Understanding Russia's Black Sea strategy

How to strengthen Europe and NATO's approach to the region

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Contents

Summary

— The Black Sea is integral to Russia's reimagining of its neo-imperial identity, its pursuit of great power status and its broader geopolitical calculus. It is in this region that Russia's post-Soviet revisionism is most prevalent. Understanding the patterns of consistency and adaptation in Moscow's Black Sea posture is essential for anticipating the country's future strategic behaviour.

— The war in Ukraine, to a significant extent, is Russia's attempt to secure its long-standing ambition to dominate the Black Sea, including critical trade and energy corridors. While the war marks an escalation, it does not represent a fundamental shift in Moscow's strategic outlook – one rooted in resisting Western, particularly EU and NATO, influence in the region. As such, Russia is likely to be even more hostile to Ukraine's potential EU membership than Moscow's official rhetoric suggests. In this context, the recently announced EU Black Sea strategy must be operationalized with urgency and credibility, signalling a firm commitment to regional security and deterrence.

— Central to Black Sea security is ensuring that Ukraine retains control of Odesa and its adjacent coastline. Any ceasefire or future peace agreement must include provisions for long-term deterrence against renewed Russian efforts to sever Ukraine's access to the Black Sea. Such a move would not only undermine Ukraine's economic viability but also diminish its broader strategic relevance.

— The EU and NATO have, until recently, misjudged Russia's strategic intentions and underestimated its resolve to pursue them. During the Cold War, NATO's core function was to deter and defend against the Soviet threat. As the Soviet Union's successor, Russia has consistently perceived NATO not merely as a threat due to the alliance's expansion, but as a hostile organization formed of the Kremlin's Cold War adversaries. Russia opposes NATO's very existence. While credible deterrence continues to dissuade direct conventional confrontation with NATO members, Moscow is increasingly turning to hybrid tactics, such as political influence and information campaigns, to achieve its aims.

— With a declining US security footprint in the region, the risks to the Black Sea and wider European security are mounting. In this context, clearly defining modalities of cooperation among the EU, UK and Turkey is essential. Strengthening collaboration among NATO's Black Sea coastal allies is equally urgent. The ongoing demining initiative led by Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey presents a promising model of functional cooperation – one that could be expanded into other domains. Russia is keenly aware of such coordination and will likely seek to undermine it through disruption and disinformation.

— Rather than pursuing a cooperative regional security architecture, Russia's vision for the Black Sea rests on a *de facto* condominium with Turkey, reminiscent of Cold War-era dynamics – Moscow asserting control over the northern basin, and Ankara over the south. This approach requires Russia to navigate an increasingly complex and transactional relationship with Turkey, particularly as Ankara's foreign and security policy shows signs of renewed convergence with the West. Turkey remains the pivotal actor in the Black Sea, due to its control of the Turkish Straits, its possession of the longest coastline in the region, and its significant geopolitical weight.

— Turkey opposes an expanded NATO footprint in the Black Sea, yet equally rejects the prospect of Russian dominance. Ankara's strategic posture is thus centred on preserving a regional balance of power – supporting Ukrainian capabilities and countering Russia's hegemonic ambitions, while avoiding a significant expansion of NATO's direct involvement. In light of a possible reduction in US regional engagement, Baltic and Black Sea defences need a joint strategy to contain Russia. A strong, resilient Ukraine, underpinned by sustained European support and robust regional partnerships, remains essential to safeguarding long-term security in the Black Sea.

— If Russia can claim victory in Ukraine – or even if it is merely perceived as victorious – such an outcome will have serious consequences for Russia's wider neighbourhood. Emboldened by success, Moscow would likely pursue a more assertive approach to reshape the region in its own image. For many neighbouring states, this could mean having little choice but to align with Russia under pressure. The Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asia are interconnected within the framework of Russia's evolving neighbourhood strategy. This reality must shape the Euro-Atlantic response, which should work towards coherent and interconnected policies across these regions to counterbalance Russian influence and reinforce regional resilience.

— China's economic presence in the Black Sea region, though still limited, is steadily expanding, contributing to a growing perception of regional multipolarity – one that Russia will increasingly need to navigate. Unlike Moscow, Beijing is unburdened by imperial legacies, which allows it to engage regional actors with fewer historical constraints. While China does not explicitly endorse Russia's neo-imperial ambitions, it does not oppose Russia's vision of multipolarity grounded in exclusive spheres of influence. For Moscow, multipolarity is less about diversity of power than about constructing an anti-Western framework for global reordering. In the medium term, Russia is likely to tolerate – and even welcome – China's regional footprint as a counterweight to the West. In the longer term, however, this pragmatic alignment could give way to strategic competition, especially as Chinese influence deepens.

01
Introduction

Russia's posture in the Black Sea is closely tied to its domestic priorities, forming a nexus between internal stability, the quest for a neo-imperial identity, and ambitions for external domination. This paper examines the patterns of continuity and adaptation in Russia's Black Sea strategy, identifying its key objectives and the instruments used to pursue them.

The Black Sea is where Russia's domestic priorities meet its external ambitions. This is where Moscow's aspirations of territorial expansion and broader strategic objectives converge, and where Russia's status as a global power is both tested and asserted. The Black Sea has become the primary battlefield in Russia's struggle against Western hegemony and in the country's efforts to shape a new international order – one in which Moscow secures what it perceives as its 'rightful' role as one of the world's leading 'civilizational centres'.[1] It is here that Russia's normative and geopolitical revisionism has been most visibly put into practice, challenging the legal and political foundations of the post-Cold War order. The Black Sea also serves as a critical hub of connectivity between East and West, and a launchpad for Russia's influence projection towards the Global South.

The war in Ukraine, to a large degree, is Russia's fight for dominance over the Black Sea region. As Putin emphasized in October 2023: 'The crisis in Ukraine is neither a territorial conflict nor an attempt to restore regional balance. The question is much broader and more fundamental. We are talking about the principles on which the new world order will be based.'[2] This research paper examines Russia's approach to the Black Sea, identifying the country's main objectives and the instruments employed to achieve them. It explains Russia's posture in the Black Sea region, assessing Moscow's opportunities and advantages as well as the constraints it faces. While much of the analysis is informed by Russia's war of aggression against

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1 For a detailed exposition of Russia's civilization vision of multipolarity, see Drobinin, A. (2023), 'The Vision of a Multipolar World: The Civilizational Factor and Russia's Place in the Emerging World Order', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20 February 2025, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-vision-of-a-multipolar-world.
2 Scrutaru, G. and Watkins, P. (2024), *Security Challenges in the Black Sea: NATO, the Wider Region and the Global Order,* Bucharest: New Strategy Center, https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2024_ResearchReport_BlackSea_NSC_LSE.pdf.

Ukraine, the paper offers more long-term detailed insights into Russia's approach, identifying patterns of continuity and adaptation. The aim is to better anticipate Russia's moves in the future in order to strengthen the strategic thinking of Europe and NATO, as well as to highlight factors and actors that enable Moscow to advance its objectives.

The Black Sea region encompasses a variety of littoral states (those with a coastline onto the Black Sea), adjacent regions and diverse multilateral institutions. In addition to Russia, these states include three NATO allies – Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey – as well as two aspirant countries, Georgia and Ukraine. Among these, Romania and Bulgaria are also member states of the European Union, while Turkey, Ukraine and Georgia are EU candidate countries with varying prospects of accession. The broader Black Sea region also incorporates Moldova, another EU candidate, alongside the South Caucasus states of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia remains a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, although the country is increasingly seeking closer integration with Europe. The South Caucasus further connects the Black Sea to the Caspian region, drawing in Iran and the '3+3 format', which includes Russia, Iran and Turkey, alongside the three South Caucasus countries. Georgia has thus far declined to participate in this format but holds an open invitation to do so. Situated at the intersection of Europe and Asia, the Black Sea region represents a geopolitical fault line, marked by competing integration and connectivity projects, and serves as a microcosm of the emerging multipolar order.

Figure 1. The Black Sea region

Based on an analysis of Russia's vision for the Black Sea, the country's perceptions of threats emanating from the West and Moscow's ambitions to reshape the global order, this paper identifies three enduring priorities likely to shape Russia's posture in the Black Sea. These factors will persist beyond the war in Ukraine and continue to inform Russia's policies in the wider region.

1. **Strategic domination of the Black Sea in the context of ongoing contestation with the Euro-Atlantic community, particularly NATO** – Moscow views the Black Sea as a key battleground in its broader geopolitical struggle against Western influence.

2. **The need to continuously manage relations with Turkey** – Given Ankara's strategic position and its balancing act between Russia and the West, Russia must navigate an increasingly complex relationship with Turkey, at a time when Ankara is gradually aligning with the West on foreign and security policy.

3. **Adaptation to emerging multipolarity within the Black Sea region** – This includes engaging in competitive cooperation with non-Western regional and extra-regional actors and strengthening interconnections with other strategic areas, such as the Caspian and Eastern Mediterranean, to reinforce Russia's regional influence.

Russia's vision for the Black Sea

Russia's vision for the Black Sea as part of the country's global re-ordering agenda is underpinned by three foundational principles: spheres of influence, differentiated sovereignty and anti-Westernism. The concept of spheres of influence, an amalgamation of 19th-century imperialism and 20th-century great power competition, is viewed by Moscow as a mechanism for creating a balance of power that ensures international stability, provided Russia is respected and recognized by other great powers. From this perspective, the defence of one's sphere of influence is not only legitimate but also essential for global order and security, while Western refusal to accept this is seen as a primary source of conflict. Russia regards its role in the Black Sea as naturally hegemonic, framing its policies in the region as defensive responses to Western encroachment. From this perspective, dominance over the Black Sea is indispensable to rebuilding Russia's imperial sphere of influence, reasserting great power status, and projecting influence into adjacent regional theatres and onto the global stage.

What constitutes Russia's sphere of influence, however, is a matter of (re)interpretation. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Russia accepted the loss of the former Warsaw Pact countries and the Baltic states but continued to view the former Soviet republics as a zone of its 'privileged interests', which Russia commonly referred to as the 'near abroad'.[3] Moscow initially

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3 See President of Russia (2008), 'Interview given by Dimitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV', transcript, 31 August 2008, http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/48301; see also Dmitry Trenin, who observes that Moscow was ready to renounce its claim on a role in its old sphere of interest: Central and Southeastern Europe, and the Baltics. But it resolved not to allow further Western encroachments into the territory it felt was its 'historical space'. Trenin, D. V. (2011), *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 107.

maintained dominance in these ex-Soviet countries through structural inequalities in power and state capacity – inequalities that Russia actively sought to perpetuate. In this sense, only parts of the Black Sea region fall within Russia's direct sphere of influence. As Russia's self-confidence grew, however, the geographical scope of its influence projection expanded, including regions from the Western Balkans to the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa.

At the same time, former Soviet republics have consolidated their statehood relative to the early 1990s and have sought to reposition themselves *vis-à-vis* Russia. Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and, more recently, Armenia, have pursued paths of integration with the West to distance themselves from Russian dominance, while Azerbaijan has followed a more independent trajectory. Moreover, Russia has been forced to accept the growing influence of actors such as Turkey, Iran and China in the so-called 'near abroad' – a development largely accelerated by Russia's need for resources in the war on Ukraine.[4] As Moscow's global ambitions expanded, its uncontested dominance in its immediate neighbourhood weakened, gradually blurring the boundaries between what it sees as its 'near abroad' and the broader Global South.

As Moscow's global ambitions expanded, its uncontested dominance in its immediate neighbourhood weakened, gradually blurring the boundaries between what it sees as its 'near abroad' and the broader Global South.

Inherent to the concept of spheres of influence is the notion of differentiated sovereignty. Although Russia *de jure* recognized the independence of the former Soviet republics in their existing administrative boundaries, it has never fully respected their sovereignty or territorial integrity. Instead, Moscow asserted a special right to protect Russian minorities and Russian speakers – loosely defined – claiming extraterritorial jurisdiction. To create pretexts for intervention, Russia pursued a policy of 'passportization', distributing Russian citizenship to residents of Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Crimea, and subsequently invoked the constitutional obligation to protect Russian citizens abroad.[5] At the same time, Moscow has consistently accused the West of applying double standards in the interpretation and enforcement of international law, criticizing Western military interventions conducted without a UN mandate, even as Russia has claimed for itself both the right and obligation to intervene in its immediate neighbourhood.[6]

In an attempt to court the Global South and galvanize support for its challenge to the Western-led international order, Russia promotes a seemingly benign vision of multipolarity, grounded in the principles of sovereign equality, respect for

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4 de Waal, T. (2024), *The end of the Near Abroad*, research paper, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/the-end-of-the-near-abroad?lang=en.
5 Estonian Public Broadcasting (2016), 'Medvedev: Russia will 'protect its citizens' always and everywhere', 30 August 2008, https://news.err.ee/118920/medvedev-russia-will-protect-its-citizens-always-and-everywhere.
6 Ibid.

diversity and inclusivity – this rhetoric often masks a different reality.[7] In practice, this vision expects smaller states to join regional hegemons, assumes the moral equivalence of autocracies and democracies, and treats the domestic affairs of great powers as off-limits to external scrutiny. This results in a differentiated interpretation of sovereign equality, where a state's level of sovereignty is effectively determined by its proximity to great powers, its size and its geopolitical weight – rendering some states 'more equal' and 'more sovereign' than others.

Russia approaches multipolarity as both a strategic objective and an ideological instrument. The idea is most closely associated with the Primakov Doctrine, which proposed the Russia–China–India strategic alignment as a counterweight to Western hegemony.[8] The key pillars of the doctrine include the preservation of Russia's sphere of influence, challenging the US unipolarity, particularly through deepened ties with China, and ensuring that NATO does not expand. In that sense, multipolarity for Russia is a fundamentally anti-Western project, designed to challenge Western dominance and reshape the global order in Russia's favour. This is particularly evident in the Black Sea region, where Russia's prime objective is to diminish the Euro-Atlantic presence, while engaging in 'friendly balancing' with states such as Turkey and China.[9] Russia believes that it can engage in competitive cooperation with 'non-Western' states that oppose the Western primacy in international systems and reject Western interventionism on the grounds of human rights and humanitarian considerations.

