



## FAKE NEWS, REFUGEES AND RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S STRATEGY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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*Judging from the Russian Federation's current behavior, its attachment to the Eurasian identity stressed by Zbigniew Brzezinski 25 years ago is still very important. Equally important is projecting its influence to the Eastern NATO Flank to revive its dominance in Europe. For that to happen, logically, the democratic cohesion of the European Union and the dominance of the Euro-Atlantic Military Alliance have to be weakened.*

*This paper aims to analyse the two most recent crises in which the Russian Federation is directly involved and its strategy for dominance – the Ukrainian crisis and the Belarus-EU border crisis. The methods employed by the Russian Federation – fake news and weaponising migration – are representative for the complex insecurity landscape that the democratic countries have to counterbalance. Analysing the degree to which these novel methods of aggression advanced Russian Federation's interests in the Black Sea would be the central point of the paper. To conduct such an analysis, qualitative methods were predominately used, such as content analysis of primary (official declarations and security briefs) and secondary sources (articles written and opinions expressed in mainstream media regarding the security crises). The conclusion does not aim to be a final one, but rather place the most recent events into the broader perspective of the new security landscape, dominated by complex threats and insecurity sources.*

*Keywords: hybrid warfare; insecurity sources; Eurasia; migration; fake news;*



## INTRODUCTION

In the 2000s, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the technological advances which facilitated the exportation of threats globally, the security landscape changed dramatically. The UN, the EU and the US – main security providers in the Black Sea Region and the Euro-Atlantic Region – have had to adapt their intelligence tools, defence methods and responses to a new concept of security, and one of insecurity as well. A valid example in this sense would be the terrorist threat. Since the 9/11 moment, terrorist groups have adapted their communication methods and organisational skills so as not to be easily intercepted, developing new methods of aggression – “cyber jihad” (Atwan, 2006, pp. 122-125). Hence, all national security institutions had to readapt to such a complex and unsteady status-quo, which includes social, economic, ecological, political problems as well (Mitran, 2007, p. 5).

In 2003, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan proposed the reanalysing of future threats to peace, and the vulnerabilities of the member states’ security systems (Annan, 2003). Naturally, to such a complex landscape of threats, the collective response needed is one that strengthens the security status of the actor endangered, such as the state. That strategy is highly visible through the coordination of the UN, NATO and the EU in Europe and the extended Black Sea Region. The purpose is to create a state of stability through prosperity, meaning economic, political, social reforms that foster democracy (since, if we are to judge after the *Democratic Peace Theory* developed by liberalists such as Immanuel Kant since the Enlightenment period, democratic states do not wage war against each other). Democracy becomes therefore a fundamental basis for peace and security. Kant’s ideas influenced Woodrow Wilson who theoretically put the basis of the League of Nations and later, in 1945, the United Nations. Such an association between democracy/prosperity/stability and security does not simplify the mission of NATO, for instance, as the military element is no longer enough to preserve security.

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Weak and vulnerable states are much more exposed to external threats. That rationale explains the Western states' current approach towards the Russian Federation. Their goal is to diminish the influence exercised by Russian Federation in the Black Sea Wider Region and its aggressive foreign policy of dominance of former USSR territories. By increasing wealth and economic prosperity – namely the economic and democratic sovereignty of the Black Sea countries (Tsereteli, 2022), Western allies aim to form a shield that would prevent Russian Federation's unorthodox methods such as illegal immigration and fake news from de-stabilising societies. Such an approach is more than logical as the security concept today penetrates all levels of society, and also refers to the interoperability between them. Individual security has not much to do with national security, let alone to regional security. The last concepts require a much more complex approach and do represent a more volatile focal point of security and strategic studies (Buzan, 2017, p. 97).

Having clarified the strategy adopted by the most powerful international forums operating in Europe and the Black Sea Region, it is important to note that the aggressor's response would be to prevent this scenario from happening. That is precisely Russian Federation's behaviour at the moment. The Russia Federation has been attached to its Eurasian identity, thus, its chance to counterbalance NATO and the US' influence in Europe has been chased ever since the end of the Cold War or the moment Vladimir Putin came to power. Russia's "Near East Strategy" focuses on projecting power in the Black Sea Region and making European states more dependent on the energetic resources provided for by the Russian Federation. Since the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, 2014 Crimean War, when Russian Federation has deliberately violated Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, its aggressive claims have not stopped, and its strategy has become visible for all actors involved in the regional security process.

