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THE ACTUAL SECURITY CLIMATE IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the context of security in the Black Sea basin area and its connections with the strategic, military, and economic aims of the main factors contributing to the region's stability and security. The work debuted with some geographical and physical features of the maritime basin, switching the analysis to security actors. The article portrays the EU (European Union) and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) regarding the actual and past actions taken to enhance the region's security and stability. Further, the article investigates the six riparian states through the military and strategic-oriented approach. The concluding part of the work exhibits a sharp insight beyond the sea basin area, and the work is closed by short concluding remarks.*

Keywords: Black Sea, security, contested, conflict, military

1. Introduction

The Black Sea is an almost land-encircled basin connected with the Sea of Marmara and the Sea of Azov by the straits of Bosporus and Kerch, respectively [1, 2]. The Black Sea has a maximal depth of around 2200 m and has an extended shelf, pointedly the northwestern sub-basin. Its affluent area covers lengthy parts of Europe and Asia, furnishing the supply of freshwater volumes of 3 x 102 km3 each year. The compelling freshwater input comes from rivers like the Danube, Dnieper, Southern Bug, Dniester, Don, and Kuban [3-5]. This freshwater inflow is culpable for the poor salinity of these sea waters, practically 18 % compared to 35‰ of the Mediterranean Sea. As a result of the weak connections with the planetary ocean, the change of the Black Sea waters is anemic, and the transmission of waters, primarily the vertical one, which is crucial for oxygen exchange among superficial and deeper layers, is very deprived [6-9]. These particular attributes of the Black Sea basin are simple to assume that this basin is undoubtedly sensitive to whatever pollution, tributaries from the catchment area being still-influential contributors [10 - 11].

The riparian states of the Black Sea are Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation [2].

However, from ancient times, the Black Sea witnessed the rise and fall of empires. Later, during medieval times, the region was the scene of the confrontation between Russia and Turkey's predecessors to gain supremacy over the region [12]. Known beneath the empire's courtyard in the past and referred to later as the soviet influence zone, the area became a field of competition between "the West" and Russia on the other side [12 - 14]. Before 1991 the influence over the Black Sea area was conducted by the Soviet Union; however, with the admission of Turkey to NATO in 1952, it seemed that the soviet power would be balanced, but this led to Warszaw Pact in 1955, when a so-called

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Eastern Bloc was established [12]. From 1955 to 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, letting NATO as the leading military power, one event in 1962 animated the area – this was the Cuban missile crisis when NATO placed nuclear missiles in Turkey. The Soviet Union placed a similar arsenal in Cuba [12, 15].



Figure 1: The Black Sea riparian states and contested territories – author`s work after [16, 17]

In 2004 Romania and Bulgaria were hoisted to the rank of NATO member, followed by 2007, when both littoral states acquired the status of full EU members. With this evolution, and with Ukraine and Georgia developing close relations with the EU and NATO, Russian Federation felt like" the West" was getting closer, and some counterbalancing actions were required. Thus, in 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in a" show of force" action meant to let the main actors know that the area's control was still under debate. In the same line, even more severe was the illegal annexation of the Crimea peninsula in 2014. Though the international community, NATO, and EU reacted to these violent actions of the Russian Federation by imposing different types of sanctions, the afterward is that Crimea belonged to Russia. Despite low international reconnaissance and the signal given by Russia was more than solid and clear: it will use all necessary means to maintain or gain control over the region [12-15, 18-20].

The Black Sea is geopolitical important because it is seen as a bridge between Occident (Europe) and the Orient. Its Turkish Straits give access to the East Mediterranean Sea, Middle East, and the Levant. The fight to control the region is justified through the possibility of inflicting force on the East, especially by Russia [12 - 15].

The Baltic has all littoral states except Russia integrated into both NATO and EU; this process is not yet complete for the Black Sea. Some experts claim that the Baltic Sea model, a" western lake," can be translated into the Black Sea case. Some similarities regarding the sizeable Russian diaspora: Estonia and Latvia compared with Ukraine and Georgia. However, the security climate picture for the Black Sea is more complicated, with frozen and, from time-to-time heated conflicts like Transnistria, Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In the same line, predominantly Russian-speaking diasporas with divergent economic and geostrategic interests, the Black Sea remains a hot spot for the leading global or regional actors [12-15, 18-22].

