NATO Parliamentary Assembly

COMMITTEE
ON THE CIVIL DIMENSION OF SECURITY

ADVANCING STABILITY
IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

SPECIAL REPORT

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I.   INTRODUCTION

1.   Once on the periphery of European consciousness, in recent years the Black Sea region reappeared on policymakers' radar. Regional geopolitics are particularly affected by Russia's annexation of Crimea. The Black Sea is also adjacent to and affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, the region is plagued by "frozen," or low-intensity, armed conflicts: Abkhazia and the occupied parts of Donbas are on the Sea[1], while Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh are in the immediate vicinity. Black Sea countries periodically experience periods of political confrontation; the overall rise of hostility is noticeable, and urgent steps are needed to   de-escalate tensions.

2.   Throughout history, the Black Sea region[2] was a crossroads of cultures and civilizations. Today, it remains highly heterogeneous; present are two EU members[3], three NATO Allies[4], two nations aspiring for NATO membership[5] and three countries seeking membership in the EU[6], and Russia, which essentially sees the Black Sea as its backyard and is a much more dominant player here than, for instance, in the Baltic Sea. This diversity explains the virtual absence of regional identity and the failures of various regional integration projects. The attempts to ignite comprehensive regional cooperation in the 1990s and 2000s were severely undermined by the recent outbursts of tensions. The Rapporteur is convinced that a strategy is needed to turn the Black Sea from an area of confrontation to one of cooperation.

3.   The Rapporteur is concerned that progress in the areas of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, media freedom and anti-corruption in parts of the Black Sea area has stalled or worse, reversed, in recent years. In particular, the erosion of democratic values creates a vicious circle of insecurity. The Black Sea is still largely viewed through the lenses of military developments, or as an area of transit of energy resources; however, it is essential to incorporate the civil (non-military) dimensions of security into strategies aimed at achieving durable stability in the region.

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[1]   Technically, Donbas is on the Sea of Azov linked to the Black Sea by the Kerch Strait.
[2]   The Rapporteur chose to focus on the Black Sea region in a narrower sense, namely including only countries/entities that have direct access to the Sea.
[3]   Bulgaria and Romania
[4]   Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey
[5]   Georgia and Ukraine
[6]   Georgia, Turkey, and Ukraine. The EU aspirant country, the Republic of Moldova is in the immediate vicinity of the Black Sea.

II.   SECURITY SITUATION IN THE BLACK SEA

4.   While this Committee report focuses primarily on the civil dimension of security, some of the most important developments in the region in recent years were of a military nature. In order to ensure a broad contextual understanding of regional stability, it is necessary to provide an overview of such developments in this report.

A.   RUSSIA'S MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THE BLACK SEA

5.   The place of the Black Sea in the strategic calculus of Russia (and its predecessor the Soviet Union) has evolved over years. Until the first decade of this century, Russia's Black Sea fleet was a less significant component of the Russian Navy, mainly due to the enclosed nature of the Sea and the fact that the only access to the open seas is through the Straits. Previously, Russia leased the Sevastopol base from Ukraine; however, the terms of this agreement prevented expansion or fleet modernisation (Watson and Tkachenko, 2010).[7] After the annexation of Crimea, Russia now *de facto* maintains unfettered control over the port. By comparison, Russia's naval base located 390km east in Novorossiysk is inferior to the deep-water ports at Sevastopol. After the break-up of USSR, Russia's Black Sea fleet slowly decayed and its combat capabilities are questionable.

6.   In the 2000s, Moscow changed its attitude towards the region and the Black Sea Fleet; it engages in systematic efforts to maintain control over the "near abroad," and prevent the westward drift of Ukraine and Georgia. In 2008, during the conflict with Georgia, the Russian Navy used its base in Sevastopol to transport troops and blockade the country (Schwartz, 2014). Annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2015 better enables Russia to deploy additional submarines, frigates and missiles to the region (Bugaiski and Doran, February 2016; Margolin, 2017; and Majumdar, 2017).[8] The incorporation of Crimea *de facto* gave Russia several hundred kilometres of coastline, as well as the ability to modernise and expand the Sevastopol base without Kyiv's permission. Russia's new military assets in the region, including considerable expansion of anti-access/area denial[9] (A2AD) capabilities, further challenge NATO's ability to ensure effective defence (Burton, 2016).

7.   Moscow argues that its new positioning in the region was defensive in nature and a reaction to the West's encroachment and deployment of missile defence capabilities. The Euro-Atlantic community fully supports the position of Ukraine and Georgia that Russia's military activities in the Black Sea are offensive and represent an attack on their sovereignty.

8.   Russia's revamped military presence in the Black Sea is significant, including new frigates and submarines, which has shifted the balance in favour of the Kremlin's broader geostrategic goals: one being international military engagement. Stronger military capabilities and reliable basing for the Black Sea Fleet give Russia greater access to the Syrian conflict theatre. A portion of the Black Sea Fleet based at Sevastopol serves as part of the Russian Mediterranean Task Force. This group enjoys more manoeuvrable and flexible response capacity compared with basing out of the Arctic Ocean (BBC, 2016).

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[7]   In 2010, Moscow signed the so-called gas-for-fleet agreement with Ukraine, where the Yanukovich government agreed to extend the lease of the Sevastopol base (originally meant to expire in 2017) until 2042. The Ukrainian opposition fiercely criticised the deal as an assault on Ukraine's independence, and it was clear that the deal would not survive the fall of the Yanukovich regime. Russia's interest in the Sevastopol base is widely believed to be one of the main motives for the Kremlin's decision to occupy and annex Crimea after the Euromaidan revolution.

[8]   By 2020, Russia plans to deploy 30 new warships in addition to the existing 47. Russia has also deployed the modern S-400 air defence system in Crimea.

[9]   A2AD capabilities are designed to prevent an adversary from bringing its main forces into or operating in a contested area. Using strategically-placed A2AD capabilities such as air defence systems, one can cut off an adversary's access to a specific territory or airspace.

B. NATO'S RESPONSE TO INSECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

9. At Warsaw, Allies renewed their commitment to the Black Sea and reiterated solidarity in not recognising Russia's illegal, ongoing and illegitimate annexation of Crimea. The Warsaw Communiqué makes clear that the Alliance supports regional efforts by NATO Allies and Black Sea littoral states aimed at "ensuring security and stability" (NATO, 9 July 2016). Allies also committed to "appropriate measures" to develop a "tailored forward presence in the southeast part of the Alliance territory" and a multinational brigade for training purposes in the region (NATO, 9 July 2016).

