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Black Sea Security Under Strain: Why the Stakes Are Higher After the Nagorno-Karabakh Ceasefire?

IVANNA MACHITIDZE

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13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge

For more information, please visit
www.gip.ge



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ivanna Machitidze obtained her MA degree in International Relations and European Studies from Central European University (Hungary) and the PhD degree from Donetsk National University (Ukraine) with specialization in Comparative Political Systems. Ivanna is the Assoc. Prof. of International Relations at the Politics & Diplomacy School (New Vision University, NVU). Since January 2019 Dr. Machitidze is the Accreditation Expert of educational programs in the field of Political Science and International Relations. Her research interests include regionalism and democratization-related issues with a focus on Eastern Europe and Russia.

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The autumn war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the outcomes of the ceasefire turned unexpectedly into a game-changer, with implications far beyond the South Caucasus. In the aftermath, the escalation of events created long lasting shifts in the region's dynamics. Russia's brokerage of the truce after hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia marked a "diplomatic victory", enhancing its position as a leading, and what is more alarming, the only viable peacemaker in the area. Moreover, an increasingly belligerent Turkey, now in tandem with a pragmatic Azerbaijan, will lead to far-reaching consequences for the wider Black Sea security architecture. Under the circumstances of the West's absence and Russia's militarization of the Black Sea, the littoral states will be more sceptical about initiating any lasting regional cooperation projects. This policy paper argues that unless Russia's assertive stance is countered by commensurate action of the EU and NATO, the Nagorno-Karabakh agenda post November 2020 creates a worrying precedent for the EaP partner countries, particularly Georgia and Ukraine. They are left with no other option than to adopt a pragmatic stance, maneuvering between Russia and the West, and only formally sticking to the Euro Atlantic vector, failing to invest into much needed reforms. On a long-term perspective, the risk is that the Black Sea and South Caucasus will see protracted instability, which would undermine any initiatives for cooperation.

Key words: the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire, the Black Sea security, "frozen conflicts", NATO, EU, Russia.

The November 10th 2020 ceasefire agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, drawn up under Russia's patronage, has once more undermined attempts to forecast potential changes in the balance of power in the South Caucasus and the wider region. [i] Yet the effects of any shift in the distribution of capabilities is of utmost importance for the larger geopolitical outlook of the Caspian, Central Asian, and the Black Sea regions. Apart from redrawing the map of Azerbaijan and Armenia-controlled territories in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas, possible consequences for regional trade relations, infrastructure projects and transport routes, and the new geopolitics have dramatically changed the agenda for regional players.

The outcome of the autumn confrontation is a reversal of the local winner and loser roles, with Azerbaijan and Armenia switching positions for the first time in three decades. Yerevan risks sliding into perpetual domestic political deadlock, suffering from "capitulation syndrome", which is resulting in a crisis of trust among the population towards Armenia's ruling elites. Turkey has carved out a limited role in the post-war settlement, however its priorities lie far beyond the South Caucasus as it wants to strengthen its regional leadership and bargaining posture in the wider area, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa. The ambitious Istanbul Canal project, linking the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, caused heated discussions that this could increase militarization of the Black Sea and possibly diminish the importance of the Montreux Convention for the region's security architecture (Middle East Monitor 2021).

Azerbaijan, with far more modest foreign policy goals, owing to its pragmatic balancing strategies and heavy investment on modernizing its military, managed to regain seven territories adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh as well as part of that territory. Although the January 11th trilateral statement promised to unblock economic and transport communications in the area, this remain vague (RFE/RL 2021). At the same time, the presence of a Russian peacekeeping force along the contact line in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin Corridor casts shadow over Baku's victorious stance and limits its capacity to exercise its own vision on a conflict settlement without the Kremlin's approval.

Finally, the US and France, Russia's co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk group, which were tasked with the mission of putting forward a working peace plan for the post-conflict agenda, fell short on offering a lasting solution. The West's inaction in the region further contributes to the insecurity concerns of its junior partners in the Black Sea area - Ukraine and Georgia. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh coincided with Georgia's October 2020 parliamentary elections and its continuing political crisis, further reiterating concerns over Tbilisi's long-term prospects of overcoming its stagnant condition as a "hybrid regime", with a democratic façade that conceals a lack of judicial transparency, increasing political polarization, the dominance of informal political players and distrust among the population as purported democratic institutions fail to deliver on major promises.

Hence, this policy paper aims to discuss the complex agenda that the post-armistice outcome brings to the Black Sea region. The analysis proceeds as follows: The Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement is assessed in the broader context of Russia's approach towards the European security architecture; the analysis then addresses the multilateral cooperation initiatives in the Black Sea area and their uncertain perspectives in the light of NATO's and EU's lack of engagement. Discussion of the post-ceasefire agenda for Ukraine and Georgia follows. Finally, the concluding part offers recommendations for international stakeholders and the Georgian Government.

