

A SEA OF STRATEGIES. STRATEGIC OUTLOOKS OF BLACK SEA STATES AMID RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

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Edited by **Piotr Oleksy**

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PREFACE

The European Union and NATO have become increasingly aware of the strategic importance of the Black Sea region. Analytical studies devoted to this area now use terms such as “strategic frontier”, “strategic battleground”, or “focal point” of security and influence. This new perspective is the result of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which began with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Russia’s aggressive imperialism gave it a strategic advantage in the Black Sea for some time. However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reversed this trend. As a result, three processes took place, reshaping the balance of power in the region.

Firstly, Ukraine managed to defend the western part of its coastline and then significantly curtailed Russia’s capabilities in the Black Sea. This also led to a widespread realisation of the importance of Black Sea transport routes, which are crucial for both the efficiency of the Ukrainian economy and global food security, and offer substantial development opportunities for other countries in the region. Secondly, a new dynamic and a new approach to the Black Sea have emerged in the policies and actions of the countries located on its coast. This has also had a significant impact on their bilateral relations with Ukraine. Thirdly, for the West – which has rediscovered the importance of the Black Sea for its own strategic capabilities – Ukraine has become the most important partner and broker of its interests in the region.

Currently, a dynamic favourable to Ukraine, the EU, and NATO has emerged in the Black Sea region. At the same time, the region remains a mosaic of diverse cultures – including strategic cultures – and visions of the development of the international order. This policy paper presents the importance of the Black Sea for Ukraine, outlines the Black

Sea strategies of regional partners – Turkey, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia – and explores how they perceive their own relations with Kyiv. We have sought to make the case studies multifaceted, presenting the region's place and bilateral relations in the strategic culture of the analysed countries, their economic and energy interests, reactions to the geopolitical dynamics of recent years, as well as internal political factors that influence attitudes toward the region and Ukraine.

This analysis shows that Russia's imperial policy has led to greater strategic synergy among the countries of the region. However, it also indicates that maintaining and deepening this synergy – which is crucial for Ukraine and the West – will depend on many external and local factors.

Piotr Oleksy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Over the past decade, the Black Sea region (BSR) has seen dynamic changes in the international balance of power. The annexation of Crimea revealed Russia's aspirations to secure a dominant position in this area. However, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reversed this trend. After the initial successes of the Russian army and navy, Ukraine managed to halt and weaken the Russian military presence in the sea. The Russian invasion has raised awareness of the importance of Black Sea transport for Ukraine's economy, the economic development of the entire region (including Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova), and global food security. For Ukraine, the Black Sea region has become a focal point of national security and foreign policy.
- The war elevated the Black Sea to the status of a critical front in the broader confrontation between Russia and the West. These processes have significantly influenced the change in the policy of other local players. Turkey, after more than two decades without a consistent vision, has now integrated the Black Sea region into the broader "Blue Homeland" doctrine, which advocates a proactive and assertive stance in its surrounding waters. For Romania, this region is a key area of strategic importance, combining security issues with energy and economic interests. The dynamics of the last decade have made Bucharest's demands more persuasive to NATO and EU partners, aligning their policies with Romania's perspective. This renewed international focus presents a strategic opening for Bulgaria to assume a more active role in revitalising regional partnerships within a broader Euro-Atlantic framework. Georgia, despite its poor relations with the EU, continues to view Russia's presence in the Black Sea region as a threat to its interests, and

perceives cooperation with NATO as the best means of securing them.

- **Ukraine's** approach to the Black Sea region reflects a strategic shift from economic interdependence to military resilience and geopolitical balancing following Russia's aggression. Historically central to Ukraine's trade, agriculture, and identity, the Black Sea has long served as both a conduit for prosperity and a theatre of conflict. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion redefined Ukraine's priorities, transforming the Black Sea from a zone of regional cooperation into a focal point of national security and international diplomacy.
- Ukraine's response combined military innovation and diplomatic outreach. Ukraine successfully pushed Russian forces out of much of the western Black Sea through the use of advanced missile systems and maritime drones, forcing the Russian fleet to relocate and weakening Moscow's regional dominance. These efforts restored near pre-war export levels via Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi ports, underscoring the Black Sea's continued economic centrality. Ukraine's long-term policy focuses on maintaining access to its southern coastline, strengthening small regional alliances, and embedding Black Sea security into Western strategic frameworks, recognising its crucial role in the emerging geopolitical order of the wider region. Diplomatically, Kyiv has attempted to internationalise the issue through cooperation with Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, and by promoting greater engagement from the EU, UK, and NATO.
- **Turkey's** approach to the Black Sea region is driven by the fundamental objective of defending national sovereignty. Turkey perceives both Russian dominance in the Black Sea and increased Western involvement as potential threats to this principle. Consequently, its policy towards the Black Sea and Ukraine seeks to strike a balance between supporting Kyiv, limiting NATO's presence, and avoiding the provocation of Russia. The survival of

a sovereign Ukraine is vital to maintaining this balance, as Ukraine is also a key supplier of components for the Turkish arms industry. Turkey views the current NATO presence in the region – comprising Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania – as adequate. However, it also maintains complex economic ties with Russia. As a result, Turkey, while formally a member of the West through NATO, effectively pursues its own independent policy in the region, prioritising its national interests.

- **Romania** treats the Black Sea as both a potential source of threats and as an area offering opportunities for economic development and increased influence on the international stage. The latter are primarily related to raw material resources and the region's importance for international transport. Russia's imperial policy in the region has led Western partners to appreciate Romania's vision for the development of a security architecture in the Black Sea. At the same time, after 2022, Ukraine became a key partner for NATO and the EU, which led to a new opening in Bucharest's relations with Kyiv. The biggest challenges facing Romania's Black Sea policy are the ambiguous attitude of regional NATO members – Bulgaria and Turkey – toward Russia, uncertainty surrounding US policy toward NATO's eastern flank, and the growing isolationist and anti-Ukrainian sentiment within Romanian society.
- **Bulgaria**, traditionally balancing between the two major regional powers – Russia and Turkey – is now expected to adopt a more ambitious posture on Black Sea security as an EU and NATO member directly exposed to instability along its eastern maritime border. Since the start of the war, Bulgaria's political elite has largely aligned with Euro-Atlantic positions. Despite domestic political instability, Sofia has played a discreet yet tangible role in supporting Ukraine – particularly through arms supplies and initiatives to strengthen regional connectivity. However, public opinion remains divided under

the enduring influence of pro-Russian sentiment and disinformation. Bulgaria now faces a critical juncture. Sustaining its Euro-Atlantic orientation could allow Sofia to emerge as a constructive actor in shaping the EU's strategic approach to the Black Sea. Yet continued institutional fragility and political fragmentation risk undermining this momentum, while entrenched state capture dynamics may erode progress from within.

- The main security risks for **Georgia** emanate from Russia's geopolitical presence in the BSR and the Kremlin's increasing assertiveness against the pro-Western states of the region. Georgia's security and stability remains highly vulnerable due to the presence of unresolved conflicts, Russia's continued destabilisation measures, as well as potential spill overs from an unstable neighbourhood. NATO can strengthen Georgia's security resilience by boosting its military capacity and civil preparedness. Georgia should strengthen bilateral strategic partnerships with important actors such as Turkey, Ukraine, the UK, and the US. The country must place particular emphasis on further improvements of its highly advanced strategic partnership with the US, with the final long-term objective of becoming its major non-NATO ally in case its NATO membership prospects continue to hang in limbo.

UKRAINE'S POLICY TOWARD THE BLACK SEA REGION

Jakub Olchowski

The importance of the Black Sea region for Ukraine

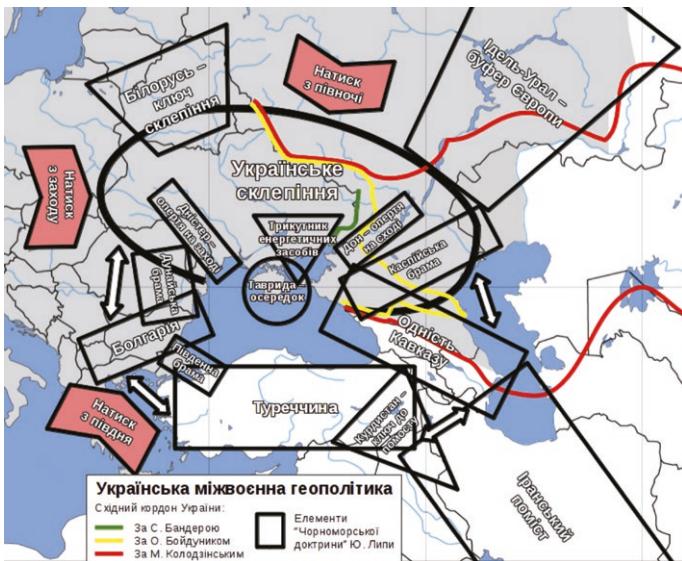
The Black Sea basin was colonised by various cultures in ancient times. It was also of great importance to the peoples settling and establishing centres of statehood, with Kyivan Rus' at the forefront, in the areas north of the Black Sea. Hence, the sea, often called the Pontic Sea in ancient times, was later also called the “Rus’ Sea”¹ or even the “Cossack Sea”. These lands were rich in fertile soil and natural resources, which, combined with the numerous navigable rivers (the Danube, the Southern Bug, the Dniester, the Dnieper, and the Don) flowing into the Black Sea, enabled the dynamic development of trade and, with it, cultural exchange. At the same time, this advantageous environment made the area susceptible to numerous wars and invasions. For centuries, the territory of present-day Ukraine was the subject of struggles with Asian nomadic peoples (which ended only in the 18th century, with the fall of the Crimean Khanate), the Ottoman Empire, and, above all, the expansion of the Muscovite state. For Russia, control of Ukrainian lands and the Black Sea coast was, and still is, one of the key conditions for achieving great power status. Furthermore,

¹ Not to be confused with “Russian”.

Russia claims the heritage of Kyivan Rus'. As a result, the Black Sea is a key element of both Ukrainian and Russian national identity, mythology, and ideology – generating persistent conflict. Furthermore, this region has been continuously contested by numerous actors, including external powers. Modern Ukrainian political thought acknowledged and appreciated the importance of the Black Sea long before the emergence of modern Ukrainian statehood. The most famous example is the Ukrainian geopolitical concept, formulated in 1940 and called the “Black Sea Doctrine” (Ukr. *Чорноморська доктрина*). It assumes that the Black Sea serves as a crucial source of support for Ukraine and the key to its development (see Pic. 1)².

Currently, the Black Sea is, from Ukraine's perspective, primarily of economic importance. The Black Sea provides Ukraine with fast and affordable access to global markets – in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. It is worth noting that approximately 30% of global grain trade passes through the Black Sea. Exports to the EU are also steadily growing, with over half of Ukrainian exports directed there – primarily thanks to the DCFTA. Ukraine, known as the “Breadbasket of Europe”, is among the world's top five food exporters, and in the top three for some food products. Ukraine is one of the world's largest exporters of wheat, corn, sunflower oil, and poultry. Ukraine's agricultural sector serves as the backbone of its economy, generating approximately 10% of GDP and 40% of all Ukrainian exports prior to the Russian invasion. This is also of significant importance for global food security – according to the WFP, the Ukrainian agricultural sector can feed approximately 400 million people (roughly ten times the population of Ukraine). To date, the

² Yurii Lypa – a publicist, writer, and physician, considered one of the most important Ukrainian philosophers and a pioneer of modern Ukrainian geopolitics. He lived in Poland for many years, then worked as a doctor in the UPA, and was killed by the NKVD in 1944. Lypa's concept called for the creation of a Black Sea-Baltic federation, that would include Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, and Lithuanians.



