

ROMANIAN NAVAL FORCES CONTRIBUTION TO STRENGTHENING ROMANIA'S PROFILE AS A PROACTIVE SECURITY PROVIDER IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Nowadays, because of growing uncertainty and instability in the context of a changing geopolitical system, we should reconsider the Wider Black Sea Region as a place in which frictions between cultural, political and economic divergent communities would be more predominant. In addition, there are the consequences of globalisation that create a factual interdependence of countries geographically far away, when the effects of local crisis are immediately perceived at the worldwide scale. Countries around this region, and not only, rely on the maritime domain for trade, economic development, food, job and other types of security. In this context, the latest actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine and the militarisation of Crimea have substantially modified the framework of security strategies in the area. The numerous frozen conflicts, due to Russian policy, represent a real threat across the region. With the Crimean Peninsula, Russia is able to extend its military reach over much of the Black Sea maritime domain, the South Caucasus littoral, Ukraine, Moldova, and, possibly, far beyond over Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.

Keywords: security challenges; Wider Black Sea Region; militarisation; Ukraine; Crimea;

GENERAL ASPECTS OF SECURITY AT THE BLACK SEA

Nowadays, due to the growing uncertainty and instability in the context of the changing geopolitical system, we must reconsider the Black Sea Region as a place where cultural, political and economic frictions between the various communities in the area will predominate. In addition, it is the consequences of the globalisation that create a real interdependence of all countries, even they are geographically distant. On the other hand, the effects of a local crisis are immediately felt globally. The states in this region, and not only, depend on the maritime field in terms of trade, economic development, food, job and other types of security. However, the maritime domain is affected by uncontrollable criminal activity. Illicit activities such as piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking in arms, human beings and drugs pose very high risks. Illegal maritime activities have a major impact on many regional and global interests: ecosystems sustainability, fisheries reserves, islands economy, and even global food security. By identifying and using a mix of appropriate techniques and tactics, illegal maritime activities can be combated quite effectively.

The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula marked a clear transformation of Russian political and security position in the Black Sea. Russian efforts to strengthen own military forces in the area have focused in particular on countering NATO forces, through a significant increase in them in Crimea, strengthening the Russian Black Sea Fleet, strengthening the presence in the South Caucasus, developing a military alliance with Armenia and improving relations with Turkey. Moreover, the Crimean Peninsula provides the Russian Federation with the possibility to easily deploy military units and resources in the Middle East to strengthen its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The main concern for the Romanian Naval Forces is the regional crisis, considering the new configuration of the operational military environment in the Black Sea.

AWARENESS OF THREATS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

As it is well known, the Black Sea region includes the coasts of six states – Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, and of course Romania, as well as the area of the South Caucasus, Moldova and parts of the Balkans. Now, the Black Sea region is seen as a region with high risk of danger in which the Russian intervention is the most destabilising factor, the other countries in the region being considered as posing no risk or a very low risk for Romania.

The latest actions of the Russian Federation in Ukraine and the militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula have substantially changed the general framework of security strategies in the area. In addition, instability, violence and armed conflict have always been present in the Black Sea since the end of the Cold War. The numerous frozen conflicts generated or preserved by the Russian policy pose a real threat to the region. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula marked a clear transformation of the Russian political and security position in the Black Sea. With the Crimean Peninsula, Russia now has the control over the second most important geographical point after the Turkish straits. Russia is now able to militarily dominate Ukraine's Black Sea coast and, by taking full control of the Kerch strait, it has cut off the access to and from Ukrainian ports in the Sea of Azov. From the peninsula, Russia can militarily cover the entire Black Sea, the coast of the South Caucasus, Ukraine, Moldova, as well as Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey.

So far, the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been equipped with a significant number of battleships: six submarines, three frigates and a few corvettes, most with Kalibr capabilities. Another series of corvettes and landing ships are in various stages of production for fleet renewal. The reception of some of them is delayed due to some aspects related to the propulsion system, but from the official statements, given in this respect, it results that in the next years all planned ships will be commissioned. Most ships in the Russian Black Sea Fleet (about 80% of the total tonnage of the fleet) are in Sevastopol, Crimea, and the others are in Novorossiysk and Feodosia. In addition, there are about 200 combat support and logistic ships from the Soviet era and only a few has been upgraded.

