SECURITY INTERESTS OF ROMANIA IN THE WIDER BLACK SEA AREA

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Abstract: The Black Sea Region proved its strategic value in time, while today is even more important due to the geo-political evolutions in the region. Located at the crossroads of three security complexes, The Black Sea Region represents an area of strategic opportunities, characterized by a great diversity of people and cultures. In this region characterized by tensions and frozen conflicts, the responsibility for the peace and prosperity belongs, in the first place, to the border countries which, with the help from some non-state actors, could turn the Wider Black Sea Region into a stable area and into “a security producer”. Our paper assesses the geo-strategic importance of the Black Sea Region given the fact that this area represents a crossroad between three major geopolitical areas – Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and the Middle East – making this part of the old European continent the place where big transport corridors linking Europe to Central Asia meet. Our analysis will also highlight the Romania’s role in the region, taking into consideration its privileged position as a NATO and EU member, which can allow it to play an active role in developing strategies in order to maximize the national security interests.

Key-words: Black Sea, security, energy, military, strategic opportunities
The Black Sea is an important strategic point on the European map but also beyond the frontiers of the old continent. Located at the crossroads of three security complexes: the Euro-Atlantic block, the ex-Soviet space and the Middle East, the Black Sea represents the interference point between “Europe and Asia, between the vast Russia and the Middle East and directly links the Southeast Europe and Eastern Europe through the Danube River but also with the Mediterranean Sea”. 31

With such a position in the region, the Black Sea is an area of strategic opportunities, an area which after the geopolitical transformations of the continent, is emerging as a distinct entity characterized by diversity, convergent economic and political interests and uniqueness. The new situation that has arisen starting with 1990, caused some important problems for the countries in the Black Sea region, generated by elements like internal differences, which were not visible until then because of the Soviet totalitarian regime, but also by interstate differences which, like the internal ones, with the collapse of communism, have reemerged even more intense, turning into “disputes caused by historical problems never closed or by economic discrepancies and differences in the military potential field, arising as a result of the arbitrary and forced split of the former USSR legacy”. 32

Due to these factors, the Black Sea has turned since 1990 into a sensitive and strained zone, an area characterized by instability caused by political, military and economic disputes between the riparian countries, instability exacerbated also by the consolidation of power of some countries with strategic interests in the region. Currently there is a trend of increase of these interests of the great powers for the Black Sea Basin, which “continues to be a historical region and a valued part of the European geopolitical picture of our days”. 33

With a population of over 200 million people at the beginning of the millennium, the Black Sea area is characterized by a great diversity of peoples and cultures, diversity that has both positive aspects, being a source of cultural enrichment, but also negative effects, being a source of disputes. At the same time, the Black Sea area has huge economic potential, representing an excellent marketplace for the exports of the EU Member States, while the energy resources turns this region in one of strategic and economic interest to the West.

If before the collapse of the Soviet Union the number of the riparian countries was small: the USSR, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, this number has grown and the current countries bordering the Black Sea are: Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Ukraine, Georgia and the heir of the USSR – the Russian Federation. Whether we talk about Romania or Turkey, about Bulgaria or the Russian Federation, today all the riparian countries tend to extend their influence in the region in order to obtain the maximum benefits from their position in the area.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union which led to the fragmentation of its vast territory and the creation of some new entities resulted also in an increase of the number of the countries in the region with a strategic link with the Black Sea area, thus creating a wider Black Sea region.

Thereby the wider Black Sea region includes, besides riparian states, the two Caucasian countries – Armenia and Azerbaijan, but also the Republic of Moldova. This area represents a meeting point of the economic, strategic and political interests of some international actors, both riparian and non-riparian, but all of them interested in increasing their influence in this area because of its connection with some further away regions, attractive due their economic potential, such as the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, rich in energy resources.

Romania’s geopolitical stance in the Wider Black Sea region

The Black Sea geopolitical landscape is in a continuous transgression. Rediscovered in the early 21st century by strategist from all over the world, the region was widely considered suitable for Caspian Sea hydrocarbons transit, as well as an ideal barrier for containing the Soviet Empire. Thus, the Black Sea played the role of eastern frontier for the “Free World”. Step by step escalation occurred, the frozen conflicted became active again, so the region stands today as a geopolitical volcano, where the Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilization” is probably obvious than anywhere else in the world.