Pic. 1. Ukrainian "Black Sea doctrine"

Source: Тутовий, *Міжвоєнні українські геополітичні концепції*, 22 January 2016, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=46537942>, CCO 1.0.

country has exported approximately 70–80% of all agricultural products. Black Sea ports played a key role in this context, handling 90% of agricultural exports (as well as other sectors, such as 85% of iron ore exports). In 2021, approximately 90% of Ukraine's maritime trade flowed through ports in the oblasts of Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and in Berdyansk and Mariupol. However, because of Russian aggression, only three Ukrainian ports on the country's southwestern coast are currently operating: Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Pivdennyi.

What may be surprising is that, in terms of hard security, the Black Sea was not perceived as an issue for a long time. A real turning point was the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Before that, in the context of security, the region had been mainly seen in Ukraine as an area of a regional cooperation within institutions like GUAM or the Black Sea Economic Co-operation, associated with trade, tourism, transportation, etc. Threat perceptions and challenges were limited to the

environment, combating organised crime and trafficking, illegal immigration, social-political issues, or frozen conflicts and their consequences. Such an approach resulted in limited capabilities of the Ukrainian military in the Black Sea.

Ukraine's national security strategies adopted in 2012 and 2015 do not refer to the Black Sea – only the recent *National Security Strategy of Ukraine* from 2020 devoted more attention to the region. It focused on Russia's aggressive policy and emphasised that Russia used the Black Sea-Caspian region and occupied Crimea as a bridge to the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the MENA region. The increased militarisation of occupied Crimea was also mentioned in the document, as well as challenges to the freedom of navigation, inflicted by Russia's actions. Moreover, the first *Foreign Policy Strategy of Ukraine*, adopted in 2021, also prioritised the Black Sea region and cooperation with individual Black Sea states. Russian military projection was considered the main threat for the region.

Finally, the meaning of the Crimean Peninsula must be emphasised. For centuries, its central location rendered it one of the most important cultural, commercial and political centres in the region. In the above mentioned "Black Sea doctrine", Crimea was recognised as a key hub, connecting all Black Sea naval routes. Today, the peninsula constitutes an ideal location to control the entire Black Sea – thus Russia has no intention of giving up Crimea under any circumstances. Russian military presence on the peninsula has constantly posed a significant threat to Ukraine and the region – in the years 1991–2022, there were many armed maritime incidents between Russia and Ukraine, and the Russian Black Sea Fleet also actively participated in both the war with Georgia in 2008 and the invasion of Ukraine six years later.

It is therefore worth noting that, from Russia's perspective, Crimea is extremely important, not only ideologically and symbolically, but geopolitically and militarily first and foremost.

Ukraine's policy toward the Black Sea region after Russia's invasion in 2022

The loss of Crimea, annexed by Russia in 2014, was a political and reputational blow to Ukraine, but it did not significantly impact Ukrainian exports or crucial Black Sea ports and routes. The situation changed after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Russia blockaded Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea, severely damaging the Ukrainian economy.

On the political and diplomatic levels, Ukraine has made efforts to unblock its trade routes. This resulted in an agreement concluded in July 2022, mediated by Turkey and the UN, to unblock three ports of the so-called “Greater Odesa” (Chornomorsk, Pivdennyi, Odesa) area and to create a humanitarian corridor for Ukrainian agricultural exports to the Bosphorus Straits. The so-called Black Sea Grain Initiative lasted until July 2023 and enabled the export of approximately 33 million tonnes of food (which constituted approximately 50% of Ukraine's total export volume during this period). The initiative collapsed following Russia's withdrawal, which failed to meet its demands, namely – lifting sanctions on trade in its agricultural products and fertilizers. Simultaneously, Russia intensified attacks on Ukrainian ports (including those on the Danube), infrastructure, and grain storage facilities. Consequently, in order to unblock food exports – a sector essential to the Ukrainian economy – Ukraine was forced to undertake military action in the Black Sea.

This posed a significant challenge, given the absolute dominance of the Russian fleet over the Ukrainian fleet in the Black Sea and the losses suffered by Ukraine in the initial phase of the full-scale war. Furthermore, as a result of the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine lost approximately 75% of its naval assets. Nevertheless, thanks to rapid adaptation to the circumstances and investment in new technologies, Ukraine managed to seize the initiative and almost completely push Russian forces out of the western Black Sea.

Not only was the Russian fleet effectively redeployed from its main bases in Crimea to the port of Novorossiysk,

but approximately one-third of its vessels were also neutralised (sunk or severely damaged). Russia's naval operations were constrained thanks to Ukraine's use of anti-ship missiles and, subsequently, the innovative use of intensively developed drones (both air and naval – USVs – unmanned surface vessels). Hence, the Russian Black Sea Fleet was forced to relocate its vessels beyond the reach of Ukrainian drones. Russia's retreat from the Ukrainian shoreline and necessity of keeping its ships far from the battlefield has not only constrained Moscow's ability to project power across the globe through naval means, but, more importantly, has significantly reduced Russia's control over the Black Sea.

Ukraine, in principle, could now attack Russian vessels transporting food and oil across the Black Sea; however, it has no intention of doing so, as such actions could be politically risky, damaging Ukraine's image, and potentially triggering negative reactions from countries with which Ukraine seeks good relations – for example, Turkey and the United States. Furthermore, such actions would provide additional fuel for Russian propaganda.

With Russian forces pushed out of the Black Sea, Ukrainian maritime export volumes have almost returned to pre-Russian invasion levels. Approximately 50% of all Ukrainian maritime exports pass through the ports of Chornomorsk, Odesa, and Pivdennyj (compared to 60% in 2021), and more grain now passes through Odesa than before 2022. This was also possible thanks to close cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria, where much of the transport passes through their littoral waters. Under wartime conditions, the Black Sea has become even more important to Ukraine than before – losing access to its ports would mean political and economic catastrophe. At the same time, this sea remains vitally important for Russia for geopolitical reasons, especially since Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO has drastically worsened its situation in the Baltic Sea. The situation on the Black Sea is also complicated – of the six littoral states, three are NATO members and two

aspire to join – but Russia still controls about one-third of the coastline, from Abkhazia to occupied southern Ukraine. Russia will undoubtedly seek to increase its influence, both politically and militarily.

The current negotiations (2025), with the involvement of the US and others, therefore continue to include the same Russian demands – Russia's interests, along with numerous “nuances”, must be taken into account – while the Russians are counting on further US concessions. This poses a threat to Ukraine's interests, hence its policy of presenting Russia's actions in the Black Sea region as part of a broader Russian strategy of confrontation with the West and neo-imperial ambitions.

Ukraine, however, places particular importance on Turkey in the region, given its growing importance and its ongoing relations with all Black Sea states, including Russia. Moscow is keen to divide the region into “spheres of influence”: Russia controls the northern coast of the Black Sea, and Turkey the southern. However, an overly strong Russia is inconvenient for Turkey, which does not want a weakened Ukraine. Kyiv, however, is aware that Ukrainian-Turkish relations will be largely shaped by relations between Turkey and the West and Turkey and Russia.

In the context of the Black Sea, Ukraine also wants to engage external actors, primarily the European Union and the United States (which Turkey opposes). Ukraine and Romania, remain the biggest promoters of greater US activity in the region, but there is growing uncertainty regarding Washington's long-term vision for the Black Sea. Therefore, the role of the European Union is increasing in importance, especially as the EU is updating its Black Sea strategy. At the same time, from Ukraine's perspective, the United Kingdom is becoming an increasingly important partner (which is also linked to London's ambitions to rebuild British maritime power). Maritime cooperation between the two countries dates back to at least 2018. Moreover, Great Britain is one of the leaders of the coalition of maritime capabilities for Ukraine.

Relations in the Black Sea will have a formative impact on the emerging regional geopolitical order as well as the future of Ukraine. Thus, especially from Ukraine's perspective, the Black Sea should be considered as a separate issue in any negotiations regarding the Russia-Ukraine war (including preventing Russian military and navy build-up in the region and ensuring the safety of navigation and ports). Ukraine will likely seek to initiate a maritime dialogue with the littoral states (including Moldova) to develop a joint position on future security arrangements in the region. At the same time, however, cooperation with NATO continues to grow.

Finally, the Black Sea region is an important part of a broader Ukrainian strategy of regional cooperation. In 2021, Ukraine's *Foreign Policy Strategy* was adopted. The document envisages, among other things, strengthening regional cooperation formats within a "strategy of small alliances". As a result, platforms for cooperation have been established with Poland and Lithuania (the Lublin Triangle), with Romania and Moldova, with Georgia and Moldova (the Associated Trio), with Poland and the United Kingdom, and with Turkey (the "Quadriga" 2+2, at the level of foreign and defence ministers) – thus encompassing the Black Sea region as well. Within the largest organisation in the region, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, Ukraine is primarily focused on developing relations with Turkey.

Although the effectiveness of these agreements varies, their existence provides a platform for cooperation and channels of communication, while simultaneously mapping Ukraine's network of relations and interests in the region. The complexity of bilateral relations remains a separate issue (see the following chapters).

Perspectives

During the last decade, the Black Sea region has become one of the crucial areas in a global “New Great Game”. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been ten armed conflicts in the Black Sea region, all of which involved Russia either directly or indirectly. After 2014 – and especially after 2022 – the security environment in the region changed significantly, with no chances to return to the previous status quo. The main threat, particularly from Ukraine’s perspective, is the expansion of Russia.

On the other hand, from Russia’s perspective, the war in Ukraine, to a significant extent, is an attempt to secure its domination over the Black Sea and its trade and energy routes. Therefore, the outcome of the war will determine not only the future of Ukraine but also the future of the Black Sea region. Russia shows no intention of withdrawing – the region is one of the key battlegrounds in Moscow’s broader geopolitical rivalry with the West, as well as a platform for power projection in other regions. Russia is also very sensitive about its great power status and cannot allow the Black Sea to share the fate of the Baltic Sea.

Moreover, Crimea is crucial for control of the Black Sea – Russia will not abandon the peninsula regardless of the cost. Ukraine realises that, given the current military situation and international circumstances, it is unlikely to regain Crimea in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it is pursuing a strategy of “small cuts”, with an aim to gradually degrade Russian air defence and naval capabilities, as well as its ability to supply the peninsula and the southern battlefield.

Nevertheless, taking control of the Black Sea by Ukraine and its allies is not a very probable scenario. Even in the event of a ceasefire, the region would remain unstable and continue to experience turbulence. In the short term, Ukraine’s goal is to maintain control over Odesa and its adjacent coastline. In the longer term, Ukraine will want to demonstrate to the West and other allies (especially Turkey) that a strong, resilient Ukraine, underpinned by

sustained European support and regional partnerships, remains essential to safeguarding security in the Black Sea region. Ukraine will continue to strive for integration with the European Union, with the additional aim of establishing a joint counterbalancing strategy aimed at preventing Russian domination of the Black Sea. Ukraine also assumes that the US will not engage in the region, which, on the one hand, presents further challenges to European security and, on the other, requires closer cooperation with the EU, the United Kingdom, and Turkey.

Ukraine holds a significant position in talks with its partners: the country has reshaped the strategic landscape of the Black Sea, effectively countering Russia's naval power and creating a new reality for regional cooperation and security. The retreat of Russia's Black Sea Fleet has changed the balance of power and made it easier for the region's states to pursue their interests. Consequently, these states now consider the security of the Black Sea as a crucial element of a future peace plan.

TURKEY'S POLICY TOWARD THE BLACK SEA REGION AND UKRAINE

Mateusz Chudziak

Turkey's approach to the Black Sea region over the last decade, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has been shaped predominantly by its clearly defined national interests. The sovereignty of Turkey takes precedence over other factors, such as geopolitical alliances or the notion of an axiological community within them. In this context, Ankara perceives the Black Sea as vital to its security, economic stability, and international position.

