


Anchoring NATO's eastern flank: A neoclassical realist analysis of Romania's Black Sea policy and its strategic interaction with Turkey

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Abstract

This study addresses two specific objectives. First, it aims to examine Romania's foreign and security policy towards the Black Sea region and explain how and why Bucharest's position in regional power dynamics has changed over time. Second, it aims to describe how Romania's and Turkey's strategic perspectives on the Black Sea relate to each other. The paper employs a qualitative, theory-informed case study methodology to examine Romania's foreign and security policy in the Black Sea region. This is complemented by a comparative foreign policy analysis to explore the relationship between Romania's and Turkey's strategic perspectives. Accordingly, the research design integrates both single-case analysis and paired comparison to capture the dynamics of strategic regional interaction. Using the theory of neoclassical realism, the paper describes Romania's strategic initiatives in the Black Sea region, explains how structural and domestic influences have shaped Bucharest's foreign and security policy, and examines the complex relationship between the regional strategies of Romania and Turkey, by identifying the common and divergent interests of the two states. Romania's Black Sea policy has been shaped by both external variables—structural power dynamics affecting the region—as well as internal variables—elite perceptions and the shifting dynamics of domestic politics. The relationship between the Black Sea strategies of Romania and Turkey can be described as a mixture of convergence, rooted in common security interests, and divergence, fuelled by distinct threat perceptions, domestic political dynamics, and regional ambitions.

Keywords:

Turkey, Romania, Russia, Black Sea, NATO

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Introduction

The first round of the 2024 presidential elections in Romania, which the Constitutional Court later annulled, sparked widespread confusion and dismay in the Western world. The unexpected triumph of Călin Georgescu, “a far-right, pro-Russia candidate [who] came out of nowhere” (Vinocur, 2024), rang alarm bells in both Washington and Brussels, which is understandable, given what Georgescu stands for. Claiming to be a fervent champion of sovereignty, he has frequently criticised the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) (Higgins, 2024) and promised that if elected president, he would conduct foreign policy not according to Western expectations but in line with Romania’s national interests. During the campaign, he designated the US air defence system at the Deveselu base as a shame (Kayali and Coi, 2024), vowed to provide no support to Ukraine (Parry, 2024), and described Putin as a wise leader and a man who loves his country (Silver, 2024). In the past, he had praised Romania’s fascist leadership during World War II (Calus, 2024). A common theme in articles published by mainstream journals on the presidential election is that Georgescu’s success is particularly worrying, considering the increasingly important role Romania has been playing in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture over the past two decades. These reports portray Romania as a country that, so far, seemed to be a stable and reliable pillar of NATO, as its commitment to the liberal international order has been in stark contrast to the illiberal direction taken by the governments of Turkey and Hungary, among others.

The current turmoil in Romanian domestic politics provided the impetus for the present paper, which, in a general sense, examines Romania’s international relations, focusing geographically on the Black Sea region¹ and chronologically on the period between 2004 and 2024. The study addresses two specific objectives. First, it aims to examine Romania’s foreign and security policy towards the Black Sea region and explains how and why Bucharest’s position in regional power dynamics has changed over time. Second, on the premise that Romania’s Black Sea policy cannot be adequately understood without considering Turkey’s regional role,² it aims to describe how the two countries’ strategic perspectives on the Black Sea relate to each other. The paper employs a qualitative, theory-informed case study methodology to examine Romania’s foreign and security policy in the Black Sea region. This is complemented by a comparative foreign policy analysis to explore the relationship between Romania’s and Turkey’s strategic perspectives. Accordingly, the research design integrates both single-case analysis (Romania) and paired comparison (Romania–Turkey) to capture the dynamics of strategic regional interaction. In terms of data analysis, the research relies on qualitative, document-based analysis of secondary academic literature, policy reports, public opinion surveys, political statements, and official policy documents.

The theoretical framework of the study is neoclassical realism, which was defined by Rose (1998) as the fourth school of the realist tradition of international relations. It represents an attempt to synthesise thoughts drawn from different strands of realism, as it seeks to explain state behaviour by reconciling the analysis of external and internal variables. Its proponents share the neorealists’ belief that the structure of the international

¹The Black Sea region is defined in the paper as the geopolitical area encompassing the Black Sea and the six littoral states of Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. Another term used in the study is the wider Black Sea region, which includes, in addition to the coastal states, those countries that are in geographical proximity to the Black Sea and are culturally, economically, or historically linked to it, such as Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Greece.