Discontent in Turkey–West relations, not least during the 2016–21 period, has been welcomed by Moscow. Despite Turkey's NATO membership, Russia at times perceives it as a non-Western actor whose 'strategic autonomy' should be cultivated and harnessed.[10] However, the recent growing engagement between Turkey and the West/Europe in foreign and security policy is straining Ankara–Moscow relations. Turkey and Russia oppose the presence of extra-regional players, including non-littoral NATO actors, in the Black Sea. Yet, Ankara also rejects Russia's bid for dominance in the region and supports Ukraine's sovereignty and capability to defend itself. These latter factors provide a conducive foundation for Turkey–West cooperation in this region. In any case, how Turkey–West[11] and Turkey–Russia relations unfold in the Black Sea will have a formative impact on the emerging regional geopolitical order.[12]

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7 See Drobinin (2023), 'The Vision of a Multipolar World: The Civilizational Factor and Russia's Place in the Emerging World Order'; President of Russia (2023), 'Opening of the Russia-Latin America Parliamentary Conference', Opening address of the Russia-Latin America Parliamentary Conference, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72401.
8 Rumer, E. (2019), *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action*, paper, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2019/06/the-primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action?lang=en.
9 Karaganov, S. (2024), 'An Age of Wars? Article Two. What Is To Be Done', personal website, https://karaganov.ru/en/an-age-of-wars-article-two-what-is-to-be-done.
10 Interview with a Russian analyst living in Berlin, under the condition of anonymity, 19 April 2025, online.
11 On the need for Turkey–West cooperation, see Gaber, Y. (2024), 'A sea of opportunities: Exploring cooperation between Turkey and the West in the Black Sea', 13 September 2024, Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-sea-of-opportunities-exploring-cooperation-between-turkey-and-the-west-in-the-black-sea.
12 Aydin, M. and Aydintasbas, A. (2025), 'Bridging the Bosphorus: How Europe and Turkey can Turn Tiffs in the Black Sea', Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 March 2025, https://ecfr.eu/publication/bridging-the-bosphorus-how-europe-and-turkey-can-turn-tiffs-into-tactics-in-the-black-sea.

Anti-Rossiya: Ukraine as an anti-Russian actor

Russia's posture in the Black Sea is deeply intertwined with its domestic priorities, forming a nexus between concerns over internal stability and ambitions for external domination. This is reflected in Russia's search for a post-Soviet imperial identity, which under late Putinism has coalesced around the notion of Russia as a 'civilization state' that encompasses the union of three Slavic nations – Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. Putin's civilizational narrative rests on two key claims. First is the denial of the existence of sufficiently distinctive national identities among these Slavic nations, asserting that their emergence as independent nation-states was a historical accident – an aberration partly engineered by Soviet policies on nationalities and exploited by foreign adversaries.[13]

The second claim is the notion of Russia as an extraterritorial nation whose political and cultural boundaries do not coincide, and which asserts a self-proclaimed obligation to protect Russians and Russian speakers beyond its formal jurisdiction. In justifying the annexation of Crimea, Putin asserted that it was Russia's duty to defend the people of Crimea from unspecified threats posed by Ukraine's so-called 'Nazi' regime.[14] In light of Ukraine's resistance, Russia has opted to forcibly dismember the country and construct a new Russia – *Novorossiya* – by incorporating territories that Moscow claims should have belonged to Russia in the first place, thus framing the conquest as the correction of a historical injustice.[15]

In the Kremlin's worldview, neighbouring states are not seen as potential friends or equal partners but as puppets of hostile foreign powers – in this case, the West – manipulated to destabilize and diminish Russia.

In justifying the full-scale invasion, Putin claimed to be acting in self-defence, invoking an imminent threat allegedly posed by Ukraine. This narrative, marked by striking hypocrisy, reflects Russia's long-standing fear that neighbouring states outside its control pose a direct threat to its internal stability. In the Kremlin's worldview, these states are not seen as potential friends or equal partners but as puppets of hostile foreign powers – in this case, the West – manipulated to destabilize and diminish Russia. As Stephen Kotkin has aptly observed, Russia views its smaller neighbours not as independent actors, but as 'beachheads for enemies'.[16]

13 Putin, V. (2021), 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 21 July 2021, https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/tt382m/pdf.

14 Atlantic Council (2023), 'Our experts decode the Putin speech that launched Russia's invasion of Ukraine', 22 February 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/markup/putin-speech-ukraine-war; see also Allison, R. (2017), 'Russia and the post-2014 international legal order: revisionism and *realpolitik*', *International Affairs* 93(3), p. 529, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix061.

15 Basora, A. A. and Fisher, A. (2014), 'Putin's "Greater Novorossiya" – The Dismemberment of Ukraine', E-Notes, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2 May 2014, https://www.fpri.org/article/2014/05/putins-greater-novorossiya-the-dismemberment-of-ukraine; for more on the discussion of Novorossiya see also Toal, G. (2017), *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, Oxford: OUP, pp. 263–272.

16 Kotkin, S. (2016), 'Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to Historical Patterns', *Foreign Affairs*, 95(3), pp. 2–9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946851.

Putin's decision to launch a full-scale invasion and engage in conventional, state-on-state warfare reflects Russia's enduring conviction that territorial control remains the most effective and secure means of ensuring political domination and an 'active defence' against perceived threats.[17] While Russia frequently engages in hybrid operations, it has also demonstrated a readiness to escalate and deploy conventional military forces to achieve its objectives swiftly and decisively. This approach was first tested against Georgia in 2008, when Moscow perceived Tbilisi as transforming into a hostile state – not only by moving closer to NATO but also by potentially destabilizing Russia's volatile North Caucasus region. As a result, Russia secured full control over two Georgian regions, including Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast. This was later followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia's choice between hybrid and conventional aggression appears largely determined by its assessment of its relative military superiority and the absence of collective security guarantees for the targeted state. Thus far, Moscow has avoided peer-to-peer confrontation or open military engagement with a NATO ally.

The interconnection between Russia's perceived foreign and domestic threats is best encapsulated in the notion of 'anti-Russia' (*anti-Rossiya*), a concept that has often been invoked in the context of the war on Ukraine. The first articulation of this idea appeared in Putin's 2021 essay, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', where he not only denied the existence of a distinct Ukrainian identity but also claimed that hostile powers have sought to turn Ukraine into the antithesis of Russia – a geopolitical tool designed to undermine Russian sovereignty and national security. He wrote:

> Step by step, Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia. Inevitably, there came a time when the concept of 'Ukraine is not Russia' was [insufficient for the West's plan]. There was a need for the 'Anti-Russia' concept which we will never accept.[18]

According to Putin, elements of this anti-Russia project include the systematic marginalization of the Russian language and cultural identity, the promotion of a political system fundamentally different from Russia's, and the gradual expansion of Western influence into what he sees as historically Russian space via Ukraine. Therefore, the invasion of Ukraine is part of Russia's active defence posture aimed at preventing the emergence and proliferation of anti-Russia regimes in its neighbourhood. In his pre-invasion address, Putin restated this position, asserting that in territories adjacent to Russia, 'which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile "anti-Russia" is taking shape. Fully controlled from the outside, it is doing everything to attract NATO armed forces and obtain cutting-edge weapons.'[19]

Recently, this concept has been extended to Moldova, with Russian officials warning that the country is next in line to be transformed into a bastion of anti-Russian policies – promoting pro-Romanian unionist sentiment and accelerating European and NATO integration efforts – despite Moldova's officially proclaimed policy of neutrality. Unlike Ukraine, Moldova lacks the deep historical and cultural ties that

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17 Research interview with a Russian analyst, conducted on the condition of anonymity, 19 April 2025, online.
18 Putin (2021), 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'.
19 Atlantic Council (2023), 'Our experts decode the Putin speech that launched Russia's invasion of Ukraine'.

Russia frequently invokes to justify its claims. This demonstrates that the rationale of countering anti-Russian sentiment is now being applied more broadly to any neighbouring state that seeks closer alignment with Western institutions and pursues a democratic system of governance. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov recently reinforced this narrative in connection with the pro-democracy protests in Georgia, arguing that there are ongoing attempts to push Georgia back onto an anti-Russian trajectory reminiscent of the Saakashvili era.[20]

Moscow's aggressive 'pre-emptive' strategies, however, often result in counterproductive outcomes. This is particularly evident in the case of Ukraine, where Russian aggression has accelerated the consolidation of the Ukrainian state, actively strengthening Ukrainian identity around the Ukrainian language in direct opposition to Russian political and cultural influence. For example, Russia considers Odesa to be a Russian city based on spurious historical and cultural grounds and due to the presence of a large Russian-speaking population.[21] However, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, pro-Russia sentiment in Odesa has sharply declined. Historically, the city has been culturally diverse, with Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish, Moldovan and other communities coexisting, and Russian serving as the most widely spoken common language. This linguistic and cultural dynamic was common across Ukraine's east and south but has been changing rapidly – including in Odesa.[22]

Even if Russia were to succeed in capturing additional Ukrainian territory, it would likely face persistent local resistance and be compelled to implement aggressive Russification policies to maintain control. More broadly, the Ukrainian public remains overwhelmingly unwilling to accept the outcomes of Russian aggression, and animosity towards Russia is likely to endure at levels previously unseen between the two nations. In his efforts to prevent the emergence of an 'anti-Russia' Ukraine, Putin may ultimately have succeeded in creating exactly that.[23]

Russia's objective of halting NATO's eastward expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine may have been achieved, but Moscow's broader ambition of neutralizing the emergence of a hostile, Western-aligned Ukraine remains unfulfilled. This suggests that even if a ceasefire is reached and Russia secures *de facto* control over parts of Ukrainian territory, it will continue to view the remainder of democratic, EU-aspiring Ukraine as a fundamental threat to its internal stability and external dominance. Past patterns of Russia's instrumentalization of conflicts across the greater Black Sea region indicate that Moscow is likely to persist in its efforts to destabilize and further dismember Ukraine, ultimately aiming to sever Ukraine's access to the Black Sea.[24] Whether Russia has or will develop a capacity to do so is another matter, depending on the parameters of the ceasefire and Western support for Ukraine.

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20 Avramenko, A. (2023), '"Anti-Russia": how Kremlin Labels its Neighbours to Justify Aggression', Ukraine World, 17 February 2023, https://ukraineworld.org/en/articles/stories/anti-russia.

21 During the 2023 end-of-year media conference, lasting more than four hours, Putin claimed that the southern part of Ukraine has always been Russian territory, 'Neither Crimea nor the Black Sea has any connection to Ukraine. Odesa is a Russian city', see *Zhurnal Mezhdunarodinaya Zhizn'* [*The International Affairs*] (2023), 'Putin: "Odessa is a Russian city"', 20 December 2023, https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/putin-odessa-is-a-russian-city.

22 See the latest survey conducted by Razumkov Centre (2024), 'The Identity of Ukraine's Citizens: Trends of Change', 25 July 2024, https://razumkov.org.ua/en/component/k2/the-identity-of-ukraine-s-citizens-trends-of-change-june-2024.

23 Shevel, O. (2023), 'A Decade of Dramatic Change in Ukrainian Society', *Current History*, 122(846), pp. 273–276, https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2023.122.846.273.

24 See the recap of Putin's 2023 media conference where he asserts that the Black Sea coast historically was never part of Ukraine, implying that the Russian operation may extend to Odesa and even further to Moldova, rendering Ukraine a land-locked country, *Zhurnal Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn'* [*The International Affairs*] (2023), 'Putin: "Odessa is a Russian city"'.

02
Russia's use of conflicts in the Black Sea region

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been directly or indirectly involved in every major conflict across the wider Black Sea region, using these crises as instruments of power projection. Russian policies have had a counterproductive impact, intensifying geopolitical competition and contributing to regional fragmentation.

As Maximilian Hess has observed, 'an astonishing ten wars have taken place on or near the Black Sea littoral since the end of the Cold War, more than in any other maritime space in the world.'[25] This includes the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Directly or indirectly, Russia has been involved in all of these conflicts. Since the early 1990s, Moscow has systematically exploited fragile relations between states and minority groups in the newly independent states of its so-called 'near abroad' to reassert leverage over their political trajectories. Beyond supporting separatist movements among Russian minorities in the Baltic states, Russia has actively encouraged similar movements in Georgia's autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Moldova's Transnistria and Gagauzia. In the case of Nagorny Karabakh, Russia was until recently a key actor in maintaining the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan – selling arms to both sides and preserving the status quo to sustain Russian influence. In each of these cases, Russia backed minority claims against central authorities, facilitating the creation of *de facto* statelets and sustaining their pro-Russian regimes.

25 Hess, M. (2022), 'Welcome to the Black Sea Era of War', *Foreign Policy*, 25 April 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/25/black-sea-war-russia-ukraine-turkey.

Russia's participation in the conflicts around the Black Sea has been both overt and covert, amounting to a policy of 'managed instability' to advance Russia's interests and to position itself as the main arbiter of conflict resolution. Notable examples of covert operations with Russia maintaining 'plausible deniability' include the deployment of North Caucasian, particularly Chechen, irregular fighters in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s;[26] the covert involvement of Russia's 14th Army in Moldova, supporting Transnistrian rebels;[27] the use of 'little green men' in Crimea in 2014;[28] and support for separatist insurgents in Donetsk and Luhansk.[29] Part of the strategy of 'managed instability' has been Russia's repositioning of itself as a peacekeeping force, often under the formal mandate of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was established shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, in order to secure its continued military presence on the ground.

Russia's participation in the conflicts around the Black Sea has been both overt and covert, amounting to a policy of 'managed instability' to advance Russia's interests and to position itself as the main arbiter of conflict resolution.

Beginning in 2008, Russia added overt, conventional military action to its arsenal of instruments, escalating the conflict with Georgia to a state-on-state war. Russia later applied the same strategic playbook to Ukraine, escalating from the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine to a full-scale invasion in 2022. In both cases, Russia engaged extensively in non-conventional 'grey-zone' operations – such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns – laying the groundwork for conventional military action while simultaneously deterring a strong Western response. Russia's escalation dominance was premised on the belief that the country could move faster than any international reaction and that the West would not respond proportionally because Moscow was defending what it saw as its fundamental interests, which were of secondary importance to the West. Moscow believed that because Georgia and especially Ukraine would never matter to the

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26 See Ouvaroff, N. (2008), 'The Role of Chechens in the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 45(8), ETH Zurich, https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-45-27-29.pdf; see also McGregor, A. (2007), 'Peacekeepers or Provocateurs?: Kremlin-Backed Chechen Troops Raise Tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia', *North Caucasus Weekly*, 8(47), Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/peacekeepers-or-provocateurs-kremlin-backed-chechen-troops-raise-tensions-in-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia.

27 See Kieff, L. (2024), 'How Do You Solve a Problem Like Transnistria?', Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-do-you-solve-problem-transnistria. For background on the Transnistria conflict and Russia's role, see Potter, B. (2022), 'Unrecognized Republic, Recognizable Consequences: Russian Troops 'Frozen' in Transnistria', *JAMS Special Issue*, Marine Corps University Press, https://www.usmcu.edu/Outreach/Marine-Corps-University-Press/MCU-Journal/Journal-of-Advanced-Military-Studies-SI-2022/Unrecognized-Republic-Recognizable-Consequences-Russian-Troops-in-Frozen-Transnistria.