Understanding the broad mechanism of security and interdependencies is not enough to study the position of littoral states. The Black Sea region is broader than the sea basin and riparian state area. The security, economic, political, and strategic implications involve some adjacent areas; thus, some authors invoke the Caucasus,

East Mediterranean Sea, the Balkans, or the Middle East divisions that impact Black Sea Security. In this regard, the Azov Sea is considered a way of projecting strategic interest into the Black Sea [12-15].

This paper has a subsequent structure: after the introduction, the methods chapter will provide insight concerning the main security actors, then the discussion portion analyzes the actual context of security with an emphasis on the possible ways ahead, and some short conclusions will end the scoop.

2. Methods

This section highlights the preeminent prospects related to the Black Sea security concerning the main security actors: the six littoral states and the cardinal organizations – NATO and the European Union. This part provides an acumen of the position of the stakeholders, as mentioned earlier, related to crucial security decisions and positions adopted, the military strength and equipment owned, defense expenditure, and the political, economic, and strategic interests.

Table 1. Littoral states main defense figures [24-27]

State	Year	Defense expenditure		Active personnel	Equipment					
		[m. USD]	[% GDP]		Tanks	Artillery > 100 mm	Combat aircraft	HELOs	Major Navy ships	Minor Navy ships
Romania	1993	*722.5*	*2.7*	*203100*	*2869*	*3707*	*430*	*219*	*7*	*50*
	2009	*2225.1*	*1.3*	*73200*	*316*	*838*	*72*	*67*	*3*	*4*
	2015	*2580.6*	*1.5*	70500	460	876	36	66	7	3
	2020	*5726.8*	*2.3*	69600	400	1118	56	66	7	3
Bulgaria	1993	*482.7*	*2.6*	*99400*	*2209*	*2081*	*217*	*83*	*1*	*23*
	2009	*905*	*1.7*	*40747*	*1474*	*1666*	*80*	*47*	*4*	*7*
	2015	*632.5*	*1.2*	*31300*	*80*	*437*	*42*	*33*	*4*	*3*
	2020	*1247.2*	*1.8*	36950	90	176	21	29	4	3
Turkey	1993	*7075.1*	*3.9*	*480000*	*4835*	*3032*	*560*	*574*	*34*	*23*
	2009	*16047.5*	*2.5*	*510600*	*4205*	*3634*	*435*	*321*	*37*	*43*
	2015	*17576.5*	*1.8*	510600	4504	4060	364	433	37	21
	2020	*17724.6*	*2.8*	355200	2379	4041	319	370	32	41
Georgia	1993	-	-	*20000*	*120*	*60*	*40*	*15*	-	-
	2009	*603.7*	*5.6*	*21150*	*53*	*236*	*8*	*33*	-	*4*
	2015	*299.5*	*2.0*	20650	123	240	12	35	-	-
	2020	*292.7*	*1.8*	20650	123	240	3	35	-	-
Ukraine	1993	*123.4*	*0.4*	*438000*	*5740*	*3600*	*1340*	*812*	*2*	*3*
	2009	*2320.4*	*1.9*	*129925*	*2984*	*3351*	*221*	*293*	*2*	*8*
	2015	*2959.6*	*3.3*	204000	2138	2570	202	216	1	3
	2020	*5924.2*	*4.1*	209000	854	1888	145	103	1	9
Russia	1993	*7766.7*	*4.2*	*2030000*	*25550*	*25700*	*7495*	*3739*	*388*	*163*
	2009	*51532.1*	*3.9*	*1027000*	*23150*	*26647*	*1971*	*1543*	*128*	*110*
	2015	*66421.8*	*4.9*	*818000*	*20459*	*29779*	*1276*	*1114*	*98*	*67*
	2020	*61712.5*	*4.3*	900000	*2950*	*5362*	*1428*	*1028*	*121*	*118*

Table 1 displays the main features of the riparian states' defense systems after some key moments: 1993 – right after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, 2009 – after the Russo –

Georgian conflict, 2015 – succeeding annexation of Crimea.