10. The Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea encompasses air, land, and maritime components. The land component is based in Romania, the air structure is guided by UK Typhoon fighter aircraft deployments, and the maritime component establishes the use of Bulgarian and Romanian ports for Allied naval vessel visits (Toucas, 2017). The Warsaw decisions represent a compromise between a more assertive proposal articulated by Romania,[10] which advocated a substantial, permanent NATO military presence in the Black Sea and joint NATO naval patrols (Chiriac, 2016), and a more cautious position by Allies like Bulgaria, whose leadership expressed concern for future escalation in the region.[11] During pre-Warsaw discussions, the Turkish government did not make statements in open support of or opposition to the Romanian or Bulgarian proposals. In the past, Turkey preferred an individual, rather than collective, naval presence in the Black Sea.[12]

11. In August 2016, NATO representatives also agreed to a "coordination body" that would contribute to managing NATO's presence in the Black Sea area (NATO, 15 March 2017), and include maritime and air surveillance components. In addition, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey and the United States have committed to contributing to air patrols in the region (Korzun, 2016; Horrell, 2016). NATO also coordinates collective regional multinational exercises designed to bolster the credibility of a NATO presence in the Black Sea. The most notable is *Sea Breeze*, an annual exercise co-hosted by Ukraine involving partners such as Georgia and Sweden. Allied naval vessels are now entering the Black Sea much more frequently than before the annexation of Crimea (Rozoff, 2017).

12. Cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine, non-NATO littoral states, offers significant mutual benefits. In addition to the aforementioned *Sea Breeze*, NATO engages in other cooperation with Ukraine; this includes helping to strengthen coastal defence and re-build its Black Sea Fleet (Margolin, 2017),[13] while Ukraine contributes to NATO-led maritime missions. Georgia also participates in a number of NATO-led exercises in order to enable better interoperability between the Georgian military and NATO forces. The Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, adopted at the Wales Summit in 2014, aims at enhancing Georgia's defence capacity, resilience and closer co-operation with NATO members. Georgia's continued cooperation with the West has bolstered the skills and professionalism of the Georgian maritime forces, specifically the Coast Guard (Antelava, 2004; Sanders, 2016).[14] Georgia contributes actively to the common Euro-Atlantic security through its participation in NATO and EU operations. Georgia is the largest non-NATO contributor to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan.

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[10]   Romania also hosts a critical element of NATO's missile defence architecture – the Aegis Ashore site at Deveselu.
[11]   That said, Bulgaria demonstrates commitment to the common regional security initiatives in tangible ways. The nation conducts annual air exercises titled "Thracian Star," which focus on increasing interoperability between Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian and US air forces, and plays a central role in coordinating with other regional actors on border security. Bulgaria also plans to send up to 400 troops to Romania as part of the Multinational Framework Brigade.
[12]   Ankara has significantly improved its relations with Moscow from mid-2016. However, Turkey's continued participation in the Black Sea Shield 2017, and its pledge to contribute to a Multinational Framework Brigade indicate Ankara's determination not to deviate from the nation's previous engagement as a cooperative partner in the Black Sea region.
[13]   The report specifies US island-class landing vessels.
[14]   In particular, the USD 65 million Georgia Train and Equip Programme, (Sanders, 2016).

C. ROTATIONAL BLACK SEA PATROLS AND THE MONTREUX CONVENTION

13.   While the Alliance demonstrates strong political will for greater regional cooperation and adequate maritime presence, it is necessary to take account of international legal frameworks – particularly the 1936 Montreux Convention – that place restrictions on deployments or multinational force patrols in the Black Sea and the Straits. The Convention establishes tonnage restrictions (15,000 tons) on vessels of war that seek passage through the Bosporus (Istanbul) Strait or make a port call in the Black Sea region. Thus, the Convention would prevent ships larger than cruisers or destroyers from entering the Black Sea. Furthermore, the Convention places restrictions on the length of time (21 days) that vessels of war are permitted in the Black Sea. These restrictions to some degree inhibit the ability of the Alliance[15] to establish a permanent maritime presence in this maritime environment.

14.   Black Sea littoral powers, including Russia, are exempt from almost all restrictions[16], barring conditions established for times of war. Restrictions under the Convention imply that NATO maritime capabilities deployed in the region by non-Black Sea Allies should be significantly smaller than the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the operation of non-Black Sea Allied naval vessels be constrained by the requirement to periodically leave the Black Sea in accordance with the 21-day limit. However, the Convention entrusts oversight power for travel through the Bosporus to NATO member Turkey (Bozhilov, 2017). Turkey's own Black Sea fleet is comparable in strength to that of Russia. Furthermore, transit of vessels of war through the Straits is permitted only with diplomatic notification and permission from Turkey (eight days warning for Black Sea powers and 15 days for non-Black Sea powers) and, during times of war, that nation can restrict access to the body of water at its discretion. Another stipulation favourable to the Alliance can be found in Article 17; here, all tonnage restrictions are lifted if the Turkish government invites a naval vessel to pay a courtesy visit to one of the ports in the Straits for a limited period of time. The limitations of the Montreux Convention imply that NATO's activities in the region will largely rely on contributions from Black Sea Allies Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, in cooperation with partners Georgia and Ukraine.

III.   UNRESOLVED CONFLICTS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

15.   Stability and cooperation in the Black Sea area is adversely affected by the existence of several "frozen" or low-intensity conflicts in the region. This section provides an update on the situation in Crimea, Donbas and Abkhazia, regions with direct access to the Sea. However, it must be noted that unresolved conflicts in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh also poison the prospects of stability and cooperative development in the wider Black Sea area.

A. CRIMEA

16.   The illegal occupation and annexation of Crimea in March 2014 crippled regional politics and created serious human rights issues within the peninsula. Prior to the annexation, the people of Crimea maintained an autonomous parliament, political parties, free media and a wide use of the Russian language[17] in administration and education. The majority of the population participated in Ukrainian political life, and largely supported Yanukovich's Party of Regions. Following the annexation, the political rights of the Crimean people were drastically reduced. The activities of pro-Ukrainian parties were forbidden, and only two political parties were represented in the

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[15]   Of significant note: The United States is not party to the Convention, but abides by its terms.

[16]   Article 12 does place considerable restrictions on the passage through the Straits of submarines belonging to Black Sea states.

[17]   According to the 2001 census, ethnic Russians made up 58% of Crimea's population, followed by ethnic Ukrainians with 24%. However, the majority of ethnic Ukrainians in Crimea were Russian-speakers. Under Stalin, Crimean Tatars were deported from the peninsula, but are now repatriating to their homeland. Today they constitute about 14% of the population in Crimea (Herbst, 2014; State Statistics Committee Ukraine, 2001).

regional parliament: United Russia and the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. Parties of minority groups such as Crimean Tatars are no longer represented in the local parliament.