The reconstruction of the Black Sea region was a very complex process starting with ripping off the label of “Russia’s salty lake”, and continued with creating an ambitious Euro-Atlantic identity. This is mainly the cause that led to establishing the geopolitical blocks, responsible – directly, or by proxy – for the entire conflict situation. Living in a time of rapid and complex global changes, the challenges we face as nations and moreover as Allies is pushing us in the process of “learning by doing”, leaving us no other option than trying to gracefully face the uncertainty and to “expect the unexpected”34.

The wider Black Sea area rivalries reveal a conglomerate of divergent interests, but when it comes to engaging Russia most of the states showed openness to cooperate in order to rebalance the strategic agenda. Therefore Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia created the illusion that a common project is feasible – or at least there is political will.

The recent evolutions in the Europe Eastern flank confirm the fact that a reconfiguration process is under way, revealing some actors loosing the model West versus Russia, but still far from the bipolar model of Continental Powers versus Maritime Powers.35 When it comes to Romania, the geopolitical landscape (options), theoretically speaking, looks crystal clear. The problem is that between the public discourse and the pragmatic realities there are some discrepancies. This is relevant less for Bucharest but in a larger extent for its neighbors. Without its will, Romania has become a pivotal actor in the region, and probably

the only state keeping its strategic agenda on track. When president Obama came to power the Central and Eastern European countries felt the shock of taking the security and defense responsibilities in their own hands. Of course, NATO and European Union will keep the umbrella over the Member States, but in the current financial context, with austerity measures pressing on the defense budgets, the reality is ambiguous than ever. After 65 years, in good and bad, the Trans-Atlantic Allies have to reinforce their “marriage” by renewing their vows. His role being attacked as never before after the Cold War, blended with the fatigue of long and challenging missions, fighting with the effects of the economic crisis, and threatened by a “Trans-Pacific love”, the Alliance has to prove the world that is more powerful than ever. This power should come from innovation, triggered by the new emerging challenges and enriched by the partners’ commitment in enhancing collective security. The reason is that, more than ever, the Trans-Atlantic Alliance represents the solid basis of the global collective defence and security framework.

When it comes to geopolitics and the Black Sea region a reflex thought drives us towards Transdniester region, Abkhazia and Osetia, and last but not least, the Azerbaijan-Armenia Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The so called protracted conflicts have been considered the Achilles heel, which Russia can easily speculate when needing a good negotiation position. Today, the West is politically stunned and militarily catatonic when confronting with the greatest security challenge in the latest decades – Ukraine. There is largely accepted that Ukraine outcome can and will influence the strategic importance of Romania in the Black Sea region. Looking to Romania’s foreign policy synoptic architecture, it becomes clear that Bucharest is using a tripod system – US relationship, NATO – EU membership, and finally the strategic partnerships. Within such a complex framework, Romania has found a way to exercise all its strategic and equally legitimate interests. The current problem is that in proximity of such hot spots like Transdniester and Ukraine its backing system is put under tremendous pressure.

The spine of the Romanian foreign policy is definitely the so called 21st Century Strategic Partnership with the United States. Therefore, Romania becomes one of the pivotal countries in the Black Sea region, with which Washington decided to cooperate when it comes to strategic balance. This is one of the reasons why Romania is hosting components of the ballistic missile defense system at the Deveselu base. Bucharest’s strategic profile has recently grown, but so are the challenges. We are today almost sure that a Russian invasion in Ukraine is imminent, paving the way for a new security landscape in the region, and maybe in the world. Everything is questioned these days, and fundamental international laws and regulations we considered inviolable have become negotiable36. Such an assertive Russia changes dramatically the way we look at the Black Sea region and basically we need to redefine our approach from economic strategic to contingency planning. The very fabric of international relation has changed. Denial of pragmatic, on the ground realities in the West has to stop and acknowledge that on the “Grand Chessboard” the bishop is causing some serious damages.

