

STRATEGIC CROSSROADS OR HOTBED OF THREATS? THE SCOPE FOR EU ENGAGEMENT IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the European Union, the Black Sea region is strategically significant as it connects Europe to the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, making it a key geopolitical, trade and energy crossroads. However, the EU has thus far fallen short of translating the Black Sea region's geopolitical importance into effective policies. This is because of internal and external factors, which are tightly intertwined: the lack of a strategic EU vision for and sustained political commitment to the region, and the sharp deterioration around the Black Sea region primarily due to Russia's aggressive actions. In this increasingly volatile, militarised and threatening environment, the EU appears strongly constrained. This is not only because its hard security capabilities remain limited but also because its policies in the region have long been fragmented across different frameworks, lacking an overarching strategy. And yet, even though Russia's war in Ukraine questions the European security order and Russia's actions have destabilising effects across the region, there is space for the EU to actively engage with a number of players around the Black Sea and contribute to stabilising the region by harnessing political, socio-economic, environmental and security tools in a renewed strategic vision.

Keywords: *European Union, Black Sea, Caucasus, security, conflicts, Russia, Ukraine*

INTRODUCTION

Recent conflicts—either the 44-day war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, or Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine—have highlighted the strategic significance of the Black Sea region (BSR) for the EU. This is because it connects Europe to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East, making it a key geopolitical, trade and energy crossroads. The BSR's relevance has only increased since the early 2000s, when the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) targeting littoral states such as Ukraine and Georgia, and especially when its own borders extended to the Black Sea after Bulgaria's and Romania's accession.

The connecting potential of the BSR, however, has yet to materialise. The region has long been fragmented as a result of historical, geopolitical, cultural and socio-economic factors. Starting in the late 1980s-early 1990s, it has also been fraught with protracted conflicts. Crucially, since the EU has come closer to the Black Sea in the 2000s, it has been confronted with growing security challenges in the context of an increasingly open clash between Russia and Euro-Atlantic organisations. Whereas some protracted conflicts have thawed, new hostilities have flared up. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and tensions with NATO, Europe, the United States, and Georgia—as well as the Armenia/Azerbaijan-Turkey war—have wide-ranging implications for both the EU and the wider BSR in terms of trade, energy and transport routes.

The EU appears strongly constrained in this increasingly volatile, militarised and threatening environment. This is not only because its hard security capabilities remain limited but also because its policies in the region have long been fragmented across different frameworks, lacking a strong regional strategic vision. Yet, even though Russia's war in Ukraine questions the European security order and Russia's actions have destabilising effects across the region, there is space for the EU to actively engage with a number of players around the Black Sea and contribute to stabilising the region by harnessing political, socio-economic, environmental and security tools in a renewed strategic vision.

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

THE EU AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE BLACK SEA REGION BEFORE RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

While security challenges in the wider BSR are certainly not new, the region remained outside the EU's radar screen until the early 2000s. In the context of its eastward enlargement, the EU stepped up its engagement around the Black Sea, first through designing new bilateral policies for littoral countries and then through launching a new regional initiative embedded in an inclusive approach called the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) initiative. It was the first attempt to think strategically about the region. However, the EU's nascent involvement stumbled against growing hard security challenges, as Russia's aggressive actions against littoral countries engaged in closer integration with Euro-Atlantic organisations gave a major blow to the EU's comprehensive approach.

In the early 1990s, the demise of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of new independent littoral states seemed to open up new cooperation perspectives around the Black Sea, which had hitherto lain on the frontier of East-West rivalry (Aydin 2004, 6). However, the break-up of the USSR also unleashed—or reopened—conflicts in the region. The conflicts that flared up in the early 1990s that had erupted even before the demise of the USSR, disrupted stability, strained relations between Black Sea countries and set the stage for lingering tensions as territorial disputes remained unresolved (i.e., Transnistria-Moldova, South Ossetia-Georgia, Abkhazia-Georgia and Armenia-Nagorno-Karabakh-Azerbaijan). This, combined with other security risks, highlighted the BSR's strategic importance for the EU, which was then engaged in the process of enlarging to central and eastern European countries. However, the area was kept in the background of EU foreign policy, lacking attention and any specifically designed regional instrument. This is because, in the late 1990s, the EU focused on the consequences of enlargement for its immediate neighbours, namely Russia and Ukraine, for which common strategies—a new instrument under the Common Foreign and Security Policy—were designed in 1999.

