



## The New Geopolitical Order in the Black Sea: Russia's Role in the Area

*Noela Mahmutaj*

*University of Tirana, Albania, <https://unitir.edu.al/>*

**Abstract:** Since February 2022, the ongoing war in Ukraine has positioned the Black Sea region at the center of strategic competition and created a new geopolitical reality in the international system. This conflict has intensified the struggle between Russia and Western powers, making the Black Sea a key point of contention. As a gateway to the world, the Black Sea holds immense strategic and economic significance for Russia. Additionally, other coastal countries along the Black Sea, such as Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria, all NATO members, have their own interests in the region, as do EU candidate countries Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. As a result, the region's dynamics and NATO enlargement impact Russia's strategy in the Black Sea area. In this context, this article aims to analyze the characteristics and significance of the Black Sea for the Kremlin's policy and the other key players operating in the region.

**Keywords:** Black Sea, Ukraine war, Russia, conflicts, strategic competition.

### Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of regimes in former communist countries brought about a radical shift in the balance of power on the international stage. Consequently, many countries sought to reshape their interests in the global system by adapting to the new geopolitical reality and adopting new foreign policy approaches. This new geopolitical transformation was also evident in the Black Sea region, which, during the 1990s, faced the emergence of new challenges. For instance, the newly created states had to contend with a complex set of issues, including economic reforms, political turbulence, and social problems. These difficulties relegated the Black Sea region to a peripheral status for

the Great Powers during this period, largely due to the structure of the international system and the prevailing balance of power, particularly involving the European Union, NATO, and the United States.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Black Sea region gained new geopolitical significance, assuming a more prominent position in global politics. This increased attention is primarily due to its transit importance, serving as a critical logistical hub connecting Western countries with Central Asia, Transcaucasia,<sup>1</sup> and beyond. The Black Sea's importance is not solely defined by its size or physical characteristics but rather by its strategic geographic location, attracting interest from regional and non-regional actors.

Numerous studies have focused on the political situation in the region and its significance in the international arena, covering economic, commercial, energy, cultural, and security aspects.<sup>2</sup> The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing war in Ukraine since February 2022 have brought significant changes not only to the international arena but also to the relationships between the countries of the region and others, such as NATO and EU member states and even China. Furthermore, in the past decade, the crisis in Ukraine and the Kremlin's approach to the post-Soviet space have been central to academic research. These studies suggest that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is driven either by the Kremlin's aspiration to re-establish a Russian Empire<sup>3</sup> or by the desire of major powers to shape a new bipolar order in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, drawing on both primary and secondary data, as well as analysis of content, discourse, and empirical data. The article aims to answer the research question: What are Russia's current strategic interests in the Black Sea? In this regard, understanding the Kremlin's policies toward the region is crucial for identifying the reasons why this area holds such significant value for Russia. The main argument is that the Kremlin's actions in the Black Sea are not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy to maintain its presence and influence in a region of considerable strategic importance. This includes military presence, economic strategies, and historical,

---

<sup>1</sup> Efrem Eshba, "Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea: Achievements, Problems, Prospects," *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 6, no. 33 (2013): 42-48, <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2013-6-33-42-48>. – in Russian

<sup>2</sup> Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building* (New York: Routledge eBooks, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315498256>.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Sanders, *Maritime Power in the Black Sea* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); Iain Ferguson, "Between New Spheres of Influence: Ukraine's Geopolitical Misfortune," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2017): 285-306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1402299>.

<sup>4</sup> Kristi Raik, "The Ukraine Crisis as a Conflict over Europe's Political, Economic and Security Order," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2019): 51-70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1414046>.

cultural, and religious ties. The article highlights the complexity and evolving nature of the new geopolitical order in the Black Sea by analyzing Russia's motivations and the responses of regional and global actors.

## **Russia and Other Players in the Black Sea Area**

The Black Sea region has undergone and continues to undergo significant geopolitical and economic changes over the past three decades. These changes are also reflected in the relationships between the region's countries and their interactions with non-regional actors. The ongoing war in Ukraine has heightened the interest of key players in the Black Sea, which plays a crucial role in the stability and development of all regional countries and beyond.

