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## SECURITY ENCOUNTERS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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### **Provocări de securitate în regiunea Mării Negre**

**Rezumat:** După 2014, comunitatea occidentală a demonstrat un interes crescut pentru Regiunea Mării Negre și dorința de a descuraja intervențiile unilaterale ale Moscovei. Cu toate acestea, Rusia și-a menținut suficientă capacitate și motivație pentru a contracara aceste evoluții. Zona a devenit o arenă de securitate relevantă pentru competiția NATO-Rusia, iar acest lucru a amplificat neîncrederea în rândul națiunilor costiere.

Rusia încearcă să își mențină poziția predominantă în Regiunea Mării Negre și continuă să-și sporească și să-și modernizeze capacitățile militare pentru a-și putea proiecta în continuare puterea în estul Mediteranei, Orientului Mijlociu și Africa de Nord. În consecință, Moscova rămâne sensibilă la activitățile militare și mai ales la noile redistribuiri ale SUA în această regiune și percepe deja acumularea forțelor militare ca provocatoare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Regiunea Mării Negre, Europa de Est, NATO, Rusia, Turcia, competiție strategică.

### **Security encounters in the Black Sea Region**

**Abstract:** After 2014, Western community demonstrated an increased interest in the Black Sea Region and the will to deter Moscow's unilateral interventions. Russia however, has retained enough ability and motivation to counter these developments. The area has become a relevant security arena for the NATO-Russia competition, and this amplified the mistrust among the coastal nations.

Russia seeks to maintain its position as the leading nation in the Black Sea Region and continues to increase and modernize its military capabilities in order to be able to further project its power to the Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa. As a consequence, Moscow remains sensitive to military activities and especially to the new US redeployments in this region and is already perceiving the build-up of military forces as provocative.

**Keywords:** Black Sea Region, Eastern Europe, NATO, Russia, Turkey, strategic competition.

### **Wide range of reasons for nowadays competition**

The European war theatre has some exclusively favourable preconditions for operations. Sir Halford John Mackinder, the English geographer, academic and politician, who is considered one of the founders of geopolitics and geostrategy, underlined in 1919 the importance of the Eastern Europe region through a famous theory: “*Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.*”<sup>1</sup> Washington is often referring to the region as a “*pivot area*”, a term made popular by Zbigniew Brzezinski, recognizing its geopolitical and economic relevance.

The Black Sea has a long history of geopolitical

clashes among which the rivalry between Turkey and Russia is one of the most prominent in terms of duration and intensity, and the 2014 events further deteriorated the security environment and escalated tensions and insecurity in the region.

The enclosed body of water connects the coastal countries with the international sea trade flows. The Black Sea trade network containing approximately 30 seaports relies on the narrow access controlled by Ankara that makes the Turkish Straits and the Marmara Sea the most relevant strategic area of the region. The extensive dispute over the Black Sea right of entry was ultimately settled through the Montreux Convention in 1936 which guaranteed the freedom of navigation for commercial vessels and established a strict mechanism regarding the passing of warships. Thereby, the access through the Turkish Straits of military ships belonging to

<sup>1</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, National Defence University Press, Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 106.

navies not indigenous to the Black Sea is restrained in terms of number, tonnage and duration of stay.

From Moscow's point of view, the only year-round navigable seaports that Russia has are located in the Black Sea, but these depend on the Turkish Straits for access in the global waters. The area delimited by Black and Caspian Seas, with navigable rivers such as Don and Kuban that connect the closed Azov Sea with social and economic vital areas and without geographical protection barriers represents an extensive vulnerability for mighty Russia. To mitigate these vulnerabilities and protect its sea trade, Moscow needs to control the Kerch strait and preferably Crimea peninsula as well.

The decline and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire allowed Moscow to become the dominant power for more than one century. The end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the "Pax Sovietica" in the region, allowed for a new geopolitical situation to emerge and new political actors to adjust the Black Sea balance of power. The newly independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, and former Moscow's satellite-states like Bulgaria and Romania have promoted their own regional agenda having the support of major third party geopolitical players.