²In this regard, the paper builds on a previously published research of the author (Lechner, 2024), which outlines the evolution of Turkey’s geostrategy in the Black Sea region and analyses its reactions to the war in Ukraine.

system—characterised by anarchy and the shifting distribution of power—has a profound impact on a country's foreign policy. For neorealists and neoclassical realists alike, the absence of an overarching authority in the international system (Kitchen, 2010, p. 121) produces a self-help environment in which pervasive uncertainty and the constant presence of potential threats force states to make adaptive responses as they struggle for security and power (Taliaferro *et al.*, 2009, pp. 28–29). The two approaches differ, however, in that neoclassical realists question the existence of a direct and clear link between systemic pressures and foreign policy behaviour. According to this line of thought, the impacts of the external environment are translated through unit-level intervening variables, such as decision-makers' perceptions and beliefs, strategic culture, the dynamics of domestic politics, public opinion, and the institutional architecture of the state. While the broad contours and general direction of foreign and security policy are mostly dictated by systemic constraints, specific details of state behaviour are shaped by these internal factors (Rose, 1998, pp. 147–152).

From an analytical point of view, the theory implies that the examination of international power dynamics should be complemented by an effort to understand the perspective and internal mechanisms of the state under scrutiny. Arguably, this approach allows for a sophisticated understanding of foreign policy and offers compelling explanations for the divergent behaviours of states facing similar external conditions; its application to the subject under consideration is therefore justified.

Romania's strategic initiatives in the Black Sea region

During the first 15 years of the post-Cold War era, Romania did not pay particular attention to the Black Sea region and, therefore, did not have a strategic concept for the region. This can be explained mainly by the fact that during the period mentioned above, the country struggled with the difficult process of transitioning from a state-led economy to a market economy while also laying the foundations of democracy and the rule of law (Dumitrescu, 2024, p. 45). A closely related factor is that in the years following the collapse of the socialist bloc, the only priority of Romania's foreign policy was to embed itself in the liberal international order by seeking admission to Euro-Atlantic institutions and building strategic partnerships with the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western allies (Ghincea, 2021, p. 4). This paramount objective overshadowed all other considerations, including the need for a Black Sea strategy. The only noteworthy aspect of Bucharest's approach towards the region before 2004 was that it advocated for a "closed" Black Sea, in line with the 1936 Montreux Convention, the international agreement that has been regulating maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits—the only gateway of the Black Sea to the open seas. The convention allows free passage for merchant ships while limiting³ the naval presence of non-coastal states in the Black Sea (Ulusoy, 2024, p. 2).

Bucharest's approach towards the Black Sea changed after 2004, when the country gained full membership of NATO. In the wake of its admission to NATO, Romania's strategic thinking regarding the Black Sea rapidly shifted from a "closed-sea perspective" to an "open-sea perspective" (Dungaciu and Dumitrescu, 2019, p. 341). Under the leadership

³Battleships belonging to non-Black Sea states transiting the straits may not exceed nine in number and 30,000 tons in total weight and may not stay in the Black Sea for more than 21 days in a row after transiting the straits. Under the agreement, Turkey has the right to close the straits if it is a belligerent in a war or feels threatened with imminent danger of war.

of President Traian Băsescu, Bucharest has abandoned the idea that coastal states shall enjoy special privileges in the Black Sea and embraced a discourse centred on the region's "internationalisation." The term was defined, among others, by Romania's 2007 National Security Strategy, arguably the country's first official document recognising the geopolitical importance of the Black Sea and its surroundings. According to the argument outlined in the document, only the entrenchment of Western values and the further enlargement of NATO and the EU can address the security challenges that are causing instability in the region. It is also emphasised that with its strategically valuable location and its commitment to Western norms, Romania has a key role to play in the process ([National Security Strategy \[NSS\], 2007](#)). This implies that Romania identified itself not only as a "security consumer" benefiting from NATO's protective shield but also as a "security provider" capable of exporting peace, democracy, and stability towards the post-Soviet space ([Ivan, 2016](#), pp. 163–164).