An analysis of the historical, political, and military aspects of the Black Sea region highlights its significance for the countries with access to it. Black Sea states such as Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania are NATO members, which creates a strategic disadvantage for Russia. The tensions in relations between the countries in the region and Russia, as well as their political alignments, often limit the Kremlin's influence in the Black Sea. Nonetheless, the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to NATO has intensified Moscow's strategic concerns about the limitations on its freedom to operate in the Black Sea.<sup>5</sup>

For Romania, membership in the European Union and NATO and its strategic partnership with the United States constitute the main pillars of its foreign policy. Bucharest has prioritized its relations with Washington and the European Union, viewing them as the primary security providers against Russia in the Black Sea.<sup>6</sup> However, the NATO missile defense system in Romania is perceived by the Kremlin as a measure intended to undermine Russian security and as a "direct threat."<sup>7</sup> In addition, in order to bolster its Western profile, Romania has embraced a narrative that defends what are considered predominantly Western values. Strengthening its relations with Western allies remains a key objective of Bucharest's foreign policy.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria's main foreign policy priority is its relationship with Brussels and the most influential countries EU member states, such as Germany and France. However, unlike Romania, Bulgaria has historically maintained a special relationship with the Kremlin. Bulgarian-Russian relations date back to the 19th century when Russia supported Bulgaria in its fight for independence. Despite their close ties, Bulgaria was on the opposite side of Russia during both World Wars. More recently, concerns about Russia's interference in Bulgaria's

---

<sup>5</sup> Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 192.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Sandres, "The Black Sea Region Caught Between East and West," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 202-225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2021.1990561>.

<sup>7</sup> "Kremlin: US Missile Defense System in Romania Threatens Russia's Security," *Reuters*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/orutp-romania-nato-site-idRUKCN0Y31AV/>. – in Russian

domestic politics and its energy dependence on Moscow have grown.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Bulgaria has traditionally adopted a very balanced approach in its relations with the Kremlin. For example, Bulgaria's National Security Strategy<sup>9</sup> reaffirms the country's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic community while also emphasizing the importance of establishing and maintaining EU and NATO relations with Russia. Additionally, Bulgaria views the Black Sea in a broader European and Euro-Atlantic context, aiming to promote regional cooperation in areas such as the economy, trade, and security.

Sofia and Bucharest joined the European Union, but this had a limited impact on their economic and trade relations with Russia. Both states are committed to being perceived as loyal members of the European Union. Since their accession to the Union in 2007, Bucharest and Sofia have sought membership in the passport-free Schengen area. After a long wait, on March 31, 2024, Romania and Bulgaria officially joined the Schengen zone,<sup>10</sup> bringing them closer to full EU integration. The imposition of sanctions against Russia in response to the war in Ukraine demonstrates Sofia and Bucharest's alignment with EU leadership, which complicates the Kremlin's efforts to maintain closer ties with them.

Other states in the region, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, are also pursuing the European path taken by Bulgaria and Romania, although they are still in the early stages of this journey. For instance, during the December 14-15, 2023 summit, the European Council made important decisions, including opening accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Georgia was granted candidate status, reflecting the EU's commitment to strengthening ties with Black Sea countries. However, the aspirations of Black Sea states, such as Ukraine and Georgia, to join the European Union and NATO understandably influence the Kremlin's threat perception.

In the background, joining the European Union means that states would be free from the tutelage and influence of Russia, which can be seen as a competition between Brussels and the Kremlin to secure as many allied countries as possible. Despite the war in Ukraine, which has caused a rift between the European Union and Russia, it is important to note that political dialogue between the two actors on security and political cooperation has not come to a complete halt. This is because both sides recognize that international issues require collaboration, even though the war of attrition in Ukraine continues.

---

<sup>8</sup> Sandres, "The Black Sea Region Caught Between East and West."

<sup>9</sup> "Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria," 2018, article 148, [https://mod.bg/bg/doc/strategicheski/20180330\\_Aktualizirana\\_SNSRB\\_2018.pdf](https://mod.bg/bg/doc/strategicheski/20180330_Aktualizirana_SNSRB_2018.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "Bulgaria and Romania Join the Schengen Area," Press Release, European Commission, March 30, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_1722](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1722).

<sup>11</sup> "European Leaders Decide to Open Accession Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in a Historic Summit," *Press Corner*, European Commission, December 18, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac\\_23\\_6711](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_23_6711).

