

**RESEARCH STUDIES 22**

**ISIS**

**Perceptions and  
Reflections of the Security  
Crisis in the Black Sea  
Region**

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## **Introduction**

The first reflection about the geopolitical environment that Bulgaria faced after the tectonic systemic shifts in the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thirty years later is that the efforts of the country to influence the transformation of the Balkans into a regional security community were successful. The second reflection is that Bulgaria was not able to influence effectively a similar development in the Black Sea area. Both the Balkans and the Caspian Sea-Caucasus-Black Sea area were conflictual knots of relations inherited from the Cold War divide. While the traditional European great powers that polarized the Balkan system of international relations pushing the small countries one against the other and the United States had the strategic interest of pacifying the South Eastern region of Europe, the dominating great power in the Black Sea area – Russia, aimed at preserving the opportunities of coming back to the territories that the Soviet Union lost after its collapse by preserving various degrees of conflictness in the neighbouring countries. Depending on the general condition of the Russian economy and state as well as its domestic political status different opportunities were either designed or just used to preserve the profile of Russia of the empire that sooner or later will be back.

What are, in this regard, the perceptions in Bulgaria of the annexation of Crimea?

## **Assessment of the annexation of Crimea**

The official Bulgarian position about the Black Sea region and Crimea can be followed in the text of the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (GSEUFSP) of June 2016, in the paragraph "The European Security Order" of part "3.4 Cooperative Regional Orders", which clearly states: "We will not recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, nor accept the destabilisation of eastern Ukraine"<sup>1</sup>. In the Strategy, as well as in the Joint Report of the European Commission (EC) and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HREUFASP) on the Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy Review of 18 May 2017<sup>2</sup> the approaches and the instruments of action by the EU for dealing with the challenges are formulated in details. This EU position fundamentally reflects the Bulgarian assessment of the developments in the Black Sea area after 2014.

It deserves to mention also the assessments of the State of the National Security of Bulgaria in 2016 Report, adopted by the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria in the end of the summer of 2017 and approved with a Decision of the People's Assembly (the National Parliament) after majority voting in the autumn of the same year: "The activities of Russia are a source of regional instability and threaten our fundamental objective for a united, free and peaceful Europe. The

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<sup>1</sup> EU Institute for Security Studies. Strategy Matters 2015-2016, EU Key Documents. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (June 2016), Paris, 2016, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Joint Report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Report on the Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy Review. Brussels, 18.5.2017, JOIN(2017) 18 final.

challenges to the security – first of all in the regions of the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, are intensifying, as well as in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, where Russia is enhancing its military capabilities and is increasing its military activities... The intensive augmenting and modernization of the Russian military capabilities on the territory of the illegally annexed Crimean peninsula, the continuing activities of its integration in the economy, the social and political life of Russia, as well as the widened outlet of this country to the Black Sea area, including to its energy resources – all this continued to lead to a long-term disruption of the geostrategic and the military balance in the Black Sea region. The lack of progress in the arrangement of the “frozen” conflicts in Transdnistria, Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia and in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements on Eastern Ukraine also contributes to the preservation of the high levels of the conflict potential in the region”<sup>3</sup>. The similar report, adopted in the Autumn of 2019 about the state of the national security of Bulgaria in 2018 goes further in outlining and criticizing the aggressive Russian policy in the Black Sea region and world-wide<sup>4</sup>.

The popular perceptions – excluding the Russia-instigated hybrid-warfare-style by pro-Moscow media and fifth-column economically attracted “Bulgarian patriots” – are that a nuclear superpower attacked a non-nuclear neighboring country and grabbed part of its territory. Despite

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<sup>3</sup> Council of Ministers of the Republic of Bulgaria (in Bulgarian). 29 August 2017. *State of the National Security of Bulgaria in 2016 Report*, at: [www.government.bg/fce/001/0211/files/Doclad.doc17rh482pr1-441713\(1\)doc](http://www.government.bg/fce/001/0211/files/Doclad.doc17rh482pr1-441713(1)doc) , approved by the National Parliament on 5 October 2017 and published in the State Gazzette No 81/2017 at: [www.parliament.bg](http://www.parliament.bg) .