Now, since the end of 2021, and the beginning of 2022, the Russian Federation has been involved in two conflicts that are instrumental to its strategy, namely the Poland-Belarus refugee crisis and the 2021-2022 Russian-Ukraine Crisis. In both these instances, Russian Federation has proved its attachment to hybrid warfare and has not hesitated to use novel de-stabilisation tools such as immigration (forcing the borders of the EU), and fake news to induce the Ukraine

population falsely-legitimate motives of a Russian invasion (Borger, Walker & Sabbagh, 2022).

The Black Sea Region has an important geopolitical character and does oscillate between being turned into a “NATO lake” or turning up dominated by a reactionary Russian Federation. In order to advance its strategy of making Southern Europe more and more dependent on Russian gas and oil, and to preserve an easy access to warmer sea for purposes of trade, Russia has to prevent NATO from exerting any more influence. The Black Sea is an economic and energetic route between the West and the East and also a convergence point between the European, Eurasian, and Middle Eastern security spaces. Since 9/11, ensuring stability and diminishing threats and vulnerabilities in the region in order to prevent the spread of terrorism has also become a priority. Russia's stakes in the Black Sea Region are as important as those of the Western allies. It is, from a geopolitical point of view, a buffer zone to prevent threats from crossing into the European space.

The aim of this paper is to explore Russia's behaviour as well as the Western allies' response in the most recent crises which have occurred between 2021-2022 – the Belarus-Poland Refugee crisis and the Russian-Ukraine crisis that has provoked panic in the entire region. The focus will be however placed on the hybrid weapons used by the Russian Federation to advance its interests and prevent NATO and the EU's spheres of influence from expanding any more. This fear of being isolated in Central and Eastern Europe motivated Moscow's behavior in 2008 regarding Georgia, and in 2014 with Ukraine.

The research methods used to achieve the academic goal exposed above are analysing and comparing qualitative secondary and primary sources, while focusing on the two specific cases – the Belarus-Poland refugee crisis and the Russian-Ukraine crisis. First of all, the role of the Black Sea as a geopolitical pivot will be explored along with the vast sources of insecurity it possesses. Then, the competing efforts of NATO and Russian Federation to exert their influence in the Black Sea Region will be exposed in brief.

The following chapter will analyse Russia's involvement as a proxy agent in the Belarus-Poland refugee crisis since Belarus is, after all, Russia's oldest ally in Europe.

The final chapter will focus on Russia's current favourite hybrid weapon – fake news, used to induce Ukraine's population in error



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*Its importance has developed constantly throughout the years as the international community based on democratic principles and also free trade ideals has developed in the area of the Black Sea, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. That is how the Black Sea Region had come to be a priority on the security agendas of the Western countries, especially the United States'.*

and provoke a series of behaviours that would de-stabilise societal and state continuity, making Ukraine an easy vulnerable target. The conclusion reached would summarise the main points made and will encourage further research being conducted on the subject.

## ROLE OF THE BLACK SEA AS A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT

When this paper was written, Russian forces had just started to attack the separatist Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk<sup>1</sup>. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Vladimir Putin to stop the violence and attacks as a last resort to try and solve the conflict diplomatically. The political discourse of the Russian leader revealed his intentions to “conquer” strategic geographic points in Ukraine, mainly referring to cities having direct access to the Black Sea. To legitimise his actions, the tradition of Ukraine’s self-government after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was entirely questioned hence an attack on behalf of the Russian Federation would not be exactly a violation of the principle of self-determination.

These efforts speak for the major importance of the Black Sea Region, a historically strategic and geopolitical point of reference, and a synergy point between Central Asia, the Middle East, and South-East Europe. Its importance has developed constantly throughout the years as the international community based on democratic principles and also free trade ideals has developed in the area of the Black Sea, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. That is how the Black Sea Region had come to be a priority on the security agendas of the Western countries, especially the United States’ (Popilevschi, 2019, p. 297).