28 US Army Special Operations Command (2015), *Little Green Men: A Primer on Modern Russian Unconventional Warfare, Ukraine 2013-2014*, Washington, DC: USASOC, https://www.jhuapl.edu/sites/default/files/2022-12/ARIS_LittleGreenMen.pdf.

29 See International Crisis Group (2022), 'Conflict in Ukraine's Donbas: A Visual Explainer', https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/conflict-ukraines-donbas-visual-explainer; see also Bryjka, F. (2022), 'The Involvement of Irregular Armed Groups in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine', The Polish Institute of International Affairs, https://pism.pl/publications/the-involvement-of-irregular-armed-groups-in-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine.

West in the same way as they matter to Russia, it could escalate its actions without risking proportional retaliation. Relatively muted international reaction to Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 arguably affected Moscow's calculations, emboldening it to move against Ukraine.[30]

To legitimize its actions, Moscow consistently refers to international norms, particularly people's right to self-determination and international (read Russian) responsibility to protect the rights of minorities, Russian citizens and Russian speakers abroad. On the one hand, Russia opposes the Western concept of human security as having primacy over national security and, on the other, it invokes international responsibility to protect human rights, including minority rights, when it suits Moscow. In the case of Georgia, Lavrov claimed that the Georgian leadership under former president Mikheil Saakashvili violated the rights of minorities, giving Russia legitimate grounds for intervention. Connecting Georgia with Russia's interests in the North Caucasus, he claimed:

> Russia did not violate the territorial integrity of Georgia but simply had to intervene to protect its peacekeepers, its citizens and the population at large… More than that, the peoples of the Northern Caucasus would have regarded it as a betrayal by Russia if it had not supported South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[31]

In Georgia, Russia invoked the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, an international principle that recognizes the responsibility of the international community to protect populations from crimes against humanity, despite being a consistent opponent of its formalization and application within the UN.[32] To highlight what it sees as Western hypocrisy and double standards in the application of international norms, Moscow also frequently cites the Kosovo precedent. It did so when recognizing the independence of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions following the 2008 war, and again in justifying Crimea's 2014 referendum on joining Russia.[33] As Putin put it: 'Our Western colleagues created this precedent with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia – exactly what Crimea is doing now – was legitimate and did not require permission from the country's central authorities.' He further questioned: 'How come Russians in Crimea are not allowed to exercise the same rights as Albanians in Kosovo?'[34]

International law is clear that remedial secession is permissible only in cases where there is compelling evidence of gross and systematic oppression. The absence of such evidence is the crucial distinction between the cases of both Abkhazia and Crimea and internationally recognized instances of secession, such as Kosovo. Moreover, none of the recognized cases of secession have resulted in annexation

30 Dickinson, P. (2021), 'The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin's green light', Atlantic Council UkraineAlert blog, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light.
31 Sergey Lavrov speaking at the Bergedorf Round Table on 'Russia's Responsibility in Global Affairs', 24–26 October 2008, Moscow, Bergedorf Publication, p. 66.
32 Evans, G. (2008), 'Russia and the 'Responsibility to Protect'', Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 31 August 2008, https://www.globalr2p.org/publications/russia-and-the-responsibility-to-protect.
33 At the Bergedorf Round Table, Sergei Karaganov said that 'the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was against international law but I do not see any difference to the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state, which was also against international law.' Bergedorf (2008), 'Russia's Responsibility in Global Affairs', p. 68.
34 President of Russia (2014), 'Address by President of the Russian Federation', transcript, 18 March 2014, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603.

by another state.[35] To bolster its justification, Russia further framed its actions in terms of 'historical justice', making the case of Crimea the most clear-cut example of post-Soviet normative and geopolitical revisionism, marked by profound contradictions. According to Putin, Crimea has 'always been Russian', along with the entire southeastern region of Ukraine.[36] He has framed Crimea as the historical and spiritual core of Russia's civilization state. In his 2014 address to Russia's State Duma justifying Crimea's annexation, he stated:

> Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian Empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolizing Russian military glory and outstanding valor.[37]

While veiled in historical and normative language, Crimea's primary significance for Russia is strategic and military. As the base of the Black Sea Fleet, it has been central to Russia's development as a maritime power and its self-perception as a great power. Russia's initial recognition of Crimea as Ukrainian territory in 1954 was based on the assumption that Ukraine and Russia would remain inseparable though as separate states. It was thought that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, their ties would remain so deeply interwoven that Crimea's formal status within Ukraine would be largely symbolic. This perception was reinforced by the presence of a predominantly Russian-speaking population in Crimea, which did not necessarily identify with the Russian state but equally had little attachment or sense of loyalty to the Ukrainian state.[38] With the fall of a pro-Russian government in Kyiv following the Euromaidan protests in 2014, Moscow's first move was to annex Crimea, staging a referendum to formalize its act of aggression. By 2021, Russia increasingly feared that Ukraine, with NATO's support, might attempt to reclaim Crimea and Donetsk.[39] The official narrative surrounding the so-called special military operation – as it is taught in Russian schools – frames the invasion as a pre-emptive action. In other words, Russia had no choice but to intervene to prevent such a scenario and secure Crimea.[40]

Despite Crimea's unique significance for Russia, Moscow's approach to the peninsula – and to Ukraine more broadly – follows a well-established pattern. This strategy consists of several key elements: using national minorities or Russian-speaking populations as a justification for military action, undermining the territorial integrity of what Russia sees as 'rogue' states to create leverage, maintaining escalation

35 Allison (2017), 'Russia and the post-2014 international legal order: revisionism and *realpolitik*', p. 526.
36 For discussion of the myth of Crimea belonging to Russia, see Lutsevych, O. (2021), 'Myth 12: 'Crimea was always Russian'' in Allen, D. et al. (2021), *Myths and Misconceptions in the debate on Russia: How they affect Western policy, and what can be done*, Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135782.
37 President of Russia (2014), 'Address by President of the Russian Federation'.
38 For a more complex picture on national and political identity of Crimea's citizens, see Knott, E. (2022), 'Were Crimeans really pro-Russian before annexation?', LSE blogs, 15 November 2022, https://www.lse.ac.uk/research/research-for-the-world/society/were-crimeans-really-pro-russian-before-annexation.
39 Interview with a Turkish academic, under the condition of anonymity, 12 February 2025, Ankara, Turkey.
40 Avramenko (2023), ''Anti-Russia': how Kremlin Labels its Neighbors to Justify Aggression'.

dominance while adapting to evolving circumstances, and invoking international law or precedents to justify its actions – thereby constructing a normative narrative for both domestic and international audiences. In this sense, the annexation of Crimea serves as a typical example of how Russia responds to perceived challenges from its former imperial subjects.

The persistent sense of threat has fostered a broad societal consensus in favour of NATO and EU membership.

Russia's strategy has had an unintended effect: expanding NATO and EU engagement with the Black Sea rather than curbing it. Since the collapse of the USSR, a growing consensus has emerged among Black Sea littoral states that the most effective way to ensure both national and regional security is through NATO membership and the development of a collective security umbrella – seen as the strongest deterrent against Russian revisionism. Our counterfactual analysis suggests that had Russia not threatened Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Tbilisi might have less urgently sought NATO protection and could have adopted a more accommodating stance towards Russian interests. Instead, the persistent sense of threat has fostered a broad societal consensus in favour of NATO and EU membership. In Ukraine, however, public opinion on NATO was divided before 2014. One of the unintended consequences of Russia's policies has been a significant shift in Ukrainian sentiment – marked by growing support for NATO membership, the consolidation of a strong Ukrainian national identity and the emergence of a more assertive national Ukrainian state.

While Russia downplays the independent agency of smaller states, particularly those that were once part of the Soviet Union, the reality is that these smaller states' perceptions of the Russian threat have driven them to seek external protection, thereby inviting greater Western military and political engagement in the region. Following the annexation of Crimea, Romania and to a lesser extent Bulgaria advocated for a stronger NATO presence on their territories. All three Black Sea NATO littoral allies, including Turkey, subsequently intensified trilateral cooperation. Thus, Russia's aggressive policies inadvertently facilitated a greater Euro-Atlantic presence in the Black Sea – the very outcome Moscow had sought to prevent. This, in turn, has resulted in a highly fragmented regional order marked by sustained geopolitical contestation.

03
Threat perceptions and the failure of signalling

Russia and NATO have long held sharply divergent perceptions of each other's intentions. While Russia consistently overstates the threat posed by NATO, the alliance has, until recently, tended to underestimate Russia's ambitions and the associated risks. Russia's threat perception is deeply rooted in a strategic culture that views international relations as inherently adversarial and defined by power dynamics.

Russia presents its posture in the Black Sea as a defensive response to an expanding and threatening Western presence, justifying its actions in reference to perceived hostile external stimuli. This stance is rooted in the belief that the Black Sea falls within Russia's rightful sphere of influence and that the growing Western military and institutional presence in this region threatens Russia's national security and great power status. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union dominated the Black Sea; Turkey was the only non-Warsaw Pact littoral state, and the Black Sea was characterized frequently as a 'Russian lake'. The post-Cold War expansion of NATO and the EU into the region forcefully reminded Moscow of its geopolitical weakness in the early 1990s. This development has also fuelled the perception that the West exploited that period of vulnerability to establish a balance of power unfavourable to Russia.

While NATO expansion remains Moscow's most frequently cited concern, the country's perception of threats goes beyond the expansion of the military alliance. It is deeply rooted in Russia's strategic culture, its sense of historical continuity, and a specific interpretation of international relations – one that views the international

order as inherently adversarial and shaped by spheres of influence. During the Cold War, NATO's primary purpose was to deter and defend against the Soviet threat. Russia has argued that with the Cold War's end, NATO should have been dissolved, and the security of the broader Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space should have been managed instead through a joint multilateral framework such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[41] As the Soviet Union's successor, Russia views NATO as a hostile alliance composed of former adversaries. Russia objects not just to NATO's expansion but to the organization's very existence.

Perceptions of Russia and NATO regarding each other's intentions and levels of risk have been sharply divergent. While NATO progressively shifted its emphasis from deterrence and defence to cooperation and dialogue, Russia continued to view the alliance as a primary threat to its national security. Following the end of the Cold War, NATO operated under the assumption that the systemic threat posed by Russia had effectively disappeared. Member states significantly reduced defence spending, shifting their focus towards collective security, peacebuilding and conflict prevention as part of a broader, comprehensive approach to security. In contrast, Russia increased its defence expenditure, professionalized its military and invested heavily in advanced weapons systems. As Neil MacFarlane observed, the sharp rise in Russian military spending stood in stark contrast to the declining defence budgets of NATO member states. This growing asymmetry made it increasingly evident that Putin's Russia was dissatisfied with the post-Cold War status quo.[42] Moscow repeatedly accused NATO of pursuing expansionist and aggressive policies, particularly in the Black Sea region. Meanwhile, NATO continued to treat the Black Sea as peripheral to European security, failing to develop a coherent strategic approach to the region. The alliance consistently underestimated the Russian threat, while Russia persistently exaggerated the threat posed by NATO.

While NATO progressively shifted its emphasis from deterrence and defence to cooperation and dialogue, Russia continued to view the alliance as a primary threat to its national security.

Russia's interpretation of Western intentions reflects its 'realist' worldview and strategic culture, exhibiting at least three defining characteristics. First, there is a persistent disregard for the agency of smaller states, particularly in the neighbourhood that Russia considers part of its legitimate sphere of influence. The security concerns and Western aspirations of these states are routinely dismissed as inconsequential, with their actions interpreted not as autonomous choices but as manipulations orchestrated by external powers to weaken or harm Russia. In this vein, Moscow consistently frames democratic movements and so-called 'colour revolutions'

41 President of Russia (2007), 'Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', transcript, 10 February 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.
42 MacFarlane, N. (2024), 'NATO and Black Sea Security', in Kakachia, K., Malerius, S. and Meister, S. (eds) (2024), *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region*, Springer, p. 46, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62957-0.

in its neighbourhood not as indigenous expressions of political agency, but as Western-engineered, regime-change operations – developments that Moscow views as illegitimate and actively seeks to reverse.

Second, Russia frequently engages in projection – attributing to its adversaries the same intentions it harbours itself. For example, Russian foreign policy analyses often portray Romania as seeking to manipulate cross-border minorities and pursue an expansionist agenda – accusations that closely mirror Russia's own strategies in its neighbourhood.[43] Similarly, Turkey is regularly depicted as a destabilizing actor, allegedly involved – either directly or indirectly – in nearly every regional conflict and accused of leveraging instability to consolidate its influence, a pattern that reflects Russia's own behaviour.[44] When the EU launched the Eastern Partnership initiative, encompassing Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the three South Caucasus states, Moscow accused Brussels of establishing a sphere of influence in the shared neighbourhood, while simultaneously asserting that this very region was Russia's own legitimate zone of privileged interests.[45]

Third, Russia views the international system as defined by competition rather than cooperation, adopting a fundamentally zero-sum logic when it comes to strategic and security interests. In this worldview, no foreign action is considered benign if it alters the perceived balance of power in regions Russia claims as its own. Through this lens, the Black Sea can only belong to either Russia or NATO – there is no credible middle ground or cooperative arrangement that preserves mutual influence.[46]

Misperceptions about each other's intentions and differing understandings of threats contributed significantly to the failure of signalling and the deterioration of relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. Western efforts to engage Russia – including invitations to dialogue and offers of institutional cooperation, such as the Russia–NATO Council, Russia's inclusion in the G7, and even the 'reset' policy following the 2008 war in Georgia – ultimately failed to reassure Moscow and did little to deter its aggressive behaviour. As one former senior British official remarked, in hindsight, it seems that no amount of reassurance was sufficient to alter Russia's perception.[47]

Despite gradually increasing anti-Westernism, until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia preferred not to fully disrupt its relations with the West, engaging instead in compartmentalized cooperation on matters of common interest. Moscow also pursued a policy of division and differentiation between NATO and the EU. This was evident in 2008, when Russia invaded Georgia. Citing NATO's Bucharest Summit

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43 Gulevich, V. (2016), 'НАТО милитаризирует Чёрное море [NATO Militarizes the Black Sea], *Zhurnal Mezhdunarodinaya Zhizn'* [*The International Affairs*], 24 November 2016, https://interaffairs.ru/mews/show/16432.
44 Gulevich, V. (2022), 'Румыния и Турция делят Чёрное море?' [Do Romania and Turkey divide the Black Sea?], *Zhurnal Mezhdunarodinaya Zhizn'* [*The International Affairs*], 17 February 2024, https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/33819.
45 Russian officials rarely use the term 'spheres of influence' due to its negative connotations. Instead, they prefer the phrase 'zone of privileged interests', asserting that this 'privilege' derives from deep-rooted historical and cultural ties with neighbouring states; Barents Observer (2009), 'Lavrov: EU expands spheres of influence', 24 March 2009, https://barentsobserver.com/en/node/19509.
46 *Zhurnal Mezhdunarodinaya Zhizn'* [*The International Affairs*] (2023), 'Песков заявил о неприемлимости идеи становления Черного моря – «морем НАТО»' [Peskov said that the idea of the Black Sea becoming a "NATO sea" is unacceptable], 13 April 2023, https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/39890.
47 Research interview with a former high-ranking British military official, conducted on the condition of anonymity, 19 March 2025, London.

declaration – promising eventual membership to Georgia and Ukraine – as a clear red line, Russia claimed to have fewer objections to EU enlargement.[48] A similar message was conveyed more recently regarding Ukraine; Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that while Ukraine had the sovereign right to decide on economic integration, that right did not extend to military alliances.[49]

Yet Russia's actions tend to contradict this rhetoric. Moscow strongly opposed the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, arguing that it was an instrument of geopolitical competition to diminish Russia's influence.[50] In 2014, Moscow successfully pressured Armenia into abandoning its Association Agreement with the EU and joining a competing Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. In a similar fashion, it coerced Ukraine under President Yanukovych to not sign its EU Association Agreement, triggering the Euromaidan protests and leading to the annexation of Crimea. If the 2008 war in Georgia was Russia's response to a vague membership promise by NATO, the annexation of Crimea was a response to a trade agreement with no prospect of membership in the EU. Viewing regional integration in zero-sum terms, Moscow believed that increased trade with the EU would come at the cost of trade with Russia, that closer alignment with European standards would lead to a gradual detachment from Russian regulatory frameworks, and that economic agreements were a tool for the EU to project political influence.[51]

Today, three Black Sea countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are EU candidate states. From Moscow's perspective, this new reality represents a worsening of the previous status quo.