The Russian Federation's force projection capabilities have expanded beyond the Black Sea. With the military intervention in Syria, Russia has developed an increasingly strong naval base in the area of Tartus-Latakia, which provides it not only

with the possibility of having a permanent presence in the Eastern Mediterranean but also with the one of expanding its political-military influence in other states from the Middle East, North Africa, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

The Russian government has allocated funds for the modernisation of naval bases in Sevastopol and Novorossiysk. The modernisation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet has also entailed the modernisation of the coastal air defence capabilities in the Crimean Peninsula. Thus, S-300 anti-aircraft defence installations have been deployed in the area since 2014, and since 2015, they have been reinforced with other defence capabilities such as Bastion mobile coastal missile systems, BAL anti-ship missile systems, S-400 modernised anti-aircraft defence installations, Pantsir close-in weapon systems, and BUK missiles to supplement the existing OSA surface-to-air missile systems. Also, to strengthen air defence capabilities, the Russian Federation has deployed numerous Su-30SM and Su-24M aircraft in Crimea, as well as Ka-27M and Mi-24 attack helicopters. It is essential to mention that the entire military infrastructure in Crimea has been modernised. Thus, all Soviet-era bunkers, early warning stations, electronic warfare systems, airports and airfields have been revitalised and new facilities have been built. As an estimate, there are about 20,000 troops stationed in Crimea, and planned for the next few years to reach 40,000. The aim is to make the Crimean Peninsula the strongest and, at the same time, the most impenetrable area in terms of Anti Access/Anti Denial (A2/AD) in the Black Sea region.

The process of transforming the conventional military conflict model into a new one, based largely on hybrid warfare and A2/AD actions, is directly influenced by the militarisation and arming process. Mention should be made that the militarisation of the Black Sea region began more than a decade ago, before 2014. Thus, the increase in the number of military capabilities because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the militarisation of the southern region in order to fight against insurgents in the North Caucasus, the deployment of the Russian forces at Georgia's borders, and the increase in the number of forces deployed in Armenia were all actions undertaken before the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Of course, the militarisation process has been much more aggressive since 2014, with significant military forces concentrated in both Ukraine and Crimea.

The Russian Federation began to tackle new forms of war since peacetime, like *asymmetric warfare*. In this regard, the Russian Naval Forces have **notified** a whole series of very large maritime **areas**, especially in the western part of the Black Sea, for a long period of time under the pretext of performing real firing exercises with artillery, missiles, torpedoes, thus prohibiting maritime traffic through those areas, with serious consequences for freedom of navigation. Moreover, the Russian Naval Forces also aim to test our reaction by **violating the Romanian territorial waters** using warships under the pretext of “*accidental*” errors. Furthermore, forms of electronic warfare, such as spoofing, have been carried out on merchant ships that record other coordinates at the on-board GPS (Global Position System) receiver than the actual coordinates. This year, spoofing actions have been reported on the AIS (Automatic Identification System)¹, making the routes of some ships different from the real ones on some websites.

Another destabilising factor is migration. The Black Sea has become a transit area for immigrants who leave northern Turkey with small and unsafe ships/boats to the shores of Bulgaria and Romania. The Romanian Coast Guard has discovered several boats (generally small fishing boats, often without the flag) with refugees and immigrants. Thus, we notice the emergence of a new route (in addition to those already established) to reach the countries of Western Europe, by transiting the Black Sea and Romania towards the Romanian-Hungarian border. It means that organised crime groups (especially those specialised in migrant smuggling) enter our area of responsibility, increasing the level of crime and social tensions within the transit area, the risk of infiltration of members of terrorist organisations, the risk of transmitting infectious diseases as result of the transit through our national territory by migrants who travel long distance in short periods of time in unhealthy conditions and without medical care. In order to manage the mentioned risks we need to engage more human and financial resources for providing assistance to migrants, for maintaining law enforcement, and for securing national borders. Even if the Black Sea route is not considered a viable option for travel to Western European states, a potential resumption of travel is not ruled out, given the continued consolidation of border security in some of the Balkan states.

¹ Some sites (www.marinetraffic.com, seavision.volpe.dot.gov, www.portal.emsa.europa.eu and www.vesselfinder.com) show the erroneous ship developments based on erroneous signals transmitted by equipment on board other ships, located in other locations.

In the event of the Alliance requesting naval military support, we have to take into consideration the limitations from Montreux Convention as concerning the aggregate tonnage of all non-Black Sea warships in the Black Sea, which must be no more than 30,000 tons (or 45,000 tons under special conditions), being permitted to stay in the Black Sea for maximum 21 consecutive days.

