

Geo-strategic Evolutions in Black Sea Region

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In ancient Greece, the Black Sea was first known as Pontus Axeinus, meaning "Inhospitable Sea". After exploration moved the frontiers farther past the sea, the name was changed to Pontus Euxinus, meaning "hospitable sea". Later, the Turks considered the sea less than agreeable, with its violent storms and called it Karadeniz, or "Black Sea".

In 1997, William Ryan and Walter Pitman¹ from Columbia University published evidence that a massive flood through the Bosphorus occurred about 5600 BC. It has been popularly suggested that the survivors' memory of this event was the source of the **legend for Noah's Flood**². Besides this myth, it is accepted that the Argonauts traveled there in search of the Golden Fleece, which was hidden in a land located at the Western end of the Caucasus Mountains.

From ancient time the geo-strategic position of Black Sea region, between South Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Middle East, down to Mediterranean and North Africa, has made the region in metaphorical terms both a bridge and a dividing line among three continents, with all advantages and difficulties drawn from this location. Nowadays this dilemma is still a valid one. Black Sea area became the "subject" of important military campaigns, transit zone for significant trade roads ("the silk road", "the road from Varegians to Greeks", and contemporary TRACECA and INOGATE) and economic debauchee.

Due to its characteristic, as a "closed" enclaved sea (from geographic point of view), the Black Sea has been controlled, during the history, by the so-called great powers, majority

arriving from Oriental Mediterranean Sea. It was the case with Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, and the Venice-Geneva condominium. The Ottoman Empire transformed the Black Sea into an "Ottoman lake", and starting with XVII century, Europe and Russian Empire struggled for Black Sea hegemony. In this latest case the strategy was a reverse one: possessing strong position in Black Sea, Russia tried to control the Oriental Mediterranean. In the first half of XIX century Black Sea was a "Russian lake" and till the First World War, Russia had the preeminence in the region. Between the two World Wars has been established a condominium between the Soviet regime and the other riparian states, based on Lausanne (1923) and Montreux (1936) treaties.

During the IInd World War, for several years Germany held the control over the Black Sea. As a result of Soviet victory, the USSR took the total control over the region, except the Southern flank. Based on this power position, the USSR tried to extend the control over the Oriental Mediterranean, Turkey being the first target. In this context, US sent several ships in Oriental Mediterranean and according to Truman doctrine, Ankara was strongly sustained against a possible Soviet aggression. From 1952, NATO has become involved in Black Sea regional evolution, due to Turkey' membership.

In this context, we could draw as a first conclusion that *the Black Sea had contributed to the shaping of the Cold War and subsequently had sustained the creation of political-military blocs*. During the Cold War, the Black Sea was a "closed sea" with USSR as a dominant, hegemony power.

Over the time, Black Sea area was under the hegemony of some great powers with short periods of relative freedom (such as Venice-Geneva condominium, or between wars period). In other words, the Black Sea history knew a cyclic evolution a succession of unipolarism and multipolarism. As a general principle the hegemony power took the control including over the small riparian states not only over the Black Sea waters.

The end of the Cold War transformed the power politics' logic from a confrontational logic with two enemy blocs to "horizontal", cooperative relations at regional level. If during the Cold War bipolar world, Black Sea was the subject of regional directions of the two superpowers' foreign policies, after '90's the globalization of regional issues has been produced³.

USSR' implosion and the dissolution of Warsaw Treaty were among the major facilitators for Black Sea area transformation. First of all, increased the number of riparian states. The emergence of new independent states reduced Russia' (the proclaimed heritor of USSR) direct control over the region. Ukraine took the control over 30% of Black Sea littoral, including major military bases (such as Sevastopol) and Georgia detains 12% from the maritime Black Sea shores. Russia even though detains 75% of the former USSR territory and 55% from its population holds only 13% from Black Sea coast.