There is little reason to believe that Russia's current approach is any different despite changing circumstances. Today, three Black Sea countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – are EU candidate states. From Moscow's perspective, this new reality represents a worsening of the previous status quo. Although, since November 2024, Georgia has suspended its European integration process and pivoted sharply away from the West with Moscow's full blessing. Large-scale protests that followed and entrenched anti-Russian and pro-Western sentiments in Georgia, however, could cause Moscow to doubt the long-term sustainability of this shift.[52] Ironically, it was Russia's aggression against Ukraine that spurred EU enlargement. By attempting to separate the EU from NATO, Russia has also worked to decouple Europe from

48 At the Bergedorf Round Table organized in the immediate aftermath of the Georgia war, Sergei Karaganov stated that Russia was interested in the eastern enlargement of the EU. 'The enlargement would extend the zone of stability and democracy on the European continent. Should Ukraine be offered the possibility of EU membership then it should accept this', he said. Bergedorf Protocol, p. 54.
49 Körömi, C. (2025), 'Russia: Ukraine has a 'sovereign right' to join EU – but not NATO', *Politico*, 18 February 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/dmitrt-peskov-kremlin-ukraine-sovereign-right-join-eu-not-nato.
50 Cadier, D. (2014), 'Eastern Partnership vs Eurasian Union? The EU-Russia Competition in the Shared Neighbourhood and the Ukraine Crisis', *Global Policy*, 5(1), https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12152.
51 Interview with an EU official, who was closely involved in EU–Russia talks led by the director-general for trade on Ukraine's Association Agreement including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, under the condition of anonymity, January 2025, Brussels, Belgium.
52 Atasuntsev, A. (2024), 'Сдача мечт. Чего добивается «Грузинская мечта»' [Giving up dreams. What the Georgian Dream is trying to achieve], *Vazhnye Istorii*, 30 October 2024, https://istories.media/stories/2024/10/30/sdacha-mecht-pochemu-gruzinskaya-mechta-vryad-li-stanet-realnostyu.

the US, portraying the EU as a purely economic actor rather than a geopolitical one. Nevertheless, Moscow remains highly suspicious of Europe's ambitions in a common neighbourhood and especially of Ukraine's EU membership, which may increase the EU's geopolitical weight and boost its defence and military capacity.

Russia views the EU as an aspiring power centre in the emerging multipolar world, but believes it lacks the necessary capabilities to fulfil that role. In the context of a potential decoupling of the US and the EU, Ukraine's integration into the latter takes on heightened significance, particularly given Ukraine's access to the Black Sea and its large, battle-hardened military. Ukraine's accession would also provide the EU with greater control over Black Sea trade and transport routes. One Russian analyst has suggested that by securing influence over the Black Sea, the EU aims to expand its trade with Africa and the Middle East, thereby enhancing its position as a global actor.[53] Such thinking reinforces Moscow's concern that EU membership for Ukraine would bolster Europe's geoeconomic and geopolitical standing at Russia's expense. Sergei Karaganov, a former foreign policy adviser to Putin, suggested that Europeans should be pushed aside as much as possible in Ukraine negotiations, signalling Russia's interest to work with the US against Europe.[54] The outcome of the war in Ukraine, therefore, will shape not only Russia's relations with its neighbours but also the outcome of a multilateral struggle for dominance of the Black Sea.[55]

53 Fabrichnikov, I. (2025), 'Расхищение Европы' [The plundering of Europe], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17 February 2025, https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/rashishhenie-evropy-fabrichnikov.
54 Russia in Global Affairs (2025), 'Sergei Karaganov: Russia Will "Crush the Will of European Elites"', interview, 28 March 2025, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/crush-the-will-karaganov.
55 Fabrichnikov (2025), 'Расхищение Европы' [The plundering of Europe].

04
Russia's global agenda through the Black Sea

Russia's drive to dominate the Black Sea is a core component of its broader global agenda. The region serves as a critical hub for East–West connectivity and a strategic launchpad for Russian power projection into the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. However, two wartime constraints have tempered Russia's ambitions: Ukraine's unexpected naval successes and Ankara's closure of the Turkish Straits in accordance with the Montreux Convention.

The capacity to project power across multiple regional theatres beyond one's immediate neighbourhood is a defining feature of a great power – something that distinguishes global players from regional ones. For Russia, the Black Sea is not merely a natural sphere of influence and domination; it is a strategic platform essential to its global ambitions. A prime example is the Mediterranean. Over the past decade, Russia's increased involvement in the Middle East – particularly in Syria – has marked a significant expansion of its presence in the Mediterranean, fulfilling long-standing geopolitical aspirations of securing access to warm waters. This enhanced posture has allowed Moscow to challenge European security from both the eastern and southern flanks, forming a key component of its broader confrontation with the West. Crucially, Russia's maritime reach in the Mediterranean is heavily reliant on the operational strength of its Black Sea Fleet, which serves as a logistical and strategic backbone for deployments beyond the region.

Additionally, Russia's quest to dominate the Black Sea and elevate its status in the Mediterranean occurred simultaneously. Beyond its naval modernization and buildup after the 2000s, fuelled by an influx of oil and gas revenue, Moscow sought to assert control over the Black Sea during the Georgia War in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Ukraine War in 2022. Likewise, in 2013, Russia established its Mediterranean squadron. In September 2015, Russia launched a military intervention in Syria, influencing the trajectory of this civil war until the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024. The former Syrian regime rewarded Russia for its military support by allowing the expansion of Moscow's previously modest Tartus naval base into a more significant facility, which accommodated two Russian submarines (until the fall of Assad) and provided maintenance services for Russia's Mediterranean squadron. This arrangement enabled the Russian navy to remain in the region longer without having to return to the Black Sea for maintenance. This base was a crucial access hub for the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa (particularly Sudan), Libya and West Africa. [56] Furthermore, as an added benefit of its intervention in Syria, Russia acquired the coastal Hmeimim Airbase, which has proven vital for its operations in Syria and the broader Middle East and served as a transit hub for Moscow's power projection and activities in Africa.[57] A Turkish scholar, illustrating how interconnected these various arenas are in the West–Russia confrontation, asserted that Russia played a role in fomenting anti-French coups in the Sahel – in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – partially in response to French policy regarding the Ukraine War.[58]

Over the last decade, Moscow has not only gained momentum in the Mediterranean, Sahel and Africa, but it has also experienced a significant boost in its relations with the broader Middle East, particularly with the Gulf states. Russia has invested in improving relations with Middle Eastern countries and the Global South more broadly as a means to avoid international isolation, to circumvent international sanctions and to put additional pressure on the West.[59] For instance, in 2017, the current Saudi King became the first-ever Saudi monarch to visit Moscow.[60] In relation to growing global multipolarity, many regional actors have begun to view Moscow, especially in matters of security and geopolitics, as a pole that complements the new multipolar Middle East.[61]

Such perceptions of Russia have reshaped these regional actors' policies towards Moscow and the West. Russia's role in regional security and its perception among regional elites partially accounts for Middle Eastern states' neutrality regarding the Ukraine War,[62] despite Western lobbying for these states to adopt a more pro-Ukraine

56 Black, E. and Kaushal, S. (2025), 'Russia's Options for Naval Basing in the Mediterranean After Syria's Tartus', *Royal United Services Institute*, 14 January 2025, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-options-naval-basing-mediterranean-after-syrias-tartus.
57 AFP via *The Defense Post* (2024), 'Russia's Military Bases in Syria Under Threat', 11 December 2024, https://thedefensepost.com/2024/12/11/russia-military-bases-syria.
58 Interview with a Turkish academic, under the condition of anonymity, 12 December 2024, Ankara, Turkey.
59 Kozhanov, N. (2018), *Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf.
60 AP (2017), 'Saudi king arrives in Moscow on historic 1st visit to Russia', 4 October 2017, https://apnews.com/general-news-9a1e83be77a248989f2bf90c9c2dec6a.
61 Dalay, G. (2024), 'Russia Just Lost Its Great-Power Status', *Project & Syndicate*, 20 December 2024, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/assad-fall-syria-shattered-russia-great-power-status-by-galip-dalay-2024-12.
62 Ibid.

stance. Additionally, to incentivize these states to maintain their neutrality, Moscow permitted them to assume various roles in the Ukraine War, from humanitarian to diplomatic.[63] For example, in August 2023, Saudi Arabia convened a peace summit on the Ukraine War in Jeddah. On 18 February 2025, US secretary of state Marco Rubio and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov met in Riyadh.[64] It should be added, however, that after the Trump administration assumed power in the US, it also permitted these countries to play these convening roles.

Two countries that will be particularly vulnerable to developments in the Black Sea are Georgia and Armenia. The future of regional (dis)order in the Black Sea will directly impact the domestic political order in these two countries and their geopolitical identity.

The Black Sea is also a stepping stone into the geopolitics of the Balkans and Eastern Europe, enabling Russia to directly challenge European security. In this context, Moldova is particularly vulnerable, due to its proximity to Odesa, if Russia succeeds in its aspiration to take over Odesa and cut off Ukraine (and by extension Moldova) from the Black Sea. Not only will this put the future of Ukraine's statehood in grave danger, but it will also have profound ripple effects on the security of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Similarly, the Black Sea has intimate linkages with the geopolitics of the South Caucasus. Two countries that will be particularly vulnerable to developments in the Black Sea are Georgia and Armenia. The future of regional (dis)order in the Black Sea will directly impact the domestic political order in these two countries and their geopolitical identity.

Moreover, the Black Sea is not only a gateway to other regions, but it is also a crucial hub for East–West connectivity projects. The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), serves as a prime example. Connectivity and major infrastructure projects are new arenas in great power competition. They are reshaping global trade and supply chains, thereby redefining geopolitics.

The Middle Corridor connects the Chinese market to that of Europe via Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Black Sea and Turkey. It represents the shortest route for cargo shipments between Western China and Europe.[65] However, this route still

63 Dalay, G. (2023), 'Russia's Ebbing Grip: What the Ukraine War Means for Moscow in the Middle East', Issue Brief, *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 20 September 2023, https://mecouncil.org/publication/russias-ebbing-grip-what-the-ukraine-war-means-for-moscow-in-the-middle-east.
64 Lee, M., Anwer, B. and Litvinova, D. (2025), 'Russian and U.S. officials meet in Saudi Arabia without Ukraine to discuss improving ties and ending war', *PBS News*, 18 February 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russian-and-u-s-officials-meet-in-saudi-arabia-without-ukraine-to-discuss-improving-ties-and-ending-war.
65 Abbasova, A. and Allison, O. (2025), 'Can the Middle Corridor be Europe's Middle Ground?', 28 March 2025, Royal United Services Institute, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/can-middle-corridor-be-europes-middle-ground.

accounts for only a fraction of cargo shipments that traverse the more established routes: the northern route (via Russia and Belarus) and the maritime route (via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal).

In recent years, this corridor has gained additional attention and cargo shipments have increased. Firstly, the Ukraine war led European nations to impose sanctions on Russia, significantly decreasing cargo shipments between China and Europe via the northern route.[66] With Russia–Europe tensions expected to continue for an extended period, this route is likely to be fraught with geopolitical uncertainty.

Secondly, the current conflict in Gaza and the Yemeni Houthis' attacks on ships have increased the security risks along the maritime route.[67] This has caused delays or rerouting of cargo shipments between China, East Asia and Europe. Given the ongoing conflict and crises in the Middle East, it is reasonable to assume that the geopolitical and security risks for the maritime route connecting East Asia and Europe will persist in the years to come.

The Black Sea is crucial for Russia to maintain its influence over the connectivity between Europe and East Asia, hinder the logistical and supply chain integration of Russia's neighbourhood with Europe, and undermine connectivity projects that exclude Russia.

As a result, these factors have significantly boosted the volume of cargo shipments through the Middle Corridor route. Amid escalating tensions between Europe and Russia, a major advantage of this route is that it circumvents Russian territory and enhances logistical and supply chain connections between Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Black Sea region – in other words, between Europe and Russia's neighbourhood. These regions are rich in critical raw materials and energy resources vital to the European economy. The Middle Corridor links Europe primarily through two key points: the Black Sea route (by sea) and Turkey (by land). Should Russia assert dominance in the Black Sea or reposition its Black Sea Fleet there, it could pose a significant security threat to these connectivity projects. Thus, the Black Sea is crucial for Russia to maintain its influence over the connectivity between Europe and East Asia, hinder the logistical and supply chain integration of Russia's neighbourhood with Europe, and undermine connectivity projects that exclude Russia.

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66 Stoll, H. (2024), 'The Middle Corridor: A Renaissance in Global Commerce', 12 March 2024, RAND, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/03/the-middle-corridor-a-renaissance-in-global-commerce.html.
67 Ibid.