This chapter will go over the strategic implications of the Black Sea Region that have particular relevance in the two conflicts on which this article is focused. First of all, we ought to describe the multiple and varied sources of insecurity, among which we can encounter: immigration, terrorism, ecological disasters, drugs smuggling. These aspects generate a complex landscape of threats to regional security and cohesion. Secondly, the competing claims to dominance of both the Russian Federation and NATO and the EU

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<sup>1</sup> May 2022 (author’s note).

will be presented. While Russia is actually willing to start a war in Europe to project its influence over NATO's Eastern Flank and ensure the monopoly of Russian oil and gas on the market (Stronski, 2021), NATO equally makes efforts to turn the Black Sea into a "NATO Lake" (Văduva, p. 5) in order to prevent the before-mentioned threats from materialising.

NATO along with the Western block and the democratic countries in Europe aim to pursue these goals by transforming the Black Sea Region into a shield strengthened by democracy and economic prosperity, trying slowly to ensure the energetic independence of countries located on the shores of the Black Sea. In this manner, frozen conflicts would be prevented from erupting again and completely de-stabilising the region. The degree to which Moscow wishes to stop this scenario from materialising is visible in its external actions and decision, as well as its aggressive behaviour and the use of a propaganda machine for disinformation and de-stabilisation. However, a preventive reaction from the West could have come sooner, more specifically before 2014 by granting Ukraine NATO membership and transforming it into a shield bordering Russian aggression. Instead, the Western international community is said to have tried to make Ukraine a neutral territory, an ambitious but, according to the arguments of Professor John Mearsheimer, not quite practical goal. It is however important to mention that in 2008, at the Bucharest Summit, NATO states pledged their efforts and intentions to indeed extend the defensive alliance to the east and grant Georgia and Ukraine membership eventually. That action was interpreted by the Russian Federation as a threat coming dangerously close to its borders (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 24-25), a logic that would trigger the unfortunate events which followed, including the present-day Russian-Ukraine war.

Analysing objectively the landscape of threats which the Black Sea Region entails, we ought to start from the geographic point of view, and move towards the economic side.

One first instability factor/threat is persistent since the end of the Cold War when the bipolar axis was replaced by the dominance of the US. The fall of the USSR and Yugoslavia led to the birth of several new nation-states in the Black Sea Region and its vicinity



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or to regions within states aiming to affirm their autonomy. That is how the so-called *frozen conflicts* have emerged (Pința, 2005, p. 50). Now, their character is even more challenging as, due to territorial implications and ethnic and religious sensitiveness, they are bound to be persistent. Conflicts in Transnistria (Moldova), South Ossetia, Abkhazia (Georgia), Nagorno-Karabakh (between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which is also a proxy conflict between Turkey and Russia), Chechnya, and Donbas (Ukraine) have been marking the difficult geopolitics of the Wider Black Sea Region since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Crenganiș). Being located in the ex-Soviet space, and formerly part of the large Soviet Union, it comes as no surprise why Russia finds it hard not to get involved – since it is attached to its formal identity, and President Putin showed no reservations into attesting his intentions of reconstructing the former Soviet borders (Putin, 2006). After all, a divided territory marked by violence and fragmentation is much easier to “conquer”. If we are to engage with the rational choice theory developed by political economist Adam Smith, Russia’s behaviour with respect to frozen conflicts leads us to believe that Putin’s actions of manipulating and, when convenient, de-freezing conflicts follows cost-benefit calculations. That was the clear case in 2008 when Russia recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, making it extremely difficult for Georgia to retain its *de jure* and *de facto* control over the territories (Dungaciu/Godzimirski, 2020, pp. 8-10). Frozen conflicts and tensions between the newly-emerged actors in the wider Black Sea region could be considered as a part of system vulnerabilities (Văduva, p. 3).