The second major transformation is concerning the military base redistribution. Till 2016, Russia could use the Sevastopol base according to the agreement signed in 1997. The military bases and sea harbors under Russia's direct control have modest capacities and do not compensate the Sevastopol lost. Besides that, Russia' direct sea coast is very difficult to be controlled (geographic, social and political). Those difficulties were obvious during the latest decade evolutions. From geo-economic point of view, Russia lost the capacity to assure the transport of the Central Asian oil and gas to Western Europe. The end of the Cold War transformed Russia into a regional power in Black Sea area and produced scenarios for recovering the lost global power status.

Ukraine' heritage is more favorable than Russia' s one. Ukraine detains strong positions for all three major geo-strategic directions of Black Sea area (Bosphorus and Dardanele Straits, Danube mouths, Cimmerian Bosphorus). So, Ukraine took Russia' place at Danube's mouths, holds the Crimean Peninsula and the main harbors and controls the Cimmerian Bosphorus. From this perspective, Ukraine is part of three geopolitical regions: Black Sea, Central European and East European.

Another significant change of status knew Turkey. During the Cold War, Turkey was the key element of US geo-strategic doctrine and the unique Black Sea riparian state allied with the "capitalist bloc". Till 1989, its main focus was on Oriental Mediterranean and only with the end of Cold War Black Sea gained a new strategic value. Currently, Turkey is "fighting" for regional power status. Turkey remains both the strongest Allied state in Black Sea region and the main partner of Russia in its direct relation with the "West". Any possible change and diversification of foreign presence in Black Sea area is a disturbing factor for Turkey.

Basically, with the end of Cold War, Black Sea changed its status from a *closed sea* to an *open sea*. In this respect, an encouraging factor was the opening of the Main-Danube navigation channel (in 1992), who assures the direct link between Black Sea and Nordic Sea. Coupled with the possibility to gain the access to Planetary Ocean through Rhine-Main-Danube navigation channel, the importance of the Straits were significantly diminished. From this perspective, it is obvious the geo-strategic position of Romania, who controls the Danube river mouths and Danube- Black Sea navigation channel.

Another significant change was produced from the perspective of the foreign presence at Black Sea shores, both in terms of alliances and individual states. NATO increased its direct presence in the region and following the latest enlargement process, Black Sea could become a "NATO lake". All riparian states have institutionalized relations with NATO. Romania and Bulgaria are the newest members. From 1997, Ukraine has an individualized

relation with the Alliance, through NATO-Ukraine Commission. Russia has, from 1997, a special relation through Permanent Joint Council, respectively NATO-Russia Council (since 2002). Alike Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan are interested in becoming NATO members. If Romania and Bulgaria are strictly interested in Euro-Atlantic integration, the Black Sea' Eastern flank is still facing a characteristic dilemma for countries located in a "turn table of great traffic and international exchanges"⁴, between the Eastern and Western integration choices. As possible alternatives to NATO, Russia launched the Community of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and a similar initiative for economic integration (EU model). In fact, the Black Sea opening enabled the initiation and the development of multiple forms of cooperation (bilateral, trilateral, sub-regional and regional). From Romania's point of view, at bilateral level, good cooperation is developed with all riparian states. At trilateral level, Romania participates in cooperative initiatives with Moldavia and Ukraine (1997), Bulgaria and Turkey (1997), Poland and Ukraine (1997), Bulgaria and Greece (1998), Hungary and Austria.

A significant impact on regional evolution has the EU enlargement process. The interests for developing direct relations and even for becoming members have all riparian states. Romania and Bulgaria are to become members in 2007, Turkey' dossier will be analyzed also in 2007. R. of Moldavia have an individual action plan with, EU as part of EU Whither Europe initiative. Ukraine and Russia have institutionalized relations with EU since 1997.

At sub-regional level, BSEC is in fact the most institutionalized organization in region. In military field is worth to be mentioned the BLACKSEAFOR. Turkey launched the majority of sub-regional and regional initiatives, according to some annalists, as a substitute for EU integration. Among the Western/NATO initiatives, it is worth to be mentioned GUUAM, launched during the NATO summit (Washington, 1999), in the context of Russia' nonparticipation.

