

CONSIDERATION REGARDING THE ROLE OF GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT OF THE BLACK SEA

Olimpiu Manuel GLODARENCO¹

Ionel Dan CIOCOIU²

¹Comander, senior lecturer Ph.D., Director of Navy Museum

²Comander, Navy Staff Forces

Abstracts: *Influenced by political and military events, the Black Sea has become transformed into a complicated intersection of geopolitical and geo-economic boundaries, becoming also a framework within which the Euro-Atlantic community asserts itself. Its strategic importance lay mostly in the role it played as a bridge and a frontier, a buffer and transit zone, between Europe and Asia at the crossroads between powers and empires. Black Sea has remained during its history a sensitive spot on the larger Eurasian map, an area in which the Great Powers employed their geostrategic concepts about the control of the seas.*

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The Black Sea, although it had, for a very long time a big importance for the geostrategic configuration of the area, it has never fully played, (except Crimeean War), an important role in triggering and creating policies and strategies. Located at the confluence of three areas of major importance - Europe, Middle East and Central Asia - the Black Sea region is the main transit area for energy resources and at the same time an important source of asymmetric risks and a source of outbreaks of conflict, having a significant impact on Euro-Atlantic security. Far from being considered a mere buffer or peripheral zone, the Black Sea region is a hub of strategic importance, situated on the corridor that links euroatlantic communities (as a supplier of security and energy) and the Middle East-Caspian Sea- Central Asia region (as a supplier of energy and security).

In terms of energy transport, the Black Sea region is the main transit space and an important source for the energy consumed in Europe, and predictions forecast substantial growth in the decades ahead.

In terms of security problems, the region is an accurate mirror of the new kind of risks and threats threatening the region and a virtual experimentation zone. The following can be found among them: international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of transport to the target, localized conflicts, illegal weapons, ammunition and explosives, drug trafficking, illegal immigration and human trafficking, inefficient governance undermined by endemic corruption and organized crime, a lack of a working democracy and the inability of local nations to exercise their powers as sovereign states.

In the process of redefining Europe and NATO's transformation, the extended Black Sea area, not only acquired new meanings and geopolitical implications, but it also represented a challenge for the West „to reshape” (an end already achieved in Southeastern Europe), in order to secure and anchor it within the democratic ideals and values, thus contributing to the strengthening of peace and stability in the world.

The Black Sea region is the richest part of Europe when it comes to separatist conflicts, imminent tension and ordinary disputes. Separatist conflicts in the eastern part of the Republic of Moldova (Transnistrian Region), eastern and northern Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Western Azerbaidjan (Nagorno-Karabakh), south of the Russian Federation (Czechnya and other republics or autonomous regions of the Northern Caucasus), other separatist smaller movements and less intense regarding territory or borders represents as many threats to the region's security and creates the dangerous possibility of igniting violent confrontations.

The Black Sea has become, in particular after September 11, 2001, and especially after NATO's expansion in 2002, an area with a complicated geopolitical and economic frontier interaction and a framework for the success of the new Euro-Atlantic community. In fact, the new configuration of the

Black Sea had become obvious in the late '90, when the first pipelines were plotted to carry energy resources from the East – a borderline zone - to the Euro-Atlantic area, the modern world.

Why is it that until now, the Black Sea Area has been ignored? Given its geographic location at the intersection of the Euro-Asian and Middle East communities' security, the Black Sea has not been considered to be the center of neither of them. In this respect, the West's explanation is clear: "When it comes to Europe our priority are the Baltic States down to the Eastern Balkans. When it comes to the former Soviet Union we focussed our attention on achieving a new cooperation alliance with Moscow. And, apart from the conflict between the Israeli's and Palestinians our interests and attention towards the Middle East were limited, usually, to the south border of Turkey". We also have to add that the conflict in the former Yugoslavia that draws, in good measure, attention to this area's frozen conflicts (Transnistria, Albania, South Ossetia, Karabakh) and the residual conflict zones left after the Soviet Union's fall that were previously ignored.

Seen by Westerners as an area of „close proximity” to Moscow, in which the latter have special interests, the Black Sea draws very little attention from the West. However, today, the Black Sea region is located at the center of western efforts to expand interests towards the Caucasus and the Middle East. As NATO extends its powers, the long-term involvement in Afghanistan and additional responsibilities in Iraq and the Black Sea region begin to be seen in a different light. The starting point for this new Western approach was September 11, 2001 which led to a change in the West's optics regarding the entire region.

The need to create a "springboard" in the fight with Islamic terrorism is reinforced by a series of structural factors present in the Black Sea region such as: the states own weak administrative capacity, poverty and economic disparities, corruption and organized crime. Also, NATO's (2002) and EU's (2007) expansions towards the Black Sea and especially the global aspirations of these organizations mean that the Black Sea comes out from the "shade" of the Ourskirts of Europe and asserts a new geopolitical reality, as a interface with other areas like Central Asia and the Middle East.