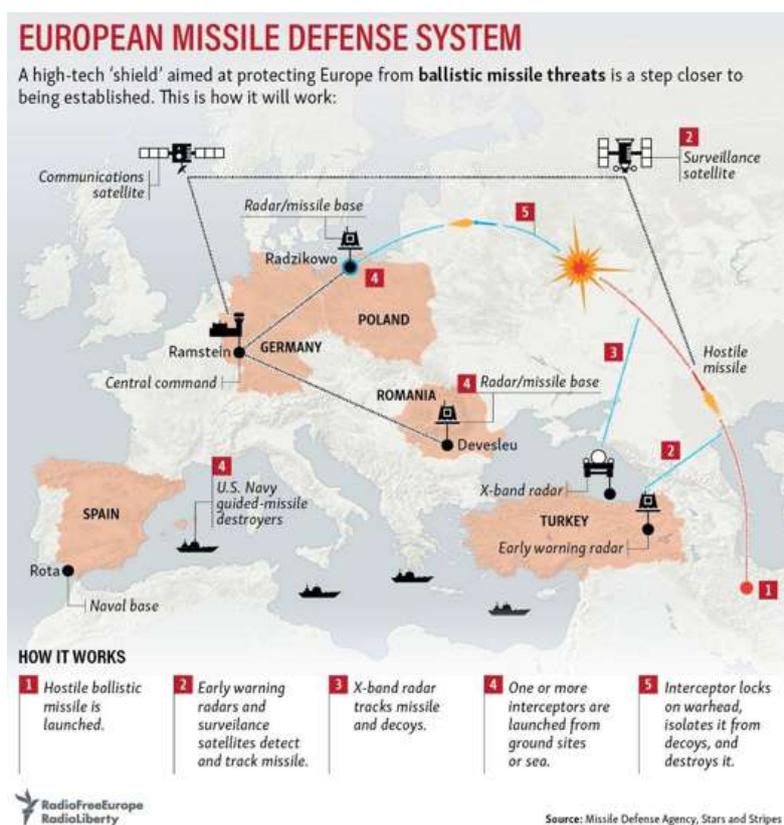
RUSSIA'S GAMBIT? HOW THE KREMLIN'S "SENIOR PEACEMAKER" ROLE ENHANCES ITS POSITION IN THE BLACK SEA

Russia's View of the Security Architecture in Europe and Implications for Black Sea Security

Understanding Russia's vision of the security architecture in the region is key to assessing developments post the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Creating a "favorable external environment" stands out as the core priority of Russia's foreign policy (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016). Currently, along with the US, China, India and Saudi Arabia, it is already among the five largest military spenders in the world (SIPRI Fact Sheet, 2020). "Insecurity syndrome" and the decreasing vulnerability of its borders (see Figure 1) have been haunting Kremlin's regional policy behavior. [ii] In this respect, the following implications should receive attention:

- First, the West's lack of political will to be embroiled in the protracted and "frozen" conflicts which have emerged since the demise of the USSR contributes to the Kremlin's "senior peacemaker" status and unilateral engagement in the protracted post-Soviet conflicts.

Figure 1. European Missile Defense System



- Secondly, Russia's view of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as a legitimate security and stability provider in Europe was undermined by the NATO-led operation in the former Yugoslavia and the inability of the OSCE to prevent that taking place. At the same time, the OSCE is currently regarded by Russia as the only regional forum where, from the Kremlin's perspective, military security issues and arms reduction can still be discussed as part of the dialogue with the West. [iii]
- Thirdly, the geographical location of conflicts to the East and West of the Black Sea mean that any change in the status quo pose complex security challenges for each littoral state. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia's de-facto coastline increased to 25% of the Black Sea's total seashore and now almost equals Turkey's share.

- Fourthly, the Black Sea area stands out as a key to Russia's "great power" identity. It serves as a springboard for Russia's dominance in the Near Abroad and increasing presence in the Middle East and North Africa. Transport of Russia's oil to the Mediterranean takes place through the Bosphorus and the Black sea. Apart from being the key to military domination in the area, having annexed Crimea, Russian can use it as a platform for humanitarian aid shipments from Sevastopol and Novorossiysk to Syria.
- Fifthly, the Sea of Azov, shared by Ukraine and Russia, now risks turning into "a Russian lake". The Kremlin stands out as the sole owner of the Volga-Don Canal linking the Caspian Sea with the Sea of Azov. The Canal is the route for Russian warships travelling between the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov, while transportation of US and NATO's military shipments through the Canal is forbidden (Sudostroenie 2018).
- Finally, investing in an increasing number of military exercises (Figure 2) and elevating tensions in the Black Sea area - the Kremlin's recent announced that it was restricting maritime traffic for foreign ships for six months - is justified by Russia as a response to NATO and US undertaking similar actions (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2021).

Figure 2. Russia's Military exercises in the Black Sea – 2019



Hence, the Black Sea's strategic importance stands out as an area where the interests of Russia and the West clash, resulting in a high risk that a miscalculation could result in full-scale confrontation.

After the Ceasefire. Kremlin-led Rewards Distribution: Turkey Still a Junior Partner, Iran – an Outsider?