As a result of its geographical position, between two strategic corridors (Balkans and Caucasus) that link Asia and Europe, cultural

diversity became another hallmark of Black Sea area. The frequent change of political status, the impressive ethnic mobility had transformed the region into a real melting pot (ethnic, religious, social and political values).

The latest evolutions, respectively the revitalization of both corridors and the Balkan and Caucasian synchronism stroke the annalists. In fact, the Black Sea situation is very complex due to its "specific spatial architecture"⁵ produced by the succession "sea (Adriatic)- continent (Balkans)- sea (BS) continent (Caucasus) – sea (Caspian Sea). The region owns simultaneous a strong creative and destructive potential. Currently, states in region and the region as a whole are in the so-called transitional period. For long term, a higher stability or a higher instability could be achieved. For a positive scenario it is obligatory to be increased the foreign support (bilateral, multilateral, institutionalized forms etc) and to be enhanced the regional cooperation.

The end of Cold War produced in this area several major changes such as:

- the transformation of confrontation policy into dialogue;
- the conversion of isolation into cooperation and interdependence;
- the recognition of global vision, regional strategies, national policies as part and parcel of regular mental exercise;
- transition to market economy.⁶

Still the metamorphosis from historical adversarial relationship to cooperation is a long term and painful journey. Among the obstacles often cited for explaining the slow progress of improving the regional cooperation at institutional and non-institutional level, a special place has the following⁷:

- lack of the culture of dialogue and cooperation;
- difficult mentality shift (old habits die slowly);
- serious shortage of local capital and minimal flows of FDI's;
- problems of transition and nation building that restricts focus on regional cooperation;
- lack of proper infrastructure.

The regional cooperation is restricted by historical perceptions, lack of homogeneity, implementation mechanisms, resources, and

international visibility, lack of a clear vision of priorities.

The term 'Black Sea area (or region)' has been used in a rather flexible way. **The first dilemma regarding this space is the very attestation of Black Sea as a region.** The problem of defining the Black Sea region is complex, as there are many different interpretations and geographical delimitations. I would like to stress that **the concept of Black Sea has two approaches.** In a broad sense, the concept includes the Balkan, Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean areas, the Caucasian and Central Asian states. In a limited sense it includes only the Black Sea basin and the territories of the riparian states.

It is perceived either as a concrete geopolitical entity, actual or resulting from history – and thus with a sense of common identity and togetherness – or as a process in hand; as a sub-region, rather than an entity per se, or a network of bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral links. Barry Buzan has defined a region as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national security cannot realistically be considered apart from one another”⁸. This security interdependence results into a region becoming a security complex. Other scholars describe the region as constructed political designs or “imagined communities”.

However, the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Project (BSEC) in 1992 has contributed to the intensification of regional cooperation and a perception of emerging common interests.

In this study the term Black Sea region (or area) is used as referring to the territories of the eleven states participating in the BSEC (i.e. the sea's six littoral states – Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine and the adjacent countries – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and Moldova).

In fact is only now that the students pay attention to Black Sea as a region and not to individual states evolution. As Olexandr Pavliuk noted the Black Sea is still a work in progress, a region in the making and regional cooperation remains a nascent process.⁹

Sufficient reasons are for **not considering BS as a region:** first of all the absence of regional solidarity and conscience of common interests and common future, lack of a common mentality of affiliation to same region. All of the Black Sea states have already defined themselves according to other geographical or institutional ties (to South East Europe, South Caucasus, the Community of Independent States, NATO and EU). These individual differences among Black Sea states, together with the lack of an integrated strategy in approaching the region limit the efficiency of regional cooperation efforts.

From economic perspective, intra-regional trade remains behind expectations. Countries in this area develop closer relations with other countries and organizations than between them. Russia is the focal point in the flow of regional trade although its share is falling. For all countries the main commercial partner is EU. Insufficient local powerful investors, lack of necessary infrastructure (including bank network), severe financial crisis that stroke almost all countries, insufficient development of local market oriented economy were among the obstacles both for obtaining a high attention from western organizations and institutions and for forging a real regional community of interests and solidarity.

The Euro-Atlantic and European integration processes had determined at regional level a vast competition between countries from the Black Sea area and their behavior was not always fair but focused on neighbor's failures.