Turkey aims to maintain a delicate balance of power by fostering at least neutral relations with most littoral states. Within this framework, Russia is regarded as a rival, while Ukraine and other neighbouring countries are seen as partners. NATO is viewed not merely as a political bloc to which Turkey belongs, but rather as a platform through which Turkey can pursue its security objectives, without compromising its interests.

Given Turkey's pursuit of a balance that reinforces its position, it cannot afford to antagonise its most significant rival, Russia. Thus, while Turkey actively develops cooperation with Ukraine and its neighbours to curb Russian influence, it simultaneously sustains political and economic ties with Moscow. Ankara does not perceive external

powers – such as the US, NATO, or the European Union – as having the ultimate authority over the region's future¹.

Effective cooperation at the NATO level occurs when Turkey sees it as beneficial for its objectives in the Black Sea region. This engagement is comprehensive, involving regional countries – with the exception of Russia – and reflects a non-binary stance. In Turkey's view, no nation in the Black Sea region is strictly categorised as a friend or foe, allowing for a more nuanced and flexible foreign policy.

Significance of the Black Sea region in Turkey's foreign policy

Over the past two decades, Turkey's foreign policy has become increasingly assertive, proactive, and focused on establishing itself as a global power. State nationalism, which has had a significant influence on Turkish identity since the beginning of the Republican era, has gained traction with the emergence of “New Turkey” under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) since 2002.

In the second decade of the 21st century, as authoritarian tendencies grew, Turkey shifted its primary ambition from joining the EU to consolidating its status as a power with global ambitions. Its unique identity, rooted in the legacy of the Ottoman Empire² and its geographic position at the

¹ The provisions of the Montreux Convention are crucial in this context, as they grant Turkey the sovereign right to manage the passage of civilian vessels, determine the conditions under which military ships can move, and restrict the movement of naval units from states that do not belong to the Black Sea region. C. Tatar, *Montrö boğazlar sözleşmesi neden önemlidir?*, STRATSAM, 28 February 2022, <https://strasam.org/tarih/turkiye-cumhuriyeti-tarihi/montrö-bogazlar-sozlesmesi-ned-en-onemlidir-565> [20.09.2025].

² K. Wasilewski, *Sen o potędze. Neoosmanizm w polityce zagranicznej Republiki Turcji*, Warsaw 2023.

crossroads of three continents, underpins this aspiration as a crucial hub for trade and cultural exchange³.

Turkey's Black Sea policy is integral to its broader international strategy, often described as "playing on many pianos". This signifies a transition from a reactive state formally aligned with the West (through NATO, of which Turkey has been a member since 1952), to an independent actor shaping policies across various regions, including the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans. Turkey aims to position itself as an equal partner alongside global actors such as the US, the EU, Russia, and China.

In terms of security, a primary goal is to prevent Russia's excessive dominance and territorial expansion in the Black Sea, where it exerts considerable influence⁴. To achieve this, Turkey is enhancing cooperation with other littoral states, particularly Ukraine. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Turkey adopted a pro-Ukrainian stance, emphasising support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and solidarity with the Crimean Tatars.

Since the post-Cold War era, Ankara has taken a pragmatic approach to the region, seeking to develop economic interests. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC), initiated by Turkey in 1992, was intended to facilitate this, but has remained largely symbolic due

³ The country's geographical location is one of the most highly fetishised aspects in Turkish discourse regarding the state's role in the world. While it undeniably influences Turkey's significance, it also creates fertile ground for the popularity of traditional geopolitics, which tends to absolutise geographical factors without taking into account the country's economic strength, its systemic position in international politics, or the reality that actual global powers often transcend geographical limitations in pursuit of their interests. An example of such thinking can be seen in: İ. Köse, *Türkiye'nin Karadeniz politikası*, Fikir Türü, 11 May 2021, <https://fikirturu.com/jeo-politika/turkiyenin-karadeniz-politikasi/> [17.09.2025].

⁴ S. Cagaptay, *Unpacking Turkey's Non-Binary Ukraine War Policy*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 7 March 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/unpacking-turkeys-non-binary-ukraine-war-policy> [2.09.2025].

to the lack of a clear vision for general policy toward the entire region⁵. Instead, Turkey has focused on bilateral relations, with Russia emerging as a key economic partner, exemplified by the Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines transporting Russian natural gas to Turkey.

Recently, Turkey's approach has shifted from pragmatic to more strategic, leading to the incorporation of the Black Sea into the *Mavi Vatan* ("Blue Homeland") doctrine in 2020. This doctrine aims to strengthen Turkey's sovereign position in the eastern Mediterranean amid disputes over maritime boundaries and resource exploitation. It advocates for an enhanced naval presence as Turkey also remains active in the Aegean and Black Seas⁶. The significance of the Black Sea increased notably following the discovery of natural gas reserves in Turkey's exclusive economic zone, estimated at 320 billion cubic meters, in the summer of 2020⁷.

Bilateral relations with Ukraine

Since the end of the Cold War, Ankara has maintained a friendly stance towards Kyiv, significantly bolstered by the Crimean Tatar community, which has a large diaspora in Turkey and includes several prominent public figures. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Turkey made

⁵ O.F. Tanrısever, *Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea Region: Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict*, EDAM – Black Sea Discussion Paper Series, vol. 1, 2012, <https://edam.org.tr/en/foreign-policy-and-security/Turkey%20and%20Russia%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea%20Region:%20Dynamics%20of%20Cooperation%20and%20Conflict> [22.09.2025].

⁶ D. Isachenko, E. Kaymak, *Turkey's Strategic Autonomy in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean*, "SWP Comment" 2024, no. 39, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C39_TurkeysStrategicAutonomy.pdf [22.09.2025].

⁷ If this figure is confirmed, the gas field will cover 30 % of Turkey's domestic demand. A. Colibasanu, *Turkey's Evolving Geopolitical Strategy in the Black Sea*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 2024, p. 19, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/12/turkeys-evolving-geopolitical-strategy-in-the-black-sea/> [23.09.2025].

several symbolic gestures, such as awarding the Order of the Republic – the highest state distinction – to Tatar leader Mustafa Dzhemilev. While Ankara has continued to adopt an ambiguous policy regarding the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, a position that persisted after the full-scale invasion in 2022, the fundamental principles of Turkey's policy towards Ukraine have remained consistent.

Turkey unwaveringly supports Ukraine's territorial integrity. As a principled unitary state with a large Kurdish minority, it has no intention of tolerating any precedents that could challenge existing state borders. Furthermore, Ukraine, which considers Turkey a strategic partner, has become a key partner for the Turkish defence sector over the past decade. On one hand, it is a market for Turkish Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicles. Initially equipped with Austrian Rotax engines and utilising Canadian technology, since 2019, these Turkish drones have been powered by engines supplied by a consortium of Ukrainian companies, Ivchenko-Progress and Motor-Sich. In recent years, cooperation between the defence sectors of both countries has intensified. Joint efforts, particularly between Baykar and Ivchenko-Progress, were strengthened by a 2021 agreement covering further deliveries of engines for entire Turkish unmanned aerial vehicle systems (MIUS)⁸. The following year, it was agreed that Ukraine would supply an engine for the Gezgin cruise missile⁹, while Turkish ROKETSAN undertook the construction of two MILGEM Ada-class corvettes for the Ukrainian Navy (the first to be launched in 2022,

⁸ G. Yıldırım, *Baykar'ın insansız savaş uçağına Ukrayna motoru güç verecek*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/bilim-teknoloji/baykarin-insansiz-savas-ucagina-ukrayna-motoru-guc-vercek/2418344> [21.09.2025].

⁹ H. Hayatsever, *Ukrayna'yla motor projelerinde belirsizlik*, Cumhuriyet, 17 March 2022, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/dunya/ukraynayla-motor-projelerinde-belirsizlik-1916654> [21.09.2025].

the second in 2024)¹⁰. There are also further plans for the joint construction of the modern Turkish Kaan fighter jet¹¹. Ukraine has thus emerged as a key partner for Turkey in the development of its arms industry, which today represents Turkey's main asset in relations with the outside world. This happened largely because Turkey, as a result of the purchase of Russian S-400 air defence systems (acquired in 2019), was excluded from the NATO F-35 fighter jet programme and covered by American sanctions imposed on entities cooperating with the Russian arms industry under the American Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)¹².

Turkish support for Ukraine reflected public sentiment, though the situation was more nuanced than in Western countries. According to a poll published by the newspaper "Cumhuriyet" in early March 2022, over 60% of respondents believed "Russia is waging an unjust war", though simultaneously 80% also asserted that "the West provoked and then failed Ukraine"¹³.

This non-linear perspective on the apparent conflict – characterised by an understanding of Ukraine's position yet simultaneous distrust of the West – reflects the complex nature of the government's policy. Despite Turkey's

¹⁰ T. Ozberk, *Türkiye Launches Second MILGEM Corvette for Ukraine*, Naval News, 2 August 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/08/turkiye-launches-second-milgem-corvette-for-ukraine/> [21.09.2025].

¹¹ K. Wasilewski, *Turkey's stance on US negotiations with Russia: no discussions on Ukraine without us*, Center for the Eastern Studies, 25 February 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-02-24/turkeys-stance-us-negotiations-russia-no-discussions-ukraine-without> [21.09.2025].

¹² Cf. M. Piechowska, *Ukraine's Policy Towards Turkey*, "PISM Bulletin" 2021, no. 124, https://pism.pl/publications/Ukraines_Policy_Towards_Turkey [22.09.2025].

¹³ Araştırmacı: Türk halkı Rusya- Ukrayna savaşı hakkında ne düşünüyor?, Cumhuriyet, 17 March 2022, <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/arastirma-turk-halki-rusya-ukrayna-savasi-hakkında-ne-dusunuyor-1916740> [22.03.2025].

support, symbolic gestures, and intensive cooperation with Kyiv, Ankara remains ambivalent towards Russia. The earlier-mentioned purchase of the S-400 and the import of natural gas through two existing pipelines are notable examples. Additionally, the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant, developed in collaboration with Russia, also merits attention, as the first of its four reactors was commissioned in 2023.

Although Turkey actively seeks to diversify its energy sources, Russia continues to play a significant role in its imports. Equally important is the broader context of trade cooperation. In 2024, Turkey's imports from Russia totalled 44.02 billion USD, while its exports amounted to 8.56 billion USD¹⁴. Despite facing a substantial trade deficit, maintaining close economic ties with Russia is essential for Turkey's macroeconomic stability. This reliance stems from Russia's role as a key energy supplier and the constant need for hard currency. Foreign exchange flows into Turkey through Russian tourists and, since 2022, also through Russian oligarchs and businessmen who redirected their assets to Turkey after Ankara opted not to join Western sanctions against Russia¹⁵.

Understanding Ukraine's position, Turkey is inherently tied to recognising Russia as a rival, with complex ties that cannot be entirely severed. Within this context, Ankara has adopted a mediating role, successfully navigating the initial stages of the conflict. It was at Turkey's initiative that an agreement was signed at Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul, allowing for the safe passage of ships transporting Ukrainian grain through the Black Sea and further through the Black Sea Straits to major markets, primarily in the Middle East and Africa. This initiative is consistent with

¹⁴ *Turkey Exports to Russia*, Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/exports/russia> [22.03.2025].

¹⁵ S. Cagaptay, op. cit.

Turkey's overarching foreign policy vision, which continues to shape the Turkish elite's perception of their country's role in the world.