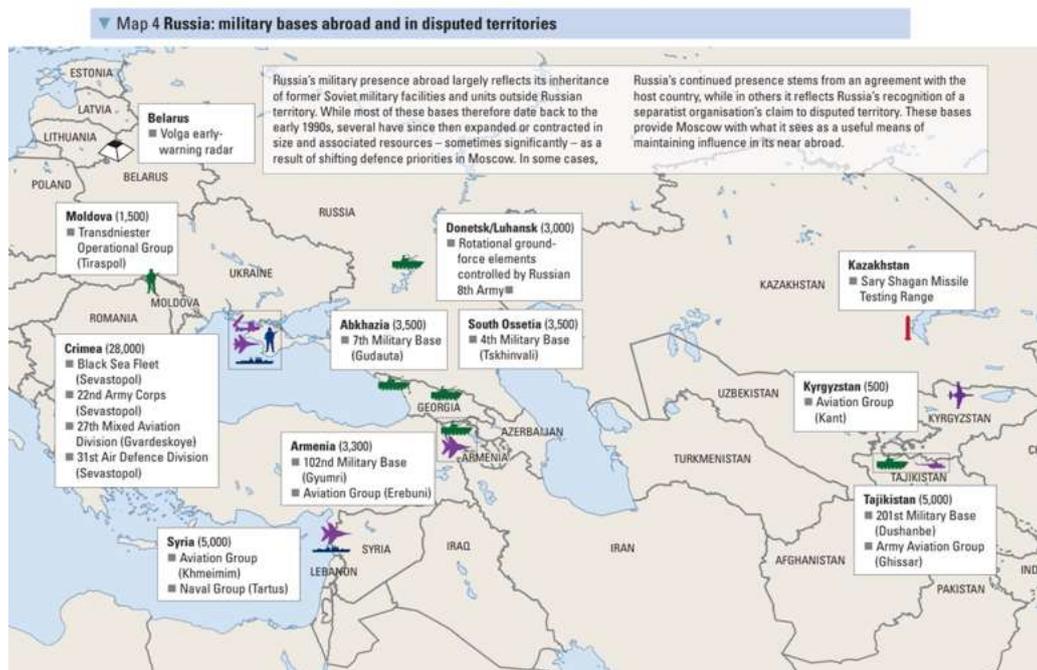
Russia's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution since the 1994 ceasefire, had been based on the principle of non-recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh's independence, which left room for pragmatic relations with both sides of the conflict, Armenia as well as Azerbaijan. Hence, when the stakes rose Turkey and Iran stayed on the margins; Turkey due to its support for Azerbaijan and policy of isolation on Armenia.

08 Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Ankara's contribution with Azerbaijan has been long-lasting military cooperation with the aim of that modernizing the army and its organizational capabilities, the result accounting for a significant share Azerbaijan's victory in the recent confrontation. Unlike Iran, Turkey thus earned itself stakeholder status, although a junior one, in the post-conflict arrangements. Although postponing discussion on the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh, Dmitri Medvedev, the Deputy Chairman of Russia's Security Council, reiterated that Russian-Turkish cooperation was of foremost importance for the resolution of the conflict (Anadolu Agency 2021). Hence, the joint Russian-Turkish Observation Center, tasked with the mission of monitoring the cease-fire in Nagorno-Karabakh, was launched in Agdam. The major question, though, remains unresolved, namely the lack of clarity of Russia-brokered ceasefire provisions as well as the mandate for its mission of 1,960 peacekeepers to oversee a secure passage through the Lachin corridor (De Waal 2021). Growing criticism is voiced by watchdog organizations, such as "Reporters Without Borders", of the denial of entry for foreign reporters to Nagorno-Karabakh by Russian soldiers (Reporters Without Borders 2021).

In the case of Iran, which has been attempting to follow a policy of giving formal support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity but developing ties with Armenia. In turn, Armenia lobbied for Iran in the Eurasian Economic Union, in particular regarding joining the organization. If this became a reality, it could further provoke geopolitical competition in the region (Jamestown 2021). Since the Autumn military confrontation, Tehran has been proactively pushing its peace plan for Nagorno-Karabakh and has offered to take part in reconstructing the seven districts regained by Azerbaijan. Joe Biden's presidency, the US Administration's intent on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, and the potential relaxation of sanctions would contribute to this stance (Voa News, 2021). At the same time, Tehran is wary of any potential strengthening of Israel's influence in Azerbaijan through enhanced military and surveillance cooperation. Another barrier to Iran increasing its profile in the post-war settlement is the Kremlin's lack of inclination to give it a stake in post-conflict resolution (RIA Novosti 2020).

Apart from overseeing the post-conflict distribution of rewards, Russia's other success is discreditation of the democratization-security nexus which had been promoted by Nikol Pashinyan since he became Prime Minister of Armenia in May 2018. His failure to deliver reforms and to prevent open conflict with Azerbaijan, the inability to sustain control over territorial gains and keep Nagorno-Karabakh under its security umbrella, all resulted in Yerevan paying a high price. Slipping into Moscow's grasp and being isolated by Azerbaijan and Turkey is now contributing to "geopolitical vulnerability" for Armenia. Any hope that loss of the ability to make independent decision would be the payoff for protection under Russia's umbrella from Azerbaijan and Turkey's revisionist stance did not come true. [iv]

While the EU-Armenia Comprehensive Enhanced Partnership Agreement came into force on March 1, 2021, the chances of it acting as a game-changer in Yerevan's domestic political deadlock seem unlikely since the West has shown itself unwilling to take any active part in resolving the conflict. Armenia risks diminution of its regional status to that of another Russian stronghold in the South Caucasus, alongside the existing military installations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. [v] As for the Kremlin, strategically it has enhanced its platform for supporting operations in Syria (see Figure 3) and involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Figure 3. Russia's Military Bases Abroad

Source: <https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2020/09/22/Russia-and-china-report-ii/>

THE POST-NOVEMBER AGENDA – HAS THE WEST EXITED BLACK SEA SECURITY?