The Black Sea area's strategic importance to the West, and to Europe in particular is bound to increase substantially in the years to come. Given the region's geo-strategic position as a natural link between Europe and Asia, and between Central Asia and the Middle East, it constitutes a vital trade link as well as an important area of transit. Consequently, instability and potential for conflict in the Black Sea area, its energy resources and its economic prospects matter to the international community. Black Sea area is recognized within the EU system of Pan-European Transit Corridors as a Pan European

transport area and further extended to cover Central Asia in the frame of Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA).

Instead of promoting closer relations based on mutual trust and respect, the majority of interested countries have developed conflicting ones. The increase of the independent countries number produced an increased number of conflicts and possible conflicts. Till present time, the countries from Black Sea are famous more for their conflict potential than for regional solidarity. The majority of conflict sources is, mostly, part of the so-called "soviet heritage"(territorial claims, national borders disputes, ethnic diversity coupled with ethnic animosity, struggle for attributes of nationhood etc).

Another aggravating elements are the disparities in military power and the preference of countries from region to forge alliances with different centers, even competitive ones. The possibility to establish NATO military bases on the Black Sea shores produced another disputes between states in region. Finally Russia was convinced that military bases in Romania and Bulgaria sustains the general fight against terrorism.

A current dilemma regarding the Black Sea is if a transit zone could be perceived as a region? Since ancient times Black Sea provoked this dilemma, but the difference is that now Western institutions and organizations are directly interested in developing relations with the region as a whole and not necessarily with a particular country. To secure and develop only one country is not sufficient! The western community paid attention to this area, sadly, only after decades of conflicts and a massive attack on US soil. Black Sea became famous due to its transit area qualification, no matter what (human traffic, dangerous materials, arms proliferation etc).The Western community perceived the area as the first entry door of dangers for European security and stability. The western awareness was not produced by local requests but by the real manifestation of globalization. Finally Black Sea became part of European village and some leaders recognized that even Caucasus is part of Europe. Nowadays Black Sea is not the object of particular Western

countries interest for certain countries from the area but the object and subject of Western strategies and coherent policies. Till 2001 NATO and EU had no regional strategy, especially for Black Sea. For time being, still Black Sea is part of a long endeavor. It is not an end but just a part of a general strategy. So the aim is to promote the security, stability, democracy towards Caucasus and Central Asia and Black Sea is again the necessary link, part of a chain and not the only beneficiary of a strategy. The question is still valid. It is Black Sea perceived as a region in real terms? If the end aim is to promote stability in Central Asia and Black Sea is important through its member states, then maybe is better that member states to be used individually in different projects. If in the end, the states in the region will be a part of a "happy unique democratic community", then we should analyze the possibility to "miss" the regionalization phase.

In this context, the question is if Black Sea face the "old" dilemma of "globalization vs regionalization" or "globalization through regionalization".

The third dilemma for riparian countries what path should be chosen? It is better to be a part of a region and to promote the regionalization or to continue the existent individualized path? New asymmetric risks and threats demonstrated (11th of September 2001), that the individual states security depends on regional one, so the regional solidarity and cooperation should be promoted and developed with priority. In this respect, aside the negative characteristics, still Black Sea posses relevant incentives and attractions such as;

Geographic position:

- The Black Sea is the required link between Caucasus and Europe (especially for gas and oil pipelines);
- Its contiguity with unstable (political-military) areas impose active NATO/EU involvement (i.e. cooperation program in the security domain between USA and Caucasian states);
- The Black Sea detains important maritime opening (Ohotsk Sea, Caspian Sea,

Marmara Sea, Aegean Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Ionic Sea, Azov Sea);

Political potential:

- Impetus given by the NATO-Russia and NATO-Ukraine relations,
- Active participation of all riparian states in PfP activities and in regional and sub-regional initiatives,
- Ongoing democracy consolidation process, the emulation produced by the Euro-Atlantic and European integration process,

Economic potential:

- Strategic position in maritime transport;
- Important transport facilities (related to Rhin-Danube-Black Sea channel, Volga-Don channel);
- Important oil and gas deposits and transit zone for the pipelines (from Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe)
- Potential market for 350 millions consumers,
- Storage and exploitation infrastructures,
- Opportunities for tourism industry,
- Important opportunities for business (i.e. the modernization and privatization of the defense industries),
- Existing potential in the field of infrastructure and communications (Constanta-Batumi ferry-boat, Burgas-Poti, Burgas-Batumi),
- Significant qualitative professional human resources

Military potential:

- National facilities (Romania's and Bulgaria's ASOC connected at NATINADS) appropriate for extending the NATO's air space management towards the Caucasian area;
- Buffer zone opposing the traffic with armaments and sensible materials originated from the CIS area;
- Regional infrastructure (Constanta, Varna, Burgas, Batumi harbors) suitable for projecting the military forces in PSO in Central Asia, sustaining/ rotating the troops deployed in the Balkan area;
- Regional cooperation in the domain of classified information exchange and the implementation of counter terrorism measures as a part of general effort in combating terrorism.

Due to latest conflicts from Balkan, Caucasian regions, BS was perceived only as a transit zone between conflicting areas. Naturally, Western institutions were not very involved in such an area, having in mind the preference for approaching and solving the problems at regional level and not case by case and also the obligatory existence of a sound solidarity and cooperation between countries from the region. Unfortunately, BSEC was not sufficiently developed to sustain a real dialogue with western institutions and organizations as representative of BS riparian countries.

According to Aymeric Chauprade and Francois Thual¹⁰, Black Sea area belongs to the same geo-system as the Caspian Sea and is characterized by Russian-German tensions as result of conflicting interests (Western factor against Eastern factor).

But recent post 90-99 evolutions allowed the dissociation of the Black Sea from the Asian geo-system and a full integration into European geo-system. From this perspective Black Sea became a "European Interior Lake" and a region.

The proximity with NATO and EU (BS states as Europe's periphery) raised two questions: first about the Europe's geographic definition and identity and secondly the right of riparian states to be considered, recognized as *de jure* and *de facto* European states (no more discriminatory policies regarding population from BS area).

Latest conflicts in Balkan region and EU and NATO enlargement processes produced also a change in so called "traditional spheres of influence". On the southern Black Sea flank (Balkan +Romania and Bulgaria) NATO and US exert the control over the Balkan Peninsula. According to Ioanis Loucas¹¹ US and Germany have already formed their own geo-political sub systems in the area of Central Europe and Balkans. Besides Germany and US, in Eastern Europe the competition includes Russia.

The end of Soviet Union produced three geo-systems: first, the Eastern Europe (Baltic States, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldavia, and Russia), second the geo-system of the

Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) and the geo-system of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgistan). The border between systems is not anymore one country. Eastern Europe allows the implementation of the so called Middle Europe ("Zwischen Europa") and it is a needed buffer zone both for defensive space against the risks coming from East and sufficient space for West strategic advance (famous Drang nach Osten). Ukraine as part of Central Europe is one of the subjects of the transforming influences, being in the traditional Poland-Germany and Russia area of influence is currently the space of competition for traditional external actors and US.

The so-called Eastern border of Europe, the Caucasian region knew recently a multiplication of member states. This geo-system constitutes a geographical unity with Turkey. The Eastern European border is transferred from the line: Ural Mountains-Ural river-Caucasus-Black Sea-Straits-Aegean Sea to the line Ural mountains-Ural river-Caucasus-Euphrates-East Mediterranean. As a result of restructuring the European geo-political dynamics relevant effects are including on Black Sea South Eastern Europe will not be the Balkans but rather the area comprising Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Cyprus. So Balkans are part of Central Europe (apart from that component are the Scandinavian geo-system, the German geo-system, Italian geo-system, the Balkan one with Yugoslavia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Romania, Bulgaria, FYROM, Albania, Greece.