Turkey positions itself as a state that maintains an equal distance from global powers, refraining from aligning with any specific political bloc. As a NATO member, it does not explicitly side with the West, yet it supports Ukraine's sovereignty, which is vital as Ukraine serves (apart from the aforementioned military cooperation with Ankara) as a key food supplier to countries in the Global South. The deal was designed to enhance Turkey's image as a state that advocates for the interests of these nations. Although the agreement lasted just a year¹⁶, the efforts made to finalise it illustrate the broader trajectory of Turkey's foreign policy and the geopolitical mindset of its elite.

Ukraine's significance to Turkey is undeniably vital within the regional context, as its sovereign existence is essential for maintaining the balance of power in the Black Sea basin. Additionally, Ukraine perceives Ankara as a strategic anchor and is capable of supplying crucial components for the Turkish arms industry, which has emerged as a key sector of the Turkish economy in recent years, all without expecting political subordination in return (as in the case of Western partners). Despite its fundamental challenges in consolidating its role as a mediating state¹⁷, Ankara continues to pursue a comprehensive balancing strategy.

¹⁶ See P. Wintour, *What was the Black Sea grain deal and why did it collapse?*, The Guardian, 20 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/20/what-was-the-black-sea-grain-deal-and-why-did-it-collapse> [22.09.2025].

¹⁷ Turkey's challenges in establishing itself as a mediator arise from a disparity between its ambitions and its actual geopolitical weight, a reality that became particularly pronounced during Donald Trump's second term. Ankara has consistently sought recognition for its role on the global stage, yet it struggles to acknowledge that its aspirations are more reflective of its self-perception than indicative of its capacity to function as an equal partner to the United States or Russia. This disconnect highlights the complexities of Turkey's position in

Turkey's policy toward strategic challenges in the region

Turkey's primary strategic objective in the Black Sea region is to maintain a balance of power in relation to Russia. Historically, this basin has served as a space where both states have alternately asserted dominance. Currently, Turkey is focused on preventing Russia from transforming the Black Sea into its own zone of influence. Ankara values the benefits provided by the existing Montreux Convention; however, the deep-rooted historicism that shapes Turkish thinking fosters a persistent concern regarding the potential resurgence of Russian demands for a revision of the Convention. In 1946, Joseph Stalin made such a demand, and the United States came to Turkey's aid. In Turkish strategic thinking, these events are viewed with ambivalence – the clear threat to the Republic's sovereignty posed by the Soviet Union was counterbalanced by Turkey's entry into Western orbit. Contrary to prevalent myths, Republican Turkey was never a pro-Western state; its mindset was fundamentally shaped by anti-occidental sentiments. In this regard, there is a continuity between Kemalist Turkey and the "New Turkey". The novelty, however, lies in the fact that today, Ankara, while striving to preserve its own sovereignty – which it absolutizes – aims to avoid repeating the situation it faced after World War II, when it escaped defeat by Moscow's expansionism at the cost of remaining permanently within the orbit of the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

Thus, crucial to maintaining the desired balance is the survival of Ukraine as an independent and sovereign political entity, as well as preventing littoral states – Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, and Georgia – from falling back into Russia's sphere of influence to varying degrees. All of these nations are either already NATO members (such as

international relations and its ongoing quest for influence. Cf. K. Wa-silewski, *Turkey's...*

Bulgaria and Romania) or have expressed their willingness to join the Alliance. From Ankara's perspective, active co-operation with them is intended to achieve the strategic goals while simultaneously avoiding giving Russia a pretext for aggressive actions. For this reason, NATO is viewed as a utilitarian platform for cooperation rather than a broad geopolitical bloc in which Turkey is merely a single link. This perspective is exemplified by Ankara's active collaboration with littoral states, using its sovereignty over the Straits to prevent increased involvement from NATO members outside the region.

Turkey's military is the most resourceful force in the region, equipped with strategic naval bases located in Gölcük, on the nearby Sea of Marmara, and in Bartın. Additionally, a new base is currently under construction in Trabzon. The country also possesses three air bases: Mürtez (Akinci), Etimesgut, and Amasya (Merzifon). When combined with the comprehensive modernisation programme for its armed forces undertaken in recent years, Turkey emerges as the only country in the region capable of potentially filling the void should the United States decide to withdraw its involvement in Southeastern Europe¹⁸.

As previously mentioned, an active US presence is not viewed by Turkey as desirable. In response to suggestions for increasing NATO's presence in the Black Sea after 2022, Turkish authorities asserted that "NATO is already there"¹⁹.

¹⁸ It is important to note, however, that Turkey does not possess the automatic capability to fill such a gap. Nevertheless, in comparison to other countries in the region, it has an incomparably greater potential. K. Catus, A. Michalski, J. Nowinowski, J. Tarczynski (cooperation J. Gotkowska), *Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in the Black Sea region: Increased cooperation?*, "OSW Commentary" 2025, no. 676, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-06-26/romania-bulgaria-and-turkey-black-sea-region-increased> [24.09.2025].

¹⁹ M. Aydin, A. Aydintasbas, *Bridging the Bosphorus: How Europe and Turkey can turn tiffs into tactics in the Black Sea*, European Council of Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, March 2025, p. 7, <https://ecfr.eu/pub>

Indeed, as part of its cooperation within NATO, Turkey actively supports mechanisms aimed at maintaining stability in the region by providing intelligence to both NATO and Ukraine²⁰. Furthermore, in 2024, Turkey, in collaboration with two other member states, Bulgaria and Romania, established the Black Sea Mine Countermeasure Task Group, which is responsible for clearing the sea of explosives and ensuring safe navigation. These initiatives were preceded by discussions held at NATO summits in both Brussels and Ankara²¹.

Economically, the situation is equally complex, as the Black Sea is traversed by two Russian gas pipelines: Turkish Stream and Blue Stream. The Turkish Stream pipeline runs near the Turkish Sakarya fields, which were discovered in 2020. Additionally, the recently discovered Neptun field is located within Romania's exclusive economic zone²². Thus far, Ankara has shown no interest in pursuing energy cooperation with Romania; however, such collaboration remains a possibility. This potential partnership would align with Turkey's broader policy of diversification and, more generally, its strategy of maintaining regional balance, extending this approach into the economic realm.

In summary, Turkey's approach to the strategic challenges in the Black Sea region involves integrating littoral countries into Ankara's overarching strategic framework. This strategy primarily aims to bolster Turkey's position while

lication/bridging-the-bosphorus-how-europe-and-turkey-can-turn-tiffs-into-tactics-in-the-black-sea/ [24.09.2025].

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

²¹ S. Dincel, U. Turk, *Turkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria establish task force to demine Black Sea*, Anadolu Agency, 1 July 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkiye-romania-and-bulgaria-establish-task-force-to-demine-black-sea/3263294> [25.09.2025].

²² A.C. Dupuy, *A new Black Sea natural gas project could be a game changer for the region – and a challenge for Putin*, Atlantic Council, 23 July 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/a-new-black-sea-natural-gas-project-could-be-a-game-changer-for-the-region-and-a-challenge-for-putin/> [24.09.2025].

simultaneously offering partners appealing alternatives that circumvent NATO's involvement. Turkey perceives this as a potential factor that could antagonise Russia; therefore, Ankara positions itself as the representative of the Alliance, all the while seeking to ensure that regional affairs remain the exclusive domain of the countries within the region.

What is next?

The Russian annexation of Crimea, along with Turkey's observed drift from the West since the second decade of the 21st century, has accelerated Ankara's development of a distinct Black Sea policy. Previously characterised by a lack of coherent vision, this policy has become more clearly defined in recent years. Within this framework, the Black Sea holds a significant role in Turkey's foreign policy, serving as a critical area through which it seeks to establish its status as a state with global ambitions while maintaining a consistent distance from major world powers.

In this context, a sudden shift in Ankara's Black Sea policy should not be anticipated. This balancing act aligns with Turkey's overarching goal of functioning as an independent and sovereign state. This approach to international relations serves Turkey well, as it enables the country to mitigate its weaknesses. Within NATO, Turkey is likely to remain a volatile member, prioritising its national interests over the Alliance's broader strategy. While it does not wish to be perceived globally as part of the West, NATO membership continues to represent a fundamental pillar of Turkish defence.

Turkey is expected to maintain close ties with Ukraine, particularly as Kyiv has emerged as a key supplier of components for new weapons in light of Turkey facing sanctions targeting its arms industry amid disputes with the West. Relations with Russia will remain complex and multifaceted, although a significant rapprochement appears unlikely. This is based on the understanding that an overly powerful

Russia poses a threat to Turkey's security and sovereignty. However, the situation could change if a potential resolution to the conflict in Ukraine would prove extremely unfavourable for Kyiv, or if Russia were to open new fronts that might disrupt the current balance.

Regarding its relationship with the West, Ankara will remain open to cooperation but will steadfastly defend its principles concerning the Black Sea, asserting that the region is an area of exclusive interest for Turkey and its neighbouring countries.

ROMANIA'S POLICY TOWARD THE BLACK SEA REGION AND UKRAINE

Piotr Oleksy

The Black Sea is a key pillar of Romanian strategic thinking, bringing together security issues with energy and economic interests. Over the past three decades, Romania's policy toward this area has focused on limiting Russia's influence and strengthening the presence of NATO and the European Union. The annexation of Crimea and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine have led Western countries to recognise the strategic importance of the Black Sea region, thereby strengthening their understanding of Bucharest's demands¹. At the same time, after 2022, Ukraine became a key partner for NATO and the EU, which led to the opening of a new chapter in Bucharest's relations with Kyiv. Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for Romania's Black Sea policy remains the ambiguous attitude of regional NATO members – namely Bulgaria and Turkey – toward Russia. Currently, two additional challenges have emerged. The first is uncertainty regarding US policy toward NATO's eastern

¹ NATO created a multinational battle group in Bulgaria and Romania, what is perceived as sign of growing attention to the southeastern flank. UE in started procedure of adoption of new strategy for the Black Sea region. Check M. Ghincea, *Making waves*, IPS Journal, 20 February 2025, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/making-waves-8094/> [12.09.2025]; P. Oleksy, S. Domaradzki, *Unijna strategia dla Morza Czarnego*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2025, no. 131, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/unijna-strategia-dla-morza-czarnego/> [12.09.2025].

flank. The second is the rise of isolationist and anti-Ukrainian sentiments in society.

There is a well-known saying in Romania that the country has only two friends: Serbia and the Black Sea. Contrary to this clear message, Romania's relations with both are actually quite complex. Without delving deeper into the issue of Bucharest's relations with Belgrade – which is not the subject of this study – it should be noted that in Romanian strategic thinking and practice, the Black Sea is treated both as a resource to be exploited for development and as an area posing a threat to national sovereignty. The first approach is related to the energy resources on the seabed and the importance of the communication routes there. The second stems from the perception of Russia as a constant threat to both Romania's security and that of the broader region. The Black Sea is seen as an area where Russia's imperial ambitions are confronted with the West – which, in this case, is primarily represented by Romania.

This combination means that, as Brian F.G. Frabègue notes, Bucharest does not merely regard the Black Sea region "as a region of interest, but instead perceives it as a multi-level strategic paradigm that is relevant beyond the national level. In this vision, the Black Sea is transformed into a reflection of Europe's geopolitical architecture, an environment in which the balance of power is actualised through port logistics, energy routes, military infrastructure, and diplomatic coalitions, rather than remaining notional"².

² B.F.G. Frabregue, *Romania's Place in the European Southeastern Flank: Historical ambitions and Structural Limits*, Blue Europe, 13 August 2025, <https://www.blue-europe.eu/analysis-en/full-reports/romania-s-place-in-the-european-southeastern-flank-historical-ambitions-and-structural-limits/> [11.09.2025].