In direct connection with the existence of frozen conflicts is *immigration*, both a threat and an instrument of pressure, as it will be shown later when addressing Russia’s support for the Minsk government in the most recent crisis. Being a strategic connection between the West, Middle East and Caucasus, the Black Sea Region has been primarily used as a route towards the civilised world whenever an armed conflict (re-)emerged. Due to its utility, the phenomenon of illegal immigration (which after all is mainly considered a threat to national security) has been toppled by global terrorism, increasing transborder criminality as well as drugs, arms, and even human trafficking. Since the government controls are extensive in the countries located in the extended Black Sea Region, smugglers, illegal

immigrants and terrorists have started to use the sea for passage from Africa, the Middle and Far East (Macuc, 2005, p. 123).

Moving to an even more sensitive vulnerability of the Black Sea Region, the *terrorist threat* for Europe and the Western states had started to manifest since the 9/11 al-Qa'ida terrorist attacks on the US. From then on, terrorism would not be an isolated problem anymore, but a persistent threat to the global security. As technological advance is synonymous with the phenomenon of globalisation (which started to become obsolete from the 2000s), terrorists have embraced the challenge to export their cause worldwide. The motives, methods, and communication skills of terrorist organisations, along with their recruitment function have adapted to the 21<sup>st</sup> century innovative standard. The so-called "*cyber-jihad*" was perfected by terrorist organisations in the Middle East (especially, al-Qa'ida) – considering that Arabs are specialists in cryptography and secrecy – which have evolved in line with technological progress, even though, at first, they were reluctant to use Western electronic facilities (Atwan, 2006, pp. 122-125). It would have been impossible for the Black Sea Region – considering the political turmoil and state of instability – to avoid becoming a prosperous zone for terrorist attacks that targeted the economy of the region by disrupting supplies, for instance (Luft/Korin, 2004, pp. 61-62). It had become imperious for the Western community (NATO, the EU) to create a "*springboard*" to the Islamic terrorism after 9/11, as the volatile security environment in the Black Sea Region favours directly the presence of terrorism (Scriciu, 2005, p. 61).

To bring the discussion in the present-day context, we could invoke nuclear and radiological terrorism (Fenopetov/Lawlor et al., 2011, pp. 197-208), as well as the occurrence of terrorist incidents in the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the West equally, with Shariat Jammāt being the most active terrorist group in Russia and the Eurasian region between 2007-2021, according to the *Dragonfly Terrorism Tracker* (IEP calculations) published in a terrorist briefing of the *Institute for Economics & Peace* in March 2022.

Another source of threat consists ironically in the *economic opportunities* offered by the hydrocarbon resources located in the Black Sea, which gives both the Western community and the Russian Federation economic stakes in the region (Anastasiu, 2019, p. 2).



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The geological developments of the Black Sea from the last centuries led to the creation of oil systems, to which the countries surrounding the sea – Bulgaria, Romania, Georgia, Ukraine, Russia and Turkey – have access. Therefore, it is only normal for tensions and struggles for monopoly of the access route to exist. The expansion of NATO towards the east becomes even more threatening to Russia. These tensions are considered challenges to the ecological security of the Black Sea, also crippled by intense pollution at the mouth of the Danube River, and the Sea of Azov as well. The more intense the exploitation conducted so as to extract resources from the Black Sea is, the more likely it is that the ecological balance of the region is disturbed. Given the level of commitment to prevent this from happening, the European Union has pledged its efforts to find the necessary balance for reducing pollution in the region, but in order to have extensive access to the Black Sea, the enlargement procedures have to be activated once again, which induces an increased feeling of anxiety to the Russian Federation. There is a whole network of competing interests in the Black Sea Region at the moment which only argues for the strategic importance of the area.

In order to protect their interests in the Black Sea Region, both the Western community and the Russian Federation have taken noticeable steps in the past century. The efforts towards implementing resilient cooperation mechanisms in the region were conducted by Western countries. The launching of the “*Border Defence Initiative*” by Romania in 2004 aimed to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. NATO’s bilateral partnerships created with Partners for Peace states seek the establishment of a network of security and stability in the Black Sea. The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation was officially founded in 1999 as a multilateral initiative having both political and economic implications. The *Black Sea Forum* NGO was created in 2008 by the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND and aims to trigger enhanced cooperation in the civic society with regard to the Black Sea vulnerabilities. One of the most notable initiatives was creating the Black Sea Naval Force program in 2001 – or BLACKSEAFOR – by Turkey in cooperation with Romania, Ukraine, Georgia, Bulgaria and Russia, which increased the interoperability of the member states’ naval forces (Mureşean, 2005, p. 221).