Romania, which throughout the Cold War was the most independent member of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, became in the early '90s, along with the others former communist states, a security orphan still having a wide range of vulnerabilities and the perception that the West still has some hostile intentions. Historically surrounded by large expansionist powers, Romanians had to adapt their alliances options and to balance the influence of their stronger neighbours especially Turkish and Russians.

For a short period after the Cold War, the region has been marked by confidence building aimed to improve regional stability and security. This tendency has been quite significant in the naval sphere with the creation of a Naval Task Force (BLACKSEAFOR) and an enduring anti-terrorist operation – Operation Black Sea Harmony (OBSH)<sup>2</sup>.

The Black Sea Region (BSR) geopolitical realities in the post-Cold War period could be analysed from the perspective of coastal states', on the one hand, and countries and organizations connected with the region, on the other, looking to influence and shape the balance of power.

### **A sea surrounded by insecurity**

Among the coastal states, Russia and Turkey remains the dominant actors which are sharing a balanced influence in terms of geographic advantages, capabilities and resources while both of them are

interested to preserve the BSR status quo. Bulgarian and Romanian actions, as NATO and EU members, are considerably influenced by the political, economic and military goals of these two organizations as well as by the US' goals in the region.

In the current political environment, the geopolitical relevance of Georgia and Ukraine as NATO partners increased, but they are still kept in a grey zone by unsolved conflicts. This "buffer zone" between the East and the West includes also non-coastal states such as Armenia, Azerbaijan or Moldova and their development is affected by internal conflicts fuelled usually from both directions and where the neo-ottoman policies of Turkey are also interfering.

For Moscow, the strategic dynamics in the BSR have not changed substantially since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sea represents an important economic transit but also the access point to the Mediterranean region, where Russia's role has significantly increased in recent years.

Russia perceives NATO's presence and training activities with its Partners in the Black Sea as threats to its security and feels that it needs to react by enhancing its military capabilities. From Moscow's perspective, the integration of Crimea into its national security plans was a logical "defensive" step, as it is a strategic stronghold that can be protected with limited resources and from which restrictive measures regarding freedom of navigation can be easily projected. In this way, it is possible to counter what Kremlin considers as anti-Russian activities carried out by NATO and as well as the Alliance's expansion in the region.

The ownership of Crimea provides a secure base for the Black Sea Fleet and the coverage for most of water body and coastline even with land-based missiles. After Crimea's annexation, Russia's coastline increased from 475 to 1,200 km which is not as long as Turkey's 1,785 km coastline, but the strategic advantages brought by the peninsula's geographical position and infrastructure provide Moscow with a significant leverage to counter Turkey, the owner of Bosphorus Strait.

By controlling Crimea, Moscow obtains the base for an enlargement and modernization of its Black Sea Fleet and is able to project power towards the Mediterranean. Russia has constantly increased its military presence both on the sea and in the air in BSR and Eastern Mediterranean, without being counter balanced by any other power, including NATO, or its member state Turkey. Possessing Crimea, Kremlin can still aspire for a degree of control over the Turkish Straits that represent an economic gate, but also the channel to expand its sphere of influence and military presence.

Russian increased interest in the Mediterranean Sea and close relationships with Syria and several North African countries are dependent by the freedom of navigation through the Turkish Straits. Opened

<sup>2</sup> \*\*\*, BLACKSEAFOR, URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/blackseafor.en.mfa>, accessed on 28.09.2020.

sea routes of communications are vital for the “Syrian Express”, the logistic sustainment network that connects Russia’s Black Sea bases (Novorossiysk and Sevastopol) to the naval facility in Tartus<sup>3</sup>, without which the military operations in support of the Syrian government would have been impossible.