Romania can hardly act on itself, which is rather natural if looking what we are up against. The fall of the Iron Curtain in the early 90s has often been considered the inflection point in contemporary history, something that even Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history”. The reality we face today shows that realism is the only sustainable theory, and that state actors have no friends but perennial interests. One of the most disturbing theory places Romania in the middle of a sea of Russian interests. A simple tour table of the neighboring countries reveals a dramatic reality, which should be carefully treated by West as a block. More precisely, is about Black Sea region countries exposure to Russian influence. Bulgaria, for example, despite the allegiance to the EU and NATO flags has roughly 80 percent of the economy directly or circuitous owned by Russian companies. Sofia managed to suspend the South Stream pipeline only under tremendous pressure from the European Union, and after the escalation of Ukraine conflict became an undeniable fact. Going a little bit further towards West, we see that Serbia sold Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), its major state owned Oil Company to Gazprom.\(^{37}\) Not only that Moscow took over control of the Serbian reserves, but it is using the NIS infrastructure to develop new gas stations in Europe.

Romania is one of the few countries that already has on its territory NIS brand operating the Russian capital. Even though Belgrad is making crucial steps towards European Union we cannot ignore the exposure it reached, and the vulnerabilities it generates for the entire region. Going further, Hungary is maybe one of the most complicated case studies since the creation of European Union. It is largely accepted that inside the organization there is a variable geometry of interests, thus Member States act in relation to their own interests, but not against the group. Budapest is one of the few, if not the only one, that closed a deal with Russian Federation despite all the negative reaction and challenges it triggered. The roughly 10 billion dollar agreement with Russia, which provided financing for Hungary’s nuclear industry in the next 10 to 15 years, rises the need in Brussels to elaborate sanctions that can go even to exclusion. It is absolutely unacceptable to have an EU member state that gives away its energy strategic sector to Moscow in times of war.\(^{38}\) Beyond that, the close ties Budapest has with Kremlin generated suspicion over the minority issue. Bucharest is watching very close the evasi- secessionist maneuvers the Hungarian minority in center of the country is exercising.

The picture cannot be complete without Ukraine, but the state of war it slipped recently leaves us with great concerns and fewer hopes than ever. Most probably, in the very next period we will witness a massive Russian invasion that will lead to creation of a newer and wider Transdniester. Thus, Romania is projected in the first line of confrontation with a pseudo-empire acting with XIX century means.

As for Republic of Moldova, the situation is gloomy than ever though is managed to sign the Partnership Agreement with European Union. The fact that most of its economy relies on Russian imports, and its banking sector is almost entirely controlled by ex-soviet special services figures, can only live us the impression of sitting on a time bomb. We


don’t know whether or when will explode, but we can definitely state that Romania is now the only unexposed actor in the region to the Russian influences. This is a reality that needs to be consolidated otherwise the West is losing its East.

Instead of conclusions

The Wider Black Sea area is the place where three major geopolitical areas are meeting: Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and the Middle East, making this part of the old European continent the place where big transport corridors linking Europe to Central Asia, Caucasus and the Middle East meet. Due to its positioning, the Black Sea represents a junction between riparian states and its vicinity, while the problems that countries located in the wider Black Sea area face, leaves no room for a different approach to the relations between them, but only through cooperation both at the economic, political, military, but also social or cultural.

The problems faced by this part of the continent, considered as a buffer zone between East and West, between Occident and Orient, lead to belief that, at least for a certain period of time (which will not end anytime soon), this space will remain highly active, while the events with political, economic or military character, will have an impact on security and stability in the region.

In this area characterized by tensions and frozen conflicts, the responsibility for the peace and prosperity of the region belongs, in the first place, to the component countries which, with help from some non-state actors, could turn the Wider Black Sea region into a stable area, into “a security producer”, capable to easier cope with threats and dangers of the century.

Romania has a privileged position given by NATO and EU membership, but, in the same time, needs a coherent foreign policy in the region, having the opportunity to play an active role in developing of some policies and strategies meant to maximize the interests of the European Union in the region and those of our country.

Due to the geographical position of the Romanian state, in a way uncomfortable given the situation that Romania represents the state border of the Euro-Atlantic space in the East of Europe, area clearly dominated by the Russian Federation, Bucharest has an important role in maintaining a connection between West and Eastern Europe, especially now, in this tense regional context.
Reference


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