Meanwhile, the Russia-Turkey relationship is generally regarded as complex. It can be described as a “handshake and smile” with no concrete open deals containing elements of cooperation and competition.<sup>12</sup> Ankara’s position explains this complexity: although the Erdogan government aligns with Moscow and considers it a close ally, it simultaneously does not recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea, partly in defense of the Muslim Crimean Tatars.<sup>13</sup> Ankara’s commitment to international organizations underscores the difference between Turkish and Russian interests. A concrete example is Turkey’s stance during the UN Security Council meeting in October 2022, where it sided with Western allies by voting against Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territories. Even heads of state have acknowledged that, despite being allies, their interests in the international arena differ, as seen in conflicts such as those in Libya, Syria, and between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Turkey, the region’s largest military power, serves as NATO’s southeastern cornerstone and a defensive bastion against Russia’s Black Sea positions.<sup>15</sup> This strategic role also explains why the Russian Federation views Turkey as a geopolitical rival in the Transcaucasian and Central Asian regions, considering it a “spearhead” of the West.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey is also eager to secure its regional leadership role through NATO, making its relationship with Russia particularly important. Both Turkey and Russia view the Black Sea as a top priority. Meanwhile, Turkey is closely monitoring the situation to ensure that the balance of power is maintained as much as possible. The Montreux Agreement allows Turkey to exclude other actors, including NATO, which plays directly into the Kremlin’s hands.<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that Turkey controls access to the Black Sea from the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits under the 1936 Montreux Convention. The Convention gives Turkey significant influence as the largest naval power in the Black Sea and guarantees Ankara complete sovereignty over the straits. It also imposes restrictions on the passage of warships through the Black Sea but does not prevent ships from returning to their home ports. Since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, Turkey has blocked these passages to all warships, not just those from Russia, thus preserving the naval balance of power. In this respect,

---

<sup>12</sup> Paul Stronski, “What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 20, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/20/what-is-russia-doing-in-black-sea-pub-84549>.

<sup>13</sup> Eshba, “Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea: Achievements, Problems, Prospects.”

<sup>14</sup> “Meeting with President of Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,” *President of Russia Official Website*, October 13, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69590>.

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations*, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Elina Treyger et al., “Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East,” Research Report RR-A597-3 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr-a597-3>.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Latschan, “The Black Sea’s Role in Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 13, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-black-sea-plays-a-key-role-in-russias-war-on-ukraine/a-66517223>.

Turkey holds a crucial geostrategic position due to its control over access to the Black Sea through international treaties. As the primary NATO member in the region, Turkey aims to serve as a trade hub for Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

Since the end of the Cold War, Ankara and Moscow have shared a common understanding of what the regional order should look like. Both actors regard the Black Sea as an area of privileged interests where the presence of non-regional actors is undesirable. Thus, for Ankara and Moscow, the Black Sea area represents a kind of informal condominium.<sup>18</sup> With Russia isolated from the West following its invasion of Ukraine, Putin has described “working with Turkey as not only pleasant but also safe.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the relationship between Putin and Erdogan should not be viewed solely as personal. Control over the straits has historically been a point of contention in Russian-Turkish relations, and a competitive dynamic still exists between Moscow and Ankara. Despite this, both actors prioritize maintaining the balance of power in the Black Sea region, as ensured by the Montreux Convention, and limiting the military presence of Western actors.

Turkey, with significant interests in both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, has ambitious plans to develop its maritime power further. Its interests in the Black Sea are shaped by control of the Turkish Straits, economic considerations, and aspirations to become a regional strategic energy hub. “Neither friend nor foe”<sup>20</sup> might best describe the current approach these two countries take toward each other.

Another important player influencing the stability and development of the region is a non-regional actor – China. Beijing has increased its regional presence by investing through its flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. Investments, particularly in infrastructure and ports in the Black Sea region, are viewed by Beijing as a critical means of securing access to European markets.<sup>21</sup>

It should be emphasized that China’s engagement will affect Russian influence in the region, and Beijing’s presence will likely lead to a recalibration of Russian behavior in the Black Sea Region.<sup>22</sup> Given that China regards the Black

---

<sup>18</sup> Daria Isachenko and Göran Swistek, “The Black Sea as Mare Clausum: Turkey’s Special Role in the Regional Security Architecture,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, SWP Comment 2023/C 33, June 21, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2023C33>.

<sup>19</sup> “Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club,” *President of Russia Official Website*, October 22, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.

<sup>20</sup> Vicken Cheterian, “Friend and Foe: Russia-Turkey Relations before and after the War in Ukraine,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 7 (2023): 1271-1294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2185443>.

<sup>21</sup> Deborah Sanders, “Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 415-436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2021.1935771>.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, “Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?”

Sea area as a component of the New Silk Road, Beijing could “exploit the advantageous position of the Black Sea ports to link the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the overland and sea-going sections of the New Silk Road, respectively, through a longitudinal and intermodal corridor in the heart of Europe.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, China’s growing presence provides an opportunity for Black Sea countries to modernize their infrastructure and attract foreign investment to stimulate their economic development. In this context, China has invested in several projects in Turkey, including highways, railways, and ports. Notably, Chinese companies constructed the Kumport container terminal in Istanbul,<sup>24</sup> one of the largest ports in Turkey. Another recent project is the Kvesheti-Kobi Road section in Georgia,<sup>25</sup> inaugurated in April 2024.