OSCE Minsk Group and NATO after the Nagorno-Karabakh Confrontation – the Classics of Distancing

The 2nd Nagorno-Karabakh war has once more reaffirmed the limited capacity of the OSCE Minsk Group to effectively implement its status as a key peacemaker in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. [vi] When asked, why the OSCE, and US with France as Co-Chairs of the Minsk Group, were left on the sidelines in negotiations of the November 10th ceasefire agreement, Vladimir Putin justified the decision on grounds of lack of time and the urgency of the situation and that coordinating with the OSCE would be too protracted (RBK.ru.2020).

Another problem in the OSCE's effective contribution to the conflict resolution efforts, even if legitimized by the Kremlin, was the diverging stance of Azerbaijan and Armenia towards its future mandate. Criticism was voiced by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev, who is openly skeptical towards OSCE's Minsk group capacity to resolve conflicts (Daily Sabah 12.12.2020). In contrast, Armenia has been stressing that any final political solution to the conflict was legitimate solely in the framework of participation of the OSCE-led Minsk Group (RFE/RL's Armenian Service, 2021). Moreover, Baku had been viewing France's contribution to the co-Chairmanship of the group with suspicion, due to its large Armenian diaspora, accusations of a pro-Armenian stance and the vote in the French Senate resolution aiming to push for recognition of Nagorno Karabakh (AP News, 2020).

10 As for NATO, the organization has distanced itself from the Nagorno-Karabakh post-ceasefire settlement. The General Secretary of NATO Jens Stoltenberg clearly drew border lines, stating that NATO was not part of the conflict, therefore fully supporting the Minsk Group-led conflict resolution format (NATO 2020). This statement hardly fitted into a recently issued “NATO 2030 – United for a New Era” report recognizing Russia as the threat to security in the region. It further called for larger contributions to the defense and deterrence capabilities of its members and partner states.

The major criticism of NATO refers to its failure to offer a protective umbrella for the Black Sea, surrounded as it is by NATO member-states from the West and South and NATO partners Georgia and Ukraine. More precisely, while awarding the Baltic States area, including Poland, the status of Enhanced Forward Presence, the Black Sea area was offered only the Tailored Forward Presence. [vii] [viii] So far, only Romania, both an EU and a NATO member, has been pursuing an assertive stance towards Russia’s militarization of the region. As part of stepping up the country’s air defense, Bucharest obtained its first Patriot surface-to-air missile system from the US in September 2020. The system includes intercept and cruise aircraft as well as ballistic missiles. By 2022 three more defence systems will be received, indicating a strengthening of Romania’s defense capabilities (Barbera 2020). Unlike Romania, Bulgaria prefers to hold a low-profile stance when it comes to acting against Russia’s interests in the Black Sea. Sofia avoids open criticism and continues to hold the middle ground as roughly a quarter of Bulgaria’s economy is linked to Russia (BBC 2016). [ix] Hence, Bulgaria rejected Romania’s offer on forming a Romanian-Bulgarian-Turkish fleet in the Black Sea (SIPRI 2018). The pace of Russia’s unilateral militarization of the region tests the Black Sea countries’ regional cooperation on their economies and trade, support of democratic reforms and good governance.

Multilateral Cooperation in the Black Sea: Too Many Initiatives – Too Little Effect

In spite of the implementation of numerous regional initiatives in the Black Sea basin, these have fallen short of building any common strategic vision or security plan.

The danger for the Black Sea region is recognition as the that it is the main transit route linking the EU with the Caspian countries without achieving any progress on regional cooperation. Turkey and Romania stand out as key initiators of two major regional initiatives - the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Black Sea Naval Force. [x] The latter has witnessed gradual erosion after Russia’s rejected its participation, along with Georgia, in drills and then, after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, finally leaving the initiative in 2015.

Alongside those the Black Sea Synergy, supported by Romania, lacks capacity as well as funding, providing for only limited effect on good governance, economic cooperation and sustainability, environmental issues, border management, combatting trafficking as well as frozen conflicts. Activation of the Eastern Partnership by the EU made the Black Sea Synergy’s future even more uncertain. Nevertheless, promoting Black Sea regional cooperation still became the No. 1 task for Romania throughout its Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2019. [xi]

Another ambitious initiative, of which Romania is the cornerstone and that has solid backing from the US, is the Three Seas Initiative, a 2015 project aiming to enhance the infrastructure in the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Sea countries that are members of the EU. The US has already agreed to invest roughly one billion euros to help it to function. An additional goal is strengthening of the capacity of the region as a stronghold against Russia and China’s presence, both envisaging the Central and Eastern European countries as of strategic importance to their trade and transport partnerships in the region.

11 The most vocal proponents of the Initiative, Poland and Romania (the first two to invest in its fund,) are also the two actors pushing for diversity of cooperation projects (Emerging-Europe 2020). In the Black Sea area, Turkey and Azerbaijan are Romania's only strategic partner countries (Romania's MFA 2020). Clearly, Bucharest prioritizes its own energy security and avoidance of dependence on the Kremlin-controlled gas and oil pipelines. Hence, Azerbaijan's increased leverage after Nagorno-Karabakh Autumn war potentially creates opportunities for a push from Bucharest for enhanced cooperation with Baku, with which there has been a strategic partnership since 2009.