17.   The situation for the Tatar population in Crimea – a minority group haunted by the memories of Soviet deportations and overwhelmingly supportive of Crimea's status as an autonomous part of Ukraine – has deteriorated since occupation. The Tatar representative body, the Mejlis, was deemed an extremist organisation and outlawed in Crimea. *Human Rights Watch* cites numerous incidents of Crimean Tatars including political community leaders, social activists and advocates, facing charges resulting in being banned from the region, and being sentenced to psychiatric treatment and prolonged detention. In other cases, they disappeared altogether (Walker, 2016). In the preliminary hearings before the United Nations International Court of Justice on Russian terrorism in Ukraine, the Ukrainian representation demanded that Russia cease all discriminatory practices against Crimean Tatars and ethnic Ukrainians (International Court of Justice, 2017; Epple, 2017).

18.   Kidnappings are another issue of serious concern for the rule of law in Crimea. In March 2016, *Amnesty International* reported there were at least seven unknown and un-investigated abductions in Crimea (*Amnesty International*, 2015; *Human Rights Watch*, 2016). The NGO CrimeaSOS cites 15 Ukrainian disappearances since the annexation (CrimeaSOS, 2017).

19.   New citizenship rules implemented in Crimea after annexation highlight the overall deterioration of legal, social, and political systems. After annexation, residents of Crimea were given one month to declare their wish to remain Ukrainian citizens, or they were automatically declared Russian citizens. According to a report by the European Parliament in 2016, non-Russians in Crimea, termed "foreign nationals," are now denied access to education, healthcare, property rights and other basic social services normally available to the public (European Parliament, 2016). This has allowed strict management of citizenship and of legal and social access for residents, quotas on employment for some foreign nationals, and denial of services and work for others. In addition, in order to crush any pro-Ukrainian sentiment, the occupying forces facilitated the replacement of Crimean professionals, law enforcement and police personnel, judges, and investigators by Russian officials (Klymenko, 2015).

20.   In Crimea, the media are not free. According to *Freedom House*, whose rankings measure zero as the best (free) and higher scores as worse, Crimea was evaluated at 30/30 for the legal environment, 38/40 for the political environment, and 94/100 for press freedom (*Freedom House*). Under the Russian authorities, many media outlets on the peninsula are unable to register with the Russian federal media regulator (*Freedom House*, 2016). Many independent outlets from the Tatar community are forced out of Crimea into Ukraine (*Freedom House*). Soon after annexing Crimea, Russia closed all independent media outlets, including *ATR*, a popular Crimean Tatar news channel. Those remaining organisations must comply with Russian laws, some of which require them to store user's data and disable services at the request of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) (Kylmenko, 2015). Additionally, many NGOs and independent research agencies, especially those that receive foreign funding, left the peninsula, leaving only pro-Russian and Russian state sponsored media.

21.   In Crimea, the Russian promise of fortune is not yet a reality. The peninsula suffers from a lack of tourism and widespread unemployment. According to Ukrainian sources, 67% of Crimean tourism, for both health and pleasure purposes, involved Ukrainian citizens, and the number of people visiting the country's beaches declined significantly. Citizens' incomes remain low after annexation; while wages and prices have gone up, purchasing power and sales declined (Abalkin, 2016). There is a near monopoly on banking (RNKB is the only true financial institution) and basic necessities for living, including electricity, are unreliable, and sometimes unavailable (Crimean Tatar activists have previously blown up power lines, demanding an end to their repression)

(Kenarov, 2015). To connect Crimea to Russia, Moscow is building an 18-mile bridge across the Kerch Strait. In September 2016, *Business Insider* estimated that the Russian undertaking would cost an estimated USD 3.2 to USD 4.3 billion (Choi, 2016). Reports indicate that the project faces many serious challenges.

22.   In sum, the illegal annexation of Crimea destabilised the region and worsened the situation for the local population. The Russian leadership sees the annexation as a strategic gain and a restitution of historical justice, and the Kremlin promotes the incorporation of Crimea to mobilise public support for the regime. However, due to the annexation, Russia became subject to European and North American sanctions. Although Russia failed to achieve international recognition of the annexation, Moscow continues to consider the Crimean issue to be "closed." Currently, no viable bi--or multi-lateral initiative exists to address the problem. Therefore, it is likely that Crimea will remain an unresolved conflict and a major bone of contention between Russia and the international community for the foreseeable future.

B.   EASTERN UKRAINE

23.   By comparison, resolution of the armed conflict in the Donbas, a region of eastern Ukraine, appears more feasible; the parties involved agree the region is a part of Ukraine, and a framework – the Minsk II Agreement, also known as the "Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements" – exists for diplomatic and political efforts.

24.   The ceasefire is one of the most important components of the Minsk II Agreement. It calls for the removal of heavy weapons from all areas of conflict and the creation of a security zone (ensuring the separation of artillery, troops, and missiles), and for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to facilitate the technical components of the agreement and provide compliance monitoring and verification. Despite this framework, the ceasefire exists almost exclusively on paper. After Minsk II was signed, the terms of ceasefire were breached almost immediately, and within the first week, nearly 300 violations were reported (Coppola, 2015). The OSCE is highly critical of ceasefire breaches. During summer 2016, fighting in Donetsk and Luhansk (both located in the Donbas) escalated; explosions and shelling,[18] throughout the region led to a significant uptick in violence in January 2017 concentrated primarily in Avdiivka, a town in the Kyiv-controlled part of the Donetsk region. In February 2017, a new ceasefire agreement was implemented in an attempt to manage increased hostilities in the region; it led to a relative reduction in fighting (now confined to the Donetsk region). Since the conflict began in 2014, fighting in the Donbas has resulted in 22,400 injuries and 9,500 deaths (Council on Foreign Relations).

25.   The ceasefire is not the only poorly implemented or ignored element of Minsk II. Ukrainian border guards and OSCE observers are continually denied access to segments of the Ukraine-Russia border in Donbas. Ukrainian institutions, independent journalists and Russian opposition figures also provide ample evidence of continued Russian military presence in Donbas, facilitated by the absence of Ukrainian border guards in the separatist-controlled area. This is also confirmed by NATO officials and, indirectly, by the OSCE mission.

26.   In the current security situation, it is virtually impossible to proceed with the political dimension of Minsk II; holding municipal elections – according to Ukrainian law and with participation of Ukrainian parties and media – would be challenging or near impossible in the separatist-controlled areas. Separatists and Russia accuse Ukraine of violating its end of the bargain, namely failing to change the Constitution and grant special status to eastern Donbas. The political establishment in Ukraine holds that this Minsk requirement – to change the Constitution in favour of Donbas – was unfair and disrespectful of the country's sovereignty. It would be political suicide for a Ukrainian politician to advocate or implement such Constitutional changes. However, Kyiv did implement an important reform granting additional powers to municipal-level institutions.