The BSR is explicitly mentioned by Russian Strategic Documents<sup>4</sup> focused on naval policies and doctrines, as a strategically important region alongside the Arctic, the Mediterranean Sea and the Caspian Sea<sup>5</sup>. The national security strategy of 2015 specifies the negative effects on Russia’s security<sup>6</sup> generated by the Ukrainian conflict and by the conflicting interests with the US and EU. As a consequence, the defence capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet have been enhanced, a combined force group, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Army Corps has been formed in February 2017 in Crimea, and a marine force for amphibious operations, 197<sup>th</sup> Assault Ship Brigade has been placed under the command and control (C2) of the fleet.

The Russian forces are operating in BSR and Eastern Mediterranean under the joint-strategic C2 of the Southern Military District (SMD) with its headquarters in Rostov-on-Don. Even if it is the smallest in size SMD contains some of the most capable formations: three Combined Arms Armies (CAAs), an Air and Air Defence Army of three aviation divisions; and two naval formations – the Black Sea Fleet, with its two naval bases, and the Caspian Flotilla.

According to *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective* study published by the Swedish Defence Research Agency<sup>7</sup>, in 2019 there were available in the SMD, from a land perspective, 34 Battle Groups with 24,000-31,000 personnel, which did not include the Russian bases in Armenia or South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, these figures contain also forces generated starting 2016 as the third CAA close to the Ukrainian border, and the army corps on the Crimean Peninsula.

The air domain relies on at least 190 fixed-wing and 210 rotary-wing aircraft, making the SMD the district

with the largest operational-tactical air capabilities, mainly because of the great amount of attack and ground-attack assets.

In the maritime domain, the Black Sea infrastructure increased considerably after Crimea’s annexation. The Black Sea Fleet has also received several new combat and auxiliary vessels that allowed it to play a major role in the Russian permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea. In the Caspian Sea, the Flotilla’s main base was repositioned 300 kilometres south, from Astrakhan to Kaspiisk, in order to provide a faster access and enhanced control over the central areas of the sea.

Starting 2014, SMD carried out a large number of major joint training activities, the most relevant being the Kavkaz (Caucasus) series of military multinational exercises<sup>8</sup>. In 2017, Russia conducted a naval focused exercise together with Turkey, the first with another BSR country after the annexation of Crimea. The joint exercise opened a chain of concerns within NATO regarding Ankara’s rapprochement with Kremlin, as the enhanced ties between the two capitals seriously reduce NATO’s naval options in the Black Sea.

Turkey is the only NATO member in the region with a fleet that can compete with Russia’s. From a trade perspective, Black Sea is not very important for Ankara, but a long coastline, and a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claim and the recent discovery of hydrocarbon deposits could significantly increase its weight for Turkish economy<sup>9</sup>.

The BSR security remains highly important as Turkey controls access through the straits, and owned naval superiority in the Black Sea after Soviet Union’s collapse<sup>10</sup>. The re-emerge of Russian naval power and divergent positions over the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Caucasus affected recent relations between Moscow and Ankara. The pragmatic personal relation between the two autocratic leaders and the broken ties with the West allowed Russia and Turkey, traditionally competitors in the BSR, to increase in some aspects, their political, economic and military cooperation.

<sup>3</sup> Maria Tsvetkova, “Exclusive: Russia, despite draw down, shipping more to Syria than removing”, *Reuters*, March 30, 2016, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-supplies-idUSKCN0W0DJ>, accessed on 06.10.2020.

<sup>4</sup> \*\*\*, *Russian Strategic Documents*, Russia Matters, URL: <https://www.russiamatters.org/russian-strategic-documents?page=0>, accessed on 08.10.2020.

<sup>5</sup> \*\*\*, *Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030*, Russia Maritime Studies Institute, U.S. Naval War College, 2017, para. 38, URL: [https://dnngwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWC/Departments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RM/SI\\_RusNavyFundamentalsENG\\_FINAL%20\(1\).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1A0%3D](https://dnngwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWC/Departments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/RM/SI_RusNavyFundamentalsENG_FINAL%20(1).pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fjFDEgWhpd1ING%2FnmGQXqaH5%2FDEujDU76EnksAB%2B1A0%3D), accessed on 11.10.2020.