Figure 4. The Azerbaijan – Georgia – Romania Interconnector Project (AGRI)



Source: Eurasian Research Institute <https://eurasian-research.org/publication/current-situation-over-the-agri-project-azerbaijan-georgia-romania-interconnector/>

Azerbaijan stands out as the key part of Romania's prospective energy cooperation with Central Asia, with Georgia serving as a key transit partner. While the Southern Gas Corridor is to be inaugurated shortly, exporting gas from the 2nd Stage of the Shah Deniz field, [xii] Bucharest has initiated the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Romania Interconnector (AGRI), which is to be finalized in 2024-2026. The components of the Southern Corridor to the EU further extends it to the Balkans and Central Europe. Azerbaijan's SOCAR is one of the key energy providers in Romania, in terms of both oil and gas purchases. Romania, in turn, looks forward to obtaining access to Caspian Sea hydrocarbons' extraction, both onshore and offshore. Although under diverse formats Black Sea cooperation has benefited from the increased attention of the EU and NATO, both Romania or Poland would hold back on outcomes that seriously challenged Russia's assertiveness in the region. However, unless constructed systematically with thorough planning and backed by adequate funding, these initiatives risk being outplayed by the Kremlin.

UKRAINE'S LEARNING OF LESSONS FROM AZERBAIJAN AND GEORGIA'S CHALLENGES OF MANEUVERING

"The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict showed that Turkish weapons are the weapons of victory," argued Denis Moskalik of the National Institute for Strategic Studies (Daily Sabah 2020). The outcomes of the Nagorno-Karabakh November 10th 2020 ceasefire have been closely observed by both Ukraine and Georgia. As NATO partners they are currently under major pressure due to security threats from Russia's enhanced position after the ceasefire agreement as well as threats that the lasting process of Black Sea militarization entail. In spite of the common challenges ahead, Kyiv and Tbilisi are on different trajectories in terms of the recent confrontation. While Kyiv openly praises Azerbaijan's success in regaining control over the areas adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh as well as its southern parts, Tbilisi is struggling to maintain a neutral stance, maneuvering in the new and unfavorable geopolitical position in which it finds itself on both a short- and long-term perspective. At the same time, the alarming implication which Azerbaijan's victory and the West's distancing brings home for both Ukraine and Georgia, is that a pragmatic stance and investment in partnership with the West, (although rejecting participation in Euro-Atlantic agreements and simultaneously promoting cooperation with Russia), eventually pays off.

Beginning of a New "Strategic Depth" for the Ukraine-Turkey-Azerbaijan Partnership?

After the 2014 Crimea annexation and Russia's aggression in the East of Ukraine, Kyiv has been intensifying military cooperation with Turkey. Ukraine may be eager to learn lessons from Azerbaijan in the hope of regaining the occupied parts of Donbas, if not all its lost territories, in the long-term. As Russia's diplomatic victory is the major outcome of the Autumn war, and the West supports deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the area, this may entail crucial consequences for Kyiv. Namely, the Kremlin may push for a similar peacekeeping mission in Donbas, after which regaining control over Donbas on Ukraine's terms would become even more problematic for Kyiv (Euromaidanpress 2020). Furthermore, Russia's troops on the Crimean Peninsula already number 32,5 thousand and diverse types of weapons are deployed there (Ukrinform January 2021).

In spite of NATO's criticism and sanctions by the US, Turkey proceeded with testing of Russian S-400 surface-to-air defense systems, which have a range of roughly 400 km (Reuters 2020). However, while being the ally of the West, Ukraine has been investing in cooperation with Turkey. Both countries are on the same footing in terms of the issue of the Crimea, with Ankara not recognizing its annexation but avoiding coming into conflict with Moscow. Hence, after 2014 Turkey and Ukraine intensified military cooperation, with the deals on purchases of warships, UAVs and all types of turbine engines (Official Website of the President of Ukraine 2020).

In August 2020 Ukraine and Turkey signed a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ukrainian Ministry of Strategic Industries and the Turkish State Defense Industry Agency (Asia Times 2020). In 2019 Kyiv and Ankara agreed on the deals on production and technology transfers of naval Ada-class corvettes under Turkey's MILGEM (National Ship) marine platforms project and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV), guaranteeing Azerbaijan's territorial successes in Nagorno-Karabakh and adjacent areas (Asiatimes 2020). Currently, both countries are already involved in more than 30 projects in the military-technical realm (Ukrinform, January 9th, 2021). President Volodymyr Zelensky has already announced a major deal, followed by Ukraine's President's announcement of an intent to construct two new naval bases to protect its position in the Black Sea area. [xiii] In exchange, Ukraine has agreed to transfer certain space technologies to Turkey.

- 13 Both countries carry out consultations and coordinate cooperation through a "2+2" format (ministries of foreign affairs and defense). The Ukraine-Turkey Intergovernmental Trade Commission contributes to enhancing the economic partnership between the two countries. Ukraine even reiterated its willingness to conclude a comprehensive free trade area agreement with Turkey (Ukrinform 2020). Finally, Ankara and Kyiv cooperate closely in the realm of infrastructure improvement for displaced Crimean Tatars after the annexation of Crimea.



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (L) and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Source: Asia Times.