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[18]   See also the OSCE's regional report published on 21 June 2016, which provides further details on specific violations of the ceasefire by various parties and militia groups. http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/247846

27.   The overall situation in Donbas remains extremely worrying. In particular, Russian President Vladimir Putin's executive order to withdraw the Russian ceasefire negotiating delegation, as well as Russia's recognition of documents issued by the separatists "republics" in eastern Ukraine, further complicate implementation of the political components of the Minsk Agreement (Dearden, 2017). Kyiv and the separatist-controlled entities have also entered a new stage of economic confrontation, where separatists have confiscated Ukrainian industries on their territory and Kyiv has imposed a transport blockade of the eastern Donbas (AP, Deutsche Welle, 2017). Instability within the separatist "republics" has also increased recently; a series of assassinations of separatist leaders is indicative of infighting among various rebel groups. That said, the Rapporteur is convinced that Minsk II, albeit imperfect, remains the cornerstone of multilateral efforts to bring stability to Eastern Ukraine.

C. ABKHAZIA

28.   The Georgian-Russian conflict over the region of Abkhazia, dating back to 1992, is another source of instability in the Black Sea region (Batashvili, 2017). In August 2008, the conflict took a new turn when, following the Russia-Georgia War, Moscow officially recognised Abkhazia as "independent." The armed conflict in the 1990s forced many ethnic Georgians – who previously constituted the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia – to flee. This radically transformed the ethnic composition of the entity. Today, the internal political situation in Abkhazia is unstable and marred by occasional political unrest and in-fighting. The human rights situation is alarming: many local inhabitants cannot exercise basic rights such as the freedom of movement, property rights and the right to education in their native language; there are cases of illegal detentions and kidnappings.

29.   Russia's physical presence in Abkhazia, including deployment of Russian troops since the early 1990s,[19] is complemented by the Kremlin's economic and political influence. Russia provides more than 65% of Abkhazia's budget. In November 2014, Russia signed a treaty that expanded its authority over Abkhazia, and gave Moscow a role in military and economic policy. Entrenching Russian control over the territory also makes it easier for citizens to obtain Russian citizenship. The current *de facto* "president" Raul Khadjimba is loyal to the Kremlin.

30.   Tbilisi, while consistently emphasising the principle of its territorial integrity, has developed a strategy of engagement with the people of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The strategy promotes people-to-people contacts, protection of human rights, and the promotion of economic interaction (Government of Georgia). For example, Tbilisi previously offered neutral travel documents for the people of Abkhazia so that they could travel abroad. Tbilisi encourages the population of Abkhazia to reobtain Georgian citizenship in order to benefit from the EU-Georgia visa liberalisation agreement that entered into force in March 2017. Georgia also offers free health care to Abkhaz residents and hundreds of people have travelled to Georgia for services. Speaking to this Committee in May 2017, Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, explained in detail the scope of Georgian government programme on reconciliation, stressing its key role in solving the problems of the people living in that region.

31.   Unfortunately, Russia and the *de facto* authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are sabotaging the efforts of reconciliation by conducting a policy of "borderisation" – installing physical barriers (razor wire and barbed wire fences and other artificial obstacles) along the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) region. The recently announced closure of two crossing points along the ABL with Abkhazia was strongly criticised by a number of countries and international organisations, including the UN, the EU, NATO and the U.S. who stressed that it would restrict the freedom of movement for locals, including schoolchildren and patients requiring medical treatment (Civil.ge, 10 March 2017). The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), an unarmed civil monitoring

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[19]   It is estimated that about 4,500 Russian troops are based in Abkhazia, and a similar number in South Ossetia. Russia has deployed air defence and Grad missile systems in the occupied Georgian regions and conducted military exercises with local forces. Abkhazian armed forces are incorporated into the Russian chain of command. See Batashvili, 2017.

mission mandated to monitor full compliance with the 12 August 2008 Ceasefire agreement and promote stabilisation, normalisation and confidence building measures throughout Georgia, is consistently denied access to the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This prevents the mission from investigating human rights violations or accurately evaluating the security environment. Diplomatic efforts to address security and humanitarian issues in these territories occur within the framework of the Geneva International Discussions, co-chaired by the EU, the OSCE and the UN. The body was created after the 2008 war. Moscow's insistence on including representatives from Abkhazian and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities (Civil.ge, 29 March 2017) limits the progress of the Geneva talks. The Euro-Atlantic community continues to strongly support Georgia's territorial integrity and repeatedly calls on Russia to withdraw its recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's "independence".

IV. DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM OF MEDIA AND CORRUPTION

32. Democracy does not have deep roots in the Black Sea region; in some parts of the region, the state of the rule of law, human rights and the fight against corruption have deteriorated in recent years. This has negative consequences for regional stability and cooperation.

Democracy Indicators, 2016						
Freedom of (below) *in* (right)	**Romania**	**Bulgaria**	**Turkey**	**Ukraine**	**Georgia**	**Russia**
National Democratic Governance *(1=high level of democracy; 7= low level of democracy)*	3.75	3.50	N/A	5.75	5.50	6.75
Judicial Framework and Independence *(1=strong independent judiciary; 7= weak judiciary under pressure)*	3.75	3.50	N/A	3.50	4.75	6.75
Freedom Rating *(1 = most free; 7 = least)*	2	2	3.5	3	3	6
Political Rights *(1 = most free and 7 = least free)*	2	2	3	3	3	6
Press *(0=best; 100= worst)*	38/100 (Partly Free)	40/100 (Partly Free)	71/100 (Not Free)	53/100 (Partly Free)	49/100 (Partly Free)	83/100 (Not Free)
Legal Environment *(0=best; 30=worst)*	9/30	12/30	23/30	13/30	13/30	25/30
Corruption *(1=low levels of corruption; 7= high level of corruption)*	3.75	4.25	4.1	6.00	4.5	6.75
Source: *Freedom House*, 2016; National Democratic Governance, Judicial Framework and Independence, and Corruption (for additional corruption scores, see Index from *Transparency International* (last updated 25 January 2017) *Freedom House*, Nations in Transit.						

33.   Within the Black Sea region, EU and NATO member states **Bulgaria** and **Romania** have the most positive assessment by international human rights watchdogs. The Euro-Atlantic integration process enabled reforms in the two countries; today, political systems are competitive and media is free, albeit polarised. Even the mass anti-corruption protests in Romania – the largest public demonstrations since the regime change/independence in 1989 – in the first two months of 2017 are viewed as a sign of health for democracy (The Washington Post, 2017). However, both countries struggle with the challenge of corruption and are ranked the lowest of EU member states in these categories. The European Commission is particularly critical of Bulgaria's poor track record of countering high-level corruption. In Romania, anti-corruption efforts, especially with regard to high-level corruption, are assessed more positively. However, the Commission identified persistent challenges to judicial independence and the relative lack of attention given to tackling general corruption as areas for improvement (European Commission, January 2017). Due to mass protests, the Romanian government was forced to scrap controversial legislation regarded by critics as enabling the legalisation of corruption. The EU supports anti-corruption reforms in Bulgaria and Romania through the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism. *Amnesty International* also notes that protection of refugee rights in Bulgaria is not strong and many migrants and refugees are subject to prolonged detention. Romania has been criticised for the alleged discrimination against Roma people (Alston, 2015 and 2016).