Romania's security policy and the Black Sea

Limiting Russia's influence in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe – and perceiving Moscow as a threat to regional security and Romania's own sovereignty – became one of the pillars of Romania's strategic culture after 1989³. As a result, a significant part of Romania's efforts to ensure its own and regional security are focused on the Black Sea coast. It should be noted that Romania's security strategy in recent years has focused on deepening alliances within NATO, attracting Western troops and investment to its territory, and attaching particular importance to relations with the US⁴.

This strategy has led to tangible results in the form of a growing US military presence on Romanian territory. In 2007, the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base was established near Constanța, on the Black Sea coast. By February 2022, approximately 1,300 American soldiers were stationed there. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this number increased to approximately 2,600. American soldiers also use other military facilities: training grounds in Babadag, Cincu and Smârdan, and the air force base in Câmpia Turzii. Another facility of fundamental importance is the military base in Deveselu, where three SM-3 missile batteries have been established. This is a key element of NATO's missile defence system (operated by the US Army). Several hundred US Navy soldiers and civilian personnel are stationed there on a rotational basis. Furthermore, since 2017, thanks to bilateral agreements, a US armoured battalion has been stationed in Romania on a rotational basis⁵. There are plans to expand

³ I. Joja, *Romania's Strategic Culture 1990–2014: Continuity and Change in a Post-Communist Country's. Evolution of National Interests and Security Policies*, Stuttgart 2019.

⁴ M. Chudziak, P. Oleksy, *Does the trilogue have a future? Romania and Turkey as partners for Poland's foreign policy*, Instytut Europy Środkowej, 2024, pp. 20–25.

⁵ K. Călăus, *Nowa strategia bezpieczeństwa Rumunii*, Analizy OSW, 15 July 2020, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2020-07-15/>

and modernise the Mihail Kogălniceanu and Câmpia Turzii bases, along with other facilities.

Romania's defence spending ranged from 1.35% to 1.84% of GDP between 2014 and 2019, reaching the 2% GDP benchmark only twice so far – first in 2020, and again in 2024⁶. Bucharest is currently focusing on developing its air force by procuring fourth- and fifth-generation F-16 and F-35 fighter jets, while also comprehensively modernising its land forces, including its armoured personnel carriers, tanks, and artillery. The country is also investing in medium-range air defence systems, such as the Patriot, as well as coastal defence systems capable of striking naval targets from land using NSM missiles.

At the same time, as analysts from the Centre for Eastern Studies emphasise:

naval expansion was not treated as a priority, so the navy's capabilities remain limited. One of Bucharest's key objectives is to maintain the safety and low cost of commercial shipping in the Black Sea. After drifting Russian and Ukrainian sea mines became the greatest security threat from 2022 onwards, Romania – which had until then possessed only minimal mine countermeasure capabilities – decided to acquire two second-hand minehunters. In 2025, it initiated the procurement process for a corvette, and the government has declared further investments⁷.

This approach to maritime defence capabilities stems largely from Romania's strategic culture and broader calculations of interests and capabilities. The overarching goal of Romanian military diplomacy is to internationalise security in the Black Sea, which requires the presence of

nowa-strategia-bezpieczenstwa-rumunii [5.07.2022].

⁶ K. Całus et al., *Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in the Black Sea region: Increased cooperation?*, OSW Commentary, 26 June 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-06-26/romania-bulgaria-and-turkey-black-sea-region-increased> [11.09.2025].

⁷ Ibid.

Western allies' naval units in this area. For Romania, the desired solution would be to replicate the model of NATO cooperation in the Baltic Sea, which involves intensive and in-depth cooperation in both military deterrence and combating hybrid threats. However, this goal is met with resistance from Bulgaria and conflicts with the interests of Turkey, which, pursuing its own multi-vector policy, does not want to allow any loosening of the provisions of the Montreux Convention, which gives it the exclusive right to decide on the movement of military vessels in the Black Sea. As Marius Ghincea stated:

Bulgaria's strategic outlook is often shaped by a more ambivalent attitude toward Russia, while Türkiye's perspective – long conditioned by the Montreux Convention – centres on maintaining its privileged position as the gatekeeper of Black Sea access. Indeed, for decades, Ankara has used the Convention's provisions to limit large-scale or long-term naval deployments by non-Black Sea states. From Romania's point of view, this has effectively closed the door to any consistent NATO maritime presence, complicating its ability to deter Russia⁸.

In effect, since 2014, Romania has failed to establish a Black Sea naval task force or to secure the permanent rotational presence of allied battalion battlegroups on its territory. NATO decided only to deploy a small training mission there. One success in this regard was the organisation of joint military exercises between 2014 and 2022: British and American navy destroyers conducted annual freedom of navigation exercises in the Black Sea, involving joint patrols with Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian vessels, port visits to Odesa, and transits through Crimean territorial waters.

⁸ M. Ghincea, op. cit.

Energy and economy

The Black Sea is of fundamental importance to Romania's economy, primarily due to its natural gas deposits and the transport routes running along the coast.

The extraction potential of the Neptun natural gas field, located on the seabed, is estimated at 170–200 billion cubic metres. However, for years, the start of its exploitation was delayed due to erroneous administrative and legal decisions. It was not until 2022 that more investor-friendly legal conditions were introduced, which additionally guarantee that approximately 64% of the revenues from extraction will go to the state budget. Since then, extraction work at the Neptun field has been carried out by the US company Black Sea Oil & Gas. The use of these resources will not only satisfy Romania's own demand for natural gas, but will also make it a significant exporter of this raw material. Bucharest presents this development as a strategic opportunity not only for its own country, but also for Europe's energy security.

Russia's blockade of Ukrainian ports has highlighted the important role played by trade routes passing through Romania. This applies primarily to rail connections with Ukraine and Romanian ports on the Black Sea. Already in the second half of 2022, around 50% of agricultural and food exports from Ukraine to the EU passed through Romania. Russia's termination of the so-called grain agreement in the summer of 2023 led to the resumption of intensive transit through Romanian territory. In this situation, the Romanian coast serves as a transit hub, which is crucial both for sustaining the efficiency of the Ukrainian economy and for ensuring global food security. These ports are also very important for maintaining the EU's trade relations with the South Caucasus and Caspian Sea regions. In this situation, Bucharest can credibly present investments in the development of its own transport infrastructure as a measure of strategic importance for the entire EU.

Relations with Ukraine

Romania's relations with Ukraine have reached an unprecedented level of mutual understanding. The two countries have managed to resolve relations on the most sensitive issues: the problem of agricultural imports and the rights of national minorities. This creates the basis for the development of a partnership that will be crucial for the security architecture in this part of the Black Sea region. This state of relations represents a new, positive qualitative shift against the backdrop of historical events.

For many years after 1991, relations between Bucharest and Kyiv were characterised by distance and even coldness, interspersed with periods of dispute. On the Romanian side, the lack of interest in deepening relations with its neighbour, with whom it shares its longest border, stemmed from historical, cultural and strategic issues. A characteristic feature of Romanian national identity and political culture is maintaining a certain distance from Eastern Slavic culture. Moreover, after 1991, Ukraine was perceived as one of the heirs to the Soviet Union, remembered at that time as an aggressor that had, after World War II, used political terror to bind Romania into a close alliance. To some extent, grievances over the territory of Bukovina, seized by the USSR during World War II and now within Ukraine's borders, were also transferred to Kyiv. For many years, these countries were also divided by a territorial dispute over Snake Island (ultimately settled in Ukraine's favour). Importantly, Romania perceived Ukraine as a strategically ambivalent state, often acting in Russia's favour. This mainly concerned Kyiv's consent to the presence of the Russian fleet in Crimea and its ambiguous policy toward Transnistria, which enabled the economic functioning of this separatist republic. The issue of the protection of rights of the Romanian population in Ukraine was also the cause of numerous political disputes.

The first breakthrough in mutual relations came after Russia's annexation of Crimea and hybrid aggression in Donbas in 2014. This resulted in a visit by President Petro

Poroshenko to Bucharest, and Romania began to see Ukraine as a potential partner on strategic issues. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Romania offered humanitarian support and assistance to refugees. Transit channels were also quickly established. Another diplomatic breakthrough came in the autumn of 2023, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Bucharest and Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu visited Kyiv. Agreements were reached on the export of Ukrainian agricultural products, military cooperation (including the training of Ukrainian F-16 fighter pilots and cooperation between the defence industries), cross-border cooperation and, crucially, the rights of the Romanian population living in Ukraine.

For some time, however, there was uncertainty regarding Bucharest's involvement in military support. According to official data, aid to the neighbouring country amounted to a small shipment of fuel, vests, helmets and ammunition, as well as 28 T-72 tanks (including five fully operational ones). Romanian politicians and diplomats assured that the aid was in fact much greater, but that for security reasons its scale could not be disclosed. This approach significantly distinguished Romania from other countries in the region, which also sparked debate within Romania itself⁹.

On an international level, Bucharest and Kyiv are also united by their concern for the Republic of Moldova to maintain its pro-Western course. For Romania, Moldova is an important partner for identity, cultural and strategic reasons. For Ukraine, a pro-Russian shift by Moldova would create new strategic threats. In this context, the Romania-Moldova-Ukraine trilogue, which has been in operation since September 2022, is an important initiative. This alliance of political and economic cooperation also aims informally to deepen security ties. It also bolsters security in the

⁹ P. Oleksy, *Rumunia zacieśnia współpracę z Ukrainą*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2023, no. 235, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/rumunia-zacieśnia-wspolprace-z-ukraina/> [12.09.2025].

Black Sea region by facilitating the delivery of critical infrastructure projects, such as energy and transport corridors. Moreover, it opens up the prospect of the three countries cooperating with each other in several areas, even after the war in Ukraine has ended¹⁰.

New challenges for Black Sea policy and cooperation with Ukraine

Romania's foreign policy after 1989, including its Black Sea policy, has been characterised by impressive continuity and stability. It would appear that it was Russia's annexation of Crimea and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that prompted Western partners to share Romania's point of view. The biggest breakthrough in Bucharest's policy is precisely the new opening in relations with Kyiv. However, this was largely due to Ukraine's need to fight the aggressor and its rapprochement with the West, primarily in political and strategic terms. The strategies of Romania, Ukraine and most Western partners toward the Black Sea region have thus converged as a result of Russian expansionism. Nevertheless, it is precisely at this point that significant challenges to the continuation of Romania's Black Sea policy have begun to emerge. These challenges are both external and internal.

The first challenge concerns uncertainty regarding US policy toward the region. After Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, the Romanian authorities gave special priority to bilateral relations with the US. Seeking to strengthen its position in NATO and the EU, and striving for Western unity, Bucharest treated its alliance with Washington as the most important guarantor of its own security. Currently, this

¹⁰ L. Pleșca, I.-G. Burcea, *Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine's Trilateral Effort on Black Sea Security*, German Marshal Fund, 30 June 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/moldova-romania-and-ukraines-trilateral-effort-black-sea-security> [12.09.2025].

stance is difficult to maintain due to the US's ambivalent attitude toward Russia – in the context of peace talks and a broader vision of mutual relations – as well as the announcement of a reduction in American military presence in Europe. The deterrent power of NATO's eastern flank, a vision shared by Bucharest, was until recently, based primarily on the American component. The unpredictability of Washington's actions during Donald Trump's presidency has called the existing strategic assumptions into question.

The second challenge concerns the rise of isolationist and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, which became particularly apparent during the election crisis that lasted from November 2024 to May 2025. The first round of the presidential election, which took place on 24 November, was won unexpectedly with 22.94% of the vote by Calin Georgescu, a man outside the political mainstream, known primarily for his activity on internet portals promoting an isolationist narrative calling for greater political and economic independence from the West and a reduction in international engagement. In addition, Georgescu spoke positively about the Russian president and referred to a very traditional understanding of nationalism and religiosity. The election was cancelled due to allegations of external interference. In the repeat elections held in May 2025, George Simion, leader of the Romanian Unity Union party, won the first round. In the second round, Simion lost to Nicusor Dan, a pro-European and liberal politician, though 5.3 million people voted for him. For years, Simion and his party have been promoting an openly nationalist vision of politics, an important component of which is anti-Ukrainian sentiment, built on traditional ethnic animosity and grievances over the treatment of the Romanian minority in Ukraine.