Georgia – Is Maneuvering the Sole Option?

While Ukraine may be possibly looking towards the Turkey-Azerbaijan partnership as a role model for own potential revision of the post-2014 geopolitical reality, investing heavily in cooperation with Turkey, the long-term outcomes of the ceasefire agreement pose considerable challenges for Georgia.

As the beginning of the post-parliamentary elections political crisis coincided with the six week-long war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Tbilisi faces an urgent need to invest in adapting to a new status quo as well as the existing asymmetric threats to its national interests and territorial integrity. Indeed, Georgia's President's Salome Zourabichvili's reference to the ceasefire agreement as the beginning of "a new era" should be followed by an adequate assessment of the long-term implications the country is yet to experience (Interpressnews.ge 2020). Georgia attempted to present itself as neutral, forbidding military cargo transit through its territory for Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as offering contribution to the ceasefire negotiations (Civil.ge 2020).

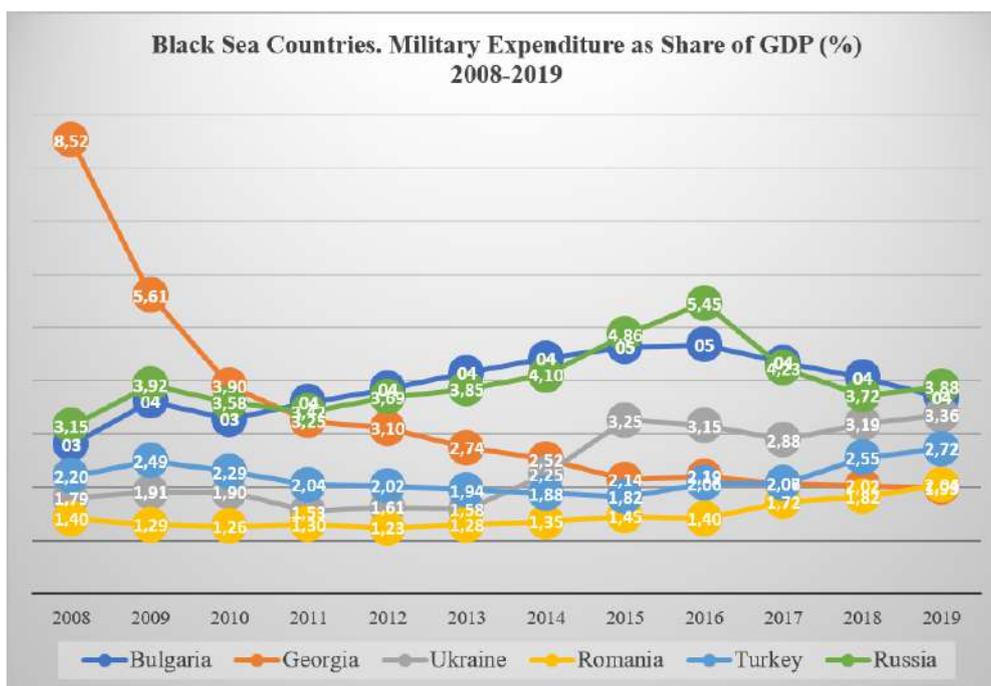
Nevertheless, the January 11th follow-up to the November 10th ceasefire agreement does not contain any mention of Georgia, apart from the vague reference to "neighbors" when discussing the unblocking of transport communications and thus the new routes linking Azerbaijan, Iran, Armenia and Turkey. In particular, Armenia's potential railway and automobile connection with Russia through the territory of Azerbaijan, and latter's linking to Turkey through the corridor to its Nakhichevan enclave, are discussed (Jam-News 2021).

14 Hence, Georgia's leverage as the main transit land route may be weakened on a mid- to long-term perspective. This depends on Baku's and Yerevan's pragmatic stance and their willingness to put aside deeply entrenched contradictions for the sake of economic gains. At the same time, Georgia's status as the key transit route for transporting Caspian hydrocarbons' transportation to the EU is less uncertain, as constructing pipelines through the territories of Armenia and Azerbaijan does not guarantee an uninterrupted flow of supplies. [xiv] In addition, Turkmenistan has also been contributing to developing connections with the Black Sea and sees Georgia as the key part of the freight route to Romania (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania 2019).

Nevertheless, Tbilisi's image as a reliable partner and possessing a favorable geographical location would bring minimal dividends, as Georgia does not have its own strategy as a Black Sea actor. The National Security Concept needs to be updated to adequately reflect Georgia's ambitions for increasing its profile on Black Sea cooperation platforms. Partnerships in the frameworks of the GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) are mentioned only in the context of bilateral relations with Ukraine and Turkey. No Black Sea regional initiatives are mentioned as part of multilateral cooperation forums (National Security Concept 2011).

In this light, a lack of strategies outlining Tbilisi's priorities in the area of security and economic cooperation between the Black Sea littoral states weaken its capacity as a reliable partner for NATO. Still, Georgia's contribution to the organization is praised on a regular basis by the organization's leadership (NATO 2020). [xv] Gen. Philip Breedlove, a former NATO supreme commander in Europe, has been one of the staunchest advocates of the need for Western partners to support Georgia's efforts to facilitate conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh (Agenda.ge 2020).

Figure 5.