During the following decade, local and regional dynamics grew more tightly intertwined as the protracted conflicts fed into growing friction between Russia and Euro-Atlantic organisations, both around the Black Sea and on a global level (Melvin 2018, 13). The fifth and especially the sixth rounds of enlargement brought the EU closer to the Black Sea, thereby raising the question of future relations with countries in the region more urgently.

In this changing context, the EU launched the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to enhance relations with its new neighbours, including five countries in the wider BSR (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). This marked a significant step forward from the low-key policies pursued in the 1990s. However, in the mid-2000s, EU policy in the BSR remained split among several distinct bilateral policy frameworks, including the ENP, the strategic partnership with the Russian Federation, and Turkey's pre-accession process. The result was the EU had a “partial picture” of the region and lacked a “holistic approach” (Tassinari 2006, 2).

Enlargement to Bulgaria and Romania further shifted the Union's attention onto a sea basin around which security challenges raised increasing concerns. It also coincided with the European Commission's lukewarm assessment of the ENP record, especially on conflict resolution, an issue of utmost importance around the Black Sea. In this context, regional cooperation was

deemed necessary to complement the bilateral dimension that had hitherto prevailed in the ENP. Most of the challenges faced by the EU around the Black Sea were indeed transnational (e.g., trafficking, organised crime, environmental pollution). In April 2007, the European Commission thus put forward the first initiative targeting the BSR as such. The Black Sea Synergy (BSS) was designed as a flexible framework complementary to existing EU policies in the region, with the aim to increase cooperation with and between the countries surrounding the Black Sea (European Commission 2007).

However, EU engagement stumbled against the growing tensions between Russia and the West in the BSR. This is because the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda pursued by some post-Soviet littoral states (Georgia and Ukraine) starting in the mid-2000s triggered Russia's concerns over what it regarded as an encroachment of Western organisations (primarily NATO) in its own area of influence (Kuimova and Weseman 2018, 2). Russia's subsequent actions—military interventions on the sovereign territory of the two littoral countries seeking closer ties with NATO, combined with the consolidation of its military presence around the Black Sea—brutally signalled the perceived centrality of the Black Sea for Russia's own security.

In a context perceived as jeopardising its own interests 2008 Bucharest Summit with its promise of eventual NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, Russia waged its first war against an independent country in the post-Soviet era, Georgia. Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, as well as the military build-up that followed, considerably added to the fragmentation of the wider BSR. Between 2008 and 2010, Russia consolidated its military presence in the two breakaway regions of Georgia (through agreements signed with de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), as well as in Armenia (with the extension in 2010 of the lease for Russia's 102nd Military Base at Gyumri) and Ukraine (through a 2010 agreement extending the lease of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Crimea until 2042). The 2008 August War also put regional cooperation further on hold. It further undermined existing organisations, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which already suffered from the heterogeneity of member states' interests (Manoli 2006). In addition, it exposed the fragility of more recent formats, such as the BSS, which was also affected by the EU's lack of strong commitment to use the synergy as a vehicle for reinforcing regional security. Finally, it also gave a fatal blow to nascent initiatives, such as Turkey's proposal for the South Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, which was aimed at promoting regional peace, cooperation and economic development (Oskanian 2011) while reflecting a more proactive Turkish policy in the Caucasus in the context of its "zero problems with the neighbours" strategy (Fotiou 2009).

Russia's regional integration projects further fragmented the region. The Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), launched in 2010 and upgraded in 2015 into a Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), was designed to counter the EU's growing influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. By offering a higher degree of integration than the EaP, it rendered both projects incompatible. Russia also pushed EaP countries for full membership in the ECU/EAEU, as was illustrated by the case of Armenia, which backtracked from signing an association agreement with the EU. In addition, when failing to "induce" post-Soviet states into joining the Eurasian integration process, Russia deployed a broad array of punitive measures vis-à-vis the three countries (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) that signed an Association Agreement with the EU.

