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**Security Threats and Risks in South Caucasus:
Perceptions From the Western Black Sea**

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THIS RESEARCH REPORT IS A VERSION OF THE AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION ON A SIMILAR SUBJECT AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, ORGANISED BY THE ATLANTIC CLUB OF BULGARIA, THE INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (IRSI), SOFIA, THE INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS), SOFIA, AND THE NATO OFFICE OF INFORMATION AND PRESS ON 18 MARCH 2005 AT THE BALKAN SHERATON HOTEL, SOFIA, ON THE TOPIC: "ATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP FOR STABILITY IN SOUTH CAUCASUS". THE RESEARCH REPORT DRAWS FROM HIS PREPARED TEXT AND FROM THE RESULTS OF ON-GOING STUDIES ON EURO-ATLANTIC, BALKAN AND BLACK SEA-CASPIAN SEA REGIONAL SECURITY ISSUES BY ISIS.

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*Perception*¹ of security threats is a dynamic process determined by the outside world and the perceiver's culture, attitudes, expectations, needs, experience and other attributes. Each interpreter, depending on her or his respective analytic point of view, subjectively defines the facts in the security realm. Values, beliefs and cognitions constitute the bulk of any perception, including about security issues. A value is a preference for one state of reality over another. A belief is a conviction that a description of reality is true, proven or known. And cognition is information derived from the environment that can be substantiated through physical evidence or perceptual observation. Cognitions are key elements in establishing perceptual systems and in changing those systems.

The threat perceptual systems of the Western Black Sea countries – Bulgaria and Romania, are strongly influenced by their values, beliefs and cognitions as *sovereign nations* with specific geopolitical positions and interests. They are also shaped in the context of their membership in *NATO*, as future *EU* members and as *US allies* on whose territories would be stationed American military bases.

One obvious reason to clarify and improve the cognitive aspects of the two countries' perceptions is the need to formulate *adequate protective measures* – political, operational and institutional, against the security threats, stemming from the East. A second one is the *possibility to utilize the accumulated experience* and the lessons learnt by Bulgaria and Romania in the process of coping with the threats, stemming from the Western Balkans, and apply them preventively in meeting the threats from the South Caucasus. A third one is that *sharing vision and opinion* about the security threats in the South Caucasus with the respective political and institutional actors, having interests in the region might stimulate their learning process on how to deal more effectively with them in a cooperative manner. This mutual learning process could serve as a solid prerequisite for the cooperative activity of the diplomatic and intelligence services of the PfP partner countries from the Western and Eastern Black Sea coasts.

The security threats, generated in the South Caucasus and perceived in the Western Black Sea, *intermingle* with the security threats of the Caspian Sea area and the Black Sea

basin. It is *impossible to separate* them here, on the Western Black Sea coast despite the specific nature and life of the threats from the three sub-regions. This is an approach practiced by other Black Sea coastal nations too². What matters in practical terms for the nations of the Western Black Sea coast is the end product of threats, the resultant vector that is shaped by the interaction of security challenges from the Caspian Sea, South Caucasus and the Black Sea areas. This is a very significant reminder since the operational treatment of those threats cannot be framed conceptually otherwise but in the broader geopolitical and strategic framework, stretching from the Western Black Sea coast through the South Caucasus region to the Eastern shores of the Caspian Sea. Any lesser magnitude of dealing with these issues would prove sooner or later inadequate and inconsistent.

The security threats perceived by the West Black Sea coast countries could be classified into three groups, requiring different conceptualizing and operational treatment.

The first group includes the *longer-term structural instabilities*. They are typical for transitional periods between old and new structures of the system of international relations, between old and new social, economic and political structures within transforming countries. The structural instabilities are:

1. The transition from a bipolar to a yet unfixed, fluid configuration of relationships among the contending centers of world power. Though there is definite concentration of military, economic and political power in the single North American – European Union power center, the specific performance of this structural instability in the South Caucasus could be traced on two levels: a) the individual national one; b) the interaction of conflicting and cooperative interests at the crossroad of the East-West and the North-South geo-economic and geo-strategic corridors³. The individual countries from the South Caucasus after the collapse of totalitarian socialism and the Soviet federation display different orientations to the evolving centers of global power, which correspond to the varying patterns, rates and levels of adaptation to the eastward expansion of the democratic civic space and zone of security and market economy. They also have varying

orientations to regional cooperation as an effective instrument of neutralizing the conflicting and stimulating constructive attitudes in the overlapping area of the East-West and North-South strategic corridors.