Russia's wartime challenges in the Black Sea

Two factors currently constrain Russia in the Black Sea. Despite its limited comparative size and capacities, Ukraine's effective naval campaign has destroyed roughly one-third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet and forced Russian vessels to retreat from Sevastopol in the southwest of Crimea. Furthermore, Turkey's strict enforcement of the Montreux Convention has blocked the movement of belligerent military vessels through the Bosphorus Strait during the war. While this has limited NATO's access to the Black Sea, it has also prevented Russia from reinforcing its fleet and curbed its offensive capabilities.[68]

Russia has traditionally supported Turkey's strict interpretation and application of the Montreux Convention, consistently warning against any attempts to revise it under pressure from NATO allies. In the context of the war in Ukraine, both Russia and Ukraine found Turkey's closure of the straits to be in their strategic interest. For Russia, the move limited NATO's naval operations in the Black Sea, restricting the deployment of additional allied vessels and helping to contain Western military influence in the region.[69] For Ukraine, it prevented Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea Fleet, thereby allowing Kyiv to degrade Russian naval capabilities and effectively neutralize the threat of large-scale amphibious assaults. With limited options for naval reinforcement, Moscow prioritized the preservation of its remaining fleet, reducing its operational aggression at sea.

Russia, therefore, would benefit more than Ukraine from a proposed ceasefire at sea, which would impose limitations on Ukraine's military capabilities, while simultaneously pressuring Ankara to open the straits. The Russian Navy operates four main fleets – the Black Sea, Baltic, Northern and Pacific – alongside the Caspian Flotilla. Of these, the Black Sea and Baltic fleets are currently under the greatest strain. The Black Sea Fleet has been significantly degraded by the war in Ukraine, while the Baltic Fleet now faces heightened pressure following Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, which has dramatically reduced Russia's strategic depth in the region.

Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia had six submarines assigned to the Black Sea Fleet, with four based in the Black Sea and two stationed in the Eastern Mediterranean, operating out of Tartus, Syria. Since the war began: one submarine in the Black Sea has been sunk, three remain but are reportedly poorly maintained,[70] and the two in Syria were forced to withdraw due to the collapse of the Assad regime with limited prospect of return – a major blow to Russia's Eastern Mediterranean posture. However, these submarines cannot return to the Black Sea, as long as the straits remain closed per the Montreux Convention. A ceasefire would provide Russia with the opportunity to demand that Ankara reopen the straits for Russian

68 Aydin and Aydıntaşbaş (2025), 'Bridging the Bosphorus: How Europe and Turkey can turn tiffs into tactics in the Black Sea'.
69 Güvenç, S. and Aydın, M. (2023), 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea', German Marshall Fund of the United States, 10 May 2023, https://www.gmfus.org/news/between-devil-and-deep-blue-sea.
70 Cook, E. (2024), 'Russia's Black Sea Fleet 'Sitting Ducks' as Ukraine Sinks Submarine', *Newsweek*, 7 August 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/russia-black-sea-fleet-crimea-submarines-rostov-don-ukraine-turkey-1935266.

ships, allowing them to replenish and reinforce its weakened fleet. If Turkey were to succumb to such pressure, it is unlikely that the country would shift its position on restricting NATO operations in the Black Sea.

As ceasefire negotiations gain momentum, international efforts must prioritize the restoration and long-term security of Ukraine's export capacity via the Black Sea.

Turkey, however, has strong grounds to resist such a request. It can – and arguably should – maintain that a ceasefire, particularly a temporary or tactical one, does not constitute the end of hostilities, and therefore does not meet the legal criteria for reopening the straits. Until a comprehensive peace agreement is reached, reopening the straits would risk enabling Russia to rebuild its naval power in the Black Sea and prepare for the next phase of the conflict. Moreover, with new assets at its disposal, Russia would be positioned to reassert control over trade flows, threatening Ukraine's economic viability. Having failed to seize Odesa and choke off Ukraine, Moscow is likely to continue its efforts by other means, including forms of economic blockade. As ceasefire negotiations gain momentum, international efforts must prioritize the restoration and long-term security of Ukraine's export capacity via the Black Sea. As the latest RUSI report aptly states, 'there is no security guarantee for Ukraine to hold if the country's economic lifeline through the Black Sea region cannot be guaranteed.'[71] Ultimately, the balance of power between Ankara and Moscow in the Black Sea remains fluid and dynamic, shaped by broader developments in the war, regional alignments and shifting naval capabilities.

With Sweden and Finland becoming NATO members, Russia now finds itself increasingly squeezed in the Baltic Sea, further boosting the strategic importance of the region. Under pressure from Ukrainian drone attacks, Moscow has sought to establish a more secure base for parts of its fleet, initiating the construction of a naval base in Ochamchire,[72] off the coast of Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia. However, transforming this small, shallow port into a major fleet base requires significant investment and infrastructure development, delaying Russia's goal of making it operational by the end of 2024.[73]

Despite its current limitations, Ochamchire could still play a strategic role in the modernization of Russia's Black Sea Fleet as naval warfare evolves. Russia has been drawing lessons from its setbacks in the Black Sea and has already begun producing its own uncrewed surface vessels (USVs) and naval drones. Given the vulnerabilities

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71 Patalano, A. and Hallett, D. (2025), 'The Strategic Significance of the Maritime Theatre in the Russia-Ukraine War', *RUSI Journal*, 170(3), https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2025.2491887.
72 Kakachia, K. and Minesashvili, S. (2024), 'Russia's Intended Naval Base in Ochamchire: Implications for Georgian and Black Sea Security', Georgian Institute of Politics (originally published by PONARS Eurasia), 28 March 2024, https://gip.ge/russias-intended-naval-base-in-ochamchire-implications-for-georgian-and-black-sea-security.
73 On construction and expansion works underway in Ochamchire see Khasaia, K. (2024), 'Bellingcat: Россия ускорила строительство военно-морской базы в Абхазии. Какими будут последствия для Грузии' [Bellingcat: Russia has accelerated the construction of a naval base in Abkhazia. What will be the consequences for Georgia], Sova, July 2024, https://sovanews.tv/2024/07/31/bellingcat-rossiya-uskorila-stroitelstvo-voenno-morskoj-bazy-v-abhazii-kakimi-budut-posledstviya-dlya-gruzii/amp.

exposed by the loss of the *Moskva*, the flagship of the Black Sea Fleet, and the difficulty of replacing large warships, Moscow is likely to prioritize a fleet composed of smaller, more agile vessels rather than relying on traditional ships susceptible to drone attacks. The Ochamchire naval base would be well-suited for housing and deploying such smaller vessels, making it an asset for Russia's future maritime strategy.[74] Additionally, Ochamchire's proximity to the Georgian coast – particularly to Anaklia port, a key hub along the Middle Corridor – enhances Russia's leverage not only over Georgia but also over regional energy and transport infrastructure. This positioning allows Moscow to exert greater influence on trade routes that are critical for connecting Europe and Central Asia, further embedding its strategic interests in the region. Russia's broader naval modernization efforts, however, hinge on regaining secure access to Black Sea ports – a goal that depends on an end to the war and the reopening of maritime passage by Turkey.

For Russia, keeping the Black Sea free from extra-regional actors – particularly the US and other NATO allies – is of paramount strategic importance. This is one area where Russian and Turkish interests converge, aligning with Turkey's long-standing concept of a regional order based on shared ownership.[75] Despite the war in Ukraine, Ankara and Moscow have remained committed to this policy. As a result, growing calls from Western policymakers urging Turkey to reinterpret the Montreux Convention – in order to facilitate greater Western or NATO access to the Black Sea – are unlikely to succeed. Ankara is expected to maintain its current interpretation of the convention, continuing to restrict the presence of non-littoral states in the Black Sea and uphold the balance it has sought to preserve.

Moscow is also wary of expanding cooperation among NATO's Black Sea littoral states, as it has thus far benefited from divergent threat perceptions of Russia and approaches to Black Sea security. For example, Russia viewed with suspicion the demining initiative[76] led by three NATO littoral states (Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey), not necessarily because of its immediate effectiveness, but due to concerns that it could set a precedent for broader regional cooperation. Given the differing security priorities and threat perceptions among Black Sea littoral states, such initiatives have historically been difficult to sustain. The demining effort represents the first concrete partnership involving the three NATO countries in the Black Sea region and could serve as a model for future cooperation.

Romania, however, remains cautious about such 'minilateral' arrangements, fearing they could lead to a broader reduction of NATO's engagement in the Black Sea.[77] Instead, Romania prioritizes securing a stronger US presence – if not directly in the Black Sea, then at least through land-based deployments on Romanian territory.[78] Russian interference in the most recent elections in Romania indicates that Moscow is willing to engineer political change in the country, as Russia considers Bucharest's insistence on a greater US/NATO presence as a direct challenge to Moscow's strategic

74 Interview with a Russian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 20 February 2025, online.
75 See for instance, Dalay, G. and Sabanadze, N. (2024), 'How geopolitical competition in the Black Sea is redefining regional order', Chatham House Expert Comment, 7 March 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/03/how-geopolitical-competition-black-sea-redefining-regional-order.
76 Zobar, G. (2024), 'Türkiye, Bulgaristan ve Romanya birlikte Karadeniz'de mayın temizleyecek' [Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania will jointly clear mines in the Black Sea], 11 June 2024, *Anadolu Agency*, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/turkiye-bulgaristan-ve-romanya-birlikte-karadenizde-mayin-temizleyecek/3246862.
77 Interview with a Romanian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 16 February 2025, Bucharest, Romania.
78 Interview with a Romanian official, under the condition of anonymity, 16 February 2025, Bucharest, Romania.

interests and has issued warnings against it. Kremlin aide Nikolai Patrushev has asserted that Western powers are seeking to turn the Black Sea into an 'internal NATO sea', akin to the Baltic. Russia, he has vowed, 'will not allow this to happen and will respond proportionally… [to a] direct security threat'.[79] Beyond regional security concerns, Russia sees NATO's growing interest in the Black Sea as part of a broader strategy to restrict Russia and curb its influence not only in the wider Black Sea region but also in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean.[80]

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79 *Vedomosti* (2025), 'Патрушев заявил о желании Запада превратить Черное море в акваторию НАТО' [Patrushev announced the desire of the West to turn the Black Sea into a NATO water area], 18 February 2025, https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2025/02/18/1092796-patrushev-zayavil.
80 Interview with a Russian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 15 February 2025, online.

05
Russia–Turkey competition, cooperation and counterbalancing

Russia–Turkey relations are complex and do not fit neatly into categories of friends versus foes. Instead, the relationship is defined by compartmentalization and transactionalism. Despite the relatively close relations between the two nations, Russia is increasingly wary about Turkey's improving ties with the West.

Russia–Turkey relations have traditionally followed a predictable pattern. The two countries are inherently competitive,[81] if not adversarial, though they cooperate when needed.[82] This conventional dynamic shifted between 2016 and 2022, when collaboration in relatively non-sensitive sectors – such as energy, tourism and trade – extended into more strategic domains, including regional conflict management and defence cooperation. A notable example is Turkey's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system, which caused a significant rift with America and resulted in the US sanctioning a fellow NATO member. Both Turkey and Russia at times also adopted

81 Celikpala, M. (2019), *Bugüne Tarih Olarak Bakmak: Türkiye-Rusya İlişkilerinin Serencamı ve Geleceği* [Looking at the Present as History: The Serendipity and Future of Turkey-Russia Relations], Report, April 2019, Istanbul: EDAM, https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MITAT_BUGUNE-TARIH-OLARAK-BAKMAK-1.pdf.
82 Dalay, G. (2021), *Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh*, Research Paper, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 4 August 2021, https://doi.org/10.18449/2021RP05.

a similar narrative in rejecting the 'unfair, unrepresentative, and Western-centric nature of the prevailing global order'.[83] Turkey's disillusionment with the West played a key role in drawing Ankara closer to Moscow. Additionally, the personal rapport between presidents Erdogan and Putin was instrumental in sustaining the bilateral relationship through various crises.

This unique period in relations has largely come to an end, particularly since the start of the Ukraine war. Subsequently, Ankara defied expectations by not pursuing the purchase of another item of sophisticated defence equipment from Moscow.[84] Furthermore, the management of opposing interests in regional conflicts has also lost its relative significance, such as in Syria where Turkey-aligned groups toppled the former regime that was supported by Russia and Iran. Nonetheless, Russia–Turkey relations remain complex and do not fit neatly into categories of friends versus foes or partners versus rivals. Instead, the relationship is defined by compartmentalization and transactionalism.[85] Despite its fragility, strong leadership diplomacy and pragmatic flexibility have enabled the continuation of ties, tested by a series of grave crises.[86]

Although engagement between the two countries spans several regional theatres, the Black Sea and the Crimean Peninsula have historically been at the heart of their rivalry, making the region a microcosm of broader bilateral dynamics. In the Black Sea, Ankara has adopted a strategy that utilizes both counterbalancing and cooperation. Turkey maintains close relations with all Black Sea littoral states – while cautiously ensuring that its regional outreach is not perceived by Moscow as containment, which could provoke a hostile response. Measures to counterbalance Russian domination involve deeper cooperation with fellow littoral NATO members, Bulgaria and Romania, as well as NATO itself, through capacity-building efforts. Indeed, a former Turkish diplomat noted that NATO is becoming stronger in this region through its littoral member states.[87] As long as these states remain protected by NATO's Article 5 (the collective security article), Russia is unlikely to directly challenge their security.

Conversely, cooperation with Russia has traditionally included limiting access to the Black Sea for non-littoral actors, consistent with Turkey's erstwhile notion of regional ownership. However, this form of cooperation has become increasingly untenable in light of Russia's aggression and expansionist aims.

Despite the relatively close relations between the two nations, Russia is increasingly wary about Turkey's improving ties with the West, particularly in the realms of security and geopolitics, as well as Turkey's rising influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Plus, as pro-Turkey groups have overthrown the Russian-aligned

83 Dalay, G. (2023), 'Turkey's next leader may be pro-West but not anti-Russia', Chatham House Expert Comment, 12 May 2023, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/05/turkeys-next-leader-may-be-pro-west-not-anti-russia; Türkten, F. and Akan, A. K. (2021), 'Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Batı'nın üstün olduğu şeklindeki sorun üreten anlayışın sonuna geldik' [President Erdoğan: We have come to the end of the problematic understanding that the West is superior], Anadolu Agency, 5 October 2021, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-batinin-ustun-oldugu-seklindeki-sorun-ureten-anlayisin-sonuna-geldik/2383371.
84 Daily Sabah (2021), 'Turkey, Russia close to reaching agreement on Su-35 fighter jet sale', 25 October 2019, https://www.dailysabah.com/defense/2019/10/25/turkey-russia-close-to-reaching-agreement-on-su-35-fighter-jet-sale/amp?__twitter_impression=true.
85 Aydin, M. (2020), 'The Long View on Turkish-Russian Rivalry and Cooperation', 8 June 2020, German Marshall Fund of the United States, https://www.gmfus.org/download/article/19021.
86 See, for instance, Dalay (2023), 'Turkey's next leader may be pro-West but not anti-Russia'.
87 Interview with a former Turkish diplomat, under the condition of anonymity, 12 December 2024, Ankara, Turkey.