Source: World Bank (worldbank.org)

15 At the same time, Russia's assertive stance in the Black Sea limits the benefits Tbilisi obtains from cooperation with NATO (Kakachia et.al. 2020). [xvi] Georgia has not been contributing enough to diversifying its arms supplies (relying mainly on US and France). In contrast, throughout the recent decade, Azerbaijan has been most successfully diversifying its military purchases from Turkey, Russia, Israel and Spain. (Armenia is solely dependent on purchases from Russia (SIPRI 2020).) As Figure 5 shows, the worrying trend is that Georgia remains the only country in the Black Sea and South Caucasus in which military spending has been constantly decreasing, whereas the range of threats it is encountering are going in the opposite direction.

Moreover, Tbilisi weakened its posture when it reformed the Black Sea Navy, turning it into a Coastal Guard lacking any capability to respond to provocations or aggression by Russia. While Georgia participates on a regular basis in exercises involving NATO and the US, Moscow has been regularly closing off separate areas of the Black Sea basin and announcing snap drills as a reaction to US-led and NATO-led exercises (USNI.org 2020). Therefore, over-reliance on NATO funding and the Allies' contribution towards its military modernization does not offer leverage to Georgia on a long-term perspective.

Meanwhile, Turkey's activist efforts towards Tbilisi after the Nagorno-Karabakh ceasefire agreement are already visible in the conclusion of deals for purchases of heavy machinery and buses by Georgia. [xvii] In the light of discussions on the perspectives of new transportation corridors linking Azerbaijan to Turkey and Armenia to Turkey to challenge Georgia's unquestioned transit status in terms of on-land and maritime transportation routes, the ministers of foreign affairs of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey reaffirmed their adherence to strategic cooperation in the economic and military-technological realms. Georgia has also expressed readiness to offer a "platform" for Azerbaijan and Armenia to build cooperation on economic, cultural, and people-to-people relations initiatives (Civil.ge 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The second Nagorno-Karabakh war, November 10th 2020 ceasefire agreement and the post-conflict agenda reaffirm the urgency for a new security approach towards the Black Sea by the West. In case the mid- and long-term outcomes of the Autumn Nagorno-Karabakh military conflict are underestimated, geopolitical shifts in the Black Sea-South Caucasus area would bring costly implications for the Euro-Atlantic security architecture overall. No doubt, very soon, the region will face further tensions, and these are already unfolding in the area. This lack of unity creates even more room for Russian militarization of the region and Turkey's efforts to increase its own leverage through possible revision of the security arrangements contributes to the insecurity of such countries as Georgia and Ukraine. After November 10th, both Tbilisi and Kyiv may find it increasingly challenging to maneuver effectively without the support of the Western partners. Hence, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

For International partners:

- US and France, as OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, should proactively contribute to observing the November 10th armistice agreement and lead it to a final overarching broad peace treaty based on multilateral engagement. As of now, Russia's "peacekeeping" mission lacks mandates on behalf of the OSCE or UN, hence, if no engagement takes place by US and France, there is a risk of "freezing" the current status quo and contributing to uncertainty in the South Caucasus and the wider area;
- NATO should promote an unequivocal stance towards Russia's attempts to compromise on the security of the three NATO member littoral states as well as its partners, Georgia and Ukraine, through a new security strategy for the Black Sea area. The Tailored Forward Presence, of which Romania and Bulgaria are the core components, should be upgraded to the Enhanced Status as in case of the Baltic States;

- As the Three Seas Initiative between the 12 EU Member-States of the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas focuses on cooperation in the realm of transport, energy and digital infrastructure, it could complement the Black Sea Synergy, providing another platform for exchange of best practices, sustainable cooperation, exchange of data, common exercise, training. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova should be involved in regional initiatives that in turn strengthen the EaP framework already in existence;
- The position of Turkey and Romania as crucial actors for any long-term cooperation initiatives in the Black Sea should be enhanced in the face of Russia's assertive stance. As both countries prioritize their energy independence and invest in the Southern energy corridor, Georgia should take advantage of its reliable-transit-partner image and push for comprehensive cooperation with both countries.

For the Georgian Government:

- Georgia's National Security Concept should be updated with the view to reflecting a clear vision of Tbilisi's mid- and long-term goals in the Black Sea area, outlining cooperation priorities as well as the challenges and threats to be addressed;
- Priority should be given to modernizing Georgian defense capabilities and diversifying its arms supply as well as investing in domestic high-tech defensive equipment production. Enhanced training and military exercises, supported by the Western partners with NATO playing the key role, should be part of the cooperation agenda;
- Tbilisi should consider investing in a high-maneuver, up-to-date, technologically advanced Black Sea Navy with the contribution of its Western partners;
- Investing in the modernizing of key transportation routes through its territory and Georgian seaport infrastructure should be given priority, which would further enhance its posture as a secure, predictable and long-term partner of the West. In addition to the major players in the region, China has been increasingly eager to develop access to the Black Sea as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Georgia should present itself as the reliable partner option;
- Georgia should demonstrate its readiness to enhance bilateral relations with each of the Black Sea countries, promoting itself as the reliable and predictable partner to regional cooperation platforms in the Black Sea. In this respect, Tbilisi should further increase its profile in the Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan strategic partnership triangle;
- The Georgian government should prove to Western partners, and the EU and US in particular, its readiness to deliver and continuously invest in democratic reforms and institutional resilience. Neither will succeed unless the continuous dialogue between major political parties is promoted. Tbilisi should demonstrate to the West its reliability and willingness to remain a part of the community of democratic countries in the Black Sea area.