Russia's 2014 actions (the annexation of Crimea and warfare in Donbas) were major turning points for the wider BSR. First, they put an end to any hope of regional cooperation, as illustrated by the paralysis of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), a naval confidence-building mechanism gathering all six coastal states in which Russia stopped taking part in 2015. Second, Russia's actions accelerated militarisation in the region and took confrontation with NATO and the West to an unprecedented level of tension. While Crimea turned into the centrepiece of Russia's military force in the BSR, Ukraine increased its military spending (Melvin 2018, 18), and NATO reinforced its presence in the region (including through establishing the Tailored Forward Presence) as well as cooperation with Ukraine and Georgia. For the EU, Russia's actions in Ukraine put into question "the European security order at its core" (EEAS 2016, 33). By turning the relationship with Russia into a "strategic challenge" (EEAS 2016, 33), they also undermined the EU's BSS initiative, which was premised on an inclusive approach impossible to maintain after Russia's annexation of Crimea and warfare in Donbas.

This, however, did not lead to a comprehensive overhaul of the EU's engagement around the Black Sea. Despite recognising the impact of the geopolitical context on its programmes (European Commission/High Representative 2015), the EU maintained the BSS as a low-key policy. By contrast, its response to Russia's actions came through its bilateral policy frameworks, namely sanctioning Russia and reinforcing the links with Ukraine and other ENP countries. The low profile of the BSS derives from the prioritisation of the EaP, which has benefitted from more substantial political support from EU Member States and has overshadowed the BSS. In essence, the priority given to the EaP has only confirmed the lack of a clear EU political vision for the BSR.

RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION, A HOTSPOT OF TENSIONS FOR THE EU

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 shifted the wider Black Sea region to the forefront of EU security concerns for two main reasons. First, it represents a new stage in a spiral of armed hostilities and violations of international law and military build-up in the region that started in 2008 with Russia's military intervention in Georgia and continued in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and warfare in Eastern Ukraine. Second, recent developments have blatantly exposed the multifaceted nature of security challenges in the wider BSR. Armed hostilities and militarisation are just several facets of a broader array of threats affecting trade, energy supplies and connectivity.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU is confronted with major security challenges around the Black Sea. These are complex, as they include multiple dimensions and affect different levels yet are tightly interwoven. First of all, hostilities may dramatically escalate in Southern Ukraine and spill over to the region. Second, Russia's aggression entails major risks of destabilising smaller countries in the Black Sea area, which find themselves in complex situations as they are both domestically fragile and closely linked to Russia, even though to different degrees. Third, Russia's war in Ukraine has also had major effects, even if indirectly, on some other conflicts in the BSR. Thus, Russia's war reverberates well beyond Ukraine and bears far-reaching implications for the wider BSR.

Possible spill-over effects of Russia's war in Ukraine around the Black Sea

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has further destabilised the wider BSR because the Black Sea has taken centre stage in Russia's war. Tensions have risen in the wake of Russia's withdrawal from the so-called grain deal (which was brokered by the UN and Turkey to export some 33 million metric tonnes of Ukrainian grain while reducing the worldwide spike in food prices between July 2022 and July 2023), as was blatantly exposed over the summer of 2023 by Russian strikes on the ports of Odesa and Chornomorsk and Ukrainian drone attacks on the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. The security situation around the Black Sea may further deteriorate as a result of Russia's recent interceptions of, or threats against, ships sailing in international waters, which are regarded as "potential carriers of military cargo" to Ukraine (Gavin 2023). Russia's actions have sparked tensions with NATO, which condemned Moscow's decision to withdraw from the grain deal, attempts to block Ukraine's exports and hamper freedom of navigation (NATO 2023b). In response to Russia's actions, NATO stepped up surveillance in the BSR, viewed as "a region of strategic importance for the Alliance" (NATO 2023a). Given the proximity between Russia and NATO countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey), any military incident—whether intentional or not—could have major spill-over effects in the region, with the Black Sea turning into the theatre of a broader confrontation. Any escalation of tensions would have major consequences for the EU, as it would affect both its own security and that of several EU candidate countries, including, but not limited to Ukraine.

Destabilisation of Eastern Partnership countries

The war in Ukraine deeply affects the EU's eastern partners, in particular the two EU-associated countries Moldova, which received EU candidate status in June 2022, and Georgia, a potential EU candidate country. This is because these states are both polarised and vulnerable to Russia's strategies of influence. In Georgia, the war exposed the rift between staunch support for Ukraine within Georgian society and the government's refusal to follow Western sanctions on Russia in a context of democratic backsliding and renewed links with Moscow. In addition to addressing the humanitarian consequences of the war in neighbouring Ukraine, Moldova faces two challenges: the risk of increased domestic polarisation (public opinion has long been divided over the country's foreign policy orientation) and the threat of a revived conflict in Transnistria (Parmentier 2022). The latter's fate is closely connected to military developments in nearby southern Ukraine, as was made clear by the Russian military leadership (Reuters 2022).