Such investments allow Beijing to enter European markets and the region’s major ports, facilitating the reorganization and shortening of trade routes. A notable example is the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, which opened in 2017 and directly connects Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia. This new link reduces journey times between China and Europe to around 15 days, which is more than twice faster than the sea route and less than half the price of air travel.<sup>26</sup> Of course, these infrastructure investments also enhance China’s proximity to and influence over the countries in the region.

China’s investments in the Black Sea region through the Silk Road project have made it an important player in the area. However, its current presence has the potential to impact the region’s future profoundly. It is, therefore, essential to recognize China’s growing importance and assess the implications of its investments on the political and economic landscape of the Black Sea region. While Russia and the West remain focused on the current situation—the ongoing war in Ukraine—China is seizing the opportunity to establish itself as a key regional player.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that China is a short-term ally but a long-term challenger for Russia. China seeks to protect and advance its interests in the Black Sea region despite Russia’s sensitivities, much as it does in Central Asia. In this regard, China has been steadily increasing its investment in Central Asia, effectively integrating itself into a region that has traditionally been

---

<sup>23</sup> Emanuele Scimia, “China, Russia and the EU’s Intermarium Bloc,” *EUobserver*, March 14, 2016, <https://euobserver.com/world/132635>.

<sup>24</sup> Yu Huichen, ed., “Kumport in Türkiye: An Example of Win-Win Cooperation among Chinese Enterprises,” *Belt and Road Portal*, November 5, 2022, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/287242.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Tian Shenyoujia, ed., “Major China-built Road Tunnel Completed in Georgia,” *Belt and Road Portal*, April 24, 2024, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/OK7KR2A8.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Nailia Bagirova, “Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey Launch ‘Silk Road’ Rail Link,” *Reuters*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/azerbaijan-railway/azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-launch-silk-road-rail-link-idUSL8N1N52XR/>.

a stronghold of Russia. This move has limited Russia's control and dominance in the area.

While the Belt and Road Initiative is often viewed from an economic perspective, the geostrategic implications of China's rising economic presence in the Belt and Road region are likely to have the greatest impact, particularly on Russia.<sup>27</sup> To achieve President Xi's vision for the great rejuvenation of the nation, Beijing has been employing a "grand strategy" embodied by the BRI. This strategy aims to ensure China's unimpeded rise to great power status by strategically aligning its economic situation with its security environment.<sup>28</sup>

Against this backdrop, Russia has proposed harmonizing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its integration initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. This proposal is seen as an effort to avoid a clash of interests with Beijing in the former Soviet republics. In 2015, China and Russia signed a joint statement on strengthening regional economic integration between the BRI and the EAEU, followed by the 2018 Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation, a document with 13 chapters, including customs cooperation, trade facilitation, intellectual property rights, departmental cooperation, e-commerce, and government procurement.<sup>29</sup> Aligning the development strategies of the BRI and the EAEU brings economic benefits for Russia and theoretically prevents a clash of interests with Beijing in the former Soviet republics, particularly those that are members of the EAEU. Moscow seeks to cooperate with Beijing to provide infrastructure support, accelerate Eurasia's regional integration, and strengthen its role as a bridge between Asia and Europe.

The key distinction between the BRI and the EAEU further highlights the economic differences. While the EAEU is an economic integration mechanism that aims to protect Russian-led Eurasia from outside competition, the Belt and Road Initiative is designed to leverage economic globalization through external connectivity. In light of these differences, while China has officially and temporarily been prepared to cede Russia a more prominent leadership role in many of the former Soviet republics, it has nonetheless actively, though quietly, advanced its own economic interests in key EAEU states under the BRI, such as in Belarus, as well as in the Black Sea region, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Thus, although geographically distant from the Black Sea, China has used investments to establish a stronger presence in the region. Consequently, its entry into the Black Sea region provides an opportunity for Western powers and regional countries

---

<sup>27</sup> Sanders, "Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?"

<sup>28</sup> Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Project Muse (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52595>.

<sup>29</sup> Li Ziguo, "Connecting the BRI with Eurasian Economic Union Is Strategic Choice of China, Russia," *Opinion*, China Institute of International Politics, April 26, 2019, [https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202007/t20200715\\_2538.html](https://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202007/t20200715_2538.html).

<sup>30</sup> Sanders, "Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?"



to reconsider their policies and address fundamental questions about the implications of their differences and rivalries.