Regarding EU military capabilities "the goal is to recover the existing tehnological and tactical gaps, compared with current capabilities and future objectives in order to give Europe the capability to organize it's own defensive and to strengthen NATO's European pillar. A primary aspect, with regards to the relationship between NATO and the UE is that the efforts need to be interdependent. Taking this into consideration, it's worth mentioning that the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and the European Security and Defence Initiative (ESDI) within NATO have the same major objectives with regards to allowing Europeans to play a larger role within a changed NATO and with regards to their own security.

Although the current political discourse, in particular the western one, is impregnated with phrases such as "new strategic importance of the Black Sea" it is clear that the problems facing the region are mostly older than September 11, 2001. Even if one side claims a need for achieving a model of security with a variable geometry through using/complementing each other on a global and regional level in organizations like ONU, OSCE, UE, NATO, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC)/Partnership for Peace (PfP), the South East European Cooperation Initiative (SEECI), Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaidjan, Republic of Moldova (GUUAM) and Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSECO), there is still the problem of harmonizing the Western strategies with the strategic interests of Russia, beside those of the Ukraine, as it entered after the "orange revolution" in the American sphere of influence, with those of NATO member states surrounding the Black Sea. Thus, after NATO's enlargement to the East, the West faces once again the fact that a further expansion of its own sphere of influence (selfperceived as a step forward towards stability) to the Black Sea "could be seen by many Russians as hostile". In fact, this scenario is not that farfetched as it happened after Russia's decline during the '90 in Central and Eastern Europe, when the West's multiphases macrostrategy riched the Black Sea.

The Black Sea area's dilemma and the fact that this is just a stage of a much broader and older plan is no longer a secret. This geopolitical vision is shared by the West's new partners in the area like Georgia, for example. This country has become one of the West's "trademarks" in the Black Sea area having the mission to ensure the safety of Baku - Tbilisi - Ceyhan oil pipeline, despite what the typical propaganda developed by the Western states sais (identity of values, democracy extension, re-discovering some territories of European culture). It is then very clear that the main reason of „existing” (with regard to the American "nation building" undergoing) for countries like Azerbaidjan or Georgia is therefore to ensure a safe access for the West to the Caspian oil.

The other dimensions, the new ideologies created in Western laboratories and undertaken by the governments of the "emerging states", represent the ideological support through which the new elites justify the existence of the states that they are running while fueling a conflict with the Russian neo-imperial vision. In the present, the political map of the Black Sea area is influenced by a former superpower, Russia, and two regional powers, Ukraine and Turkey.

As the successor of the USSR, Russia is still a major player in the Black Sea region. A long time has passed since Moscow was the most important actor in the Black Sea, and it seeks to maintain the fulcrum role it held once, in the construction and maintenance of „the Cold War shoreline architecture". The Russian neo-imperial outlook on the Black Sea has its origin in Tzarist and Soviet eras but especially in the need to counterweight USA and EU expansion in the region. In this respect, the former Russian president Vladimir Putin has shown, constantly, an increased interest for keeping a Russian Fleet in the Black Sea which, despite of a tehnological gap acquired during the last 15 years, still represents a significant force that must be taken into consideration. The statements made regarding the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov only highlight the fact that Russia does not want to abandon its position in the Black Sea area. This active presence in the area is maintained through various methods. Moscow continues to obstruct the dismantlement process of its bases in Georgia, a commitment undertook at the OSCE summit in Istanbul, in November 1999.

The separatist trends of Abhazia, South Ossetia and of the Autonomous Republic of Adjaria are backed up by

Russia. Although in 2000 there were certain signals indicating that Russia is beginning to respect its international commitment to deactivate military bases in Georgia, except for the base of Vaziani that's deactivated only at declaratory level (a check being impossible), the base in Gudauta, where in fact most Russian troops have remained on their positions and, sometimes, carry out military actions, as it happened in the Pankisi Valley. Under the pretext of the fight against terrorism, Russian strategy is influenced, in fact, by two contradictory tendencies: on one hand they encourage the development of an atmosphere of confidence by participating in organizations, diagrams of regional cooperation and multinational actions to preserve security against the so called „new risks” and on the other hand uses military force in frozen conflicts or just to discourage them, when Moscow finds that the action of one or the other of the states in the area tends to take a dangerous turn.

Recently emerged out of the Orange Revolution, which was probably encouraged by the West, Ukraine became an outpost at the crossroad of three geopolitical zones: Euro-Atlantic, Euro-Asian and Islamic. Although insignificant as a naval power in the Black Sea (compared with Russia and Turkey), Ukraine is an important piece in the western energy routes puzzle. Through its operational Odessa oil terminal, Ukraine can settle the flow of oil from the Caspian Sea and Middle East towards Europe. Even if, at the subregional level, Ukraine remains a player with certain importance, it is clear that it depends, in a tremendous way, on the trajectory that the Western governments will create for this country.

Turkey, a very active presence, particularly in the former Soviet Islamic republics, the most important American pillar at the border of continental Russia and an equally important cultural influence, is one of the Black Sea geopolitical area regional leaders. Turkey's ambitions were based on the belief that, following the disintegration of the USSR and Yugoslavia, its mission is to restore the political, economic and, especially, cultural influence on the former territories of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish naval forces recorded a certain development attributed on the need to keep a military advantage over Greece in the Aegean area and Cyprus. Thus, although a significant presence in the Black Sea, the Turkish fleet's main objective is to ensure the security of the Straits and the have the operational capability to operate within NATO's strategies.