<sup>4</sup> Народно събрание на Република България, Решение за приемане на Годишен доклад за състоянието на националната сигурност през 2018, at: [https://www.parliament.bg/bills/902-00-19\\_Godishen\\_doklad\\_za\\_sastoyaniето\\_na\\_natsionalnata\\_sigurnost\\_na\\_RB\\_2018.pdf](https://www.parliament.bg/bills/902-00-19_Godishen_doklad_za_sastoyaniето_na_natsionalnata_sigurnost_na_RB_2018.pdf)

the traditional call for having more Russian tourists to the Bulgarian Black Sea resorts, despite the mounted globally military power of the Russian Federation (RF), this country has lost its attraction and respect that traditionally entertained in Bulgaria. The sympathy and solidarity with the Russians striving for democracy and respect for human rights has not diminished but the state and its economic resources are treated just as a fact of our geopolitical and geoeconomic surroundings that have to be taken into account by our small country. The more educated Bulgarian public is aware of the long list of violated international political and international legal norms by Moscow<sup>5</sup>.

The Bulgarians do not trust the explanatory notion of “the historical belonging of Crimea to Russia” – not necessarily because Crimea has not been part of an empire and its Soviet continuation, but because reviving historical dreams and the territories linked to these dreams is a policy from previous centuries and leads to chaos and wars. Second, no less unconvincing is the concept of the “Russian world” and how strongly Ukraine, Byelorussia and Great Russia constitute the single body of this

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<sup>5</sup> The Helsinki Act of 1975 provides inviolability of borders unless peaceful negotiations lead to other solutions; The Belovezh Agreement of 1991 for the dissolution of the USSR provides for guarantees of the territorial integrity of the constituent Soviet republics and for the inclusion of Crimea as an autonomous part of the Ukrainian state; The Lisbon Protocol of 23 May 1992 of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belorussia, the Russian Federation and the United States about the mechanism of formalizing the accession of all 5 states to the START, and for Belorussia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan – to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 as non-nuclear states; The Budapest Memorandum of 5 December 1994 of the United Kingdom, United States, Russian Federation and Ukraine that guarantees the security of Ukraine in light of the country’s accession to the NPT against nuclear attack and of its territorial integrity; The Bilateral Treaty of the Russian Federation and Ukraine of 2003 for the regulation of the border between the two states – signed by Putin and ratified by the Russian Duma, and, The Harkov Agreement of 2010 between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, signed by Medvedev and Yanukovitch, about the right of Russia to base its Black Sea Navy in Sevastopol by 2042.

landmass together with its culture, spirituality, etc. Bulgarians understand well that the Byzantine world/Third Rome did not teleport itself, but had something to do with the Bulgarian Kingdom – one of the two great European powers at the time of the birth of Kiyivan Rus. Orthodox Christian religion, Bulgarian letters and literature, even some strategic support were decisive for the establishment of Kiyiv Rus. And it is a matter of the relations among Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Russians today who is/are the heir/s of this historical wealth. And thirdly, the interpretation of the term “power” by the present regime in Moscow resembles an absolutely unacceptable political philosophy of the Russian empire about Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality. All these three explanatory variables contradict the Bulgarian political philosophy of democracy and human rights, established in our Constitution, laws and international treaties.

## **Reasons of the aggressive Russian policy**

An analysis by a Russian academic concerning the Baltic Sea region states that Moscow has “love-hate type relations”<sup>6</sup> with its neighbors of this area. In an interview in 2014 former Russian Prime Minister Primakov discards the perception of analysts that Russia has aggressive policy towards its neighbors and adds: “During the time of the Ukrainian crisis an opportunity appeared, and Russia used it”<sup>7</sup>. There are so many Russian “theories”, explaining how legal and normal it has been to simply carve a piece of land from another country due to the ‘coincidence’ this territory has been part of the Russian world for ever. Furthermore, the aggressive (as always) West, especially NATO, have been threatening the security of the nuclear superpower.