Assad regime in Syria, there is greater potential for Turkey and the US to find common ground in Syria and beyond. Moreover, Turkey and Europe are likely to enhance their cooperation in foreign and security policy, with Ankara potentially serving as one of the key pillars of any emerging European security architecture.[88] Russia is likely to view these developments with suspicion and concern.

In addition, Turkey is deepening its foothold in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, which Russia perceives as areas of its traditional hegemony.[89] What Turkey regards as the Turkic world, Russia views as its so-called 'near abroad'. Again, Russia is highly sensitive about Ankara's growing ties with countries in this area. For Russia, these developments collectively indicate that the special period in Russia–Turkey relations, which involved regional conflict management and defence cooperation, and was underpinned by a shared discontent with the West, has reached its limits. Going forwards, the competitive – at times adversarial – nature of Russia–Turkey relations is likely to become more conspicuous.

Despite this, Russia will strive to maintain close working relationships with Turkey for three main reasons. First, despite the latter's NATO membership and EU candidacy, Moscow does not view Turkey as a Western country, which is valuable at a time when Russia sees itself engaged in a prolonged confrontation with the West. Second, in spite of deepening ties with the West, Moscow sees Turkey as an autonomous actor. This independence from the West is something that Moscow values.

Third, Moscow appreciates Turkey's unique international position.[90] It is a NATO member that could purchase the Russian S-400 missile system, refrain from joining Western sanctions, and maintain close relations with Moscow. Russia believes that this demonstrates a model or approach for other European states in the future.

The Ukraine War has been a watershed moment for Turkey's relations with both Russia and the West. Initially, Turkey adopted a multi-layered, cautious approach: supporting Ukraine without overtly antagonizing Russia in a delicate balancing act between Moscow and the West.[91] Once the war began, Ankara was among the first countries to deliver military items to Ukraine,[92] but at the same time Turkey maintained close ties with Moscow. Arguably, Turkey's decision to not join the West on sanctions against Russia, facilitated Ankara's ability to play multiple roles in the war: diplomatic, humanitarian and geopolitical.

At the diplomatic level, Turkey convened Russian and Ukrainian delegations, including hosting the trilateral meeting of Turkish, Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers on 10 March 2022 in Turkey's southern coastal city of Antalya.[93] Ankara also facilitated the draft Istanbul Protocol, which was negotiated between Ukraine

88 *The Economist* (2025), 'Europe's reluctant reset with Turkey', 24 April 2025, https://www.economist.com/europe/2025/04/24/europes-reluctant-reset-with-turkey.

89 Dunya (2024), 'Bakan Fidan: Alfabe birliğini bir an önce tesis etmeliyiz' [Minister Fidan: We must establish the unity of the alphabet as soon as possible], 6 July 2024, https://www.dunya.com/gundem/bakan-fidan-alfabe-birligini-bir-an-once-tesis-etmeliyiz-haberi-735513.

90 Research interview with a Russian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 25 April 2025, online.

91 Dalay, G. (2023), 'Democratisation would make Türkiye stronger', The Berlin Pulse 2023/2024, Koerber Stiftung, https://koerber-stiftung.de/site/assets/files/34825/the_berlin_pulse_20232024_1.pdf.

92 Güvenç and Aydın (2023), 'Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea'.

93 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, (2022), 'Türkiye-Russia-Ukraine Trilateral Foreign Ministers Meeting, 10 March 2022', 10 March 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-rusya-ukrayna-uclu-disisleri-bakanlari-toplantisi--10-mart-2022.en.mfa.

and Russia at the end of March 2022.[94] While the draft agreement was ultimately rejected – by Ukraine but particularly by its Western partners, who saw it as capitulation – Turkey remains poised to revive its role should new diplomatic initiatives arise.

At a humanitarian level, in July 2022, Turkey, in collaboration with the UN, brokered a grain deal between Moscow and Kyiv.[95] Considering that approximately 30 per cent of global grain exports traverse the Black Sea, this deal was crucial for international food security.[96] In a similar vein, in January 2024, Turkey and other NATO littoral states, Bulgaria and Romania, established a taskforce to demine the Black Sea, which, among other benefits, enabled Ukraine to export its grain.[97] Furthermore, on 1 August 2024, Turkish intelligence facilitated one of the largest prisoner swap deals between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War.[98]

While still avoiding open hostility towards Moscow, Turkey is increasingly aligning with Europe on matters of security and is becoming an integral part of the emerging European security architecture.

Geopolitically, Ankara's closure of the Turkish Straits has significantly restricted Russia's naval mobility, complicating efforts to rebuild its degraded Black Sea Fleet. Ankara's ability to maintain positive relations with all major stakeholders – Ukraine, Russia, the US and Europe – enables it to play a multifaceted role. While still avoiding open hostility towards Moscow, Turkey is increasingly aligning with Europe on matters of security and is becoming an integral part of the emerging European security architecture.[99]

Moreover, the war is redefining broader Turkey–Russia relations, shifting the power dynamics between the two. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow held supremacy in the Black Sea. However, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has lost its naval hegemony in the region, allowing the Turkish navy to gain more prominence there. After 2000, as revenues from the energy sector (oil and gas) began to flow in, Russia invested more in its navy, regained dominance and became more assertive. Additionally, the Georgia War of 2008 and the annexation

94 Among other things, the document would have required Ukraine to abandon its aspirations for NATO membership and accept a neutral, nuclear-free status in exchange for security guarantees from the permanent members of the UN Security Council and the imposition of restrictions on the Ukrainian military.

95 UN News (2022), 'UN welcomes new centre to put Ukraine grain exports deal into motion', 28 July 2022, https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1123532.

96 Euronews (2023), 'Tahıl anlaşması nedir, anlaşma dünya için neden önemli?' [What is the grain deal and why is it important for the world?], Euronews, 15 July 2023, https://tr.euronews.com/2023/07/15/tahil-anlasmasi-nedir-anlasma-dunya-icin-neden-onemli.

97 Dincel, S. and Turk, U. (2024), 'Türkiye, 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.

98 Kirikcioglu (2024), 'Türkiye's intelligence agency orchestrates historic prisoner swap involving 7 countries', Anadolu Agency, 1 August 2024, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiyes-intelligence-agency-orchestrates-historic-prisoner-swap-involving-7-countries/3292579.

99 Aydin and Aydintasbas (2025), 'Bridging the Bosphorus: How Europe and Turkey can turn tiffs into tactics in the Black Sea'.

of Crimea in 2014 contributed to Russia's consolidation of power in the Black Sea, though not to the levels during the Cold War. Meanwhile, in the last two decades, Turkey's navy in the region was relatively modest and dispersed over a wide area, indicating that Ankara does not see Russia as an imminent threat, especially as long as the war in Ukraine continues.[100]

The question of (inter)dependency in relations has also changed dynamically with each major new development.[101] For instance, before the latest Nagorny Karabakh war (2020) or not least the Ukraine war, Moscow was the ultimate arbiter in the South Caucasus compared to Turkey, held a more dominant position in Syria and wielded significant influence in Libya. During this period, Russia was present on Turkey's northern, southern and eastern borders, leaving Ankara feeling geopolitically squeezed and encircled. Cumulatively, these factors rendered Ankara more dependent and vulnerable in various conflicts and regional settings where both actors were operating. However, a series of recent developments – the Nagorny Karabakh war (2020), the Ukraine war (2022) and the downfall of the Assad regime (2024) – has strengthened Turkey. Consequently, Moscow is no longer reluctant to treat Turkey as an equal in the Black Sea.[102]

Overall, the competitive aspect of Turkey–Russia relations has intensified since Russia invaded Ukraine. While Turkey's ties with the West have improved, Russia's relative strategic value to Ankara has declined. Growing concerns about Russian revisionism have elevated the perceived threat from Moscow. Preventing Russian domination of the Black Sea remains a key priority for Ankara. In line with this goal, in 2024 Ankara delivered two navy corvettes – a small class of warship – to Ukraine, and it is likely that more are under construction.[103]

The reconfiguration of Europe's security architecture, catalysed by the Ukraine war and potentially marked by reduced US engagement, has given Turkey a central role. The future of the Black Sea and Ukraine will be pivotal in this new order, and both are already subjects of dialogue between Turkey, Europe and the UK. While Moscow once exploited Turkey's estrangement from the West, increasing cooperation between Ankara and Europe, alongside Turkish unease over Russian ambitions, is likely to push Turkey closer to the West.

100 Interview with a Turkish military and maritime analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 13 December 2024, Istanbul, Turkey.
101 Dalay (2021), 'Turkish-Russian Relations in Light of Recent Conflicts'.
102 Interview with a Turkish scholar, under the condition of anonymity, 13 December 2024, Istanbul.
103 AP news wire via the *Independent* (2024), 'Ukraine adds another Turkish corvette to its navy for the war with Russia', 2 August 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/ukraine-ap-turkish-turkey-olena-zelenska-b2590170.html.

06
Russia and China: Leveraging partnership and delaying rivalry

China is gradually and cautiously expanding its presence in the Black Sea region. Beijing and Moscow share a strategic objective in seeking to push back Western influence, with China emerging as one of the key enablers of Russia's war effort. However, their relationship may become more competitive, as Black Sea littoral states increasingly welcome Chinese economic engagement.

China plays a role in the Black Sea region that constitutes both an advantage and a potential long-term challenge for Russia. The two countries have a shared desire to reduce the US hegemony and push back against the promotion of Western democracy, with the aim of limiting interference in their domestic affairs. They reinforce each other's narratives on the need to 'democratize' the international order, protect state sovereignty and respect each other's interests in their respective spheres of influence. Despite China's unease about forceful revision of borders and disruption of supply chains, Beijing has thrown a lifeline to Russia in its war against Ukraine. China's support has significantly undermined both the intent and the impact of the Western sanctions regime, providing Russia with more than 80 per cent of dual-use

goods to sustain its war machinery.[104] While respecting Russia's geopolitical interests in the Black Sea, China's economic footprint is steadily growing and is largely welcomed by the states in the region.[105]

One of China's key advantages over Russia is its lack of historical baggage in the region. Unlike Moscow, which is often viewed with suspicion due to its imperial legacy, China is generally perceived as a politically neutral and non-threatening actor, offering attractive investments, particularly in infrastructure and economic development. Like Russia, China does not concern itself with domestic governance models or human rights standards. Its loans and investments come with few strings attached and no standard requirements in contrast to European financing. Unlike Russia, however, China is not associated with territorial ambitions, making it more widely welcomed by populations across Black Sea states. In Romania, for instance, positive interactions with China during the Ceaușescu era – particularly the president's role in Sino-US normalization – continue to shape favourable public perceptions of China.[106] Even in Ukraine, despite Beijing's open support for Russia in the war, there has been relatively little anti-Chinese sentiment. Although the attitude may be changing after the revelations of Chinese soldiers fighting in Ukraine, many Ukrainians had hoped that China could play a constructive role in securing a lasting peace.[107]

Ukraine has welcomed China's Belt and Road Initiative and attracted Chinese investments in infrastructure projects, deepening cooperation even after the annexation of Crimea, which China does not officially recognize. China is interested in Ukraine as a destination for Chinese goods and for its rail and maritime links. In a move for greater diversification and to try to reduce its reliance on Russia, China became one of the main importers of Ukrainian agricultural goods. Ukraine's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU, which came into force in 2017 became one of the main attractions for Chinese investments looking for access to the EU market.[108] Despite China's support for Russia in the war, there are discussions about involving Chinese companies in Ukraine's reconstruction, potentially as a means of deterring Russia's continued aggression and hybrid operations.

For smaller states such as Georgia, China serves as an attractive counterbalance to both Russia and the West, providing leverage for political bargaining. China also offers an alternative source of investment and economic partnership, helping to mitigate anti-Russian sentiment domestically. The Georgian government has deepened its ties with China through a strategic partnership agreement, bringing Chinese investments into key infrastructure projects – including the deep-sea port at Anaklia.[109] The decision to select a Sino-Singaporean consortium for Anaklia's

104 Sabanadze, N., Vasselier, A. and Wiegand, G. (2024), *China-Russia alignment: A threat to Europe's security*, MERICS Report, Mercator Institute for China Studies, 26 June 2024, https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/Chatham%20House%20GMF%20MERICS%20Report%20China-Russia%20alignment_06-2024.pdf.
105 For a detailed discussion of China in the Black Sea, see GLOBSEC (2021), *China in the Broader Black Sea Region*, Report, March 2021, https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/China-in-the-Broader-black-sea-region-ver7-nonprint.pdf.
106 Interview with a Romanian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 18 February 2025, Bucharest, Romania.
107 Interview with a Ukrainian analyst, under the condition of anonymity, 10 November 2024, online.
108 Ibid.
109 Civic Idea (2025), 'Beijing's Black Sea Push: A New Maritime Frontier', 13 March 2025, https://civicidea.ge/en/beijings-black-sea-push-a-new-maritime-frontier.

construction, despite objections from the US and the EU, was partly framed as an insurance policy against potential Russian subversion. Georgian officials argued that Chinese investment in the project would serve as a stronger deterrent against Russian interference than European involvement, as Moscow would be less likely to challenge an initiative backed by China.[110]

For China, Georgia is attractive as an investment destination due to its geographic location and connectivity potential. The port of Anaklia would provide Beijing with a major strategic entry point to the Black Sea and an asset in the Middle Corridor linking China to Europe. Moscow probably dislikes such a strategic footprint from Beijing in the Black Sea, but it does not view this as posing a security threat or an immediate challenge. For Russia, the main struggle is with the West. For this reason, Beijing remains a partner, as it has proven to be in the Ukraine War. Moreover, Russia is reassured by a shared attitude towards the West and growing political and ideological alignment with China.

Likewise, Beijing–Ankara relations are gaining new momentum. Turkey plays a pivotal role in the Middle Corridor and is becoming an increasingly important trade partner for China. Chinese car manufacturers are establishing major production facilities in Turkey, taking advantage of its skilled workforce, strategic geographic location and customs union with the European Union. However, despite growing economic ties, Turkey–China relations still lack strategic depth. The significant presence of the Uyghur community in Turkey and the strong public sympathy for their plight mean that the potential for a deeper relationship between Beijing and Ankara is likely to be limited.

China is gradually and cautiously expanding its presence in the Black Sea region, ensuring that its actions do not directly challenge Russian interests. Some states, such as Romania, maintain cordial relations with China, yet remain cautious about allowing Chinese investment in critical infrastructure. Bucharest, in particular, has aligned closely with the US position on China and has exercised restraint in deepening economic ties. In Bulgaria, China has signalled its interest in port infrastructure, although significant investments have yet to materialize. In the long run, China could pose a challenge to Russian influence in the region. Growing power asymmetry between the two countries and evident interest from the Black Sea states in the potential for Chinese economic cooperation may bring about more competition between Moscow and Beijing. For states in the Black Sea region, China offers more attractive economic opportunities than Russia without being associated with Moscow's neo-imperial agenda. For China, Russia's anti-Western posture is more important than its anti-Ukraine policy. It is the global consideration and the logic of great power competition that bring Beijing and Moscow closer together, not each side's policies towards their extended neighbourhood. This latter point is likely to induce more strains in the two countries' relations. Moreover, China's strict adherence to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity reassures Black Sea states, many of which have experienced Russian violations of these very principles.