To sum up, the Black Sea's geopolitical dynamics have undergone significant shifts. It is no surprise that both regional and non-regional actors are actively pursuing a range of geopolitical and geo-economic initiatives in the Black Sea, driven by their long-term strategic interests.

### **Why Does the Black Sea Matter to Russia?**

Over recent years, the situation in the Black Sea has undergone significant changes, driven not only by the latest geopolitical trends but also by shifts in the internal politics of regional countries. The most notable changes occurred after 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea. The peninsula's strategic location between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea makes it geographically important, in addition to housing one of the largest ports on the Black Sea, Sevastopol. The annexation of Crimea marked the beginning of a new political approach for the countries in the region and Europe, initiating policies based on perceiving Russia as a threat. The recent events in the Black Sea, particularly the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, are driving a new geopolitical order with a stronger emphasis on geoeconomics. Russia and the West have entered a period of prolonged confrontation with varying intensity.

The strategic importance of the Black Sea for Russia and its efforts to preserve its geopolitical influence are reflected in several key official documents, such as its Foreign Policy Concept, the 2015 Maritime Doctrine, the Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities up to 2030, and the National Security Strategy. These documents outline Russia's current policy in the Black Sea, which focuses on two main areas: political and economic.

First, Russia's military-political activity aims to prevent the involvement of non-regional actors or block the expansion of alliances in the Black Sea region. Specifically, the 2015 Naval Doctrine of the Russian Federation underscores Russia's goal to strengthen its maritime presence in the Black Sea and assert national sovereignty in the international arena. This document also highlights the operation of the Russian naval fleet in Ukrainian territory and waters and Sevastopol. Therefore, in its updated Maritime Doctrine of July 31, 2022, Russia declared the Black Sea and the adjacent Sea of Azov as critical areas of national interest.

Further, Russia's interest can be attributed to the strategic position of the Black Sea, which is the only sea that does not freeze in winter and provides direct access to the world's most important trade routes. Seaports like Murmansk in the north and Vladivostok in the east freeze for several months each year and are geographically distant from the Black Sea. This considerable distance not only impedes trade and the Russian fleet's ability to assert itself as a global power but also creates significant challenges, delays, and costs for reinforcements.

Consequently, a significant portion of Russian trade is conducted through seaports in the Black Sea, with the Kerch Strait—a 4.5 km channel linking the

Black Sea and the Sea of Azov—having a strategic importance for Russia. Russia views the control of the Kerch Strait as a critical security issue, as it provides direct access to the Don River and ensures control over the maritime domain, preventing other states from threatening Russia’s access to the Caucasus. Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has controlled both sides of the Kerch Strait, enabling the transfer of goods and oil.

It is important to recall the bilateral agreement between Moscow and Kyiv regarding the Sea of Azov, signed by Presidents Leonid Kuchma and Vladimir Putin on December 24, 2003.<sup>31</sup> The treaty entered into force in April 2004 following ratification by both countries’ parliaments, regulating access of both states to internal waters. It allowed free navigation for vessels of both nations and fostered cooperation in navigation, environmental protection, fisheries, and maritime safety. It also stipulated that disputes in these waters should be resolved through mutual agreement. However, the Ukrainian parliament denounced all treaties with the Kremlin concerning the Sea of Azov in February 2023. Subsequently, in June 2023, the Federation Council of Russia passed legislation to withdraw from the bilateral treaty, arguing that Ukraine no longer held littoral status over these waters following territorial changes as a result of the large-scale aggression.<sup>32</sup>

Moscow also views the Black Sea as a critical security buffer zone, protecting it from instability emanating further south. By maintaining a strong military presence in the region, Russia can deter NATO’s enlargement and assert its dominance over neighboring countries.<sup>33</sup> This is exemplified by Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Georgia, motivated by the desire to prevent these nations from joining NATO. The Kremlin justifies recent events in the Black Sea as measures taken to defend national interests and ensure future security.

Further, the identity of many Russians can be traced back to the fatal blow dealt to the Ottoman Empire, which allowed Russia to play a significant role in the Black Sea and beyond. Russia is also interested in maintaining strong ties with Türkiye, one of the most powerful countries in the region, and other prominent states. Russia’s maritime presence in the Black Sea enables it to project power into the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and beyond.

Russia’s history and identity are closely linked to the region, particularly through the Black Sea Fleet, established by Catherine the Great and based in Sevastopol, Crimea. Sevastopol, the headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, holds deep historical significance for Russians. It is sometimes referred to as a

---

<sup>31</sup> “Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Strait of Kerch,” *FAOLEX*, December 24, 2003, [www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/fr/c/LEX-FAOC045795/](http://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/fr/c/LEX-FAOC045795/).