34.   In July 2016, **Turkey**, a NATO member, experienced a major attack on its Constitutional institutions when a part of the military attempted to overthrow the government. The events resulted in an estimated 249 deaths and 2,191 injuries, and were condemned by Turkey's Western allies. NATO Parliamentary Assembly has firmly condemned the coup attempt and fully acknowledged that these events had a profound impact on Turkish society. Following the coup, the government undertook a number of extreme security measures; over 100,000 civil servants – mostly teachers, police, military officials, doctors, and judges – were dismissed, about 47,000 jailed on terrorism charges, and hundreds of news and media outlets closed down. International watchdogs reported multiple cases of media repression, including detention of journalists (150 cases) as well as the investigation of academics (*Amnesty International*, 2017). By lifting parliamentary immunity, the government enabled the detention of 12 opposition parliamentarians, including those in a party leadership role. During the NATO PA Annual session in Istanbul, Turkish officials argued that civil servants, journalists and opposition politicians were not detained because of their professional activities, but rather for their links with terrorists. Nevertheless, many in the West are not convinced that the actions of the Turkish government in the wake of the coup were entirely proportional and respectful of the rule of law. One year later, arrests and detentions are still being made. Throughout August 2017 hearings took place in Ankara of hundreds of people for their alleged involvement in the July 2016 attempted coup. On trial for various charges – violating the constitution, attempted assassination of the President, and murder – are 486 people, many facing up to life in prison. The detainees also include numerous honoured international journalists and human rights activists who complain about the lack of fair and just trial. The Rapporteur expresses her unequivocal condemnation of the coup attempt and stresses the need to ensure that the government's response fully aligns with the foundational values of the Euro-Atlantic family of nations. The Rapporteur also regrets the signals coming from Turkey that the country might reintroduce the death penalty.

35.   On 16 April 2017, Turkey held a constitutional referendum that would give sweeping powers to the president. According to the official results, 51.41% of citizens voted in favour, and 48.59% against the changes. International observers from the OSCE and the Council of Europe noted that the "referendum took place on an unlevel playing field and the two sides of the campaign did not have equal opportunities" (OSCE, 16 April 2017). Thousands of protestors took to the streets denouncing the referendum. In response, the authorities extended the state of emergency imposed after the failed coup by three months. Many Western leaders reaffirmed respect for the right of Turkish citizens to decide on their own constitutional order, but, given the nearly equal split of Turkish society on this issue, called on Ankara to seek broader consensus and maintain respectful dialogue with the opposition.

36.   **Ukraine's** path towards becoming a fully-fledged European democracy has been beset with setbacks, such as the paternalistic rule of President Yanukovich (2010-2014). As witnessed by multiple international election observation missions, in which the NATO PA regularly participates, Ukraine has developed an impressive record of holding elections that generally meet international standards. Political life in Ukraine is lively and the political scene is competitive and diverse. Media is among the freest in the region. However, Ukrainian institutions have so far failed to address the country's most acute problem – rampant corruption. In 2015, Ukraine adopted anticorruption legislation, created a National Anticorruption Bureau (NABU), and Parliament adopted a disclosure law for all political party financing. Ukraine also has undergone exemplary reform of its notoriously corrupt public procurement system. During the recent NATO PA Rose-Roth seminar in Kyiv in July 2017, Ivan Miklos, Chief Economic Adviser to the Prime Minister of Ukraine and former Minister of Finance of Slovakia, as well as Hugues Mingarelli, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, noted that Ukraine had made more progress on reforms in the last three years than in all previous years of independence combined. While corruption remained a major problem, the scope for corruption had been reduced. They stressed, however, that the battle between reformers and those who tried to preserve their vested interests was far from being over. Oligarchic influences remain strong, and bribes continue to permeate everyday life; *Transparency International* ranks Ukraine at 131st out of 176 countries in its 2016 Corruption Perception Index. The lack of rule of law in the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea is particularly acute.

37.   Following the Rose Revolution of 2003, the government of **Georgia** embarked upon a profound programme of national transformation. Previously, the country was one of the most corrupt republics of the former Soviet Union, but now, is consistently named one of the world's top reformers. Under President Mikheil Saakashvili, governance was radically overhauled, simplified and digitalised. However, the Saakashvili government is said to have prioritised modernisation over democratisation, and by the end of his rule complaints regarding the treatment of the opposition and restrictions of media freedom were piling up. Reports of inhumane treatment in prisons were instrumental in facilitating the electoral victory of the opposition in 2012. The new government announced the protection of human dignity as its top priority. However, almost immediately, it initiated a campaign of prosecuting senior leaders of the previous government, prompting concerns over politically-motivated retribution. Over time, the scale of the prosecutions receded, and the government implemented reforms aimed at increasing judicial independence. However, the opposition regularly reports cases of violence against opposition politicians and offices, and blames the authorities for failing to investigate. Testifying to this Committee during the NATO PA Spring Session in May 2017 in Tbilisi, one of Georgia's most prominent civil society activists, Ana Natsvlishvili, Chairperson of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, identified a number of challenges, including the need for the credible and transparent selection and appointment of judges and the practice of the probation of judges, which if left unaddressed would create risks for judicial independence. She regretted that, in the draft of the new Georgian constitution, the process for the appointment of judges remains opaque.

38.   Over the course of 2017, the drafting of the new constitution and the new electoral code has caused prolonged tensions between the ruling party, which enjoys the qualified majority in the parliament, and the opposition as well as a number of NGOs. The planned scrapping of direct presidential elections and the postponement of the introduction of a proportional electoral system until 2024 are the most acute issues. The ruling party did, however, indicate its preparedness to negotiate and make compromises (such as abandoning the the idea of the so-called "bonus system", which would offer a substantial advantage to the party obtaining most votes), as well as to take into account Venice Commission recommendations, which allows for hope that the new Constitution could be a consensual document.

39.   *Freedom House* assesses that the media landscape in Georgia remains largely pluralistic and diverse. However, in February 2017, this diversity was seriously challenged by the decision of Georgia's Supreme Court to return the ownership of the popular Rustavi2 TV station to its previous owner Kibar Khalvashi (Radio Free Europe, March 2017). Rustavi2 is one of the most popular TV stations in Georgia and it is also highly critical of the current government. A number of Western countries and international watchdogs expressed concern that the change of ownership might inhibit media pluralism in the country. On 4 March 2017, the European Court of Human Rights suspended the Georgia's Supreme Court decision and the issue of ownership remains unresolved.