<sup>6</sup> \*\*\*, *Russian National Security Strategy*, December 2015, para. 17, URL: <https://russiamatters.org/node/21421>, accessed on 08.10.2020.

<sup>7</sup> Fredrik Westerlund, Susanne Oxenstierna (eds.), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2019*, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2019, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Kavkaz-2020 was Russia’s biggest military exercise in 2020 and involved more than 80.000 troops from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, China, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tajikistan (for more details see \*\*\*, “Kavkaz-2020: Russia’s Biggest Military Exercise This Year”, *Warsaw Institute*, September 28, 2020, URL: <https://warsawinstitute.org/kavkaz-2020-russias-biggest-military-exercise-year>, accessed on 14.10.2020).

<sup>9</sup> Ariel Cohen, Talya Yuzucu, “Turkey’s gas find in the Black Sea: How big is this Tuna?”, *Atlantic Council*, September 14, 2020, URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/energysource/turkeys-gas-find-in-the-black-sea-how-big-is-this-tuna>, accessed on 14.10.2020.

<sup>10</sup> By 2013 the Turkish fleet (not only the ships based in the Black Sea) was 4.7 times larger than the combined fleets of Russia and Ukraine in the Black Sea (for more details see Siemon T. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, “Turkey and Black Sea Security”, *SIPRI Background Paper*, December 2018, URL: <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2018/sipri-background-papers/turkey-and-black-sea-security>, accessed on 14.10.2020).

After the 2016 events in Turkey, and the massive internal purges implemented by the governmental authorities, the country's slow process of gaining EU membership has been suspended. Moreover, the intra-NATO rifts generated by Ankara's decision to purchase S-400 missile systems and the disputes in Eastern Mediterranean continue to challenge Turkey's Western links and aspirations.

On the other hand, just a month before the failed coup attempt, President Erdogan warned the West about the Russian raise in BSR saying that "*the Black Sea has almost become a Russian lake*"<sup>11</sup> and asked for more NATO presence. He also supported Bucharest's initiative to establish a joint Bulgarian-Romanian-Turkish fleet in the Black Sea, idea rejected in the end by Sofia.

The Turkish security policy and strategic planning remain however quite opaque as public debate on country's defence rarely takes place and official documents detailing threat's perception are usually classified. The most recent defence white paper that defined the country policy by Atatürk's concise precept, *Peace at Home, Peace in the World* was published as long ago as 2000.<sup>12</sup> Since then Turkish leadership from Ankara (or Istanbul) promoted a neo-ottoman policy attempting to spread its influence over certain areas in the Balkans, Middle East, Africa or Caucasus. President Erdogan is aggressively promoting a reform of the UN and especially UNSC to increase the weight of the emerging countries<sup>13</sup>. As a result of these changes Turkey is playing now, together with Russia, a revisionist and sometimes a spoiling game on the regional arena.

With greater willingness to get directly involved in regional conflicts, Turkey encouraged and supported the 2020 Azerbaijani offensive over the Nagorno-Karabakh while the international community has called for a negotiated cease-fire rather than backing one side. Turkey's military is also active in Syria, Libya, Iraq, Cyprus, Qatar, Albania, Djibouti, Somalia and is sustaining the dispute over the Aegean Sea's EEZ with Greece and UE disregarding the United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (UNCLOS).

All of these shows how Ankara's relations with its NATO allies, especially the US, have deteriorated in recent years, while the ones with Moscow have fluctuated from friendly, to near war and back to friendly. Meanwhile, Ankara is looking to develop the

prolific relation and cooperation with Kiev, supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea.

Chinese economic "peaceful rise" is present also in the BSR as Beijing's influence is expanding through financial instruments and infrastructure projects part of "Belt and Road Initiative".

### **Western Commitment in the Black Sea Region**

After the Soviet Union's collapse, the security equation in BSR has slightly changed as Washington amplified its regional commitments to counterbalance the increasing Moscow's influence.