2.1 Romania

The Black Sea serves as a major commercial route for Romania. Moreover, the sea bottom in the Economic Exclusive Zone of Romania contains limited but still relevant resources of hydrocarbons [11, 23]. The country's admission into the NATO and EU confirmed the country's importance in the Black Sea security system, though even before NATO integration, the country was very active in the Partnership for Peace framework [15].

Romania still uses outdated military equipment. Things are changing recently, and acquisitions of new or NATO compatible equipment are ongoing: F-16 aircraft, Patriot SAM systems, HIMARS artillery systems, and Piranha APC are just some positive examples. This evolution is due to a change in the country's strategic approach after the Crimea annexation when it becomes more apparent that Russia, by its actions, is a threat to Black Sea Security. This fact determined political decision-makers to agree on an item of increased defense expenditure.

After the annexation of Crimea, Romania called for an increased NATO and US presence in the Black Sea. It asked for establishing a NATO flotilla in the Black Sea comprising Romania, Turkey, and Bulgaria units. However, with the opposition of Bulgaria and the unstable position of Turkey, the initiative failed [15, 23].

Romania is claiming a prominent position within the union on Black Sea matters. However, other regional actors' support did not benefit from this initiative, and there are chances to get some concessions at the EU level [13].

Not only once, but the US also highlighted the importance of the strategic partnership with Romania. As a response to Romania calling for an increased NATO and US presence, we have US forces and assets based at airbase Mihail Kogălniceanu some aviation elements, and, the most important, a component of Anti-Ballistic Missiles (ABM) shield based at Deveselu. The ABM shield brought a rising rise in tensions with Russia, which perceived the shield as hampering its capabilities. Besides US deployments, Romania benefits from a Tailored Forward Presence (tFP) of NATO, consisting of some HQs at BDE, DIV, and Army Corp level and a NATO Force Integration Unit. The tFP brought Romania's increased participation in NATO-led exercises hosted on its territory or in the Black Sea region [14, 23, 28].

2.2 Bulgaria

A former member of the defunct Warsaw Treaty Organization and a related friend of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria got the status of NATO (2004) and EU (2007) member contributing towards a westernization of the Black Sea while remaining in good standing with Russia [12-14, 29].

Bulgaria supported NATO actions in the Black Sea basin. However, it was resilient to a Romanian proposal to establish a Romanian-Bulgarian-Turkish flotilla into the Black Sea under the NATO umbrella [23, 29].

A recent position of the Bulgarian president suggested that Crimea annexation was, in some instances, agreed upon by Bulgaria [29, 30].

Owning some old military equipment, Bulgaria proceeded with some new acquisitions but with a moderate speed.

The country participated actively in primary operations and exercises led by NATO and the EU [29].

Sharing common cultural values and due to economic reasons, especially those related to Russia's gas supply, Bulgaria is struggling to balance its position between NATO and EU on the one hand and Russia on the other hand [14].

2.3 Turkey

With its admission into NATO as a full member in 1952, Turkey endeavored to counter the Soviet Union's power in the

Black Sea region. However, the tensions between the two main actors reached their peak in 1962 with the Cuban missile crisis.
Having the second fleet in strength during the Cold War, Turkey gained naval superiority after the Soviet Union collapsed for a while. The fall of the Soviet Union provided Turkey with the opportunity to play a leading role in the Black Sea region. However, this aim fell apart starting in 2008, and Turkey shifted its focus on its internal issues with the Kurdish population or Middle East area.
The annexation of Crimea in 2014 overlapped adverse developments in the Middle East. It deepened the tensions between Turkey – Russia, which culminated with the downing of a Russian combat aircraft that violated the Turkish airspace in 2015.
Besides NATO membership, Turkey was negotiating with the EU. However, in 2016 the negotiations got suspended, due to an unsuccessful coup against the Turkish president, with Turkey shifting its former orientation NATO - EU towards Russia. Another tense episode was in 2017 when Turkey bought an air defense SAM system from Russia and not a NATO or EU member country.
Considering the oscillating position of Turkey, some NATO states moved their forces from Turkey. Despite a fluctuant position, Turkey actively supported an increased NATO presence in the Black Sea basin and backed the Romanian initiative for a joint NATO fleet Romania – Bulgaria - Turkey. Turkey is also a participant in NATO and EU-led exercises and missions.
Turkey increased its defense allocation regarding defense expenditure, agreeing to spend at least 2% for defense purposes. Turkey acquired updated assets during the last years meant to replace the older obsolete equipment [12-14, 30].