The sources of both politicians' popularity are to be found primarily in the deep and widespread public disappointment with the political elites and the functioning of the state. It is difficult to say at present whether the current broad coalition government will be able to reverse this

trend. The rise of nationalist and isolationist sentiments in Romania is in line with US policy toward the region. The challenges to the stability of Romania's Black Sea policy and its relations with Ukraine are therefore manifold. Nevertheless, based on the experience of the last thirty years and an analysis of the narrative of sovereignist forces in Romania, it is difficult to imagine that a takeover of power by the right-wing opposition could lead to a radical shift in Black Sea policy. However, it would most likely result in a cooling of relations with Ukraine and a reduction in international activity aimed at strengthening the position of NATO and the EU in the region.

BULGARIA'S POLICY TOWARD THE BLACK SEA REGION AND UKRAINE

Maria Simeonova

The Black Sea: Bulgaria's overlooked strategic frontier

Bulgaria's post-1989 transition was defined by its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Following years of economic hardship in the 1990s, Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. This trajectory could have positioned Sofia as a bridge between the West and the post-Soviet and Balkan regions, which were all undergoing turbulent transitions and, in the latter case, wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. However, despite its geographic and cultural proximity to the region, Bulgaria struggled to develop a coherent Black Sea policy. Its foreign policy priorities focused on completing integration milestones – Schengen and Euro-zone accession – while endemic corruption, state capture, and weak governance continued to limit the assertiveness and strategic depth of its external action.

Another missed opportunity for Sofia was to use its EU and NATO memberships to curb Russian influence. Energy dependence persisted through gas pipelines and strategic assets such as Lukoil Neftochim Burgas, the largest refinery in the Balkans, located on the Black Sea coast and owned by Russia's Lukoil. The Kozloduy nuclear power plant continued to rely on Russian nuclear fuel. Bulgaria's Black Sea coast also became home to an increasing number of Russian property owners. In 2010, the Kamchia Resort Complex

was inaugurated – a large facility with sports, conference centres, and cultural infrastructure owned by the Moscow municipality. These economic and societal links deepened Russia's informal leverage in Bulgaria, shaping both elite calculations and public perceptions. As a result, the cost of adopting a more assertive regional posture toward Moscow – particularly in the Black Sea – appeared politically prohibitive for successive governments.

As a result, earlier Russian aggression – in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014) – provoked hesitant responses from Sofia, reflecting its cautious balancing approach, shaped by pro-Russian political formations and an ambiguous public mood¹. The combination of structural dependence and political hesitation effectively muted Bulgaria's voice in shaping the regional security agenda.

Until 2022, Bulgaria's Black Sea policy was projected mainly through participation in regional formats and initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), and the EU's Black Sea Synergy. These frameworks proved inadequate in the face of Russia's increasingly assertive strategic objectives in the region, which aimed to undermine the Euro-Atlantic trajectory of neighbouring states and reassert Moscow's dominance. This ambition was most clearly articulated in Russia's draft "security guarantee" agreements submitted to the United States and NATO in December 2021², which demanded the withdrawal of NATO forces and infrastructure from Eastern Europe – a direct challenge to the European security order established after the Cold War.

¹ *Public Opinion Poll: Bulgarian Foreign Policy, the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and National Security*, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 26 March 2015, https://ecfr.eu/article/public_opinion_poll311520/ [20.10.2025].

² *Press release on Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees*, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MID), MID.ru, 17 December 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1790809/ [20.10.2025].

Between support and hesitation: Bulgaria's political and public response to the war in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 coincided with a period of political instability in Bulgaria, marked by repeated elections and fragmented coalitions. However, public opinion polls showed a clear movement away from pro-Russian sentiments in Bulgaria in the immediate aftermath of the start of the war³. Attitudes toward President Vladimir Putin deteriorated sharply around February–March 2022. A majority of Bulgarians seemed supportive of sanctions against Russia and nearly half (47%) supported this even at an economic cost.

Despite expressing sympathy for Ukraine in the first months after the start of the war, Bulgarians showed hesitation when it came to military support to Kyiv⁴ over fears that this might drag Bulgaria into the war. Hence, early political official statements were cautious. But Bulgaria, under Prime Minister Kiril Petkov (PP), covertly supplied Ukraine with ammunition through intermediaries, leveraging its defence industry's production of Soviet-standard arms. This quiet contribution was driven by reformist and pro-European partners in the coalition, "We Continue the Change" (PP) and Democratic Bulgaria (DB), but kept from the public eye due to the presence of the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) within the ruling coalition.

Public sentiments in Bulgaria are partially attributed to a well-documented Russian interference in Bulgarian public space. Recent parliamentary elections in the country

³ *Войната Русия – Украина: радикална промяна в обществените нагласи към руския президент и ръст на солидарност с европейските страни*, Alpha Research, February 2022, <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/995-voinata-rusia-ukraina-radikalna-promiana-v-obshtestvenite-naglasi-kum-ruskia-prezident-i-rust-na-solidarnost-s-europeiskite-strani.html?lang=bg> [20.10.2025].

⁴ *Eurobarometer: 30 % of Bulgarians support sending military aid to Ukraine*, Bulgarian National Radio (BNR), 5 May 2022, <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101642427/eurobarometer-30-of-bulgarians-support-sending-military-aid-to-ukraine> [20.10.2025].

were marked by Kremlin-backed campaigns amplified by the far-right pro-Russian party Revival and mirrored across a network of anonymous “mushroom websites”⁵. In terms of media output and social media posts originating from Russian diplomatic missions, Bulgaria ranks fourth in the Balkans with 1,572 items – far behind Romania, which leads with 7,193. The picture shifts dramatically when considering user interactions: Bulgaria leads with 2.3 million interactions compared to approximately 0.77 million in Greece and a drop to third place in Romania⁶.

At the political level, the far-right party Revival and sympathetic social media ecosystems amplify Kremlin propaganda, sustaining anti-EU and anti-NATO messaging. President Rumen Radev’s famous 2021 statement that “Crimea is Russian, what else could it be” has echoed in a subsequent peace narrative. Radev maintained his stance and has consistently opposed military aid to Ukraine, reiterating this position during President Volodymyr Zelensky’s 2023 visit to Sofia. Although pro-Russian voters have declined, their influence remains visible through parliamentary representation and social media mobilisation; the momentum of public solidarity with Ukraine and disillusionment with Russia in the aftermath of the start of the war was not harnessed into unambiguous policy action.

Still, during a short-lived rotation government led by the largest but also traditionally rival coalitions – GERB-UDF and PP-DB – Bulgaria demonstrated its ability to play a role in the support for Ukraine against the Russian aggression. During his visit to Kyiv on 26 February 2024, Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov (PP) led a delegation that underscored Bulgaria’s solidarity with Ukraine and its

⁵ *Bulgaria Disinformation, Mushroom Websites*, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty – RFE/RL, 6 April 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-disinformation-mushroom-websites/32893788.html> [20.10.2025].

⁶ C. O’Kelley, *Russian Embassy Facebook Activity in Southeastern Europe*, Disinfo Fence, 28 February 2023, <https://disinfo-fence.eu/russian-embassy-facebook-activity-in-southeastern-europe/> [20.10.2025].

commitment to long-term cooperation in key strategic areas. Among the main conclusions of the visit was a shared focus on strengthening Black Sea and Danube infrastructure as vital corridors for trade, energy, and reconstruction, positioning Bulgaria as a gateway for Ukrainian exports to the EU. Both governments agreed to enhance connectivity and logistics, restore safe navigation in the Black Sea, and modernise Danube transport routes, linking these initiatives to wider European efforts to diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on Russian-controlled routes. Environmental cooperation also emerged as a priority reflecting a broader vision of green reconstruction. Overall, the visit reflected Bulgaria's attempt to leverage its position as a Black Sea littoral state in support of Ukraine's recovery and integration with the EU.

Since January 2025, Bulgaria has been governed by a GERB-led coalition that includes its former rivals – the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and the populist There Is Such a People (ITN). Prime Minister Rossen Zhelyazkov, a GERB politician with a solid Euro-Atlantic profile, has maintained alignment with EU and NATO policies on Ukraine and defence spending. Yet, despite its pro-European rhetoric, the government faces domestic unrest over state capture and the politicisation of the judiciary, with protests following the arrest of opposition figures nationwide.

While Bulgaria remains rhetorically aligned with the EU's position on Ukraine, it is not leading initiatives to bolster regional security and/or connectivity. For example, efforts to revitalise trilateral cooperation with Greece and Romania – highlighted at an October 2023 trilateral summit in Euxinograd⁷ – have stalled politically, despite their strategic importance for NATO's military mobility along the Eastern flank, the security of global food supplies, the North–South

⁷ Press release: 32726, Hellenic Prime Minister's Office, 9 October 2023, <https://www.primeminister.gr/en/2023/10/09/32726> [20.10.2025].

corridor, and security in the Black Sea. Moreover, though negotiations on a bilateral security agreement with Ukraine began in late 2024⁸, the agreement has not been finalised⁹. This gap illustrates political constraints and hesitancy that continue to limit Bulgaria's regional agency and its ability to translate political commitment into sustained strategic action.

Strategic transformation and regional engagement after February 2022

Bulgaria's slow military modernisation long constrained its regional influence. Recent efforts, however, mark a shift. Defence procurement increased sharply between 2019 and 2023, mostly due two US contracts for F-16 Block 70 fighter jets¹⁰ and the construction of two multipurpose modular patrol vessels (MMPVs), expected to enter service by 2026¹¹. The US approval of a Naval Strike Missile Coastal Defense System is expected to enhance Bulgaria's maritime deterrence, while participation in NATO's Mine Countermeasures Task Group Black Sea (MCM Black Sea) alongside Turkey and Romania underlines Sofia's practical contribution to regional maritime security.

Bulgaria's modernisation is increasingly embedded within NATO's broader deterrence architecture on the Eastern

⁸ Україна та Болгарія розпочали переговори про підписання, Office of the President of Ukraine, 25 October 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-ta-bolgariya-rozpochali-peregovori-pro-pidpisannya-94073> [20.10.2025].

⁹ Bulgaria's political turmoil stymies security deal with Kyiv, Bloomberg, 19 December 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-12-19/bulgaria-s-political-turmoil-stymies-security-deal-with-kyiv> [20.10.2025].

¹⁰ BULGARIA_19-36, U.S. Department of Defense, 9 December 2024, https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/09/2003604164/-1/-1/0/BULGARIA_19-36.PDF [20.10.2025].

¹¹ Bulgaria's navy launches second new patrol vessel ahead of schedule, Sofia Globe, 12 December 2024, <https://sofiaglobe.com/2024/12/12/bulgarias-navy-launches-second-new-patrol-vessel-ahead-of-schedule/> [20.10.2025].

flank. The Italian-led multinational battlegroup stationed at Novo Selo since 2022 is a symbol of allied presence and interoperability¹². Sustaining these reforms will require consistent strategic investments coordinated with neighbouring allies, as well as institutional continuity and political will – elements that have often been undermined by domestic political opportunism.

The war in Ukraine accelerated Bulgaria's diversification away from Russian energy dependence. The 2022 suspension of Gazprom gas deliveries, following Sofia's refusal to pay in rubles, catalysed a shift toward alternative suppliers. Bulgaria subsequently achieved progress through the Greece – Bulgaria Interconnector (IGB), expanded pipeline supplies from Azerbaijan, and increased LNG imports from the United States.