The **lack of a powerful local leader** accepted by all countries in region is another impediment both for developing the regional cooperation and imposing Black Sea as a well-defined region. From this perspective scholars still argue who is the most relevant actor in region. Individual actors (Russia, Turkey and lately Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria) and collective actors (NATO¹², EU, BSEC, OSCE) are components of this power game aimed to impose and recognize a regional leader.

Although the existence of a number of regional or sub-regional initiatives is positive (GUAM, BSEC, BLACKSEAFOR), **none of**

them has sufficient potential for a comprehensive security framework. For some scholars OSCE remains an important actor in region given the legitimacy of its role in resolving remaining conflicts even though on the other hand OSCE suffered from a lack of efficiency in overcoming the regional problems.

In early '90s EU and NATO enlargement process was considered a panacea for regional problems, but recently has become obvious that both organizations has no strategic common policy for the area. Latest evolutions proved that traditional collective frameworks are not applicable to this area but the main focus should be on creating a regional cooperative security framework or a common security space.

In classical geopolitical terms, controlling the Black Sea would mean controlling the access to those regions. From a modern strategic perspective, securing the area and promoting a climate of peace and stability contributes directly to the diminishing of a whole range of conventional and non-conventional risks to Europe's security.

After the end of Cold War this region has become a strategic center-stage as a result of three processes: first, the recession of Russian power and consequent chance for the region's states to pursue a Western orientation; second, the discovery of the real potential of Caspian oil and gas in the 1990s, and its importance to Europe; and, third, the operational requirements of anti-terrorism coalitions post-9/11. This means that the Black Sea and Caspian basins, with the South Caucasus uniting them, must now be seen as comprising together a functional aggregate in the near abroad of an enlarging West.

Black Sea region is a boundary and so, as a final conclusion I stress the idea that is a bridge to new challenges and opportunities for the Western institutions. The region divides Europe and Asia geographically and has been a bridge between Russia and the West.

I also stress the idea, that connecting the Black Sea to the Balkan and Mediterranean issues through a integrated approach of

NATO's southern flank, the management of the risks and threats against European security will be optimized and it will set up a strategic bridge between Europe and Turkey.

NOTES:

¹ William Ryan and Walter Pitman, *Noah's Flood*, 1999.

² Initial resistance came from those who looked for more detailed correlation with the Book of Genesis (see Noah's Ark and Mount Ararat) or preferred as prototype the similar marine ingression that formed the Persian Gulf in the lower Tigris and Euphrates valley. Subsequent work by marine archeologist Robert Ballard has identified ancient shorelines, freshwater snail shells, drowned river valleys and tool-worked timbers in 300 feet of water off the coast of modern Turkey.

³ Petre Otu, *Black Sea from a closed sea to an open sea*, in Geopolitic and military history during the Cold War, ed. Col. prof. univ. dr. Ion Ghiurcă, col. lector univ. Mircea Chiriac, Bucharest 2002, High Military Studies Academy printing house.

⁴ Gheorghe Bratianu, *Black Sea, from origins to Ottoman conquest*, IInd ed. Polirom, 1999.

⁵ Petre Otu, *Black Sea from a closed sea to an open sea*, in Geopolitic and military history during the Cold War, ed. Col. prof. univ. dr. Ion Ghiurcă, col. lector univ. Mircea Chiriac, Bucharest 2002, High Military Studies Academy printing house.

⁶ Amb. Nurver Nures, formerly first deputy secretary general in the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, "Black Sea Economic Cooperation/A vision of opportunities, delivered at the NATO Colloque in Bucharest, 2/4 may 2001.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Barry Buzan, *Peoples, States, and Fear*. An agenda for international security studies in the post cold war era, 2nd ed. Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner, 1991.

⁹ The Black Sea region. Cooperation and security building, ed by Olexandr Pavliuk and Ivana Klympush Tsintsadze, East West Institute, 2004.

¹⁰ A. Chauprade and Fr. Thual, *Dictionnaire de Geopolitique*, Paris, Eclipses, 1998, pp. 437-439.

¹¹ Ioannis Loucas, *The new Geopolitics of Europe&The Black Sea region*.

¹² Despite the fact that currently NATO doesn't claim a leading role in solving regional conflicts.