- 17 **[i]** Apart from cessation of hostilities, the ceasefire agreement envisages deployment of Russian peacekeeping troops for 5 years with the possibility of further extension. Armenia, according to a planned schedule, cedes a number of territories (Aghdam, Lachin and Kelbajar) to Azerbaijani control. Azerbaijan preserves control of the territories captured during the war, including the strategic town of Shusha/Shushi. For the first time in more than three decades Azerbaijan will obtain control over the direct transport route to the Nakhichevan Autonomous Region, whereas Armenia is promised unblocked transportation routes linking it to regional infrastructure. It will get railway access to Iran through the territory of Azerbaijan. The agreement requires observance of such humanitarian issues as exchange of hostages, civilian population safety etc.
- [ii]** Initially demonstrating intent to play a responsible stakeholder role in the European security architecture from the position of "equals" with West, in 2007 Moscow suspended its participation in the 1990 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement, addressing it as a "divorce from reality" after failing to push through the adoption of a less stringent limitations regime for Russia **[ii]** (SIPRI 2009).
- [iii]** Further information can be found through the following link: <https://www.pnp.ru/politics/v-mid-obyasnili-pochemu-rossiya-ostayotsya-v-obse.html>
- [iv]** As a security provider, Russia established the 102nd military base in Gyumri after the 1992-1994 war's first episode was over. In exchange, Russia would exercise patronage of the Armenia's military and be involved in modernization and provision of arms. In 2010, the 25-year validity of the agreement was extended for up to another 49 years (Kremlin.ru 2011). Secondly, Armenia has been part of Russia's network of such regional integration projects as CSTO and EEU, leaving its cooperation within the EU's Eastern Partnership and NATO without progress. Thirdly, in 2016 an agreement was reached on a joint air-defense system justified by the need to enhance Armenia's intelligence and defense capabilities (Reuters, 2016) 5. Armenia's limited transportation capacity, being a landlocked country with the borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan closed, makes Georgia the sole transportation connection with its own strategic partner, apart from transportation routes with Iran.
- [v]** The 102 nd Russian military base in Armenia, the 7th base in Abkhazia and the 4th base in Tskhinvali region are included into the Southern Military Command of the Armed Forces of Russia.
- [vi]** The OSCE assumed the mandate following the Budapest Summit of 1995, after the ceasefire took place. Apart from Nagorno-Karabakh, the OSCE is assigned the mission of reducing tensions, facilitating the dialogue among the parties to the crisis in Transdniestria (Moldova) and the breakaway territories in the East of Ukraine.
- [vii]** Both initiatives were agreed at NATO's 2016 Warsaw Summit.
- [viii]** The latter is based on a brigade under Multinational Division Southeast in Bucharest. The trainings are coordinated through a Combined Joint Enhanced Training Initiative. Both Bulgaria and Romania are involved in protection of NATO airspace (NATO 2015). These capabilities are enhanced by NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the broader NATO Response Force, Allies' additional high readiness forces and NATO's heavier follow-on forces in case of need. In April 2020, NATO Foreign Ministers came to an agreement that more Black Sea exercises were of crucial importance for countering Russian-led hybrid warfare. (NATO, June, 2020)
- [ix]** During the Presidency of Rosen Plevneliev (January 2012 – January 2017), a representative from the pro-European GERB party, Bulgaria, was critical of Russia's attempts to militarize the Black Sea.
- [x]** Among the other BSEC subdivisions are the BSEC Project Development Fund, the Hellenic Development Fund and the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB). Black Sea Naval Force a taskforce to oversee peace and stability provision in the region initiated by Turkey in 1998 and formally established in 2001.
- [xi]** The two framework documents adopted under Romania's patronage are "The Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea and the Black Sea Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda.
- [xii]** The Southern Gas Corridor consists of the South Caucasus Pipeline Expansion, Transanatolian and Transadriatic pipelines.
- [xiii]** Since annexation of Crimea and construction of the 19 km long bridge linking Russia's Taman peninsula with the Crimean Peninsula, Ukrainian navigation through the Straits has been sabotaged on a permanent basis. On November 25, 2018, the Federal Security Service of Russia attacked and captured three vessels belonging to the Ukrainian Navy on their way to the port of Mariupol from the Black Sea. In 2019 the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea decided on the immediate release of the ships and the captured servicemen to Ukraine. Transfer took place (although in a damaged condition) and the captured servicemen were released.
- [xiv]** The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, the Baku–Supsa pipeline, and the Southern Gas Corridor pass through Georgia as well as the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway
- [xv]** In December 2020 Georgia received the updated Substantial NATO-Georgia Package enhancing the functioning of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center, and increased number of port calls by NATO allies, intensified training and exercises as well as other measures.
- [xvi]** As in case of the Massive Defender Europe 2020, the most\ large-scale trans-Atlantic deployment in 25 years.
- [xvii]** As in case of the US-led exercise Sea Breeze-19 or Georgia-US bilateral exercise Agile Spirit in July 2019
- 17 Further information: Republic of Turkey. Ministry of National Defense <https://www.msb.gov.tr/en-US/Slide/28112020-87255>

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