The NATO Eastern Flank become the subject of intensive political discussions regarding allied cohesion and solidarity but also of a stronger NATO presence as part of the defence and deterrence strategy and, as a result, the allies from the BSR have been assisted and reinforced. NATO's overall priorities for the BSR like advance planning, force deployment, equipment preposition, and joint exercises with allied and partner countries were complemented by regional member states with additional measures. Romania and Bulgaria pay with a special attention to training and education of armed forces' personnel as well as infrastructure development and procurement of essential equipment in order to increase the interoperability, readiness and resilience of their national forces.

Comparing with the BSR environment, Romania was perceived as an oasis of stability and became the favourite regional partner for the western outside powers. Since Moscow took over the Crimea, Bucharest has been advocated for additional NATO and US presence in Romania, forces to be stationed temporarily or even as permanent presence of rotational forces and also to be prepositioned stocks and heavy equipment. In addition, Romania committed to infrastructure investments and procurements of some scarce essential equipment.

European Union is promoting its assumed values of democracy, prosperity, stability, rule of law, good governance, and increased cooperation in the BSR through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Proposed by Poland and Sweden in 2008, the EaP was set to provide a discussion platform for trade, economic strategy, travel agreements, and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours<sup>14</sup>. However, as both programs are not very influential, as there is no promise of EU membership, they do not pose a serious threat to Moscow for the moment.

Balkans politics gained an evident pro-European track and enhanced the economic ties with EU, but the region remained an arena for strong economic and geopolitical competition between bordering major

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Erdogan, In Plea To NATO, Says Black Sea Has Become «Russian Lake»", *Eurasianet*, May 12, 2016, URL: <https://eurasianet.org/erdogan-plea-nato-says-black-sea-has-become-russian-lake>, accessed on 15.10.2020.

<sup>12</sup> \*\*\*, *Defense White Paper 2000*, Turkish Ministry of National Defence, August 2000, URL: [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154907/Turkey\\_2000eng.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154907/Turkey_2000eng.pdf), accessed on 14.10.2020.

<sup>13</sup> \*\*\*, "Turkey's Erdogan calls for 'immediate reforms' for more effective UN", *TRT World*, September 22, 2020, URL: <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-s-erdogan-calls-for-immediate-reforms-for-more-effective-un-39965>, accessed on 14.10.2020.

<sup>14</sup> \*\*\*, *The European Neighborhood Policy*, URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en), accessed on 09.10.2020.

traditional actors like Turkey and Russia, but also US and, more recently, China.

For NATO, the Black Sea was not a priority until 2014. Starting with the Wales Summit, the Alliance's political and military support for the region improved. Since the West acknowledged its militarization by Moscow and the fact that the SMD is using it as a vector for Russia's influence in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, NATO has started developing a new approach to security in the region. Some response actions and tailored assurance measures in support of NATO members in the region have been agreed and implemented.

The 2016 Warsaw Summit set apart the Alliance's interest for the BSR highlighting its commitment to partners such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. The summit's declaration, and the following actions, confirmed that the region has become a greater priority for the West which declared itself ready for a prolonged standoff against Russia. NATO's answer to the perceived increased threats consisted in a series of defence and deterrence measures including the establishment in Romania of multinational headquarters and deployment of allied and US forces.

After Moscow took over the Crimea, Bucharest advocated for additional NATO and US presence in Romania, forces to be stationed temporarily or even as permanent presence of rotational forces and also to be prepositioned stocks and heavy equipment. In addition, Romania has committed to investing in infrastructure and some scarce essential equipment.

Besides regional Home Nation Defence Forces, NATO has the capability to quickly deploy the NRF including the VJTF, and subsequently Follow-on Forces and/or other High Readiness Joint Forces. The deployment however can be jeopardised by the A2AD systems located in Crimea and Krasnodar that constitute a permanent threat for NATO's lines of communications. The mitigation of these risks has been considered by the Alliance and actions have been taken such as: setting up local C2 capabilities, pre-deployment of forces and stockpiles on allied soil, boosted military patrol and reconnaissance flights, increased naval presence in the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits, enhanced training and education programmes and military assistance funding for Georgia and Ukraine.