ROMANIAN NAVAL FORCES CONTRIBUTION TO SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

Russia's annexation of Crimea has been a shock to the Euro-Atlantic community, even as Russian leaders have repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the growing number of members of the Euro-Atlantic community, especially when the issue of Ukraine was raised. Although NATO considers that it does not have enough forces to deter Russia in the Black Sea, a decision has not yet been made at the political level to deploy a substantial force in the area or to create a permanent NATO base. Russia sees an increase in the number of NATO forces in the area as a strategy to seize new allied states, so their level of insecurity is steadily rising. NATO has declared that both Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the Alliance, but a timetable for accession has not yet been set. Especially after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, NATO has developed cooperation with these countries, increasing the number of missions and exercises in the area. The deployment of heavy weapons by NATO states, especially the USA, to Georgia and Ukraine could create the feeling that they can be elements of defence against Russia, but we must not forget that Article 5 does not guarantee the security of these states as they are only NATO partners. In addition, there is no bilateral agreement between the United States of America and any of these states. However, the conduct of these types of exercises is beneficial in the sense that Russia must consider the two states as potential platforms for the deployment of NATO forces.

PARTICIPATION IN THE STANDING NAVAL GROUPS – SNMG2 AND SNMCMG2

In accordance with the commitments assumed by Romania, the Romanian Naval Forces participate with integrated capabilities within the Standing Naval Groups – SNMG-2 (Standing NATO Maritime Group) and SNMCMG-2 (Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group) in the Black Sea basin within the limit of 90 days/a T22R

frigate, a NAVAL IAR 330 PUMA helicopter and a detachment of combat divers on board and a minesweeper, to support the implementation of insurance measures at the Alliance level. Also, the significant contribution of the Romanian Naval Forces should be underlined by the assumption of the command of the SNMCMG2 by the Minelayer “*Vam. Constantin Bălescu*” – 274, for six months, in the first half of 2020, and the assumption of command of the forces within the Operation Sea Guardian 2021 by the frigate “*Regina Maria*” – 222. NATO standing maritime groups have the mission to ensure standing naval presence of the Alliance, in order to deter potential threats to the organisation, namely to provide a rapid military response in crisis situations.

Participation in the mission of the NATO standing maritime group is an important component of Romania’s strategic profile and offers the opportunity for the Romanian Naval Forces to contribute to strengthening Romania’s profile as a proactive actor for ensuring security in the Black Sea region.

PARTICIPATION IN THE NATO RESPONSE FORCE – NRF

In the context of the beginning and continuation of the crisis in Ukraine, as well as in that of the security challenges posed by Russia’s actions or the threats from the Middle East to security in the Black Sea region, the Alliance’s eastern border, the heads of state and government of the Member States approved, at the NATO summit in Wales (September 2014), the “*NATO Readiness Action Plan/RAP*”, which essentially provides for the reconfiguration of the Alliance’s strategic military defence and deterrence posture in Europe and its vicinity. At the mentioned summit the Allies decided to strengthen NATO’s *Enhanced NRF* by creating a “*spear head force*”, the *Very High Readiness Joint Task Force – VJTF*, able to be deployed within a few days in response to a crisis situation.

In this regard, the Romanian Naval Forces contribute with deployable elements of command and control in order to complete the forces of VJTF, thus contributing to the Alliance sustained effort to provide a timely response in the shortest possible time to a crisis against the Alliance, in particular, in the eastern flank of the Alliance – the Black Sea Region.

ORGANISATION AND PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL EXERCISES IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

Romania will continue to act decisively within NATO, in order to increase its relevance and to support the Alliance to remain the strongest and most effective collective defence organisation in history. Romania, through the Naval Forces, is interested in the full establishment and preserving of a climate of security and stability in the area, thus participating in and conducting specific activities for this purpose.

We can mention here the joint exercises “*SEA BREEZE 2021*”, with activities and participating forces in the naval, air and land domain, with the main objective of developing cooperation and improving interoperability between the forces of NATO members and partners. The “*SEA BREEZE 2021*” exercise represents the initiative of the strategic partner, USA, to support the Ukrainian Naval Forces in order to increase the level of training, with logistical support provided by the EDI (European Deterrence Initiative) programme. The Romanian Naval Forces participated in this exercise with the frigate “*Regina Maria*” – 222 (within Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 – SNMG2), the corvette “*Horia Macelariu*” – 265, 1 staff officer and carried out search and rescue exercises at sea, refugees recovery, commercial vessel traffic monitoring, medical evacuation, exercises upon receiving an asymmetric threat warning, as well as live firing exercises. The exercise takes place annually in the Black Sea, in the territorial waters of Ukraine and contributes to the development of trust between NATO partners and the signatory countries of the Partnership for Peace (PfP).