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110 Interview with a Georgian official, under the condition of anonymity, 22 December 2024, Tbilisi, Georgia.

07
Russia's relations with Romania and Bulgaria

Russia is actively seeking to project influence among NATO's Black Sea littoral states, with the aim of diminishing the alliance's presence in the region and disrupting coordination among its coastal allies.

Of the three NATO littoral states in the Black Sea, Russia perceives Romania as a particular challenge to its position. This perception stems from Romania's strong commitment to NATO and its persistent efforts to enhance the alliance's presence in the region. Bucharest has actively pushed to elevate Black Sea security as a strategic priority for the US, NATO and the EU, advocating for a 'comprehensive approach' that extends beyond military considerations to include economic connectivity, environmental and energy security, and resilience-building. Since the annexation of Crimea – and especially following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine – Romania's threat perception of Russia has intensified. The proximity of active military operations and concerns over a potential spillover, whether through an accidental attack on Romanian territory (for example, the incident with the Russian drone that struck a Danube port), the flow of refugees, or a deliberate escalation, have heightened Bucharest's security anxieties. Russia's attempts at the start of the invasion to capture Snake Island and destroy the Zatoka Bridge (the only road link between Romania and Odesa) have reinforced fears that Moscow remains intent on capturing Odesa. If successful, this could enable Russia to reconnect with Transnistria (the landlocked region that is trying to break away from Moldova), creating a direct land border with Romania – an increasingly concerning prospect

for Bucharest. While Russia's capture of Odesa appears unlikely for the time being, Bucharest is worried about such a prospect, describing it as a 'nightmare scenario' for Romania.[111]

Moscow, in turn, is also suspicious of what it views as Romania's expansionist agenda – specifically, its alleged aspirations to incorporate Moldova (potentially including Transnistria) and extend its influence into Ukraine's Odesa and Chernivtsi regions by leveraging Romanian-speaking minorities. Although the idea of Moldovan unification with Romania has largely lost traction – particularly after Romania acceded to the EU and NATO – Russia continues to invoke the myth of 'Greater Romania' as a persistent strategic objective of Bucharest. As one Russian publication put it, 'Russia stands in the way of Romania pursuing its expansionist agenda'.[112] Accordingly, Moscow views Bucharest's close cooperation with Washington and its active role in Black Sea security initiatives as part of a strategy aimed at advancing Romanian interests at Russia's expense.[113]

In an effort to weaken Romania's pro-NATO and pro-US consensus, Russia employs hybrid tactics, including election interference, disinformation operations and support for anti-liberal political groups and figures. As in other parts of Eastern Europe, Romania is experiencing a surge in conservative populism, driven by an anti-globalist and anti-liberal agenda – an ideological shift that Moscow seeks to exploit to further its strategic interests.

> **In an effort to weaken Romania's pro-NATO and pro-US consensus, Russia employs hybrid tactics, including election interference, disinformation operations and support for anti-liberal political groups and figures.**

Despite Romania's substantial benefits from EU and NATO membership, nationalist sentiment with anti-Western overtones has been growing. This trend is fuelled by several factors: perceptions of Romania's marginalization within the Euro-Atlantic community; resistance to rapid globalization and liberal norms perceived as a threat to traditional values; and anxiety over potential spillover effects from the war in Ukraine. Russia capitalizes on these sentiments, amplifying both anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives to foster public resentment towards Romania's support for Ukraine. The meteoric rise of a previously unknown presidential candidate Calin Georgescu in 2024 is widely viewed as a product of Russia's hybrid operations.[114] However, his success also reflects a broader societal trend: the increasing appeal of strong, authoritarian-leaning personalities with nationalist and anti-Western agendas. Persistent economic disparities as well as an inequality of opportunities

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111 Interview with a high-level Romanian official, under the condition of anonymity, 11 February 2025, Bucharest, Romania.
112 Gulevich (2016), 'НАТО милитаризирует Чёрное море' [NATO militarizes the Black Sea].
113 Ibid.
114 Haynes, D. (2024), 'Russia's 'hybrid attack' on Romanian election could trigger NATO response if proven', Sky News, 6 December 2024, https://news.sky.com/story/russias-hybrid-attack-on-romanian-election-could-trigger-nato-response-if-proven-13268126.

generated by European integration also fuel resentment and increase support for anti-establishment, populist leaders. This trend, however, coexists with a strong pro-European and pro-Western sentiment in society, especially among the urban youth, leading to deepening societal polarization.

Romania has had a complicated relationship with Ukraine, often shaped by disputes over Romanian minorities. One of Romania's long-standing grievances has been what it perceives as an artificial division between Romanian and Moldovan communities in Ukraine.[115] However, despite these historical tensions, Romanian authorities have chosen to set aside bilateral disputes and extend strong, albeit often underreported, support to Ukraine. The two governments signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2020 and have begun conducting regular exercises on the Danube.[116]

At the same time, Romania harbours some concerns about Ukraine's growing military strength, particularly the prospect of it becoming the largest, battle-hardened army in the Black Sea region after Russia.[117] Nevertheless, Bucharest remains a firm supporter of Ukraine's NATO membership, recognizing its strategic importance in countering Russian influence. Romania also fears that if Russia achieves its war objectives, a post-war Ukrainian regime could emerge that is nationalist, anti-Western and closely aligned with Moscow.[118] Additionally, there are concerns over the potential infiltration of organized crime and large-scale refugee movements, both of which could destabilize Romania – creating vulnerabilities that Russia could exploit.[119]

In Bulgaria, Russia maintains strong ties with local political and business elites, with one of its most effective tools being political influence.[120] This is further reinforced by well-executed information operations that shape public perception in Russia's favour. Unlike in other Eastern European states, there is little resentment towards Russia among the wider Bulgarian public, nor is there a strong perception of Russia as a direct threat to Bulgaria. Instead, Russia is often seen as a liberator against Turkish regional dominance, with a prevalence of positive historical narratives that cultivate pro-Russian sentiment.[121] Both left-wing and nationalist political parties, along with influential public figures, frequently express sympathy for Russia and advocate against Western military aid to Ukraine, arguing that it only prolongs the conflict. The Kremlin's portrayal of the war as a Western-provoked proxy war is widely echoed in the Bulgarian media, reinforcing the narrative that Moscow has a legitimate right to defend itself against NATO expansion.

115 Constantin, S. (2022), 'Romanians and Moldovans in Ukraine and their kin states' engagement before and after the war – towards a triadic partnership for effective minority protection?', European Centre for Minority Issues Blog, 1 November 2022, https://www.ecmi.de/infochannel/detail/ecmi-minorities-blog-romanians-and-moldovans-in-ukraine-and-their-kin-states-engagement-before-and-after-the-war-towards-a-triadic-partnership-for-effective-minority-protection.

116 Vişan, G. (2021), 'Guardian of the Danube: Romania's Mixed Progress in Implementing a Black Sea Strategy', Jamestown Foundation, 20 December 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/romania-the-danube-and-the-black-sea-growing-security-challenges-and-underutilized-economic-potential.

117 Interview with Romanian official, under the condition of anonymity, February 2025, Bucharest, Romania.

118 Romanian interviewee, under the condition of anonymity, February 2025, Romania.

119 Ibid.

120 Ratchev, V. R. and Tagarev, T. (2022), 'Bulgaria's Black Sea Dilemma: NATO Ally or Russian Gateway?', Jamestown Foundation, 13 January 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/bulgarias-black-sea-dilemma-nato-ally-or-russian-gateway.

121 Bulgarian interviewee, under the condition of anonymity, February 2025, Sofia, Bulgaria.

As a result, Bulgaria's participation in any coalition of the willing or peacekeeping operation in Ukraine is highly unlikely. Increasing defence spending remains one of the most contentious domestic issues, often weaponized as part of an anti-Western, pro-Russian discourse. Despite these dynamics, the Bulgarian government views Russia as an aggressive, revisionist power that poses a direct threat to Black Sea security. However, Bulgaria lacks the military capabilities to counter such threats effectively. Its naval capabilities are both weak and outdated. Sofia remains particularly concerned with the secondary risks associated with the war – such as floating mines, violations of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the activities of Russia's 'shadow fleet', and the broader environmental impact on the Black Sea.[122]

The success of Russian interference in Black Sea littoral states relies on three key foundations: a well-established reach into domestic areas, the strategic manipulation of existing vulnerabilities, and the cultivation of influential local proxies whose interests align with Moscow's.

The success of Russian interference in Black Sea littoral states relies on three key foundations: a well-established reach into domestic areas (political, informational and economic), the strategic manipulation of existing vulnerabilities (social, ethnic and economic), and the cultivation of influential local proxies whose interests align with Moscow's – whether or not they are explicitly pro-Russian. In some cases, such as Georgia, these proxies include ruling parties, while in others – like Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova – they are found within opposition forces.[123] Some of these actors openly advocate for pro-Russian positions, while others do not. Yet, both serve Moscow's interests, particularly in efforts to push back against Western influence in the region. Depending on circumstances, Russia's interference can be overt or covert.

Russia exploits the principles of open competition, freedom of expression and media pluralism in target countries, leveraging these freedoms to conduct unhindered and highly effective information operations. A key feature of its strategy is the use of context-sensitive themes that resonate strongly with specific domestic audiences, often playing on fears, national pride and societal grievances. These narratives are further amplified by the interconnectedness of Kremlin-sponsored digital and social media content with mainstream media platforms. A study conducted by the Democracy Centre in Sofia revealed the most common themes used for manipulating public opinion in both Romania and Bulgaria, including: 1) accession to Schengen as humiliating and dangerous; 2) Ukrainian agricultural imports as cheap and

122 Ibid.
123 For the discussion of Russian influence in Georgia, see Sabanadze, N. (2025), 'Is Russia behind Georgia's Geopolitical Realignment?', *GEOpolitics* 14, 8 January 2025, https://politicsgeo.com/public/storage/articles/January2025/Natalie%20Sabanadze%20-%20Is%20Russia%20Behind%20Georgia%E2%80%99s%20Geopolitical%20Realignment.pdf.

threatening to domestic agricultural sector; 3) the inevitability of Russian victory and Ukraine being split up between Russia and neighbouring EU members; 4) oppression of Bulgarian and Romanian minorities by Kyiv; 5) Western-imposed ideology of liberalism and LGBTQ rights as threats to national sovereignty and traditional values.[124]

Beyond these country-specific themes, Russia's information operations across the broader Black Sea region frequently emphasize: the fear of war and the probability of spillovers into neighbouring states; NATO expansion as the root cause of the conflict; the EU as a force undermining national sovereignty; Western liberalism as a threat to national culture, religion and traditions; and the unreliability of the West as a security and economic partner. These narratives often originate on Kremlin-affiliated digital and social media platforms before being amplified by mainstream media. The extent of this interconnection varies across countries – appearing particularly strong in Bulgaria and Georgia, but less so in Romania. However, in all cases, this media ecosystem makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between legitimate reporting and information manipulation, effectively laundering Kremlin-backed narratives through different sources.

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124 Georgiev, G. and Galev, T. (2025), *Webs of Deceit: Online Information Manipulation Networks in Bulgaria and Romania*, Report, Center for the Study of Democracy, 27 January 2025, https://csd.eu/publications/publication/webs-of-deceit.

08 Russia's advantages and constraints in the Black Sea region

To secure a competitive advantage in the Black Sea, Russia is working to capitalize on the opportunities it has built over time while mitigating the constraints it faces. This chapter maps Russia's opportunities and limitations across four key domains: political/diplomatic, informational/ideological, military/security, and economic.

As discussed earlier, Russia's posture in the Black Sea and its policies towards littoral states are shaped by two interrelated perceptions: first, a historically ingrained sense of entitlement to dominate the region; and second, a strategic imperative to repel Western competition and challenge its influence in the Black Sea region. To maintain its competitive advantage, Russia has developed a strategic approach that targets the vulnerabilities of littoral states where Russia has significant leverage. In turn, this has led states in the region to seek closer integration with Western institutions, creating increasingly adversarial regional dynamics and imposing constraints on Russia's power projection.

Russia manipulates the Black Sea region through political proxies, cultural and historical influences, a military presence, trade and energy dependencies, and state vulnerabilities that can be instrumentalized. These areas represent the main opportunities/advantages for Russian power projection in the region and

can be classified into four main categories: political/diplomatic, informational/ideological, military/security, and economic. Constraints are those factors that limit Russia's ability to gain geopolitical advantage in the region. Not all opportunities and constraints carry the same weight, while some can be seen as both an opportunity and a limitation, depending on circumstances. Charting them helps to increase understanding of Russia's strategic vision of the Black Sea region and to anticipate which instruments of power the country is likely to deploy, as well as when and where.

Table 1. Russia's opportunities and constraints in the Black Sea

Category	Opportunities/advantages	Constraints
Political/diplomatic	• Authoritarian/hybrid regimes • Anti-establishment/nationalist/pro-Russian parties • Elite capture and strategic corruption • Election interference • Protracted conflicts/occupation regimes • Divergent threat perceptions among NATO allies • Turkey's previous discontent with the West and its hedging strategy • Russia-led regional integration projects • Potential US withdrawal from Europe/transatlantic rift • Chinese support	• Attraction to EU/NATO • Enduring trust in NATO deterrence • Local pro-democracy sentiment/resistance movements • Turkey's support for Ukraine • China's dual role/growing local attraction to China • Failure of Russian-led projects • Increasing convergence around the Russian threat • Cost of supporting *de facto* statelets.
Informational/ideological	• Anti-liberalism/threat to traditional values narrative • Rising anti-Western nationalism • Orthodox Church, especially in Bulgaria and Georgia • Media influence/information laundering (the surfacing of content created by Russia in the mainstream media) • Historical narratives • Information operations/fake news	• Growing awareness/resilience to Russian malign influence • Negative historical memories/Russian imperialism • Consolidation of Ukrainian national identity • Ideological competition/convergence with Trump-era US • Restrictions on Russian media
Military/security	• Black Sea Fleet; naval bases; regional troop presence/'peacekeeping'/military bases • NATO's naval restrictions • Investment in and modernization of the military • Expanding military-industrial complex • Lessons from Ukraine/battle-trained army	• Weakened Black Sea Fleet • More effective Ukrainian drones and military innovation • Loss of Tartus base, Syria • Military-technological advantages • Rising European defence investments • Improved cybersecurity
Economic	• Civil ports • Energy infrastructure • Trade and energy dependencies • Grain exports and energy flows • Legacy economic/business ties • Control of critical infrastructure	• EU integration prospects; increased trade • Middle Corridor • Underwater electricity cable • Connectivity projects • China's growing interest/investments

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Table 1 illustrates that while Russia has amassed significant leverage for power projection, it also faces substantial constraints. However, Moscow has demonstrated a greater ability to capitalize on its strengths and opportunities to advance its interests. As a centralized, authoritarian state with minimal domestic accountability, Russia can formulate and pursue its objectives with greater clarity and determination. In contrast, the constraints Russia faces are primarily imposed by a less efficient, fragmented coalition of states and multilateral organizations, such as NATO and the EU, which often struggle with coordination and a unified strategic vision. For example, there is still no NATO Black Sea strategy even though the strategic relevance of the Black Sea for the alliance is no longer in doubt.