40.   **Russia's** image as an emerging democracy continues to deteriorate under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Under his rule, Russia is consistently characterised as "authoritarian" / "not free" politically and highly corrupt. President Putin has systematically imposed "the vertical of power", which justifies the subjugation of major TV channels, the oligarchs, regional leaders and the expulsion of the real opposition from the parliament. President Putin's party, *United Russia*, dominated in the September 2016 Duma elections, earning 343 of the 450 seats. The remaining seats in the governing body are divided among ultranationalists, Communists and *United Russia* satellites. Opposition leaders are under constant surveillance, and details of their private lives are regularly leaked. Independent NGOs are harassed, in part through the so-called "foreign agents" law. The law is designed to impede the work of foreign donors, as well as issue harsher punishment for "extremism."

41.   Corruption in Russia remains an integral part of the state system. Anti-corruption crusaders such as Alexei Navalny face constant harassment and arrests (Herszenhorn, 2013; Higgins, 2017; Tsvetkova, 2014).[20] Nevertheless, as the Russian economy struggles and the quality of life deteriorates for many in recent years, public discontent grows over the staggering riches of the elites. A video report by Navalny and his team depicting the wealth of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev prompted mass demonstrations across Russia in March 2017.

V.   OTHER REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Figure: Turkish Stream Planned Pipeline
Source: Robinson, *Interfax,* 10

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[20]   In February 2017, he received a 5-year suspended sentence for alleged embezzlement, while his brother Oleg was imprisoned in 2014 on trumped-up charges – a move widely interpreted as the authorities taking a hostage to silence Navalny.

42.   The region also faces a number of other challenges, of which some present opportunities for regional cooperation. First and foremost, the Black Sea is of particular geopolitical significance as an **energy** transit hub from the oil- and gas-rich Caspian region and Russia to Europe. It is also estimated that the Black Sea itself could hold significant oil and gas reserves. Certain Black Sea states intend to harness these resources; for example, Romania plans to begin production of offshore gas reserves (ITE Oil and Gas).

43.   For Russia, the Black Sea is a strategic corridor through which it can export its oil and gas directly to central Europe, circumventing Soviet infrastructure in newly independent Eastern European states. Russia endeavours to increase the amount of gas that travels through the Black Sea to the West, but is working to reduce the percentage of this supply transported through Ukraine. In this context, one needs to mention the initiative called the Turkish Stream, which would replace South Stream, a project slated to deliver natural gas through the Black Sea to Eastern Europe. South Stream was proposed in 2012, but for reasons of non-compliance with EU industry competition frameworks the project was cancelled in December 2013 (Gotev, 2016).[21] The Turkish Stream pipeline, however, is moving forward. In November 2016, Russia and Turkey negotiated further the terms of construction for this EUR 13.6 billion natural gas pipeline under the Black Sea (Mazneva, et al, 2016).

44.   Europe's high dependence on Russian energy resources, primarily oil and gas (Eurostat, 2016),[22] contributes to broader policy concerns. To balance the geopolitical issues that might affect European energy supplies, the EU has taken important steps towards reducing this dependency, primarily through the so-called Third Energy Package and the recently proposed Energy Union. Nevertheless, Russia remains the dominant energy player in the Black Sea region, although some Azerbaijani oil is transported through a pipeline that runs from Baku to the Georgian port of Supsa. The EU-backed *Nabucco* project to transport Caspian gas to Europe via the Black Sea has not materialised. Azerbaijani oil and gas does, however, reach outside markets through the Mediterranean route – the pipelines that run from Baku to Tbilisi and on to Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. In 2017, the notable Baku-Tbilisi-Kars rail project is intended to be completed, which would potentially provide a link between Europe to Central Asia and China.

Figure: Refugee Travel Routes to Europe
Source: McHugh and Tomkiw, *International Business Times*, 16 September 2015

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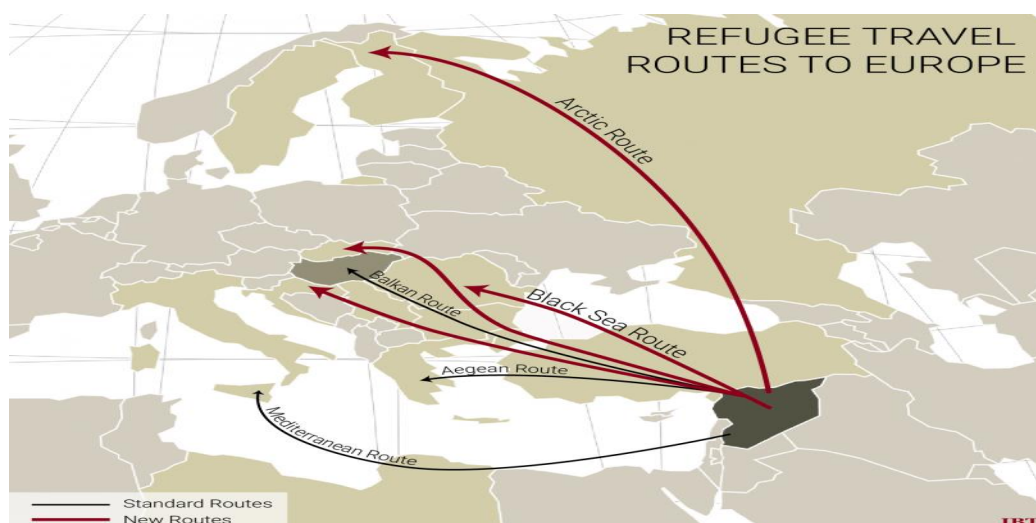
[21]   A new wave of discussions in March 2016 indicates that other countries, including Bulgaria, might be interested in picking the project up as their own bi-lateral initiative with the Russian Federation.
[22]   The Russian Federation is the EU's main supplier of crude oil, natural gas and solid fuels. In 2014, Russia was responsible for 29% of the EU's solid fuel imports.

45.   The Black Sea potentially offers another route for **refugees** and migrants fleeing the conflict in Syria to seek asylum in Europe.

46.   Thus far, the Black Sea route is not a favoured option for refugees and migrants fleeing the conflict in Syria – illegal border-crossings on the Black Sea are very rare, and at the peak of the crisis in 2014-15 Bulgaria and Romania reported 433 persons arriving by land at their borders. However, compared to the longer Arctic route, the expensive overseas voyage to Italy, and strict entry regulations implemented by Turkey, the Black Sea and eastern Balkan route may provide a more viable option for refugees (Faigle, et al., 2016). More resources should be dedicated to analysing the use and potential opening of the Black Sea route and cooperative regional contingency plans should be developed.

47.   Routes for smuggling in **illicit substances** closely follow patterns and trends for human trafficking and illegal border crossings. A report by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction cites an increase in trafficking activity throughout the Black Sea region and through the Southern Caucasus. Conflict in Syria led smugglers to seek routes that did not pass through Turkey or Greece, but rather cut through the Black Sea and Caucasus.