On the other side, the Russian Federation has been much more sceptical and even infuriated by NATO and the EU initiatives to enhance cooperation as the chances of resurrecting the once great Soviet Empire (a goal to which Russian President Vladimir Putin is attached to) were slowly but surely diminishing. Russia's sphere of influence was shrinking and this anxiety motivated its aggressive behaviour. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russo-Ukraine War which is still ongoing are proof of the lengths Russia is willing to go to in order to prevent the Western community from expanding in the Black Sea. By supporting Russian separatist forces, Moscow proved it did not care at all for the sovereignty of its former Soviet states, and even argued that these states had no tradition as autonomous countries (Putin, 2022). The declarations of the NATO and EU officials revealed the instable and volatile security environment that Russia has created recently and urged for additional cooperation as the security of the entire continent is at stake (Borrell, 2022).

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Black Sea Region left behind its neutral implications for the Western countries and turned into a strategic geopolitical pivot, key to maintaining the security of the region and preventing the complex landscape of threats from overwhelming it. The Black Sea Region has embraced its historic role of being a decisive factor in the development of continental security (Popilevschi, p. 300).

### **BACK TO BELARUS, RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S OLDEST ALLY AND FRIEND**

If there is one state that has been loyal to the Russian Federation and which has supported its foreign policy ambitions since the fall of the Soviet Union, that is Belarus. Its ties to Moscow have two main foundations, besides the close interpersonal relationship that features Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko, friends since Belarusian President Lukashenko was elected in 1994. Such loyalty extended so as to involve military support as well, which is most visible in the 2021-2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Belarusian territory has been exploited to enable Russian Federation to fire ballistic missiles, ensure transportation for the Russian heavy weapons and military personnel and also ensure the airspace corridor for the Russian military



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aircraft to fly into Ukraine. This reality attracted sanctions imposed by the EU to Belarus, according to the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Borrell, 2022).

Moving to the dimensions of the Russia-Belarus partnership, first, there is the tight economic cooperation in the field of energy, as Belarus acts as an intermediary between Russia and the other European countries when it comes to exporting resources. Equally, the Russian Federation composes a primer export market for manufactures coming from Russia. Russia is the most reliable export partner for Belarus when it comes to oil and gas as 15% of the Belarusian GDP is represented by exports received from Moscow (Coes, 2021). Extending this argument furthermore, the relationship between Russia and Belarus is important in the light of Russia's economic and energetic strategic interests in the Wider Black Sea Region – trade and routes for pipelines and energy transmission lines (Derman, 2021). Trying to become the primer energy exporter in Europe has been visible in the context of Russia's extending its energy ties more and more in the Balkans – North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia. However, Russia's economic leverage in the Black Sea Region is deeply affected by the EU's ambition of reaching the zero-carbon target by 2050 and choosing to engage with the Azerbaijani pipeline for instance (Stronski, 2021). Some of the European countries have started to consider other alternatives by themselves since the Russo-Ukraine war has started at the end of February 2022. For instance, Romania tried to reorient itself towards other natural gas exporters such as Qatar, Azerbaijan, the US, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. This kind of attitude provokes Russia as, if it were to lose its economic/energetic leverage over European countries, its claims in the Black Sea would become irrelevant. Losing Russia's stake in the Black Sea Region would have an impact on Belarusian economy as well as the most important pipeline from Russia to the rest of Europe runs through Belarus. Moreover, since the European Economic Community was created and notable steps were taken to advance economic integration in Europe, Russia and Belarus have been trying to counteract such an ambitious project and have declared jointly that the Eurasian Economic Union is the most advanced and efficient (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus). The Treaty establishing the EEU was signed in 2014 by Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Secondly, the Russian-Belarusian partnership has political foundations as well, especially in light of the tensions developing constantly between the Minsk Administration and the European Union since 2020. The civil society has been suppressed and arrests have been unlawfully made to annihilate any sign of opposition towards Alexander Lukashenko, who has won elections by fraud. In addition to this, gender-based violence was at high rates, and the rule-of-law principle was systemically damaged. The EU imposed a fifth package of sanctions in December 2021 due to the instrumentalisation of migrants by the Minsk Administration in order to put pressure on EU borders. The actions of Belarus were supported by Moscow.