2. A difficult and slow internal systemic transformation of the individual countries of the South Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea basins from totalitarianism and centrally planned economy to democracy and functioning market economy. These difficulties can hardly be separated from the military conflicts and still frozen tensions in the region, very much linked to the Russian non-reformed imperial style of foreign political behavior⁴, to the unwillingness of Moscow to accept the fact of the existence of new sovereign states with whom constructive and equal relations are possible and any temptation to dominate as a hegemonic power would be opposed. The difficulties on the domestic level have been linked in the last 14 years with the multitude of new for these societies state-building and state-functioning issues. All these instabilities led to mounting domestic governmental and societal corruption – a real painful trauma for the transforming societies.

The second group includes *social, institutional, ethnic, religious, and ecological factors; problems of the energy resources transfer to the world markets, and unresolved yet international legal issues* that constitute security risks.

1. Belated economic, technological and infrastructure modernization of the region of South Caucasus, coupled by continuous internal national economic, social and political crises in the individual countries and missing regional cooperative structures other than those designed and utilized by the Russian dominating power, generate various security risks. The South Caucasus region did not inherit from the Soviet past a functioning common economic and trading area that would provide the prerequisites to construct a cooperative market-economy based common regional economic space. This situation found the South Caucasus unprepared for the newly arising needs of adaptation to the global economy as well as to the novel conditions of conflicting and cooperative interests

at the crossroads of the East-West and North-South strategic transport, trade and economic corridors.

2. Ethnic and religious differences, augmented by conceptual, perceptual, cognitive and emotional deficiencies and multiplied by the purposeful activism of corrupted political autocrats and their families. The Ottoman imperial past has also left a negative trace in the area and the cooperative efforts in the last years by Turkey and Armenia serve a very positive cause of getting to terms with the past.

3. There also exist grave ecological problems in the Black Sea and in the coastal state territories⁵. Pollution is the worst and is caused by the littoral and other states through the Danube, Dniestr and Dniepr rivers. Oil transportation by sea could lead to devastating consequences, especially to the straits that link the Black Sea with the Marmara and the Aegean Seas. The deteriorating Black Sea environment has a negative impact on the people, economy and tourism – a major source of incomes for most of the coastal countries. There is a pending risk of ushering disputes between neighboring countries over the origin of the pollution and the way of dealing with it.

4. The Black Sea and the Southern Caucasus have acquired a specific feature – of a ‘battlefield’ for the oil and natural gas pipelines. The diversification of energy supplies may significantly change the South East, Central and West European and the North American dependencies from the Middle East and Russia. Three out of the four alternative routes for oil supply from the Caspian Sea cross the Black Sea. The security threats posed by the various conflicts and terrorist activities endanger the stability of the oil and gas supplies via the Black Sea.

5. South Caucasus are part of an international legal and geopolitical problem that appeared after coming into force on 16 November 1994 of the Convention on the Law of the Sea (1982). The problems are with the new boundaries of the territorial waters, the institution of a 200 miles exclusive economic zone and of the continental shelf boundaries. None of the present Black Sea coastal states can establish a non-conflict

exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of the dimensions, provided by the Convention. The most complicated of all problems is the delimitation of the sea space. The Convention requires the neighboring and the opposite states to sign mutual agreements based on the Law of the Sea – a question that necessitates agreement on the orientation point for drawing the shares of the exclusive economic zones and the continental shelves of the littoral states. The neighboring coastal countries should also reach agreements on the territorial waters. A disputed island between Romania and Ukraine has already become a legal case, presented to international judicial institutions. The question is important also in connection with the need of legally regulating the navy activities in the Black Sea – under the water, on the surface and in the air space over it.