The war also prompted the withdrawal of Russian corporate assets, such as Lukoil Neftochim Burgas. While the Russian energy group has considered selling the refinery since 2024, the transaction is yet to be announced. The Bulgarian government holds leverage over the sale, and may block it to prevent penetration of entities linked to, for example, Russia, Belarus, or Hungary. The identity of the future buyer will shed more light on whether Russian interests still hold influence in Bulgaria¹³.

The publication of the joint communication on EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region in May 2025¹⁴ marks a success story in Bulgaria's and Romania's long-standing

¹² *Bulgaria training for NATO multinational battle group*, Italian Ministry of Defence / Difesa, 15 March 2024, <https://www.difesa.it/eng/primo-piano/bulgaria-training-for-nato-multinational-battle-group/49455.html> [20.10.2025].

¹³ *Southeast Europe in Focus*, “South-East Europe Association” 2025, no. 3, <https://www.sogde.org/en/publications/southeast-europe-in-focus/> [20.10.2025].

¹⁴ *EU Strategic Approach Black Sea Strategy*, European Union, 28 May 2025 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d-9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU%20Strategic%20Approach%20Black%20Sea%20Strategy.pdf [20.10.2025].

advocacy for a stronger EU presence in the region. The strategy's priorities on maritime situational awareness, critical infrastructure protection, and climate security reflect Bulgaria's interests as both a littoral and front-line EU and NATO member state.

The document envisages the creation of a regional hub for maritime situational awareness, though its precise location and funding details remain undefined. Ensuring effective coordination between NATO and EU mechanisms and managing Turkey's sensitivities – particularly its scepticism toward the involvement of non-littoral actors in Black Sea security – will be essential to the strategy's success.

Going forward, Bulgaria should seek to assume a more proactive role in implementing the EU's strategic approach rather than relying on Brussels to dictate priorities and financing. The emerging EU defence funding schemes and the NATO 5% defence investment pledge offer opportunities to link national modernisation efforts with broader Black Sea security objectives. By integrating these initiatives with regional cooperation among Romania, Greece, and Turkey, Bulgaria could strengthen both its national capabilities and its standing as a constructive actor in shaping the Euro-Atlantic agenda in the Black Sea.

The EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea should be viewed through a regional lens: it is not merely a tool for Bulgaria and Romania to strengthen their national capacities, but also a framework that entrusts them with the responsibility to project EU posture and foster stability across the wider region, including in the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

Official Bulgarian strategic documents consistently identify the Black Sea as a region of high importance within national foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, Bulgaria has not succeeded in establishing itself as a significant actor in this

space. This limited profile results from a combination of factors: insufficient administrative capacity, the need to balance between regional powers, and the absence of a clear political vision. In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and despite EU and NATO membership, Bulgaria – burdened by hyperinflation, difficult public sector reforms, and later by entrenched corruption and politicised institutions – lacked the means to articulate a distinct and sustained Black Sea strategy. Yet beyond these capacity constraints, what was missing was strategic imagination – one that would transcend the entrenched mentality of deference toward Moscow and cautious balancing toward Ankara.

In the short term, Bulgaria is likely to maintain its Euro-Atlantic trajectory and political support for Ukraine. However, persistent domestic instability, populist pressures, and institutional fragility could dilute its strategic focus. The risk of an anti-EU or anti-Ukrainian shift remains moderate but tangible, dependent on short-term economic performance, electoral outcomes (presidential in 2026 and potentially early general elections), and the evolution of public sentiment.

For now, Bulgaria's ability to project power in the Black Sea depends largely on its integration within EU and NATO frameworks. The stronger the institutional role of these organisations in the region, the greater the expectations for Bulgarian engagement. To meet them, Sofia must align external commitments with domestic reform – particularly in strengthening institutional integrity, defence modernisation, and coordination with EU Black Sea initiatives.

If Bulgaria succeeds in translating this alignment into policy, it could gradually emerge as a constructive and credible Black Sea actor.

GEORGIA'S POLICY TOWARD THE BLACK SEA REGION AND UKRAINE

Krzysztof Fedorowicz

Geographically, Georgia is located in the western part of the South Caucasus and on the eastern bank of the Black Sea, bordering Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey to the south, and Russia to the north. Its Black Sea coastline spans roughly 310 km, of which approximately 110 km remains under Tbilisi's control. More than 200 km of the Black Sea shoreline is controlled by Abkhazia, an entity not recognised internationally and functioning as a de facto protectorate of the Russian Federation. Under international law, Abkhazia is part of Georgia; however, since the mid 1990s, as a consequence of war, the authorities in Tbilisi have lost control over this territory, where an alternative centre of power operates in Sukhumi, recognised and supported by Russia. In practice, since the early 1990s, Moscow has supported, armed, and financed separatists in both regions, systematically undermining Georgia's sovereignty by mass issuance of Russian passports to residents of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Accordingly, the role of the Black Sea in Georgia's foreign policy – and its perception by political elites – evokes both threats and opportunities¹. Over the past three decades, the Black Sea region has been important to Georgia

¹ T. Stępniewski, *Geopolityka regionu Morza Czarnego w pozimnowojennym świecie*, Lublin–Warsaw 2011, pp. 197–201.

from three key perspectives: economic, politico-military, and ideational.

From an economic standpoint, Georgia's location on the Black Sea makes it a strategically significant transit country with stilluntapped potential. As a bridge between Europe and Asia, the Black Sea basin has always had considerable geopolitical and geoeconomic importance as a transit node along trade routes. At the global scale, the Black Sea connects Asia with Europe and the West with the East, and it affords littoral states, including Georgia, the potential to develop transport infrastructure and to become a regional and global hub for commerce and logistics. If this transit potential were fully realised, the South Caucasus could become a contiguous, overland counterpart to the Suez Canal – an important artery of transit for the entire world.

Energy and economy

Georgia underscores the significance of the Black Sea as a source of economic exchange, investment, and tourism. Moreover, Georgia views its status as a coastal state as conducive to regional cooperation and peacebuilding in the unstable South Caucasus. Economically, the Black Sea region remains an important export market and a significant source of imports for Georgia. In 2021, four Black Sea countries ranked among Georgia's ten largest export partners, led by Russia (14.4% of exports), followed by Turkey (7.6%), Ukraine (7.2%), Bulgaria (6%), and Romania (0.7%). The two largest import partners also came from the Black Sea region – namely Turkey (18.1%) and Russia (10.2%) – with Ukraine in seventh place (4.5%), as well as Bulgaria and Romania (1.7%).

The Black Sea plays a crucial role in Georgia's access to global markets and in facilitating international trade. Georgia's Black Sea ports primarily handle transit to and from the region. Maritime transport (4.5 billion USD) accounts for about 40% of Georgia's foreign trade turnover

(11.3 billion USD), with the remainder carried by road (42%), rail (6.7%), and air (7.6%). At present, Georgia relies on two principal ports – Poti and Batumi – and two oil terminals, Kulevi and Supsa. Poti is Georgia's largest port, handling around 80% of the cargo volume processed by Georgian ports².

The Black Sea basin is also an important international energy corridor, and Georgia is a key transit country. Several critical elements of energy infrastructure of international significance are currently in place. These include two oil pipelines: the Baku–Supsa pipeline, which connects the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea with the Georgian port of Supsa on the Black Sea, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, which delivers Caspian oil to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean.

Yet over the past twenty years, the Black Sea region has not become a dynamic zone of trade, transport, energy, or cultural exchange. Instead, much of the region's potential has been lost as it has turned into an arena of rivalry for dominance and competing geopolitical interests. This constitutes the second image that shapes Georgia's perception of the region.

Georgia's security policy and the Black Sea

From a politico-military perspective, Georgia views the Black Sea as a potential source of threats to its national security and stability. The region exerts a significant impact on Georgia's security, stability, and development, and it can both disrupt and support these. On one hand, the Black Sea area has recently become a principal geographical stage of Russian geopolitical assertiveness, which directly and indirectly undermines Georgia's national sovereignty and

² E. Khokhrishvili, B. Lebanidze, *Georgia and the Black Sea: Risks, resilience and opportunities*, "Zeitschrift für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik" 2022, no. 15, pp. 193–197.

jeopardises its statehood and foreign policy priorities. The Black Sea forms an important ring of security and geopolitics around Georgia, presenting both potential risks and opportunities.

Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and, to a lesser extent, South Ossetia, has had a decidedly negative impact, as does the resulting dominance of the Russian Navy in adjacent coastal waters. Georgia is particularly exposed to military risks stemming from the strong presence of Russian naval and armed forces in the Black Sea region. It bears recalling that the Black Sea coast was among the key theatres during the 2008 war, when the Russian Navy decimated Georgia's fleet and maintained a maritime blockade, denying access to the port of Poti and the entire Georgian coastline. Russia maintains over 8,000 troops and modern military equipment in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and retains a military presence in the strategically important port of Ochamchire in Abkhazia. Since 2008, Georgia has lacked modern naval forces, and its small coast guard has no chance in a direct confrontation with the Russian Navy. As such, Georgia is practically defenceless at sea in the face of recurrent provocations by Russia and Abkhazia. The Russian occupation of approximately 20% of Georgian territory is cited as one of the main threats to Georgia's national security, with the Black Sea dimension constituting an integral part³.

Negative security consequences for Georgia also arise from Russia's occupation of Crimea and the armed conflict in Ukraine. Russia's longterm strategy appears aimed at transforming the Black Sea into an antiaccess zone, which threatens Georgia's potential as a transit hub and its strategy of connectivity with the external environment, including with NATO and EU partners. The principal security risks for Georgia derive from Russia's geopolitical presence in the

³ A. Kuimova, S. Wezeman, *Georgia and Black Sea Security*, Policy Paper SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), 2018, pp. 3–5.

Black Sea region and the Kremlin's increasingly assertive posture toward the region's pro-Western states. Georgia's security and stability remain highly vulnerable due to the presence of unresolved conflicts, Russia's ongoing destabilising activities, and potential spillovers from instability in the region.

The Black Sea is also regarded as an important bridge toward the EU and NATO⁴. Membership in both organisations has remained, until recently, a key objective of Georgia's foreign policy, and the Black Sea is the only area offering Georgia direct geographic links to NATO members – Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania. Political elites in Georgia have long sought to decouple the country from the South Caucasus region and to associate it more closely with the community of Eastern Europe, both politically and culturally. The image of a Black Sea littoral state appears helpful in this regard, as it provides symbolic and physical ties with other Eastern European coastal states. Overall, Georgia perceives the broader Black Sea region as an important pillar of its security and prosperity and the main gateway to the EU and NATO. Consequently, the Russia–Ukraine war and the further destabilisation of the Black Sea region have threatened Georgia's strategic interests and exerted a powerful influence on its domestic and foreign policy.

Relations with Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has posed a major challenge for Georgian authorities, exerting a predominantly negative impact on both Georgia's domestic and foreign policy as well as on the country's overall security.

⁴ K. Fedorowicz, *Działania Sojuszu Północnoatlantyckiego wobec Gruzji*, [in:] W. Paruch, M. Pietraś, B. Surmacz (eds.), *Sojusz Północnoatlantycki w środowisku niepewności i zmiany. Dwadzieścia lat członkostwa Polski*, Warsaw 2020, pp. 274–276.

First, the war in Ukraine has deepened already fiercely polarized domestic politics and has triggered a serious political crisis. The Georgian government's lack of a firm stance against Russian aggression sparked mass protests. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Georgian society sided with Ukrainians and condemned Russian aggression. A decisive majority also supported the continuation of a pro-Western foreign policy and distanced itself from co-operation with Russia. Meanwhile, the authorities refrained from openly criticising the Kremlin and chose to maintain correct relations with Moscow at the expense of ties with the EU and the United States. Owing to its geographic location, Georgia quickly became a key transit state for the import of Western goods subject to sanctions into Russia. It also became a haven for more than 100,000 Russians fleeing conscription⁵.