<sup>32</sup> “Federal Law of June 13, 2023 No. 206-FZ ‘On the Denunciation of the Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait,’” *Garant.ru*, June 14, 2023, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/406929980/>.

<sup>33</sup> Stronski, “What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?”

“city of Russian glory” due to the bravery of those who died defending it from the Axis forces during WWII and the prolonged siege during the Crimean War. As a result, Russia values the Black Sea Fleet as a key instrument of its foreign and security policy and an enforcer of its maritime doctrine. The Black Sea Fleet is one of Russia’s four naval fleets. Its goal is regional power projection in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Beyond the Bosphorus, it is often supported by the Baltic Fleet, the Northern Fleet, and, on occasion, the Pacific Fleet.<sup>34</sup>

From a historical and cultural perspective, countries in the region, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, have ties with Russia that place them, in the Kremlin’s view, rightfully in Russia’s “sphere of influence.” The Kremlin sees any endeavor of these countries towards Euro-Atlantic alignment as a direct threat to Russia’s national interests. The Black Sea region and the opportunity it provides to connect Russia to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East are critical to Moscow’s national security concerns.

Thus, Russia’s strong historical ties to the Black Sea, its interests in developing Black Sea ports, and foreign policy objectives to protect its role and interests in the “near abroad” have all provided a significant impetus for the future development and expansion of the Black Sea Fleet. In this context, the operational approach of the Russian fleets demonstrates how the Kremlin views the area spanning from the North Atlantic and the Arctic to the Baltic and Black Sea as a unified geostrategic domain. Consequently, using various political, diplomatic, military, and economic tools is an integral part of Russia’s strategic thinking.

Secondly, the Black Sea is also crucial for Russia’s economic interests, as it serves as a gateway to bolster its position and influence. With access to the European market and beyond, the Kremlin can maintain and strengthen its economic and trade ties, making the Black Sea an essential part of Russia’s strategy for success. In this context, Russia has important economic interests in the Black Sea, as most Russian trade, including energy sources, is transferred by sea. It is estimated that nearly three-quarters of tankers crossing the Bosphorus either originate from or are heading to Russia. Hence, as the main energy operator, Moscow uses its control over gas distribution networks to convert economic influence into long-term political leverage over local governments. Before the war began, Russia supplied over 25 % of Europe’s total oil consumption,<sup>35</sup> with approximately one-third of this transported via tankers from the Black Sea. Oil from Azerbaijan is shipped from Baku to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk and then transported via tankers through the Turkish Straits. Ports like Novorossiysk are critical for Russian exports, particularly oil and grain. Control over

---

<sup>34</sup> Stronski, “What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?”

<sup>35</sup> Ksenia Borisocheva, “Analysis of the Oil- and Gas-Pipeline-Links between EU and Russia: An Account of Intrinsic Interests,” Centre for Russia and Eurasia, Athens, Greece, November 2007, [www.files.ethz.ch/isn/47031/Analysis%20Oil%20and%20Gas.pdf](http://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/47031/Analysis%20Oil%20and%20Gas.pdf).

the Black Sea region enables Moscow to secure trade routes and maintain influence over landlocked Central Asian countries that rely on these routes for exports.<sup>36</sup>

Russia has strengthened its position from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea through energy projects. For example, projects such as Blue Stream and Turkish Stream have been pivotal in maintaining influence over many European countries. The meeting between Putin and Erdogan on October 13, 2022, confirmed the Kremlin's aim to position Turkey as a central hub for the supply of Russian oil and gas to European countries. While a new Cold War is on the horizon, Moscow has already used and will continue to use its vast energy resources as political leverage to block NATO's further enlargement into Russia's Black Sea borderlands, particularly the accession of Ukraine and Georgia.

In peacetime, Russia and Ukraine accounted for nearly 24 % of global wheat exports, about 19 % of barley exports, and 60 % of sunflower oil exports.<sup>37</sup> Today, both nations increasingly target each other's merchant ships in the Black Sea. Disruptions to trade would have severe economic consequences for both countries. Ukraine still depends significantly on this route, although it has diversified its export routes and now ships only 40 % via the Black Sea.<sup>38</sup>

In summary, the Black Sea is crucial to the Kremlin's trade strategy, as Russia exports substantial quantities of grain, fertilizers, and other goods via Black Sea ports. Access to the Black Sea facilitates Russia's role as a global trade actor and supports ambitions to expand its influence in the Mediterranean and beyond.