The third group includes *very intensive and actual security threats*, having local and regional features though they are global in nature and are linked to global processes and tendencies⁶. These threats interact in a systemic way, reinforce or pre-dispose each other. That is why it is hard to separate them into sub-groups though specific methods and instruments target each one of them. These threats are:

- a. Terrorism and radical religious extremism. In the South Caucasus as well as in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions Muslim population meets Christianity and ethnic conflicts and ethnic separatism together with failed or weak states and entities provide a rich milieu for global terrorists. The forward based US and NATO forces in the fight with terrorism in the region additionally motivate terrorists for their activity.
- b. Illegal migration, together with human, drugs and weapons smuggling constitute grave risks for the Western Black Sea coastal countries and to Central and Western Europe and North America. Fragile or failed state institutions, internal government corruption, low living standards, national culture and mentality influenced during the centuries by Russian, Ottoman and Soviet imperial practices, and weak market economy facilitate the implementation of these criminal activities.
- c. Organized crime and money laundering should be also added to the list of actual security risks in the Caspian Sea-South Caucasus-Black Sea area.

A very important feature of this group of risks is that they are induced strongly by global networks. There can hardly be any doubt that criminal activism is welcome in entities with unclear statuses as Nagorno Karabakh, Transdnistria, Abkhazia, Southern Ossetia. Nearby is another focus of global criminal activity – Kosovo.

Anyway, as Ronald Asmus and Bruce Jackson wrote not long ago, “if we think of the multitude of big and new problems and threats, that raise concerns with the Europeans today – illegal migration, drugs, proliferation of weapons or trade with women – the Black Sea region constitutes the new frontline of overcoming them, because through this region pass some of the major routes of black trade of this type”⁷.

Indeed, it would be shame to allow the traditional ‘Silk Road’ to be used for serving drug traffickers on their way to European markets or for passing dangerous technologies to terrorists from Al Qaeda. All these security issues are closely interacting with each other and sometimes a traditional organized crime act or armed activity, motivated by lofty nationalist ‘principles’, become disguised preparations for a terrorist operation with tragic consequences for people and countries close or far from the region where these activities have been registered. Once the Black Sea has become a key strategic outpost for fighting terrorism and societal backwardness in the broader Middle East any security threat in this region will be perceived as a real danger not for a region in the periphery of a geopolitical center, but as a challenge against the very center.

Endnotes

¹ See on perceptions in international affairs: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976; Peter A. Toma, Robert F. Gorman, *International Relations: Understanding Global Issues*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, California, 1991, p.50-56, etc.

² See also the article of the Ukrainian researcher Alexander Goncharenko, *Caspian-Black Sea Security Challenges and the Regional Security Structures, Connections*, Vol. III, № 2, June 2004, p. 1-7.

³ Black Sea Regional Profile, *Electronic Quarterly Periodical, ISIS*, Issues from 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005, all at: www.isn.ethz.ch/isis/OnlinePeriodicals

⁴ On this issue Alexander Goncharenko writes the following: “The tactics used by Russia have been felt in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdnistria, Crimea, etc. At first, following the usual model, Russia stimulates a conflict, uses it for its own purposes, and then plays the role of a peacemaker. Hitherto Moscow has practically annexed Abkhazia and South Ossetia, continued the colonial war in Chechnya, violated the

withdrawal deadline in Moldova..., blocked the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and increased pressure on Georgia and Ukraine to resubmit to control within its orbit”, in: *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵ Little has changed for the better since 1996 when on 10-12 July in Istanbul was adopted a Final Declaration at the First Interparliamentary Conference on Environmental Pollution in the Black Sea Area.

⁶ See a deep study on that in: Olga Olikier, Thomas S. Szayna (Eds.), *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the U.S. Army*, RAND Arroyo Center, 2003, 379 pp.

⁷ Ronald D. Asmus und Bruce P. Jackson, *Eine Strategie für den Schwarzmeer-Raum*, *Internationale Politik*, Juni 2004, Nr. 6, 59 Jahr, 80.

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