Weaponising migration has been a tactic used by Belarus to counter EU sanctions, which have had an economic impact over the former Soviet state. The most recent example was the 2021-2022 Belarus – EU border crisis, an occasion used by Belarus to prove that it has the same affinity for hybrid warfare as its partner – Russia. In July 2021, Alexander Lukashenko threatened to de-stabilise the European bloc by facilitating uncontrolled waves of migrants – with the risk of also permitting drug smugglers, criminals and human traffickers from the Middle East to try to cross illegally into the EU. In this manner, multiple sources of threat to the European security would be activated. Belarus has been moving away from the chance of making a democratic transition and moving towards a dangerous scenario where Russia is its only regional partner, both economically and politically. In the light of recent events, the relations between the EU and Belarus would only worsen following Minsk's decision to actively support Russia's decision of invading Ukraine and Putin's strategy in the Black Sea, which includes a 'divide and conquer' policy targeting NATO and the EU, and exerting unhindered control over the former Soviet space (Riehle, 2022, p. 62).



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## **FAKE NEWS – RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S FAVOURITE HYBRID WARFARE WEAPON**

Portraying Russia as an indispensable player in world affairs implies a complex dissimulation game based on disinformation and fake news. Russia has been employing this strategy very well in the past years but most visibly in the past few months by crafting an entirely alternative reality for the war with Ukraine. The deadly war which has crippled multiple strategic cities of Ukraine



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is presented as a mere ‘*special operation*’ to the Russians (Gessen, 2022). The international community and also citizens of Ukraine and other NATO and EU countries have gone to great lengths to inform the people in Russia about the true facts and the number of war victims. An example in this sense would be the innovative method of using online restaurant reviews to disseminate information from outside the borders of Russia, as the citizens are victims of media censorship (Wollaccott, 2022). Hence, fake news, dissimulation and disinformation remain the favourite tools for exerting control and manipulating public opinion employed by Russian President Vladimir Putin today. But before exploring what happens in Ukraine and how these tools are actually used, we ought to construct a more theoretical framework of the novel security threat – fake news. Hybrid warfare has been so extensively used by Russian authorities that the term has lost its specificity and came to cover virtually any interaction of Russia with another state (Kofman, 2016).

Counted among the most challenging threats to national security, cyberattacks have the potential to harm profoundly the integrity of national cyber networks through their frequency and intensity. For instance, among the specific requirements of the Romanian Armed Forces in order to fulfil security objectives, purchasing the necessary effective communication and technological systems which are compatible to those of NATO and EU is counted. The logic of this fact is based on the strengthening of an integrated informational system on the continent. Such a system serves specifically to anticipate and prevent any unforeseen military operation that would take by surprise national authorities, according to the Romanian National Security Agenda for 2021. Fake news could be even directly instrumentalised to confuse the enemy and prevent it from grasping the military intentions of the combatant. Such a scenario is an important part of Russia’s hybrid warfare landscape. Fake news represents an even more complex dimension of disinformation in which considerable efforts are invested to qualitatively alter the information environment while preserving some reminiscences of the truth. Such an action related to the media is called *hybrid media system* (Lesenciuc, 2021, p. 8).

Judging from Russia’s efforts to prevent NATO from extending any further and forcing European states to align to its goals and become allies, Russia’s expansionist tendencies confirm that Moscow’s

foreign policy is in line with the Primakov doctrine – developed by former foreign minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, which resembles to a certain point a return to the Cold War logic of bipolarity. The Russian Federation opposes the current status-quo – that witnesses the US being the only true great power – and could be even considered a revisionist superpower since 1990s.