2.4 Georgia

Georgia has the peculiarity of having two breakaway regions, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which became hot or frozen depending on the level of ambition of the Georgian government related to these regions' level of independence. After the subsidence of the Soviet Union, these provinces sought their autonomy inner the Georgia republic. This action led to a chain of conflicts that froze after the mediation of the United Nations, the CSCE (Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe) precursor of OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). This situation lasted until 2008, when Russia, which supports the separatist regions from politically, militarily, and economically points of view, invaded Georgia to punish the recent establishment of close ties with the European Union and NATO and demonstrate the weak reaction of the weak the said organisms. The outcome of the conflict led to increased dependence on the two regions by Russia and a bigger surface of territory lost by Georgia. In recent years, Russia recognized the two regions' independence, signed bilateral treaties, and boosted its military presence and control over them. Georgia continued to strengthen its ties with NATO and the EU but pursued normalization of relations with Russia [21].
In light of the 2008 conflict with Russia and the 2014 forced annexation of Crimea, Georgia updated its defense documents that acknowledged Russia's potential aggression as a security risk. With this regard, Georgia updated the organization and structure of defense forces, enhancing the relations with NATO and the EU. The modernization of the armed forces is considered mainly Army, Air Force, Air Defense, and Special Operations, while the Navy, with its primary assets lost during the 2008 conflict, is still getting less attention. Georgia has received some training and attended NATO-led exercises [18].
Except for Russian ethnics in Georgia, the mainstream populace is pro-West oriented,

and the Russian medial channels' impact is marginal [14].
The solution for the Georgian conflict is far from a Russia – the West opposition approach; the dimension and solutions meant to address Georgian issues has many complex angles [31].

2.5 Ukraine

After the subsidence of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had normal relations with its neighbors from the Black Sea basin except for the Russian Federation, who never accepted that Ukraine could have a separate destiny apart from Russia. In this regard, we mention that Ukraine was an essential contributor to the Soviet economy when the country as belonging to the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), and after 1991, part of critical economic assets remained on the Ukrainian territory while the navy ships sharing process lasts for years. The Russian Black Sea Fleet remained on the Ukrainian territory in the Sevastopol naval base.
Ukraine tried to get close to the European Union and NATO to balance the economic and military power of its more powerful and threatening neighbor.
In 2014, after the fall of President Viktor Yanukovych, under the framework of social turmoil called Euromaidan, Russia intervened. However, the aggression was not directly assumed. It took over the Crimea Peninsula with the central part of the Ukrainian ships. It supported the sovereignty of the apart Donbas region (parts of Luhansk and Donetsk territories) on said protection of the Russian-speaking population living in the area. This action disrupted Ukraine's freedom of movement into Azov Sea and the ability to communicate with its economic assets in the eastern part of the country.
Ukraine has tried to update its military equipment and increase military spending to curb this development, but the latest has the same trend with its economic power [19].
Nowadays, Russia postured a massive contingent estimated at 100,000 troops with heavy and actual military equipment around Ukraine's borders, suggesting an imminent invasion.
The Russian Federation and its president Putin try to stop NATO and EU enlargement, and unfortunately, Ukraine has become the subject of negotiations between Russia and the West. There were some failed negotiation attempts, but no settlement is foreseeable until now.
In the Ukraine crisis context NATO, the US, and EU countries provide military and political support for Ukraine, but no stakeholder will send troops to Ukrainian territory; the military support is related to lethal and non-lethal military equipment.