By prompting EU-associated countries (first of all, Ukraine) to file an application for EU membership, Russia's aggression has seemingly reinforced their determination to join the EU. And yet, in an increasingly complex and volatile environment, the war has significant consequences for Georgia's and Moldova's domestic politics. It also leads the EU's eastern partners to adapt their foreign policies, sometimes opting for risky navigation between Western organisations and Russia—as is the case in Georgia (Avdaliani 2023). In both countries, integration with the EU remains highly sensitive to domestic and regional developments and may thus be derailed either by new political majorities or revived conflicts.

Revival and escalation of regional conflicts

While Russia's aggression against Ukraine bears important implications for conflict areas close to Ukrainian borders, such as Transnistria, it also affects other conflicts in the wider BSR. The sharp deterioration of the security situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh best illustrates this. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan that erupted in 2020 drastically changed the geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus. The 44-day war glaringly exposed the EU's helplessness, as the bloc kept a low profile during the conflict. This is because of three reasons. First, the EU had not been previously involved in the negotiations related to Nagorno-Karabakh because it did not participate (as such) in the OSCE Minsk Group. Second, its key policies in the region—whether the ENP or the EaP—missed a security dimension and did not directly address conflict resolution. Third, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (unlike those in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia or Ukraine) opposes two ENP partner countries, which only added to the EU's hesitations. Despite halting hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan and deploying Russian forces with a peacekeeping mandate, the Russia-mediated ceasefire agreed on 9 November 2020 fell short of offering a sustainable solution to the conflict as it did not touch upon the status of Nagorno-Karabakh—a pivotal issue for both sides. By shifting Russia's attention and resources elsewhere, Russia's aggression against Ukraine created a dangerous security vacuum in the South Caucasus. As Russia was no longer able or willing to act as an alleged guarantor of peace in the aftermath of Ukraine's full-scale invasion, an emboldened Azerbaijan captured new territories of strategic significance in Nagorno-Karabakh and blocked the Lachin corridor that connects Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia for more than nine months (with dire humanitarian

consequences for the 120,000 ethnic Armenians living in Karabakh). In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a new offensive and took over the rest of the enclave, triggering the forced exodus of the Armenian population. Against the background of lingering hostilities in Ukraine, Azerbaijan has also increasingly threatened Armenia's territorial integrity, both rhetorically and through several incursions in the internationally recognised Armenian territory, resulting in casualties and several thousand civilians being displaced.

Facilitated by Russia's inaction against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan's actions entail considerable risks, including a new military escalation. This is a major concern for the EU, as the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan bears direct implications for EU policies, whether for the EaP, energy or connectivity. Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh by force was a significant blow to the EU, exposing the sheer limitations of EU foreign policy. Since late 2021, the EU has substantially stepped up its involvement in the conflict, including acting as a mediator between Armenia and Azerbaijan and launching a new monitoring mission in Armenia. Despite the EU's increased engagement, Azerbaijan's attack triggered only a weak initial response from the bloc. Due to different views among member states, the EU has not adopted any sanction and instead limited itself to condemning the use of force and warning against any threat to Armenia's territorial integrity.

Threats to connectivity and energy supplies

Security in the Black Sea region is not circumscribed to defence and military issues but encompasses political, economic, societal and environmental aspects. The EU has long regarded the wider BSR as a critical crossroads for trade and transport connections to Central Asia and further East, as well as energy supplies from the Caspian Sea basin.

Yet the Black Sea's connecting potential remains untapped. This is also because connectivity projects reflect different views (Smolnik 2023) and feed into existing conflicts. In the wake of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, new corridors and transport routes (e.g., the Yeraskh-Julfa-Ordubad-Meghri-Horadiz railway) seemed to emerge across the South Caucasus; however, they have yet to materialise in a context of lingering tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In addition, the war in Ukraine has obstructed some of the routes, particularly maritime ones, due to Russian attempts to block Ukrainian exports. At the same time, it has also increased the demand for additional corridors. For the EU, Russia's actions against Ukraine exacerbated the need for both alternative energy suppliers and new routes circumventing Russia. The Black Sea is of strategic importance in both respects.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the past few decades, the strategic relevance of the BSR for the EU has been increasing as the Union has both expanded closer to the Black Sea and deepened relations with other littoral states. However, Russia's aggressive actions since the late 2000s have not only turned the region into an area of confrontation but also unleashed a wide range of threats that could spill over to the EU. With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these challenges have acquired greater urgency for the EU and require a thorough re-examination of its regional policies.