The importance of the Black Sea for Russia is also linked to security, as it seeks to counter perceived threats from opponents. Recent events in the Black Sea, particularly the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, have undoubtedly led to a significant shift in the region's geopolitical order. It is also important to note that the involvement of non-regional actors could further impact the future of the Black Sea region. In conclusion, the Black Sea holds immense strategic value for Russia due to its military positioning, geopolitical dynamics involving NATO, energy transit routes, and critical economic interests. These elements shape Russia's policies and actions, reflecting its broader goals and security concerns.

## Conclusion

Globalization and recent international developments, such as COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and other regional conflicts, have changed the way states cooperate, ushering in a new world order and redefining geopolitics with a stronger focus on geo-economic and geostrategic issues. The war in Ukraine, in particular, is reshaping the geopolitical landscape, with the Black Sea region emerging as a focal point in global politics. This prominence is due to the fact that the countries

---

<sup>36</sup> Chris Miller, "Why the Black Sea?" *Black Sea Strategy Papers*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 23, 2017, [www.fpri.org/article/2017/01/why-the-black-sea/](http://www.fpri.org/article/2017/01/why-the-black-sea/).

<sup>37</sup> Latschan, "The Black Sea's Role in Russia's War on Ukraine."

<sup>38</sup> Latschan, "The Black Sea's Role in Russia's War on Ukraine."

involved in the war (Russia and Ukraine) both have access to its waters. With its strategic location, the Black Sea serves as a vital link between Europe and Asia, fostering economic, commercial, and socio-political ties with neighboring regions, including the Caucasus, the Caspian, and the Balkans. This unique geographical position makes it an area of interest for many countries, including major powers.

Historically, the Black Sea played a secondary geopolitical role until the early 2000s. However, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought the region back into the spotlight, both politically and in global media. The outcome of the ongoing war will likely shape the future geopolitical order in the Black Sea region.

The Kremlin has actively pursued foreign policy strategies to maintain its influence in the Black Sea over the past decade. The Black Sea is important to Russia as it provides access to warm waters, a critical feature absent from Russia's other maritime outlets. These waters do not freeze in winter, offering unrestricted access to major trade routes. Thus, Russia's geographical position and its reliance on the Black Sea underscore the region's strategic importance for regional stability and future developments.

Russia's interests in the current international landscape extend beyond economic and energy mechanisms to include military and political strategies. Moscow aims to minimize the influence of Western players by expanding political, military, and economic cooperation with the Black Sea countries. However, Russia has not yet established relations with these countries at the desired level. After the fall of communist regimes, Black Sea countries, like many former communist bloc nations, shifted their political direction. Bulgaria and Romania, for example, are now members of the European Union and NATO, aligning with Euro-Atlantic structures. The Black Sea policies of these two countries significantly influence their relations with Russia and other regional countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

In summary, the Kremlin justifies its war with Ukraine, which began in 2014, as a necessary measure to prevent a decisive shift in the strategic balance in favor of NATO. This response was driven by the potential accession of Ukraine or other former Soviet republics to NATO, as well as the desire to deter other former Soviet republics from even considering closer alignment with the West. Thus, the Kremlin's strong opposition to NATO and EU expansion toward additional Black Sea states is among the key reasons for the conflict between Kyiv and Moscow. Moscow has used, and will continue to use, its vast energy and economic resources as political leverage to block further NATO enlargement on Russia's Black Sea borders.

Moreover, Russia enjoys a significant geopolitical advantage in the competition with the West for strategic influence over the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and inland Central Asia. Consequently, Russia's role in this region will remain influential, owing to its geographic location and other historical, religious, and cultural factors that underpin its presence. Above all, energy dynam-

ics, economic interests, military presence, geopolitical rivalries, regional alliances, and environmental and human security concerns will determine the ability of great powers to maintain a presence in the Black Sea area in the future. The influence of major powers like the European Union, China, Russia, and regional actors such as Türkiye is continually shifting due to these strategic considerations.

To prevent conflict escalation and restore peace and stability, any approach in this region must prioritize diplomatic commitment and constructive engagement.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

### Acknowledgment

*Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 22, 2023, is supported by the United States government.

### About the Author

Dr. **Noela Mahmutaj** is a lecturer and researcher at the Institute of European Studies, University of Tirana. She holds a PhD in Political Science from the School of International Relations at Saint-Petersburg State University. Her research interests include geopolitics, the history of European integration, the Western Balkans, the Black Sea region, and Central and Eastern Europe.