2.6 Russian Federation

Russia is the largest country globally in terms of surface, and its military, economic and political power are also considerable.
The NATO and EU enlargement plan into the Black Sea basin, especially concerning Ukraine and Georgia, increased tension in the region.
Moreover, the takeover of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the actual status of the region with Russian troops posture toward an imminent invasion into the Ukrainian territory drive the situation worse and highlight Russia as a threat not only for littoral states but also for other countries from the hinterland.
Enhancing its control over the Black Sea region, Russia improves its capability to project force beyond the Black Sea into the Middle East and Asia.
Russia identifies NATO and its enlargement policy as the main threat. The Ukrainian issue relates to the Russian disagreement with NATO activities and posture close to its borders.
Like other littoral states, Russia has increased its military spending and updated its military equipment. Moreover, it enhanced the presence in the annexed Crimea and reassured its support for all

regions with frozen or hot conflicts in the former Soviet republics; generally, these areas are pro-Russia, and the population speaks the Russian language [20].

According to the analysts, the central vision related to the annexation of Crimea: Crimea is a platform enhancing Russia's ability to project its military, while others support some A2/AD (Anti-Access Area Denial) measures meant to contain NATO enlargement [15].

The tension between Russia and the West, specifically NATO, increased at an unprecedented stage in the latest period. Russia asked NATO to withdraw its forces and military assets from its neighborhood, even from NATO member countries, requests unacceptable to NATO and its allies.

The conflict between the West with Russia is not only related to ideology, politics, or military. However, it is also, in a significant measure, linked with the dependence of Europe on Russian hydrocarbons, especially natural gas, Russia being the supplier of the area, and yet no alternative is foreseeable. Economic war is also a valuable asset, and Russia knows how to get the maximum benefit from this [14].

2.7 The European Union

The European Union is in close cooperation with NATO, but the organizations work on different tiers; NATO militarily deals the security issues, while the EU has a political, economic, and sustainable approach.

The Union has separate channels for member states and partners, and the latest one allowed the EU to open membership discussions with countries like Georgia, Ukraine, and even Turkey.

The Georgia – Russia conflict in 2008 found the European Union unprepared. The response was weak, while in 2014, after the Crimea takeover, the EU had a more consistent response applying economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions to Russia as a state, economic entities, and even persons. We mention that even in 2014 was not a large consensus. Some countries called for a lift of sanctions.

Turkey has an exciting chapter concerning relations with the EU. From a candidate eager to be hoisted at the rank of full member to an adversary position after the failed coup in 2016 when president Erdogan perceived the West as being the origin of the coup; this position led to a series of frictions between Turkey and the EU on the Asian states' migrants' matter [12].

The actual crisis in Ukraine found the EU in a similar position to the one in 2014. The EU condemned Russia's actions and is ready to enforce different sanctions. However, again some countries, based on their economic or political ties with Russia, have a low voice or call for fewer radical sanctions. We can judge this different approach concerning the type of aid provided to Ukraine.

2.8 NATO

The world's most powerful military alliance, NATO, plays a chief role in the Black Sea basin. With Romania and Bulgaria admitted in 2004 and Turkey having important defense forces in the area, the alliance extended its interest area. It strengthened the ties with Georgia and Ukraine though these two countries did not collect a membership action plan yet.

Russia is the most prominent opponent of this powerful organization though it had some attempts to become a member. In 2008 and 2014, Russia intervened brutally in Georgia and respective Ukraine. It warned NATO and the whole world that the alliance is too close to its border and will not allow the said countries to take further actions to get the rank of NATO full member [12].

Before 24 February 2022, Russia had brought massive contingents to the Ukraine border and postured them to suggest an imminent large-scale invasion event as expected.

Compared with 2014, in 2022, NATO countries, in the correlation of efforts with

the European Union, provided some consistent military lethal and non-lethal aid. Like the European Union, some NATO members do not share the same opinion regarding the type of actions to enforce, the nature of sanctions, or the size or type of military aid [32].
The aggressor also lost many troops (an estimated 29,000) and significant military equipment.