Since the mid-2000s, EU action around the Black Sea has combined a series of bilateral frameworks reflecting the different aspirations of partner countries vis-à-vis the EU, with a regional initiative (BSS) inspired by other EU policies (primarily the Northern Dimension). Yet the scheme failed to serve as an overarching strategy for the EU in the region. This is because of two reasons. First, it was initially designed as an inclusive initiative gathering all wider BSR countries and has, therefore, been significantly affected by the changing geopolitical context. Second, it has failed to gain strong political support among EU actors, primarily the member states, who have also fallen short of proposing alternative frameworks. As a result, it has evolved into a practical framework premised on a bottom-up approach and sector-oriented support (European Commission/High Representative 2019), a relevant approach yet of limited use in the face of hard security challenges affecting the region. In parallel, the different EU policy frameworks around the Black Sea, which have remained the central pillars of EU action, have grown further apart as a result of both regional and domestic developments. In contrast to the mid-2000s, the EU's relations with the two Black Sea regional powers, Russia and Turkey, are either frozen or tense. By contrast, relations have intensified with ENP countries, three of which have become associated with the EU and applied for membership. The growing disparity between EU policies in the region is likely to persist and even increase, particularly after the recognition of Ukraine and Moldova as candidate countries (as well as Georgia as a potential candidate) and their gradual inclusion in the EU's enlargement policy.

In this context, it is critical for the EU to develop a forward-looking strategic vision for the BSR that has thus far been lacking. Such a vision should be comprehensive as all levels (human, infra-or para-state, state, transnational, regional, global) and security components are tightly interlinked in the region.

Recommendations to the EU

Based on a broad process involving all EU institutions (including the European Parliament) as well as regional stakeholders, develop a strategic vision for the BSR that would take into account security threats (the ongoing conflicts and their consequences), political developments (including democratic backsliding) and socio-economic challenges.

Use the European Political Community (EPC) to foster dialogue among Black Sea countries and reflect on the challenges facing the wider BSR;

Act as an anchor for reforms in those EaP countries that have engaged in political transformations and are interested in closer links with the EU by offering a credible membership perspective in the foreseeable future. This requires adapting the EU's enlargement policy to the current context by moving to gradual integration (Mihajlović et al. 2023).

Recommendations to the High Representative and the Member States

Enhance member states' attention to the Black Sea, as only a handful of them have pushed for EU-wide policies (e.g., Greece, Romania, Bulgaria in the case of the BSS) or other initiatives also directed at the Black Sea (e.g., Poland's Three Seas Initiatives). A strong EU engagement in the wider BSR crucially hinges on a strong and sustained engagement from a majority of member states.

Step up the EU's involvement in mediation talks, whether international (e.g., Geneva International Discussions in the case of Georgia) or EU-driven (as is the case between Armenia and Azerbaijan since 2021). The war in Ukraine has detrimental effects on other regional conflicts. Progress towards conflict resolution is critical in light of the risks of escalation (for instance, between Armenia and Azerbaijan), as well as expected EU membership for Moldova, Ukraine, and potentially Georgia, which requires settling border disputes.

Reinforce missions in order to closely monitor developments on the ground and avoid any conflict resurgence or spill-over effects. The EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA) is especially important in this respect, given the current risks of new violations of the country's territorial integrity.

Enhance the EaP's security dimension by fostering security cooperation (Meister et al. 2023) and providing targeted assistance to countries whose security is impacted by the war, such as Moldova, where the EU has deployed a Partnership Mission (EUPM) to enhance security sector resilience in the areas of crisis management and hybrid threats.

Recommendations to the European Commission/EEAS

Set up a task force responsible for designing new regional instruments for the BSR in order to address political, socio-economic, environmental and security challenges in line with the EU's new vision. These instruments should target all the willing countries in the wider BSR except Russia.

Expand infrastructure investments, such as the submarine Internet cable linking EU member states to the South Caucasus, with a view to reducing the region's dependency on terrestrial fibre-optic connectivity transiting via Russia. This is because connectivity is key to trade and energy flows, as well as people-to-people contacts. It also includes a cooperative dimension, as it is considered conducive to regional cooperation, thereby contributing to appeasing tensions (Smolnik 2023).

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