Russia's 2022 military assault on Ukraine marked a turning point for Georgia – not only as a regional threat but also as a catalyst for its internal and external political compass. From the outset of the war, the administration in Tbilisi adopted a position built on three strategic pillars: refraining from imposing sanctions on Russia, avoiding direct military assistance to Ukraine, and pursuing cautious diplomacy to maintain relations with the West. This stance was justified in terms of "national interest" and "economic security".

However, this cautious approach elicited substantial public discontent. Drawing on the historical memory of the 2008 war, Georgian society developed strong empathy toward Ukraine. Mass protests in Tbilisi and other cities expressed solidarity far beyond the government's policy of "neutrality". Civil society organisations, volunteers, and even local religious activists voiced support,

⁵ E. Tkeshelashvili, *Georgia's Warning for Ukraine. A Cease-Fire Alone Would Hardly End Russia's Quest for Dominance*, Foreign Affairs, 5 July 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/georgia/georgias-warning-ukraine> [12.09.2025].

revealing a deep divergence between state policy and public sentiment.

Second, in the realm of foreign policy, the Russia–Ukraine war exposed the limitations of the balancing strategy pursued by the ruling Georgian Dream party. The Georgian government did not join sanctions against Russia and did not provide political or diplomatic support to Ukraine. A diplomatic rift with Ukraine quickly emerged when the Georgian authorities began obstructing departures from Tbilisi by Georgians seeking to take part in Ukraine's defence, arguing that this would imply Georgia's direct involvement in the war. Georgia's prime minister publicly claimed that there was a plan to "Ukrainize" Georgia, allegedly backed by Ukrainian state officials in alliance with the Georgian opposition, and that he would not allow a scenario akin to the proEuropean "Euromaidan" movement of 2013 that culminated in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity. He publicly alleged that the Ukrainian government had been "appointed from the outside" and blamed foreign powers for Russia's war against Ukraine.

Another point of contention was the arrest of Mikheil Saakashvili, a Ukrainian citizen, and President Zelenskyy's (rejected) requests for his release. Disputes also erupted over weaponry which, according to Kyiv, Georgia had received from Ukraine as a gesture of solidarity during the August 2008 Russia–Georgia war. The Ukrainian side asked the authorities in Tbilisi to return those rocket systems and was refused. This decision drew criticism from Kyiv and deepened the spiraling crisis in Georgia–Ukraine relations, leading to the withdrawal of the Ukrainian ambassador from Tbilisi in the first half of 2022.

On the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, 25 February 2022, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that Georgia would not join Western sanctions on Russia so as not to "harm" its own country. Georgia would continue to pursue a "pragmatic approach tailored to national interests". He explained that eschewing bilateral sanctions

against Russia was part of his party's approach based on "strategic patience" and was particularly responsible in light of Georgia's sensitive geopolitical situation. In his view, a policy of patience toward Russia would guarantee peace and stability for Georgia⁶.

In March 2024, the Georgian government requested that Ukraine consent to the extradition of Georgian officials from the former ruling party, the United National Movement (UNM). The Ukrainian authorities ignored these demands concerning the return of UNM politicians who had found refuge in Ukraine, some of whom currently hold important positions in the Ukrainian government. Leaders of the Georgian Dream party repeatedly accused Ukrainian special services of involvement in attempts by Georgian opposition groups to overthrow the government. In 2024, Georgian special services began searching for 300 volunteers fighting on Ukraine's side in the war with Russia. Some were summoned to appear before the Georgian judiciary on charges of forming an organised criminal group whose objective in 2023 was to overthrow the Georgian government by force. It is noteworthy that more than 2,000 volunteers have served in the Georgian Legion operating in Ukraine since 2014 (incorporated into the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2016). Since the beginning of Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine, at least 73 have been killed in action, making Georgians the most numerous fallen foreign volunteers on Ukraine's side.

Despite this, Georgia–Ukraine relations – primarily at the political level – have reached their lowest point in history. The ongoing estrangement between Kyiv and Tbilisi is the result of strained relations between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the West, as well as the Georgian

⁶ F. Smolnik, G. Tadumadze, M. Sarjveladze, *Die Außen- und Europapolitik des Georgischen Traums im Kontext von Russlands Krieg gegen die Ukraine. Grenzen des Pragmatismus*, "SWP-Aktuell" 2023, no. 58, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/die-aussen-und-europapolitik-des-georgischen-traums-im-kontext-von-russlands-krieg-gegen-die-ukraine> [9.09.2025].

government's excessively cautious approach to Russia's war against Ukraine. The Georgian Dream government changed the visa policy for Ukrainian citizens, shortening the visa-free stay from three years to one. The reduction appears to be Tbilisi's punishment of Ukraine for supporting Georgia's proEuropean opposition. Following Georgian Dream's decision to postpone Georgia's integration with the EU, Ukraine imposed sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the honorary chairman and founder of Georgian Dream, and on 19 other officials.

New challenges for Black Sea policy and cooperation with Ukraine

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022, Georgian Dream propagated a narrative about the existence of a "global party of war" which, in cooperation with Georgia's political opposition, seeks to stage a coup and drag the country into war by opening a "second front". According to this narrative, the party of war is an international organisation whose members include leading Western politicians and institutions, and its alleged aim is to pull Georgia into the conflict. In this way, society received a clear message regarding the war in Ukraine: either stability and security under the current government, or chaos and war under the opposition, portrayed as the country's internal enemy. The policies of Western partners – especially the European Parliament and the U.S. Embassy – were increasingly presented by representatives of the ruling party and affiliated actors as improper "interference" from the outside, while more critical views of Georgian Dream's policy were framed as insulting to the Georgian nation.

Georgia and Ukraine are currently experiencing the worst moment in their diplomatic relations, despite once being regarded as close partners. The diplomatic rift between the two countries highlights differences in ideology, security priorities, and foreign policy orientation. The likelihood of

an improvement in Georgia–Ukraine relations is very low, mainly because these ties are inextricably linked with the broader Eurasian geopolitical context. The future of the relationship depends on the security architecture shaped by major international players and, of course, on the outcome of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Georgia’s increasing accommodation of Russia meets with frequent criticism from Ukraine and the West. The breakdown in diplomatic relations between Kyiv and Tbilisi – together with their increasingly divergent positions on key bilateral issues, especially those concerning Russia – will be difficult to overcome.

The Russia–Ukraine war has not significantly altered the structural determinants of security for Georgia and the Black Sea region. Most Georgian experts believe that NATO, the United States, and the EU play the most positive role in strengthening security in the broader Black Sea area. This view aligns with the general image of Georgian society as decidedly pro-Western and sceptical toward Russia. Most Georgians identify the United States as Georgia’s most important ally, alongside the United Kingdom, Poland, the Baltic states, the EU, and NATO. The United Kingdom, in particular, appears to be a highly trusted actor with regard to deterring Russia’s assertive regional policy – the actor in which Georgians have the least confidence. Consequently, Georgia must seek new regional security configurations that could emerge among Poland, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Turkey, and other states of Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region⁷.

Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is one of the top foreign and security policy priorities of Georgia. Georgia attaches great importance to NATO’s role in strengthening its stability and security. The country aims not only to become a recipient of security but also

⁷ S. Kandelaki, *Black Sea Geopolitics after the Russia-Ukraine War: View from Georgia*, “Caucasus Analytical Digest” 2022, no. 130, pp. 21–27, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000579582.

to play an important role in strengthening common Euro-Atlantic security⁸.

On 24 April, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte released the Secretary General's Annual Report for 2024, outlining the organisation's key achievements and priorities over the past year. The Secretary General's report referred to Georgia as "one of NATO's closest partners" and "an aspiring member of the Alliance". Georgia also remains a focus of NATO's engagement in the South Caucasus, where the Alliance reaffirmed its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of partner nations in the region.

⁸ *NATO – Georgia Relations*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, <https://mfa.gov.ge/en/nato/232016-saqartvelo-nato-s-urtiertobebi> [12.09.2025].

CONCLUSIONS

- The Black Sea has become a decisive front in Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and in the broader geopolitical contest between Russia and the West. Control over this region now directly determines Ukraine's economic stability, security, and international influence. Ukraine has successfully reshaped the strategic balance in the Black Sea through innovation, resilience, and diplomacy. Despite Russia's numerical advantage, Ukraine's use of asymmetric warfare and regional partnerships has constrained Moscow's dominance and revived Ukraine's maritime capabilities and economic routes. The future of the Black Sea will be crucial in defining the post-war international security and geopolitical order. Sustainable stability requires curbing Russian influence, deepening Western engagement, and consolidating Ukraine's role as a key maritime and regional security actor.
- Russia's imperial policy has led to greater strategic synergy among the countries of the region. However, it also indicates that maintaining and deepening this synergy – which is crucial for Ukraine and the West – will depend on many external and local factors.
- Turkey's policy toward the Black Sea and Ukraine is based on a balance between supporting Kyiv, preventing NATO from increasing its presence, and avoiding antagonising Russia. The survival of a sovereign Ukraine is crucial to the desired balance; Ukraine also serves as a key supplier of components for the Turkish arms industry. Ankara considers NATO's involvement in the region – in the form of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania – as sufficient. However, it has complex economic relations with Russia. All this means that Turkey, while formally a member of the West (via NATO), de facto pursues its own independent policy in the region, with its

own national interest as its primary goal. Ukraine and its partners must take this factor into account in their strategies toward the Black Sea.

- Romania should be regarded as Ukraine's most reliable partner in the Black Sea region and a pillar of EU and NATO policy toward this area. This applies to cooperation in the areas of security, transport and energy. The challenge to the stability of this policy is the ambivalent stance of the US toward Russia and NATO's eastern flank, as well as the rise of sovereignist sentiments in Romanian society. The latter factor in particular could cool relations with Ukraine in the future, though even under such circumstances, the Black Sea strategies of both countries will remain convergent.
- Official Bulgarian strategic documents consistently identify the Black Sea as a region of high importance within national foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless, Bulgaria has not succeeded in establishing itself as a significant actor in this space. This limited profile results from a combination of factors: insufficient administrative capacity, the need to balance between regional powers, and the absence of a clear political vision. There was an evident lack of strategic imagination – one that would transcend the entrenched mentality of deference toward Moscow and cautious balancing toward Ankara. In the short term, Bulgaria is likely to maintain its Euro-Atlantic trajectory and political support for Ukraine. However, persistent domestic instability, populist pressures, and institutional fragility could dilute its strategic focus. The risk of an anti-EU or anti-Ukrainian turn remains moderate but tangible, dependent on short-term economic performance, electoral outcomes (presidential in 2026 and potentially early general elections), and the evolution of public sentiment. For now, Bulgaria's ability to project power in the Black Sea depends largely on its integration within EU and NATO frameworks. The stronger the institutional role of these organisations in the region,

the greater the expectations for Bulgarian engagement. To meet them, Sofia must align external commitments with domestic reform. If Bulgaria succeeds in translating this alignment into policy, it could gradually emerge as a constructive and credible Black Sea actor.

- Georgia's perception of the Black Sea region's future appears Westoriented and centred on regional cooperation. Despite the three-year suspension of its EU integration process, and the Georgian authorities' clear departure from European political standards, the process of Atlantic integration continues uninterrupted. The United States and NATO are viewed as key stabilising forces in the Black Sea region, while Russia is seen as the main aggravating factor. Both its location on the eastern shore of the Black Sea and its non-membership in NATO mean that expectations regarding the role Georgia can play in the region differ from those of Bulgaria.

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