2.9 Russia – Ukraine conflict

On 24 February 2022, Russia projected comprehensive military aggression against Ukraine. The conflict causing thousands of fighting has achieved thousands of deaths, civilians and military, and displaced people – estimated more than seven million and another five million left the country seeking refuge in neighboring European countries [32,33].
Russia has tried to take the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv but faced the heroic resistance of Ukraine and limited its land operations in the Eastern part. However, ballistic missiles and aviation strikes have continued over the whole territory.
The result of this conflict is not easy to be anticipated, as the peace talks had limited outcomes, and Russian propaganda is trying to turn everything into positive facts.
Along with conflict losses, the local populace reported many war crimes, rapes, and stealing of goods, which got visible after the Russian troop's withdrawal.
The NATO position remained prudent and did not get directly involved, but individual countries and NATO members could support Ukraine; with this regard, the US and the United Kingdom were the main contributors with financial and military aid.
The riparian states followed the NATO and EU behavior again. Bulgaria was reluctant to impose sanctions against Russia.
Moldavia, Georgia, and Ukraine were invited to perform the first steps to be admitted to the EU as a future warranty for their security. However, Ukraine has asked initially to be admitted to NATO too.
Turkey maintained its neutrality, denying the transit of any military-armed vessel through Bosporus.
EU, US, and most occidental countries imposed economic, diplomatic, and personal sanctions against Russia, its president, including his family and oligarchs.
In this light, it is to be noticed that riparian states can affect the security of the Black Sea Region, and the leading global actors like the US support Ukraine and China, reaffirming its relationship with Russia.
Belarus supported Russia, providing a base for launching the operations for Russian troops. Even Chechnya sent a detachment of fighters in support of the undeclared war of Russia against Ukraine.
Russia claims that it is just a special operation meant to clear Ukraine of Nazism. Nevertheless, no war was declared, but as an answer to Occidental sanctions, Russia took some similar actions and threatened the use of tactical nuclear weapons [31, 32].

3. Discussion

The approach to the security of the Black Sea basin is not straightforward as finding the boundary of the Black Sea region. The Black Sea region is not only the sea basin with its six riparian states. It also encompasses some states with frozen conflicts linked with the former Soviet Union and now being Russian satellites or other types of ethnic or territory subdivisions or sub-regions. Some authors even refer to trans-regions like the Black-Caspian Sea region or Black-Mediterranean Sea region. Understanding the region's security environment requires the consideration of the ethnic, cultural, language, economic, political, or social aspects are just some of the aspects to be considered. There is no doubt that the security climate in the Black Sea basin is complex, and its assessment needs to consider Moldavia, Armenia, Azerbaijan,

and other Caucasus republics with strong political and economic ties with Russia.
Russia plays a pivotal role in the region's security. NATO and the EU, with their advance to the East, make Russia feel threatened not regarding its security but the influence sphere into the Black Sea basin [13].
Due to some particular interests of the two powerful alliances, they are not fully committed to countering Russia's actions. The energetic security of the region is still dependent on Russia's resource of hydrocarbons, and the friction between Turkey and occidental stakeholders is just worsening the situation.
Russia is in a continuous search for regaining control over the former Soviet republics and the basin of the Black Sea to project its military power further to the Middle East and Asia.
Concerning the aggression of Ukraine, NATO remained neutral, allowing individual countries to decide the level of support provided to Ukraine. The European Union does not have a synergy of actions regarding the Russia – Ukraine conflict. Some countries are reluctant or passive to this issue due to their ties with Russia or hydrocarbon dependence.

4. Conclusions

The Black Sea is important for all main stakeholders concerning the security process in the region: the US, NATO, the EU, and Russia. It is paramount for all organizations and stakeholders to display unity and synergy of actions and decisions and prove that they can provide critical support for their partners like Ukraine, Moldavia, and Georgia. Of the three later mentioned actors, Russia has the advantage of being a single state and having a coherent approach to the Black Sea area.
OSCE and UN should get involved in the central security scene in the region to add some sense of impartiality and equidistance. During the latest negotiations for Ukraine, the OSCE was backstage, and the UN was almost absent.
The ongoing aggression of Russia against Ukraine meant, allegedly, to stop NATO and the EU enlargement to the East. The conflict issue requires a solid and standard answer and the leading organizations - NATO and the EU, and military and rich economic countries like US and UK- to be committed and support their partners and preserve peace near their member countries' borders.
This conflict taught us that the security of the Black Sea region could be substantially influenced by stakeholders located geographically far away from the basin territory but having convergent or divergent interests with the actors of the conflict.

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