The Doctrine was applied most visibly in 2008 Russian-Georgian war, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the current 2021-2022 invasion of Ukraine. Military offensive is supported by hybrid attacks that aim to de-stabilise the national system of the targeted country in order for it to become vulnerable and prone to collapse (Rumer, 2019, *passim*). Another indicator of the prevalence of the Primakov doctrine is the calculated risks taken. Only pronouncing the phrase ‘*nuclear weapons*’ produces panic and chaos. Portraying Russia as an unbeatable nuclear superpower is yet another means of manipulating public opinion and inducing fear to the enemies (Podvig, 2018, *passim*.)

Russia resorted to hybrid warfare in the 2008 war against Georgia and used extensively disinformation, fake news and cyberattacks in the separatist South Ossetia region, but military power proved to be the decisive force whereas hybrid instruments were rather secondary. Frank G. Hoffman defined the notion of “*hybrid threats*” as the adversary’s “*tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behaviour in the same time and battlespace to achieve their political objectives*” (Hoffman, 2014). Russia has undoubtedly made use of multiple means of disinformation and fake news to manipulate the Georgian government and the population. All methods followed the slogan of anti-Western propaganda. In the “*Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*” published by the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2016, the effectiveness of Russian propaganda was clearly underlined.

The situation did not look any different in Ukraine in 2014 and does not look different now in the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2021-2022. In 2014, the hybrid tactics were used to prevent and delay the responses of the Ukrainian authorities without using military intervention (Nilsson, 2018, p. 20). Another hybrid tactic was the constant support and collaboration with pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine in order to craft an alternative reality based on disinformation (Darczewska, 2014). In the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014



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*In 2014, when Moscow was confronted about the presence of arms in the territory, officials spread the fake news that they were actually seized by Russian troops from the Ukrainians. Even after a temporarily ceasefire following Russian annexation of Crimea, Russian forces have continued up to this day to employ hybrid warfare tools to de-stabilise Ukraine, thus transforming the country into a case-study for Russian hybrid tactics. Antagonising the pro-European government in Ukraine and vilifying it in front of the Ukrainian population was a means to provoke unrest and mistrust.*

that was succeeded by elections that brought Petro Poroshenko in the position of President of Ukraine, the strategy of President Putin focused on depicting the newly formed government as a fascist and corrupt one. At that time, Poroshenko made important advances to integrate Ukraine in the EU, action that naturally increased anxiety in Moscow. Vladimir Putin aggressively and unlawfully annexed Crimea and the strategically important federal city of Sevastopol while increasing the military presence in the area.

In 2014, when Moscow was confronted about the presence of arms in the territory, officials spread the fake news that they were actually seized by Russian troops from the Ukrainians (Zaremba & Solodky, 2021). Even after a temporarily ceasefire following Russian annexation of Crimea, Russian forces have continued up to this day to employ hybrid warfare tools to de-stabilise Ukraine, thus transforming the country into a case-study for Russian hybrid tactics. Antagonising the pro-European government in Ukraine and vilifying it in front of the Ukrainian population was a means to provoke unrest and mistrust. Such a rhetoric has been constantly used by Moscow since 2014.

An example of hybrid attacks would be the over 300 cyberattacks against Ukraine in 2018 alone, according to the Security Services of Ukraine's estimates. In the context of the 2019 Ukrainian presidential elections' second round, an *Internews Ukraine* analysis discovered a mostly negative portrayal of both pro-European candidates Volodymyr Zelensky and Petro Poroshenko by the Russian social network *Vkontakte* (Zaremba/Solodky, 2021).

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine was motivated solely by a deceiving and incorrect information. Putin claimed that his actions of seizing strategically-important cities in Ukraine were conducted only in a preventive, defensive manner. His argument was that Russia did not feel safe anymore, because it was always put under pressure by Ukraine. Russian President has been portraying the invasion as a "*special operation*", deceiving the Russian population, while constructing a dangerously-sensitive rhetoric. The political discourse of Moscow has three keywords: de-militarisation, denazification, and genocide, the purpose being to construct the image of an aggressive and offensive Ukrainian regime (Kirby, 2022).