*E-mail:* mahmutajnoela@gmail.com

### Bibliography

- “Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Strait of Kerch,” *FAOLEX*, December 24, 2003, <https://www.fao.org/faolex/results/details/fr/c/LEX-FAOC045795/>.
- “Bulgaria and Romania Join the Schengen Area,” *Press Release*, European Commission, March 30, 2024, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_1722](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1722).
- “European Leaders Decide to Open Accession Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova in a Historic Summit,” *Press Corner*, European Commission, December 18, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac\\_23\\_6711](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ac_23_6711).
- “Federal Law of June 13, 2023 No. 206-FZ ‘On the Denunciation of the Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on Cooperation in the Use of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait’,” *Garant.ru*, June 14, 2023, <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/406929980/>.
- “Kremlin: US Missile Defense System in Romania Threatens Russia’s Security,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/orutp-romania-nato-site-idRUKCNOY31AV/>. – in Russian
- “Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club,” President of Russia Official Website, October 22, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.
- “Meeting with President of Turkiye Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” President of Russia Official Website, October 13, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69590>.
- “Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria,” 2018, [https://mod.bg/bg/doc/strategicheski/20180330\\_Aktualizirana\\_SNSRB\\_2018.pdf](https://mod.bg/bg/doc/strategicheski/20180330_Aktualizirana_SNSRB_2018.pdf).
- Bagirova, Nailia, “Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey Launch ‘Silk Road’ Rail Link,” *Reuters*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/azerbaijan-railway/azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-launch-silk-road-rail-link-idUSL8N1N52XR/>.
- Borisocheva, Ksenia, “Analysis of the Oil- and Gas-Pipeline-Links between EU and Russia: An Account of Intrinsic Interests,” Centre for Russia and Eurasia, Athens, Greece, November 2007, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/47031/Analysis%20Oil%20and%20Gas.pdf>.
- Cheterian, Vicken, “Friend and Foe: Russia-Turkey Relations before and after the War in Ukraine,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 34, no. 7 (2023): 1271-1294, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2023.2185443>.
- Cohen, Saul Bernard, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

- Eshba, Efrem, "Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea: Achievements, Problems, Prospects," *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta* 6, no. 33 (2013): 42-48, <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2013-6-33-42-48>. – in Russian
- Ferguson, Iain, "Between New Spheres of Influence: Ukraine's Geopolitical Misfortune," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2017): 285-306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1402299>.
- Grigas, Agnia, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).
- Huichen, Yu, ed., "Kumport in Türkiye: An Example of Win-Win Cooperation among Chinese Enterprises," *Belt and Road Portal*, November 5, 2022, <https://eng.yida.iyilu.gov.cn/p/287242.html>.
- Isachenko, Daria, and Göran Swistek, "The Black Sea as Mare Clausum: Turkey's Special Role in the Regional Security Architecture," Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), SWP Comment 2023/C 33, June 21, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.18449/2023C33>.
- Latschan, Thomas, "The Black Sea's Role in Russia's War on Ukraine," *Deutsche Welle*, August 13, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-black-sea-plays-a-key-role-in-russias-war-on-ukraine/a-66517223>.
- Miller, Chris, "Why the Black Sea?" *Black Sea Strategy Papers*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 23, 2017, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/01/why-the-black-sea/>.
- Pavliuk, Oleksandr, and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, *The Black Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building* (New York: Routledge eBooks, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315498256>.
- Raik, Kristi, "The Ukraine Crisis as a Conflict over Europe's Political, Economic and Security Order," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2019): 51-70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1414046>.
- Rolland, Nadège, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Project Muse (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 2017, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/52595>.
- Sanders, Deborah, "Can China Promote Stability in the Black Sea Region?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 21, no. 3 (2021): 415-436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2021.1935771>.
- Sanders, Deborah, *Maritime Power in the Black Sea* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- Sandres, Deborah, "The Black Sea Region Caught Between East and West," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 202-225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2021.1990561>.



- Scimia, Emanuele, "China, Russia and the EU's Intermarium Bloc," *EUobserver*, March 14, 2016, <https://euobserver.com/world/132635>.
- Shenyoujia, Tian, ed., "Major China-built Road Tunnel Completed in Georgia," *Belt and Road Portal*, April 24, 2024, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/OK7KR2A8.html>.
- Stonski, Paul, "What Is Russia Doing in the Black Sea?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 20, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/20/what-is-russia-doing-in-black-sea-pub-84549>.
- Treyger, Elina, et al., "Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East," Research Report RR-A597-3 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr-a597-3>.
- Ziguo, Li, "Connecting the BRI with Eurasian Economic Union Is Strategic Choice of China, Russia," *Opinion*, China Institute of International Politics, April 26, 2019, [www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202007/t20200715\\_2538.html](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/COMMENTARIES/202007/t20200715_2538.html).