48.   In addition to the trafficking of persons and drugs, regional organised criminal gangs transport more dangerous substances through the region illegally, including arms and munitions, unsecured nuclear material and highly enriched uranium (HEU). The most frequent incidents occur in Bulgaria, Romania, and Georgia. Territory in Georgia has long been used by organised criminal groups to smuggle highly radioactive materials (in addition to HEU, they also smuggle cesium and strontium) (Giragosian, 2009). The Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia under de facto Moscow control, where international verification mechanisms are virtually non-existent, contain serious potential of being used for various sorts of illegal activities, including illicit trafficking and smuggling of CBRN materials. In recent years there have been several attempts of nuclear and radioactive materials smuggling via these territories. Georgia continues to devote significant attention to countering smuggling of radioactive material by improving its anti-smuggling capabilities.

49.   Both international and regional actors are involved in countering human trafficking and illicit substances trafficking in the Black Sea region. The EU Drug Strategy (2013-2020) takes a comprehensive approach to these issues, aiming to combat drug use and crime, and strengthen the criminal justice and health care systems, as related components of the broader problem. The strategy emphasises partnering with countries in the region to address shifting drug trafficking routes and cross-border organised crime. Black Sea states also aim to cooperate on similar multinational initiatives. The Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF) is an example of regional law enforcement counter-trafficking cooperation initiatives (Houston, et al., 2006). Many countries in the Black Sea region are also party to international conventions on drugs and narcotics.

50.   Black Sea states also cooperate on **environmental** preservation efforts. They share a common concern for threats to biodiversity and are committed to biodiversity initiatives including pollution control. In 1992, the six Black Sea states, including Russia, ratified the Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution (Bucharest Convention). This convention enabled Black Sea states to work more closely together to preserve the ecosystem while ensuring sustainable consumption of marine and coastal resources in a way that promotes economic development (Abaza, 2012). The Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution, based in Istanbul, Turkey, provides the foundation for stronger regional mechanisms for cooperation among the Black Sea states in the way of sustainable development. In 2002, the governments of Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine, signed the Black Sea Biodiversity and Landscape Conservation Protocol, with the aim of maintaining the ecosystem in the Black Sea and enforcing the necessary environmental policies for protecting resources in the region. The European Union, through the European Commission, also provides financial support for some of the coastal and environmental monitoring projects initiated under the Bucharest

Convention (European Environment Agency, 2015). Protection of the maritime environment is the area where all Black Sea littoral states can find common ground. Being less politically charged, environmental cooperation holds important potential to bring the littoral states closer together, thus contributing to the cultivation of regional identity.

51.   **Tourism** is another important field for potential cooperation in the Black Sea area. The Black Sea is home to a number of coveted historic treasures, beautiful seaside destinations and harbour towns, and vibrant cities – there are many benefits to sharing them with others in the region and Europe. However, tensions in the region have had a negative impact on tourism in part of the region. In 2016, Turkey saw a 30% decrease in tourist arrival (European Travel Commission, 2017). Crimea remains essentially closed to non-Russian nationals (Wehelie, 2016). In 2007, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Georgia initiated a Black Sea Network for Sustainable Tourism. The initiative aimed to increase tourism to the Black Sea region by 20% and "establish and operate a cooperative and self-supporting Black Sea Network for sustainable tourism" (Black Sea Tourism Network, 2017). The BSEC also focuses on promoting tourism.

52.   Promoting travel within the Black Sea region – not just to and from it – is also a priority. There are a few airlines that advertise low-cost flights to regional destinations. However, they provide limited options in the region – most flights go to Western Europe. Many of the low-cost airlines in Europe have limited services to the Black Sea.

53.   In 2017, Turkish airlines announced new promotional flight offers from the Middle East to the Black Sea region with discounts ranging 40-60%. The promotion covers dates during the tourist season, and would serve as a model for airlines serving the Black Sea region to promote and enhance tourism. The initiative brings together eight partner organisations from five countries to stimulate and promote sustainable tourism. It is also funded by the European Union under ENP. The project website reports 22,318 visitors to the region; project programme range from promoting wine and food regions, cultural sites, and vineyards to coastal sightseeing tours (Black Sea Cross Border Cooperation, 2017).

54.   Enabling better **telecommunications** throughout the region is another way to promote connectivity and will increase the likelihood people will travel. It also helps connect people across Europe. In June 2017, the EU eliminated roaming charges for all consumers in the European Union. This has not yet been proposed in the Black Sea region, and carriers from Georgia and Ukraine still charge roaming for customers traveling to the EU. There are proposals – in line with approving visa-free travel for Ukrainians to Schengen – for the EU to drop roaming charges for European customers traveling to Ukraine. According to Ukrainian and Georgian media, this initiative to free up communications would be extended to the six countries in the EU's Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Republic of Moldova, and Belarus).

VI.   REGIONAL COOPERATION IN THE BLACK SEA

55.   The Black Sea region is not a well-defined ensemble and lacks regional identity. Nevertheless, since the collapse of the bipolar international system at the end of the Cold War, important steps have been taken to revive or create cooperative frameworks and consolidate regional identity. The central, and most inclusive framework for cooperation in the region is the **Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC)**. It was envisioned as a cooperative political and economic initiative which began with the Istanbul Summit Declaration in 1992. The treaty for the organisation entered into force on 1 May 1999. Today, the organisation represents approximately 335 million people throughout the Black Sea littoral region and basin and the Balkans: it provides the 12 members (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine) with a foundational structure for regional political integration and a forum to engage in broader security and stability efforts. The primary function of the organisation is to promote cooperative engagement and

multilateral economic initiatives in a number of significant areas, including agriculture, customs, energy and good governance. The BSEC also has a parliamentary dimension – the Parliamentary Assembly of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (PABSEC).

56.   To further facilitate economic integration in the region, the organisation established the BSEC Project Development Fund, the Hellenic Development Fund and the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDB). The latter is an international financial institution that holds EUR 3.45 billion in capital. It promotes regional cooperation in the spheres of development and economics through trade and project finance lending, guarantees equal participation in private enterprises and public entities in member countries. The BSTDB is also heavily engaged in small and medium enterprise sector development. In 2016, the bank won the "Best Regional Development Bank" Global Award given (by Capital Finance International) for the second consecutive year.

57.   The BSEC has served as a way for the EU to codify political and financial support in the region. Both the EU and the BSEC see the benefit in this partnership; for instance, the BSEC has asked the EU to become more involved in the Black Sea Ring Highway and Black Sea Motorways project.

58.   Despite its limited resources, BSEC not only offers concrete economic benefits, but also serves as a confidence-building mechanism. Its parliamentary dimension offers a unique platform for dialogue. These BSEC characteristics have led some to believe that it could become the region's main interlocutor and spill over to sectors beyond the economy and development. Indeed, the BSEC seeks to enable its member states to engage in efforts to counter organised crime, corruption, money laundering, and smuggling. However, one of the weaknesses of the BSEC is its broad membership; coordinating the diverging policies and regional strategies of all its member countries is challenging.