After years of strategic neglect, the EU unveiled its Black Sea strategy in May 2025.[125] Central to the plan is the creation of a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub, aimed at providing enhanced monitoring and early warning of emerging threats and malign activities in the region. The hub may also play a role in overseeing the implementation of any future ceasefire or peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. In addition, the strategy outlines investments in regional infrastructure to improve military mobility and strengthen NATO's deterrence posture. If effectively implemented, the initiative could constrain Russia's subversive activities and foster a more coordinated response among EU member states. However, key operational details remain unresolved – including the location of the security hub and the mechanisms by which early warning will trigger timely and credible action.

Furthermore, different members of the Euro-Atlantic community have traditionally had contrasting and varying threat perceptions of Russia, limiting the effectiveness of their collective response. While the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led to an unprecedented level of alignment – solidifying a shared view that Russia is Europe's principal threat – there is a strong likelihood that divisions will resurface once hostilities subside. Differing perspectives on how to re-engage with Russia may lead to renewed fractures within the Euro-Atlantic community, weakening its long-term strategic coherence.

A new opportunity for Russia is growing tension in the transatlantic relationship itself and the credibility of US commitments to European security. While there are ongoing efforts to strengthen NATO's European pillar and enhance Europe's defence capabilities to reduce dependence on the US, forging a consensus on how the EU can step up as an independent centre of power remains a long-term challenge. Many European states, particularly those in the territorial vicinity of Russia, such as Poland and the Baltic states, continue to prioritize the transatlantic link and remain sceptical of Europe's potential to become an autonomous security actor. However, the Trump administration has signalled a reduced interest in maintaining previous levels of commitment to European security and has been reluctant to provide clear security guarantees for Ukraine or support a US backstop for a potential European peacekeeping mission. This has weakened NATO's deterrence posture and raises doubts about the credibility of Article 5, potentially incentivizing Russia to test the

125 Höller, L. (2025), 'EU unveils the Black Sea Strategy with an eye on post-war Ukraine', DefenceNews, 29 May 2025, https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/05/29/eu-unveils-black-sea-strategy-with-an-eye-on-post-war-ukraine; European Commission (2025), 'New EU Strategy for Secure, Prosperous and Resilient Black Sea Region', news article, 28 May 2025, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/new-eu-strategy-secure-prosperous-and-resilient-black-sea-region-2025-05-28_en.

alliance's resolve and advance its long-standing objective of undermining NATO. A potential flashpoint for direct Russia–NATO confrontation remains in the Black Sea – where strategic tensions are already high, and the risk of escalation persists.

Thus far, Russia has welcomed signals from the Trump administration, particularly its reluctance to offer unconditional support for Ukraine and its moves to scale back democracy promotion programmes – initiatives that Moscow has long perceived as direct threats to its interests. The closure of programmes funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has had a devastating impact on civil society organizations across the Black Sea region, weakening domestic resistance to authoritarian tendencies and expanding opportunities for Russian influence projection. Moreover, the emerging political divide between the US and European partners as well as disagreement over the Ukraine peace negotiations have created the perception of a growing rift in the transatlantic alliance, leading to speculation about the end of what Moscow calls the collective West.[126] For Russia, this would be a major gain and a step towards realizing its vision of a multipolar non-Western world.

> **The emerging political divide between the US and European partners as well as disagreement over the Ukraine peace negotiations have created the perception of a growing rift in the transatlantic alliance, leading to speculation about the end of what Moscow calls the collective West.**

However, Trump's embrace of an anti-woke agenda – including criticism of what is perceived as excessively liberal societal norms – has paradoxically blunted one of Russia's key ideological tools. By adopting a similar stance on social conservatism, the Trump administration has challenged Russia's monopoly on anti-liberalism, making it more difficult for Moscow to frame opposition to liberal values as inherently anti-Western or anti-US. Additionally, various conservative political actors across the Black Sea region – who previously aligned their interests and political identities with Russia – have increasingly gravitated towards the Trump administration, eager to secure its favour. This shift has introduced a new dimension to ideological competition, complicating Russia's efforts to position itself as the principal defender of traditional values against Western liberalism.

The above example demonstrates that certain opportunities or advantages identified in Table 1 can function simultaneously as vulnerabilities and vice versa. In another example, while Russia has expanded its military bases in unrecognized breakaway entities in the Black Sea region and taken advantage of them for its military and

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126 Liboreiro, J. (2025), "The West as we knew it no longer exists,' von der Leyen says amid Trump tensions', euronews, 16 April 2025, https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/16/the-west-as-we-knew-it-no-longer-exists-von-der-leyen-says-amid-trump-tensions; Michta, A. A. (2025), 'Heading For Divorce? The Ideological War Threatening NATO', 1945, 26 April 2025, https://www.19fortyfive.com/2025/04/heading-for-divorce-the-ideological-war-threatening-nato.

political purposes, sustaining these facilities over the long term is costly. Financially, they represent an increasing burden, while politically, managing local regimes has become more challenging. Since the 2008 war with Georgia, Russia has invested considerable diplomatic capital in seeking international recognition for Abkhazia's independence. Yet its strategy of effectively buying recognition has largely failed, securing support only from small island states and dependent partners: Nicaragua, Venezuela, Assad's Syria, Vanuatu and Nauru. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has abandoned efforts to advance Abkhazia's recognition and has instead focused on consolidating control over the region through political pressure and economic means. However, this has faced strong resistance from the local population, civil society and opposition political parties. Russia's financial and political priorities have shifted towards developing Crimea and other annexed Ukrainian territories, leaving Abkhazia with diminished support and rising local discontent.[127] Abkhazia's geopolitical utility as leverage over Georgia is reaching its limits, while the political and financial liabilities for Moscow are growing.

A similar pattern is emerging in Transnistria (Moldova), where Russia's support for the separatist regime has been dwindling, as its focus on Ukraine has trumped other priorities. Although Russia still maintains troops there – reportedly numbering around 1,000–1,500 after a recent troop reduction from a high of 5,500–6,000, with only 200–300 actual Russian peacekeepers – most of the force consists of locally recruited Transnistrian personnel.[128] Transnistria lacks a direct border with Russia, yet it functions as leverage over Moldova and Romania, which would increase significantly if Russia were to seize Odesa and become an immediate neighbour of Moldova. At present, this is not a realistic prospect. However, Odesa holds immense strategic value for Russia. Should an opportunity to seize it arise, Moscow would be unlikely to let it pass. The city is not only deeply embedded in Russia's neo-imperial imagination, but it also represents a critical asset that could significantly enhance Russia's global economic influence.

127 Nikoleishvili, S. and Selkälä, T. (2024), 'At the break of thaw, a deluge: The last moments of Abkhazia?', Italian Institute for Political Studies, 12 November 2024, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/at-the-break-of-thaw-a-deluge-the-last-moments-of-abkhazia-189552.
128 Interview with a former OSCE official in Transnistria, currently with an international NGO in Moldova, under the condition of anonymity, 19 March 2025, online.

09 Conclusion: Trends of continuity and adaptation

There can be no credible counterbalancing of Russia in the Black Sea without a Ukraine that has a Black Sea coastline. Therefore, the defence of Odesa should form the basis of any joint counterbalancing strategy aimed at preventing Russian domination of the Black Sea. With a reduced US focus in the region, cooperation among major EU members, the UK and Turkey is essential.

In the Russian worldview, multipolarity is not merely about the distribution of power among several global actors, but rather about the legitimacy of exclusive spheres of influence as the fundamental organizing principle of international politics. The existence of multiple centres of power and gravity in global affairs, from Moscow's perspective, inherently means that each is entitled to its own geopolitical domain. Rather than promoting a universal and rules-based order, Russia envisions a world of 'multi-ordering', in which different power centres maintain their own normative and political ecosystems.[129]

In the Russian lexicon, multipolarity and multi-ordering are effectively interchangeable. This worldview merges the 19th-century imperial logic of spheres of influence with the 20th-century Cold War-style ideological bifurcation, where there are two or more simultaneous systems of international governance. Russia

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[129] See Dalay, G. (2025), 'The New Geopolitics of Türkiye-Europe Relations', in Taştan, K., Dalay, G., Quencez, M. and Wright, G. (2025), EU–Türkiye Defense Cooperation: Why Now – and How Far?, policy paper, Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), https://www.gmfus.org/news/eu-turkiye-defense-cooperation-why-now-and-how-far.

does not simply seek a seat at the table of great powers – it seeks recognition of its own normative and geopolitical space.[130] Within this framework, dominance over the Black Sea is viewed as essential for reconstituting Russia's imperial sphere of influence, affirming its great power status, and enabling power projection into adjacent theatres such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond. Accordingly, Russia's posture in the Black Sea encapsulates its concept of an imperial national identity, regional hegemony and global ambition.

Instead of envisioning a cooperative regional security system, Russia's concept of regional order in the Black Sea hinges on a *de facto* condominium with Turkey along Cold War-era lines: Moscow controlling the north and Ankara the south. Central to this vision is the subordination of non-NATO regional states to Russian influence. In essence, Moscow's security logic necessitates the insecurity of its neighbours – particularly those outside NATO's protective umbrella – as Russia's approach is rooted not in mutual security or regional ownership, but in domination. Regional ownership for Russia means keeping external actors outside of the Black Sea, and not constructing an order premised on the cooperation of sovereign, equal and independent littoral states. Even during the Cold War, when the regional system was split, the Soviet Union maintained overarching supremacy in the Black Sea.

This foundational outlook continues to inform Russia's Black Sea strategy. Going forwards, Moscow is likely to deny agency to non-NATO littoral states, seek to reconstitute its regional power, assert strategic supremacy and use the Black Sea as a launchpad for influence into adjacent theatres. This hegemonic vision leaves no room for a genuinely cooperative regional architecture or inclusive security arrangements. In this context, strategies based on containment or counterbalancing – whether through hard power or softer-power mechanisms of deterrence and resilience – remain the most viable means to prevent Russian domination in the region.

Regional littoral states may pursue effective issue-based and time-bound cooperation or counterbalancing strategies *vis-à-vis* Russia – the demining taskforce between Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria is a case in point. This framework could serve as a model for cooperation in other areas, including offshore energy exploration activities. Yet, Black Sea states are unlikely to agree on and maintain a long-lasting containment policy towards Moscow. Not least because Turkey and Russia appear set to remain committed to their shared position on keeping the non-littoral NATO presence out of the Black Sea.

Against the backdrop of these constraints, the following three policies are of utmost importance for the West: investment in military capabilities of the littoral states (including NATO engaging in more military capacity-building activities), the creation of new NATO strategies to boost its presence in the Black Sea beyond the maritime realm, and support for Ukraine that ensures it remains a Black Sea country with a formidable naval power. Given its demand for Ukraine's demilitarization, Russia will strongly object to this last point. This might even trigger Moscow to make another bid to take over Odesa and cut Ukraine off from the Black Sea

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130 Ibid.

completely. There can be no credible counterbalancing of Russia in the Black Sea without a Ukraine that has a Black Sea coastline. Therefore, the defence of Odesa should form the basis of any joint counterbalancing strategy aimed at preventing Russian domination of the Black Sea, both by the littoral states as well as by NATO/ European powers.

At a time when the US has publicly stated its aims to downsize its security commitments in Europe, including in the Black Sea, cooperation among major EU members, the UK and Turkey is essential. The Trump administration has ruled out a NATO mission in Ukraine. Similarly, beyond the littoral member states, as indicated above, Ankara opposes an expanded NATO presence in the Black Sea while also rejecting the prospect of Russia's dominance. Thus, Ankara's strategic interests align with maintaining a balance of power, supporting Ukrainian capabilities and counterbalancing Russia's bid for hegemony without escalating NATO involvement. Given the potential US withdrawal, there is a need to enhance foreign and security policy cooperation among NATO's EU and non-EU members. A strong Ukraine, backed by European support and regional partnerships, is central to ensuring Black Sea security.

The emerging political divide between the US and European partners as well as disagreement over the Ukraine peace negotiations have created a perception of a growing rift in the transatlantic alliance, leading to speculation about the end of what Moscow calls the collective West.

For Europe and NATO to gain a better understanding of the implications of Russian policy in the Black Sea, it is critical to comprehend Russia's consistency in its motives and vision for the Black Sea region and beyond. The war in Ukraine may have redefined Russia's strategy and instruments, but not its fundamental objectives and vision. One of the main goals has been to prevent the integration of the Black Sea region into the European and Western domain. Consequently, Russia will probably be more hostile to Ukraine's membership of the EU than Moscow's rhetoric suggests. Therefore, it is crucial for the EU to offer credible and sustained commitments to Ukraine and other Black Sea countries.

For Russia, the war is a bid to remake its own neighbourhood, particularly the former Soviet republics, in its own image. If Moscow emerges victorious, or at least is perceived as such, it will have severe consequences for those countries in Russia's so-called 'near abroad'. Countries such as Armenia and Kazakhstan will have no choice but to toe the Russian line. The Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asia are intimately interconnected in Russia's emerging new neighbourhood strategy. This reality should also inform the European response, including that of the UK and Turkey, in both devising and interconnecting neighbourhood policies towards

the same regions. In the long run, Moscow may also need to navigate China's growing interests in the Black Sea, as Beijing expands its economic and strategic footprint in the region.

To summarize, the regional order around the Black Sea is becoming increasingly fragmented, dynamic and competitive. The balance of power is shifting rapidly in response to both local and global developments. With Russia's resources stretched in Ukraine, Turkey's rising ambitions, and growing interconnections between different theatres of geopolitical contestation, the Black Sea region is emerging as a microcosm of multipolarity. Russia is actively working to shape the new regional order in ways that serve its strategic interests and reinforce its global agenda. To achieve this, Moscow seeks to secure its territorial gains along Ukraine's Black Sea coast; neutralize Ukraine's capacity as a regional competitor; ensure Turkey's cooperation premised on keeping extra-regional actors, including non-littoral NATO countries, outside of the maritime domain in the Black Sea – with an aim to return NATO's presence there to its pre-2022 levels.

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