During the annual multinational exercises “*EURASIAN PARTNERSHIP MCM DIVE 2021*” took place joint trainings to increase the interoperability of divers from countries such as: Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, USA and Ukraine. “*EURASIAN PARTNERSHIP MCM DIVE 2021*” is a multinational exercise led since 2011 by the US Navy and hosted by the Romanian Naval Forces. Since 2016, the MCM (Mine Countermeasure) capability has been introduced in the exercise, thus increasing the complexity of the exercise. In 2021, divers from the mentioned countries performed real dives, in the maritime area of Constanta, having as support fast intervention ships, for the Explosive Ordnance Disposal – EOD exercises (PMn “*Vam Constantin Bălescu*” – 274, DgM 25 “*Lt. Lupu Dinescu*”, NMH “*Cătuneanu*”,

the intervention ship for divers “Venus”).

Moreover, the Romanian Naval Forces (Fast Patrol Boat 190 “*Lăstunul*” and the frigate “*Regina Maria*” – 222 (within Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 – SNMG2), the minesweeper “*Lt. Lupu Dinescu*” – 25 (within Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 2 – SNMCMG2) and three staff officers from EXCON) participated in the multinational exercise “*BREEZE 2021*”, organised by the Bulgarian Naval Forces, held in the territorial waters of Bulgaria and the international waters of the Black Sea.

In February 2021, the Romanian Naval Forces organised the multinational exercise “*Poseidon 2021*” with participating forces belonging to the Romanian Naval Forces, the Romanian Air Force, the Romanian Land Forces, the Border Police, the Dobrogea Emergency Situations Inspectorate, the Naval Forces of Bulgaria, Naval Forces of France – Air Component, Naval Forces of Greece, Air Force of Spain, Naval Forces of Turkey, US Naval Forces and the SNMCMG-2. The multinational exercise *MCM LIVEX POSEIDON-21* took place in the port of Constanta, territorial waters and international waters of the Black Sea.

At sea, there were maritime interdiction exercises, anti-submarine warfare exercises, procedures for identifying and tracking aerial targets, MCM exercises, surface warfare exercises and live firing exercises, and towing a damaged ship.

SEA SHIELD 21 was the biggest multinational NATO exercise organised by the Romanian Navy Forces in the Black Sea area, in March 2021. The main objective of the exercise was to verify and strengthen the level of interoperability and cooperation between the Romanian Naval Forces and the other services in the Romanian Armed Forces, different structures in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other NATO naval forces. In the exercise participate 11 Romanian military ships and three Romanian aircraft, five foreign aircraft and five foreign military ships, one mobile launch system, served by approximately 2,000 Romanian and other troops from six NATO states (Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Romania, USA and Turkey). The Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 participated too. The exercise covers all stages of a NATO naval operation of response to a geopolitical crisis in the Black Sea region. It aims to strengthen the Alliance maritime posture in a volatile security environment. *SEA SHIELD* is aimed at developing the forces interoperability in all combat domains – maritime, subsurface, land and air.

The first edition of this exercise took place in 2015, and in the following years the scenarios have been adapted to respond quickly and efficiently to the full spectrum of threats to maritime security and regional stability.

The “*RIVERINE 2021*” exercise is a bilateral exercise, planned by the Romanian Naval Forces and Ukrainian Naval Forces on the Danube River, in the area of responsibility. The participation of the Romanian Naval Forces with capabilities in the “*RIVERINE 2021*” significantly contributes to increasing the level of training and the development of Romanian-Ukrainian bilateral relations, in order to maintain security and safety in the maritime area of the Danube River. Five Romanian warships and a helicopter and six Ukrainian warships, as well as structures within the Border Police participated in the exercise.

There is a multitude of multinational exercises that involve aspects of security in the Black Sea region. It means, as I have already mentioned, that the issue of security in the Black Sea is one of interest not only nationally and regionally, but it is also of particular interest in the Euro-Atlantic structures or even NATO or EU member states. The Romanian Naval Forces have been involved in exercises both in the Black Sea and, as we have seen, in other maritime areas, with the aim of raising the level of preparation of the response that is needed in front of any threats to the maritime security.

In fact, during all the international meetings in which the leadership of the Romanian Naval Forces has been present in recent years, there have been addressed aspects related to long-term maritime security in the Black Sea area, their implications for NATO or EU maritime strategy, as well as issues related to the development of cooperation in the maritime operations domain, training and joint missions.

BLACK SEA HARMONY OPERATION

The provisions of the Montreux Convention (entered into force on 9 November 1936, a document regulating the regime of civil and military naval traffic through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles; warships of non-littoral states may not be stationed for more than 21 days in the Black Sea) limit NATO's involvement in solving the security problems of this maritime space (the attempt to expand the Active Endeavor operation that had been planned for 2006).