The theoretic opportunism makes invalid any claim by Moscow of logical background of the aggression against Ukraine and the security crisis in the Black Sea region that followed. NATO’s strategic posture in Europe before the Russian invasion in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea has been in no way threatening Russia’s territory and sovereignty. The Alliance has been actually disarming on European territory while Russia has been pumping already for years its military muscle.

The explanation of the Russian aggressive policy is rather in the unsuccessful domestic social, political and economic model and the generated unattractive integration capacity out of it. It is no secret that the European integration – widening and deepening, demonstrated by the European Union, has geopolitical consequences too. Thus the western

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<sup>6</sup> Sergunin, Alexander. 2019. “The Baltic Sea Region After the Ukraine Crisis and Trump: A Russian Perspective”, *DIIS Report 2019: 04, Copenhagen*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Яна Израэлян. “Е.Примаков: Появилась возможность, и Россия воспользовалась ею”. “*Россия сегодня/Русия днес*”, 31 октября – 6 ноября 2014, с. 14.

coast of the Black Sea is for more than ten years also the coast of the EU with Romania and Bulgaria becoming full members in 2007. The aggressive Russian act in Crimea precluded for the time being the peaceful geopolitical competition of the EU and the RF about the future of former Soviet constituent republics and satellites. Obviously for Russia the economic, financial, standard of living arguments could not serve effectively in this peaceful competition and cooperation. Silencing the attraction of the EU, the active economic and trade relations between the Union and Ukraine was considered possible only within the logic of the violent military toolbox Russia possessed as know-how, experience (after the aggression against Georgia in 2008) and materially preparing the “opportunity”, of which Evgenyi Primakov spoke about. It has never been a problem for the Russian propaganda machine to “explain” the “defensive” Russian actions by the creeping danger of NATO’s enlargement to former Russian allies. Despite the fact that joining NATO and EU has been carried out according to the free will of the new member states, their integration in the two institutions has always been portrayed by Moscow’s propaganda as non-voluntary and anti-Russian activity.

The inability to project integration around the ‘Russian nucleus’, for example, in the framework of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS), or the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – a clear reminder of the deficiencies of the Russian social, political and economic model when compared to the enlargement of the EU, shows why Moscow embarked on the military way of reaching foreign political goals. The attraction of the EU to the Russians has been becoming dangerous for the Russian regime itself. Unfortunately, in the meantime before Ukraine joins as a full-fledged member the family of European Union nations, the country has been divided and treated by Russia as a war zone, needed for

guaranteeing the ‘strategic depth’ for defense from an imaginary enemy. Keeping this enemy alive in the conscience of Russian society is vital for the prolongation of the existence of the present regime in the Kremlin. And the anti-NATO propaganda becomes more effective in the process of brain-washing Russian society after NATO reacted materially to the real aggression from Russia.

There is another significant explanatory factor of the devastation of peace and security in the Black Sea region by the Russian aggressions in Georgia and Ukraine: the positioning of Moscow in the global strategic bargaining game. With the two aggressions – in 2008 and 2014, Russia definitely placed itself among the capable actors of spoiling regional peace and international arrangements. Demonstrating this potential, in addition to the policy of weakening the EU and individual Union members, may eventually provide a place for Russia as an equal in the “Board of Directors”, governing the world – together with the other two major power centers: USA and China. In this situation Ukraine could be just one of the Russian bargaining chips. The specific feature of this situation is that unlike the USA, China and the EU Russia is an economically insignificant player whose image of a dangerous military force cannot elevate Moscow to the status of a global superpower. However, by accentuating on strategic ambiguity, blackmailing globally Russia hopes to guarantee at least its regional imperial comfort.

## **Consequences of Russia's aggression**

Russia is a global nuclear superpower and its aggressions in the Black Sea basin rose the regional and international tensions. The negative example of the nuclear giant brought the world back to an arms race that existed only during the Cold War.