59.   In the security sphere, the central regional initiative is the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (**BLACKSEAFOR**), initiated by Turkey in 2001. The framework promotes maritime cooperation between Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, focused on preventative measures against terrorism, organised crime, and trafficking. The conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, as well as tensions between Russia and Turkey effectively paralysed BLACKSEAFOR (in November 2015, Russia suspended its participation in the initiative). However, some maritime cooperation among Black Sea littoral states continues in the form of regular meetings of heads of the region's Border and Coast Guard agencies. In 2004, Turkey also launched the Black Sea Harmony naval operation, designed to cooperate with other littoral states in order to curb terrorist activities by tracking and boarding suspect ships.

60.   An interesting initiative bringing together certain states of the Black Sea region is **GUAM** (whose name derives from the initials of the participating states, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and the Republic of Moldova). It was launched in 1996 and widely viewed as an attempt to create a bloc within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in opposition to Russian attempts to maintain political and military control over the region. Uzbekistan was also a member between 1999 and 2002. The central purpose of GUAM is to promote democratic values, ensure sustainable development, strengthen regional security and stability, further develop social, economic, and humanitarian efforts and enhance political interaction. The GUAM initiative has not proven particularly effective, despite the efforts to revive it in the wake of the "coloured revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. Nevertheless, GUAM contributed to the development of trade relations among its members and serves as a useful forum for discussion on issues of common interest, such as combatting organised crime and terrorism.

61.   The **European Union** promotes cooperation in the Black Sea region. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in 2007, the EU, under the German Presidency, took a more active role in the region. Black Sea Synergy (BSS), established in 2007, was launched as a

framework to develop consistency on policy in the Black Sea region. It builds upon, and complements the Union's strategy in the region and works in tandem with other cooperation instruments, such as the Eastern Partnership under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The initial aim of the initiative was to drive bottom up development of industry, the focus being on fisheries, maritime transport, energy, education, civil society, and research. The goal was to bring together all Black Sea Synergy participants to work on specific projects. For example, Black Sea states are working together, under the European Marine Observation and Data Networks (EMODNet), to make marine data more accessible, and maritime monitoring systems more interoperable and effective.

62.   BSS more broadly focuses on promoting democracy, good governance, human rights, and stronger economies. During the first year, BSS saw great gains in the economic and environmental spheres, and over the course of the next five years, enhanced NGO capacity in the region was a highlighted success. Over time there developed a number of security related components, among them fighting organised transnational crime and trafficking and trade in illicit substances, weapons, and munitions. This represents higher prioritisation by the EU community in taking on migration and security issues, like trafficking and frozen conflicts, as well as a broad vision for the EU's maritime policy. This priority is also shared by other regional cooperation institutions, including financial organisations like the BSEC, which has a working group dedicated to combatting crime.

63.   The BSS initiative contains a number of positive elements, but its implementation has not always been satisfactory, and it has received criticism from the European Parliament due to limited results since its launching in 2007. Compared to the Eastern Partnership, which has held multi-level governmental meetings and integrated efforts with civil society, BSS has not effectively demonstrated deep, effective engagement – on average countries prefer engagement through ENP. BSS has also been limited to sectoral partnerships and marred by limited funding. While BSS demonstrates the utility and effectiveness of the EU taking a regional policy approach to issues like development, there are several lessons for Europe to learn about engagement in the Black Sea region based on the initiative. They include increasing participation, sectoral cooperation and coordination with regional and international organisations.

64.   Today, the EU maintains multiple strategies for the region based on principles of continued partnership, cooperation, and enhancing stability. The Black Sea Basin Programme (2014-2020) promotes business and entrepreneurship and Black Sea Horizon (BSH), which is nested under the Black Sea Cooperation Programme (BSCP) framework, supports the EU's relations and efforts in the region on science and technology and the environment. The Black Sea NGO Forum established in 2008 was created to enhance dialogue and cooperation among NGOs in the wider Black Sea Region, strengthening the NGOs' capacity to influence regional and national policies. The EU's Global Strategy introduced by Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in 2016 identifies protracted conflict in the Black Sea region as a challenge "to the European security order" (Mogherini).

VII.   CONCLUSIONS

65.   The deterioration of the global security landscape in recent years undermines efforts to develop regional cooperation and regional identity in the Black Sea. Military build-up is approaching dangerous levels, multiple conflicts remain unresolved and Russia has substantially increased its foothold in the region. However, deterioration of stability in the Black Sea is not yet at a point of no return; the international community – particularly the EU and NATO – should place the region higher on their agenda in order to reverse negative trends and reignite regional cooperation.

66.   The North Atlantic Treaty Organization must take into account regional sensitivities and tread carefully in order not to cause unnecessary escalation. A sense of proportionality and prudence

should continue to guide NATO's actions in the region. The Alliance should support the preservation of the Montreux Convention as the legal basis of maritime activities in the Black Sea, and continue to support partners in the region – Ukraine and Georgia – in their cooperative security efforts.

67.   In parallel with reassurance measures, the Euro-Atlantic community should support regional initiatives aimed at reducing tensions and developing cooperation in areas where all littoral states find common ground: economy; environment; science; fight against organised crime; human trafficking and trafficking in illicit substances; and assistance to refugees and migrants. It is of vital importance to promote people-to-people contact and frameworks to bring together civil society organisations across the region. To foster these contacts, innovative ideas should be considered, including the promotion of low-cost airlines operating in the region as well as the phasing out of roaming tariffs, following the example of the EU. Such initiatives would bring tangible benefits to the people and demonstrate the advantages of the regional approach.

68.   Regional cooperation platforms such as the BSEC must be supported. The platforms of cooperation built during the 25 years of the BSEC offers the possibility for spill over from the economic domain to new areas of cooperation. The BSEC could be strengthened, for instance, by embracing the multi-speed approach, where a subset of BSEC members could move ahead faster with certain joint initiatives. This approach would help to overcome stagnation while side-lining irreconcilable disagreements among certain BSEC member states.

69.   The EU as a soft power with considerable resources can play a more significant role in bringing the region together. The EU's Black Sea Synergy initiative should receive proper funding and move up the EU agenda. It would be helpful to streamline various EU programmes dedicated to the Black sea region and to establish a post of European Union Special Coordinator for the Black Sea region.

70.   To achieve durable, long-term stability, the region must become more democratic and less corrupt. The principle that "democracies do not fight each other" also applies to this region. It is essential that Euro-Atlantic community strategies in the Black Sea space include projects aimed at enhancing democratic institutions, the rule of law, transparency, media freedom and anti-corruption initiatives.

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