In the incipient stages of a potential crisis, the rapid deployment of capabilities has been also considered in order to mitigate further escalation or destabilization. An extensive series of studies and simulation have been conducted by NATO to properly assess the A2AD threat and to find ways to overmatch the systems<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Ruslan Minich, "Russia Shows its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond", *Atlantic Council*, November 6, 2018, URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-shows-its-military-might-in-the-black-sea-and-beyond>, accessed on 06.10.2020.

Two of the six NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partners, Georgia and Ukraine, are belonging to BSR, the former being recognised on 12 of June 2020<sup>16</sup> and through this programme, extensive assistance packages and information sharing have been granted in order to increase their resilience and to enhance interoperability with NATO.

Beyond NATO, the US is working directly with its partners and developing bilateral cooperation programmes and the US Congress has approved the sale and delivery of defensive weapons to Ukraine and Georgia<sup>17</sup>.

In 2020, US Secretary of Defence, Mark Esper, signed a 10-year "*Roadmap for Defence Cooperation*", on October 6 with Bulgarian Minister of Defence, Krasimir Karakachanov<sup>18</sup>, and on October 8, with Romanian Minister of Defence, Nicolae Ciucă<sup>19</sup>. The agreement is designed to boost the strategic partnership by enhancing the defence cooperation especially in the BSR, and by addressing the Russian A2AD threat and China's growing influence in the area<sup>20</sup>.

## Conclusions

The key objective of Russia's foreign policy, in its near abroad, will remain the international recognition as a great power, instituting an exclusive sphere of influence. As for now, the associated implications do not seem to create a military overstretch for Moscow, moreover it appears that it has closed the gap between its foreign policy ambitions and military capability. We can therefore expect that Kremlin will continue its aggressive foreign policy and its use of armed force to sustain its ambitions and interests in the BSR.

We consider that Moscow will continue to use the threat of escalating military conflicts around Black Sea, as a bargaining tool in the process preserving its near abroad influence, but the Nagorno-Karabakh

<sup>16</sup> \*\*\*, "NATO recognises Ukraine as Enhanced Opportunities Partner", *NATO News*, June 12, 2020, URL: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_176327.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176327.htm?selectedLocale=en), accessed on 06.10.2020.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Miller, "U.S. Confirms Delivery Of Javelin Antitank Missiles To Ukraine", *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, April 30, 2018, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/javelin-missile-delivery-ukraine-us-confirmed/29200588.html>, accessed on 06.10.2020.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Garamone, "U.S., Bulgaria Chart 10-Year Road Map for Military Cooperation", *DOD News*, October 6, 2020, URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2373954/us-bulgaria-chart-10-year-road-map-for-military-cooperation>, accessed on 09.10.2020.

<sup>19</sup> \*\*\*, *Remarks by Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper and Romania Minister of Defense Nicolae Ciucă*, Transcript, October 8, 2020, URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2377378/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-dr-mark-t-esper-and-romania-minister-of-defense>, accessed on 09.10.2020.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem and \*\*\*, "US to deploy up to 2,500 soldiers in Bulgaria", *Anadolu Agency*, October 13, 2020, URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/us-to-deploy-up-to-2-500-soldiers-in-bulgaria/2005004#>, accessed on 09.10.2020.

conflict demonstrated some syncope in the claimed Russian political, economic and military influence.

The end of the 2020 six-week Azerbaijani-Armenian war increased the Moscow's relevance in the South Caucasus detrimental to the West, but also Turkey. A failure of Moscow policy over Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has the potential to generate reactions all over the Caucasus and BSR. Ultimately, could become more challenging to protect and preserve the identities of Russian communities living in the former Soviet space and to limit the involvement of the EU and the US in Eastern Europe. Worst scenario for Moscow would be to gradually lose its influence and power, up to a point when it risks becoming a space for the West vs China confrontation.

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