The concerns of the countries of the so-called B-9 or “Bucharest Nine” – the three Baltic states, the Visegrad Four, Romania and Bulgaria, are real: Russia is pushing the international relations back to dividing into “spheres of influence” among the military power centers. Once Russia has tested its geopolitical whims by using force and reaching “territorial successes” may lead to the temptation to try again – why not on EU or NATO territory. This perception is undeniable in the countries of the so called “Eastern flank”. The historic experience of these countries during tense conflictual periods has been with tragic consequences and always within the big powers’ formula of using these countries as terrains for bargaining and dividing into “spheres of influence” in order to serve as “strategic buffers” in eventual military conflicts. The sovereign decision of the B-9 states to become members of NATO and the EU has been motivated by the will to never allow this geopolitical fate be repeated again.

Russia's aggression in Georgia and later – in Ukraine, aims at precluding the dreams and sovereign will of these countries to join the EU and NATO. The brutal reality of insecurity that Russia created in the Black Sea region as if confirms the success of this policy. The dialectical logic that Soviet and later – Russian politicians, missed to understand and implement, is that no foreign political aim would be possible if not

backed by a prosperous and unified *democratic* society. The plan to guarantee generationally the Russian military successes abroad by moulding a Young army (Юнармия) while failing to develop a successful economy and attractive soft power is, in fact, the design and preparation for the next tectonic geopolitical failure of Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The perception that events and the general development of Russia is getting out of control leads to efforts to compensate these trends by purposeful governmental activity. What potential worst-case scenario, driven by real and observable factors, might realize in the Black Sea region?

The first factor is the influence of the domestic deficiencies in Russia on its foreign-political behavior. The stagnating Russian economy, the growing social discontent from the lack of democracy and respect for human rights may push the top decision-makers in Russia to seek solutions for the prolongation of the ruling regime by unifying the nation via enlarging the territory of the federation further to the West: Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Transdnistria are not only hypothetical, but also real geostrategic and military stepping-stones to lightening-up Russian patriotism “Putin style”/revived Ekaterina the Great style/Stalin style. This would be necessarily portrayed as a needed act of saving Russia’s territorial integrity.

The second factor is the re-written already by the Russian leadership in the last 20 years history of the country, the new historical myths on which the present social brain-washing and real policy are based on. Every day Russian propaganda is giving “proofs” that certain pieces of the globe

have once been parts of Great Russia and it is not bad thinking about next opportunities – similar to the one that Primakov spoke about, concerning Crimea. Soviet internationalism is forgotten, claimed as harmful and well placed in the rubbish-heap of history. So we have the new, formulated by Putin's regime historical and conceptual framework of mobilizing the nation – in place and under control.

Thirdly, the leadership factor. This president of Russia is programmed to be in power for years to come. And he is well known of the ambition to have Ukraine back into Russian possession – with all the negative consequences for the Black Sea regional security situation. Putin is known for his revisionist ambitions. He is also well known for his readiness to take from other countries without giving anything in return. His conscience is at ease as all this may lead to elevating Russia to a super-power status – unfortunately for him only militarily. Putin is knowledgeable enough to understand that developing and sustaining Russia as a leading military superpower requires a strong economic and financial background as well as a leading forward general, not just for military purposes, science. As both are not present in the Russian case and as his regime is under growing stress, he might be tempted to hurry and reach big success now.

## **Conclusions**

The security situation in the Black Sea region will continue to be highly dependent of Russia's policy. However, the broader regional situation, the development of Ukraine, the persisting processes inside Russia as well as the internal evolution and interplay of the other global power centers – USA, EU and China – all these factors will also influence the state of security in the area of the Black Sea. Bulgaria's motivation of joining NATO and EU was to guarantee the security of South East Europe and to contribute to the stability of the Black Sea region. Being a motivated member of these two institutions, despite all various issues, Bulgaria will continue to press the case of turning the Black Sea area into a regional security community – similarly to what happened to the Balkans – an area of EU and NATO enlargement, a territory of interconnected democratic states, economies and societies. The unfinished business in this regard in the Western Balkans has united the efforts of EU and the United States with the will of the local countries. The attraction of the western coast of the Black Sea will grow in the future for all coastal states.

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