President Putin relies heavily on disinformation and fake news in the current crisis while advancing troops in Ukraine. It could even be

claimed that the large wave of refugees crossing NATO and EU's borders serves the foreign policy goals of the Russian Federation, those being the de-stabilisation of regional prosperity and the prevention of NATO's expansion further to the east in the Black Sea Region. The geographical importance of the region motivates Vladimir Putin to occupy strategic posts that are located on the shores of the Black Sea. The armed conflict has not yet reached the point of a potential ceasefire, and it remains to be seen if the EU and US economic sanctions of influential people close to Putin's leadership would pressure Moscow to agree to withdraw. The condition under which Russia would indeed put an end to the aggression is maintaining Ukraine neutral and stopping the process of EU enlargement any further, actions which would directly undermine the external sovereignty of Ukraine hence the right to decide its own path in foreign relations and not be pressured or coerced by any other state into a certain direction. A diplomatic and security dilemma has once again arisen. The status-quo is even more concerning if we reckon with the refugees arriving in neighbouring countries which might not have a home to return to. That would create yet another immigration problem for Europe and especially the Black Sea region.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the beginning of Vladimir Putin's long-lasting mandate as President of Russia, the foreign policy has had clear directions that added increased importance to the strategic region of the wider Black Sea. But to be able to extend its influence ever further, Russia shall prevent both NATO and the EU from doing the same.

Another key aspect on the Russian Federation's agenda is reconstructing the former prestige of the USSR, a purpose that legitimises invasions of former-Soviet sovereign states and the exploitation of hybrid warfare tactics, among which the most preferred ones are the instrumentalisation of migrants and the use of disinformation and fake news. Indeed, by witnessing extensive and constant use of these methods in the past years, the Euro-Atlantic region has become accustomed with tensions rising from Moscow, but, nonetheless, employing the military elements and triggering an armed offensive came as a surprise for democratic decision-makers.



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*President Putin relies heavily on disinformation and fake news in the current crisis while advancing troops in Ukraine. The geographical importance of the region motivates Vladimir Putin to occupy strategic posts that are located on the shores of the Black Sea. The armed conflict has not yet reached the point of a potential ceasefire, and it remains to be seen if the EU and US economic sanctions of influential people close to Putin's leadership would pressure Moscow to agree to withdraw.*





*The Black Sea is historically a convergence point between multiple cultures and geographic areas, while also displaying economic and security implications. The instability of the region (frozen conflicts, cyberattacks, terrorism etc.) provides the perfect impetus for Russia to export its influence and even end up controlling the entire region in time, a goal that has been more than visible in present-day times.*

From this perspective, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine eight years after it had annexed Crimea could be labeled as a "grey rhino" (overlooked event that was highly probable) rather than a "black swan" (unpredictable and unlikely event). Hence, the international community could have foreseen to a certain point the upcoming events (Monaghan, 2022, p. 8).

The Black Sea is historically a convergence point between multiple cultures and geographic areas, while also displaying economic and security implications. The instability of the region (frozen conflicts, cyberattacks, terrorism etc.) provides the perfect impetus for Russia to export its influence and even end up controlling the entire region in time, a goal that has been more than visible in present-day times.

The case study of Belarus as Russia's oldest and most loyal ally in the region proved to what lengths the ambitions of Russia could go to influence decision-making in the region and de-stabilise the EU by using the hybrid tactic of instrumentalising migrants to put pressure on EU's borders as we have seen in the case of Poland. In addition to that, Russia's extensive use of disinformation, fake news and deceiving rhetoric was visible since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the 2014 Crimea annexation.

The most recent outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was marked by the invasion launched in February 2022. The war has been producing security, political, humanitarian, and economic effects upon the entire Black Sea Region. It follows the exact same logic, strategy and tactics of the past conflicts, proving a unique consistency in Russia's foreign politics and its affinity for hybrid methods of de-stabilisation that aim to induce paralysis in the decision-making process of Kiev by appealing to the element of surprise.

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