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the Black Sea.
1991	Dissolution of USSR	Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian presence in the Black Sea region decreases and Turkey initiates increased economic cooperation among coastal states.
1992	Black Sea Economic Cooperation Treaty	Under Turkish leadership, a treaty on Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) is signed in Istanbul.
1994	Budapest Memorandum	Ukraine agrees to remove its nuclear weapons and transfer them to Russia in exchange for security guarantees from Russia, the US and the UK to protect its political independence and preserve its territorial integrity.
1997	Russia-Ukraine bilateral treaties	Long-standing disputes over the Black Sea Fleet between Ukraine and Russia are resolved through three bilateral treaties. The Fleet is divided: Russia gets 81% in exchange of a \$526mn compensation to Ukraine, which gets the remaining 19%. Ukraine agrees to lease the Sevastopol base for 20 years, in exchange for \$97mn annually and to allow up to 25,000 troops, 132 armoured combat vehicles and 24 pieces of artillery on Crimean naval bases. The lease is renewed in 2010 and extended until 2042 in exchange for energy contracts at favourable prices.

1997	Russia-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty	Ukraine and Russia agree to respect each other's borders and territorial integrity.
1997	Bulgaria-Turkey maritime agreement	An agreement is signed between Turkey and Bulgaria on the delimitation of their respective EEZs in the Black Sea.
1997	Georgia-Turkey maritime agreement	Turkey and Georgia sign a protocol confirming the maritime boundaries between the two countries and their respective EEZs in the Black Sea.
1999	BSEC Organization establishment	Following the BSEC Treaty in 1992, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation is established. The regional economic organisation still exists today.
2001	Launch of BlackSeaFor	Under Turkey's initiative, the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BlackSeaFor) is launched to foster inclusive security cooperation among coastal states. Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia participate in joint naval drills. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War disrupts the programme, which is eventually terminated in 2014.
2003	Blue Stream pipeline	The Blue Stream pipeline makes its first gas deliveries from Russia to Turkey via the Black Sea and allows for the diversification of Russia's gas delivery routes.
2004	Operation Black Sea Harmony	Turkey initiates Operation Black Sea Harmony in an effort to fight terrorism in the Black Sea; coastal states are invited to join.
2004	Bulgaria and Romania join NATO	Bulgaria and Romania become members of NATO, but the organisation's role in the region remains limited.

2008	NATO Bucharest Summit	NATO declares Ukraine and Georgia will eventually become members but no timeline for membership is decided. This is a red line for Russia and leads to the deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations.
2008	Russo-Georgian War	Georgia's attempt to regain control of South Ossetia leads to conflict with Russia. Turkey, allegedly neutral, denies American warships passage through the Bosphorus Strait to deliver humanitarian aid to Georgia on the basis of the Montreux Convention.
2009	Ukraine-Romania maritime dispute	A dispute between Ukraine and Romania on the maritime delamination and their respective EEZs is resolved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
2009	Nabucco and South Stream pipelines	Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Austria sign an intergovernmental agreement for the Nabucco pipeline project, which is to bring Azeri gas through Turkey and Bulgaria to Austria. Russia, resentful of this move, proposes the South Stream pipeline project as an alternative: it would run parallel to the Blue Stream pipeline through the Black Sea to the Turkish-Bulgarian border and then follow the same path as the Nabucco pipeline, only with Russian gas.
2013	Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP)	The Trans Adriatic Pipeline replaces the failed Nabucco pipeline project. This pipeline brings Azeri gas to Europe through Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy – the latter three sign an intergovernmental agreement.

2013 – 2014	'Euromaidan' protests	After Ukrainian President Yanukovich's refusal to sign an association agreement with the EU, mass protests erupt in the country and the Ukrainian regime responds with force. Eventually, Yanukovich is overthrown and the interim government signs the agreement with the EU.
2014	Russian annexation of Crimea	Russia invades Crimea. Referendum results indicate the majority of Crimea's population support integration with the Russian Federation. These results are not recognised by the West, but Russia proceeds to annex Crimea. Russia now controls Ukrainian navy forces in Crimea and strengthens its Black Sea Fleet. Russia's coastline in the Black Sea is tripled in size alongside the acquisition of Crimea's corresponding EEZ. The Kerch Strait is now controlled by Russia.
2014	Cancellation of South Stream pipeline	Russia cancels the South Stream pipeline project following its annexation of Crimea and sanctions imposed by the European Union.
2016	Kerch Bridge construction	Russia starts the construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge, connecting the Crimean Peninsula with Russian territory.
2016	NATO Warsaw Summit	NATO implements the Tailored Forward Presence (TFP) with the aim of reinforcing its role in the Black Sea region in response to Russia's increased military presence.
October 2016	TurkStream pipeline agreement	Russia and Turkey sign an intergovernmental agreement on the TurkStream pipeline following the restoration of Russo-Turkish relations. The pipeline is to go from Russia to Turkey under the Black Sea. Construction starts in May 2017.

May 2018	Kerch Bridge completed	Russia completes the Kerch Strait Bridge, thereby limiting the size of ships that can reach Ukrainian ports on the Azov Sea.
July 2018	Sea Breeze naval exercise	The 18th edition of the bilateral, annual 'Sea Breeze' naval exercise sees Ukraine's Navy Chief denounce Russian activities and intentions in the Black Sea.
November 2018	Kerch Strait incident	The Russian coast guard captures three Ukrainian naval vessels passing from the Black Sea to the Sea of Azov. Russia claims Ukraine violated its territorial waters, while Ukraine argues the seizure is an act of aggression. The Ukrainian sailors and vessels are detained for a year in Crimea.
January 2020	TurkStream pipeline operational	The TurkStream pipeline – 930km of which is submerged in the Black Sea – delivers its first gas supplies from Russia to Turkey, Bulgaria, the Western Balkans and southern Europe. The pipeline allows Russia to bypass Ukraine as a transit country in delivering gas to the southern EU.
June 2021	British warship incident	A British warship deliberately enters coastal waters off annexed Crimea. Russia declares HMS Defender to have violated the borders of the Russian Federation. Moscow says it was forced to fire warning shots and drop bombs in the path of the British destroyer to change its course. The UK says it was upholding the right of innocent passage in Ukraine's territorial waters.

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