As a result, Turkey immediately came up with an artifice called Operation *Black Sea Harmony (OBSh)* to make up for this deficit. This initiative has worked with the support of Turkey, Russia and Ukraine, namely those opposing the internationalisation of the Black Sea maritime space. The operation became legal on 1 March 2004, with the main missions of naval surveillance and monitoring of suspicious ships.

Romania was officially included in the operation when it signed the *Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)* on 6 December 2010. The exchange of information between the OBSh Permanent Coordination Centre in Eregli and the OBSh Coordination Centre in Romania began in June 2014.

HIGH-PERFORMANCE SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM

The surveillance activity can be successfully performed by the system surveillance – SCOMAR, which represents the “*electronic eye*” of the Black Sea. This system integrates the most advanced IT&C, radar and optoelectronic technologies. The system is made up from sensor stations, communications, the Command-and-Control Centre, intervention units (naval, land and air). The system works 24/7 and exchanges data and information with national and international agencies. It provides a tactical maritime picture of the surface of the water in the territorial sea, contiguous zone and exclusive economic zone, air activity and ground situation. To achieve this goal, the proposed system has been designed to ensure the early detection of ships and craft so that they can be located before approaching the coast and thus providing the Romanian Border Police with the essential time to be able to take the necessary actions.

The sensor station subsystem detects, identifies and tracks suspicious ships, using radar and sensor functions by transmitting the obtained video images or signals to the Command-and-Control Centre where the threat is analysed and assessed. Decisions are made by the centralised Command and Control Centre (CCC), where all pieces of information collected by the system’s sensors are available and presented in an organised and structured manner. In addition, communications links are available for higher CCCs and other external agencies and organisations. Interception and/or rescue decisions are then transmitted to responsible structures. The overviews provided by this integrated system are also exploited by other

co-beneficiary authorities, such as: the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Agriculture etc.

However, the main purpose of a maritime security operation is to prevent, deter, stop and eliminate terrorist threats, illicit trafficking in weapons of mass destruction and associated materials, trafficking in human beings and, in general, any activity contrary to international law related to activity at sea. This activity requires measures aimed at the naval presence on commercial traffic lines, active surveillance and reconnaissance actions, discovery/tracking/interrogation as well as the agreed boarding of contacts of interest/suspicious ships.

For this, the Romanian Naval Forces need modern warships and adequate surveillance and early warning components that will allow interoperability with the fleets of NATO member states while exercising the Romanian state rights at sea and river.

MODERNISATION PROGRAMMES

Credibility comes with capability. It is the responsibility of the Romanian Naval Forces to provide capabilities for our own security and thus contribute to security in the Black Sea region. Therefore, the Romanian Naval Forces have embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme to create new capabilities that will be able to meet the whole spectrum of specific missions and tasks, such as: the acquisition of four multifunctional corvettes, the acquisition of the coastal defence system with missiles against surface ships (Naval Strike Missile), the modernisation of the T22 frigates and other procurement programmes (e.g., four helicopters with ASW capabilities).

In addition to the obvious tendency to strengthen the country’s territorial defence, it is also aimed at strengthening the capabilities to achieve maritime security in the area. The desire of modernising the frigates, as well as the acquisition of multifunctional corvettes, leads to the conclusion that the leadership of the Romanian Naval Forces is directly interested in increasing the capacity of security provider in the Black Sea region.

CONCLUSIONS

The annexation of Crimea and the armed confrontations in eastern Crimea have radically altered the balance of power in the Black Sea region, leading to a scenario of militarisation of the Pontic basin that could be a serious source of concern for international actors. Thus, according to the latest estimates: *"If in eastern Ukraine the degree of militarisation and armament exceeds, without any effort, the total troops and armament that the eastern flank of the Alliance will have, after the reassurance measures and raising the budgets of the states in the region to 2 % of GDP, Crimea would turn into a real aircraft carrier capable of projecting force throughout the Black Sea, as well as in the Mediterranean Sea, fundamentally altering the balance of forces in the region"*(Chifu).

Today, the Black Sea region remains a complex and uncertain security space. It is due to many factors such as the accumulation of unresolved local security issues, examples in this regard being the recent situation in Donbass, the continuing deterioration of the relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community, the major changes in the balance of power in the interdependent security regions and global order.

In the Black Sea region, we can anticipate a strengthening of NATO's military posture, including through strong security commitments to support allied and partner states that have low military potential. The frozen conflicts in the area will continue to be a factor of instability for the region despite NATO's support for the states in the region.

The security of the Black Sea region must be common, comprehensive, continuous and achieved through cooperation with other neighbours, partners or allies.

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