Involved in various regional cooperation schemes (OCEMN, BLACKSEAFOR), Turkey has its own series interests to promote, not always in agreement with those of the other NATO allies (Bulgaria), and is aware that no regional strategy will be able to ignore her vision.

Where is Romania positioned in this geopolitical constellation? Judging by the official documents of the Bucharest administration, the Romanian vision emerges from the fact that, because of the risks and opportunities the Black Sea region presents that are similar to those of other spaces, e.g Mediterranean, it can create a common vision that can coagulate Eastern Europe, the Black Sea, Caucasus and the Mediterranean. This common approach should have, among other objectives, the security and stability of the region and to ensure the supply along the energy routes. Also, Romania subscribes to the policies of NATO and the UE in order to support democratic processes in the region and to be able to grant direct aid to member in transition.

As the founding member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation at the Black Sea (OCEMN), Romania stands by its objectives, considering that the organisation has a significant potential for developing economic cooperation at a regional level, to promote stability and security, and to build a common understanding of values in the states placed around the Black Sea basin.

However, in spite of certain strengths, Romania doesn't have, for now, the means to enable a position of its own. The official rhetoric already used all the topics that have been in good measure, exhausted since the '90. Any attempt on behalf of Romania to overcome its current status and real possibilities, will lead to a loss in credibility and to the failure of any future initiatives. The experience accumulated by Romania during her participation to multiple regional initiatives (during the '90 there has been an inflation of such initiatives), shows that there haven't been any benefits, nor a change in economic circumstance to measure up to them. From a geopolitical standpoint, Romania could not have a position well individualized, since its economic and military potential simply does not allow it. Even more, the difference in policy even from some NATO allies in the area, but especially the fact that any attempt to establish normal relations with the Ukraine has been a constant failure.

Except Russia and Turkey, the other countries in the Black Sea region share several common features and interests. Firstly, is the fact that all are post-communist societies and all are former Soviet republics, except Bulgaria and Romania. National infrastructure, modernization, institutional transformation, democracy and market economy constitute their agendas for the moment and - for most - for the foreseeable future. Secondly, all these countries were part of one or both of the empires in the region, the Russian and Ottoman Empires, for long periods in their history, if not throughout history. The national identity came into existence as a result of many struggles for independence and sovereignty. Thirdly, most of these countries (or at least large segments of their elite and the population in general, if not all, want to be members of the institutions of security and development from the West, i.e NATO and UE.

Unlike the Mediterranean, the Black Sea area is not a unitary region, either economic or regarding trading policies. The two major sub-regions along the Black Sea coast, the Balkans and the Caucasus, share similar development notebooks throughout history, but they were somewhat of a parallel reality, with very few, or even without the precedents of interdependence and mutual influence. Ukraine was part of Russia and the USSR, and the first steps toward an independent existence came after 1991. The geographic location and the post-soviet legacy have a great impact when it comes to defining the diversity among the Black Sea countries.

Bulgaria and Romania, located on the western flank of the region, were quickly absorbed by NATO's and EU's

integration processes. These countries were part of the Communist block, but not of the Soviet Union, allowing them to overcome a lot easier the communist legacy (although the process of transformation has not been completed, yet). The Southern Caucasus countries are passing through a difficult process of national reconstruction, and are confronted with a variety of hostile factors and obstacles. Some of them arise from weaknesses (or even the absence) of the modern social development tradition, which makes it difficult to overcome tribal identities and conflicts, economic decline and political fragmentation caused by an environment of transition found in the post-Soviet states. Some additional barriers to the development path and reconciliation have arisen from regional conflicts and disputes between nations and major communities in the region, Armenians, Azeri people, e.g.

Russian interference in the region, considered by Moscow as part of its sphere of interest, led to more major conflicts, particularly in Georgia's territory. These conflicts cannot be solved without Kremlin's goodwill or in the absence of an enlarged international framework to put into action international law in areas like Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A similar situation can be found in Transnistria, even if it is far from the Caucasus situation. It is also important that Turkey and Armenia begin a process of reconciliation that could lift the Turkish blockade of Armenia and the reopening of common borders. However, in the Central and South-Eastern Europe, the Balkans area is still the main source of tension and conflict, with major implications for regional and continental security and stability.

As a closing argument, it can be said that the Black Sea area is a place of convergence for the interests of major global actors and those of smaller actors that have to change their positions accordingly. Maintaining a climate of peace and stability necessary to achieve a range of objectives and a desired economic prosperity level, should be assured by an instrument which is suitable to be the guarantor of regional security.

Romania's desire is to acquire, sometime in the future, a naval force capable of fulfilling both traditional missions as well as missions arisen from the asymmetrical risks. Any such initiative has to be tailored and is determined by the current capacity of the Romanian economy to support reduced military structures, a great variety of actions that engage naval forces and the transition to modern naval technology and multifunctional platforms.

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