In line with these objectives, Romania has launched several ambitious, but mostly unsuccessful, initiatives to enhance cooperation among coastal states and provide an impetus for greater regional involvement of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, thereby attempting to link the objectives of region-building and security-building ([Ciută, 2007](#), pp. 53–56). Given that Russia made it clear in the mid-1990s that it intends to maintain and reassert its control over the post-Soviet periphery ([Afanasyev, 1994](#)), Romania's vision of integrating the Black Sea region into the Western security architecture was clearly at odds with Moscow's geostrategic designs. Romania's Atlanticist commitment and active involvement in regional affairs are closely linked to security anxieties related to Russia, fuelled by negative historical experiences of the 19th and 20th centuries ([Ivan, 2016](#), p. 165). Romanian president Traian Băsescu, nevertheless, tried to attract Moscow into a regional collaboration in 2005, when he invited leaders of all coastal states to participate in the Black Sea Forum, a failed diplomatic initiative aiming to establish a new framework of dialogue and cooperation. As a reaction to Moscow's refusal to participate in the negotiation process, Băsescu hardened his foreign policy discourse, explicitly stating that the Black Sea should never become a Russian lake ([Ivan, 2016](#), p. 166). In the belief that only the enhanced regional presence of the United States can counterbalance Russia's power, Romania actively lobbied in 2006 for NATO's Operation Active Endeavour, a US-led naval mission in the Mediterranean, to be extended to the Black Sea. Its proposal, however, could not be implemented due to the lack of Turkey's consent ([Socor, 2016](#)).

Another Romanian initiative, called the Black Sea Synergy (BSS), was put on the European Commission's agenda in 2007 and has since then been functioning as the EU's regional policy framework for the region. Accordingly, the main tenet of the initiative was to address the Black Sea area's security challenges through the regional involvement of the EU, of which Romania became a member in 2007 ([Dumitrescu, 2024](#), p. 47). Bucharest expected that the BSS would contribute to the solution of frozen conflicts in the wider Black Sea region—Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. As the unresolved status of these border disputes enhances Russia's ability to manipulate and control regional developments ([Dungaciu and Godzimirski, 2020](#), p. 9), the initiative clearly implied the need to restrain Moscow's influence. The BSS, however, has failed to make any progress in this regard due to its underfunding and the lack of adequate support from other member states ([Dungaciu and Dumitrescu, 2019](#), p. 340).

According to some authors, the main reason why Romania's efforts to internationalise the Black Sea produced very limited results is that the hawkish rhetoric and confrontational posturing of Romanian officials vis-à-vis Russia not only exacerbated Moscow's mistrust ([Ciută, 2007](#), p. 63) but also pushed other regional actors with more dovish attitudes to

resist Bucharest's security-driven initiatives (Ghincea, 2021, p. 8). This explanation fits into a broader interpretive framework that sees the conflict in Ukraine and the emergence of a "new Cold War" between the West and Russia as primarily caused by NATO's and the EU's expansion eastwards at Moscow's expense (Mearsheimer, 2014). From Bucharest's point of view, however, Russia's increasingly aggressive drive to dominate the post-Soviet periphery—manifested in the 2008 war against Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine—has confirmed that any attempts to appease Moscow are counterproductive and that Russia's imperialism can only be contained through NATO's military power (Joja, 2018).

Regardless of how we interpret the origins of the region's gradual regression into a buffer zone of conflicting great power agendas (Çelikpala, 2010), it is evident that with the Russian annexation and subsequent militarisation of Crimea, complemented by the modernisation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the post-Cold War *status quo* of the Black Sea was shattered, as the regional balance of power shifted in Moscow's favour. With a massive military build-up, Moscow aimed to preserve the Black Sea as a *mare nostrum*, where its will can prevail without any constraints (Blank, 2021, p. 46). The West's rather restrained reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea (Grygiel and Mitchell, 2017, p. 93) and NATO's tendency to prioritise the Baltic Sea region over the Black Sea region (Hodges *et al.*, 2020) also contributed to the fact that Moscow was able to gradually gain control of the maritime spaces surrounding the peninsula in the following years, thereby unilaterally redefining the region's political and legal order (Åtland, 2021, p. 319). An additional objective of Moscow was to utilise its dominance over the northern part of the Black Sea, and Crimea in particular, to project military power into the Mediterranean and the Middle East. This was demonstrated by Russia's direct military intervention in Syria in 2015, during which the Black Sea Fleet performed a supportive function (Sinovets, 2021, p. 69).

Besides making the decision to raise defence spending to 2% of its GDP by 2017 (Chiriac, 2015), Romania reacted to the shifting balance of regional power by launching new strategic initiatives. In 2015, together with Poland, Romania created the Bucharest 9 (B9) format, which brings together nine NATO members⁴ situated on the Eastern frontline to better coordinate their actions within the Alliance (Vişan, 2021). The initiative's main objective is to strengthen NATO's Eastern flank by improving military mobility, enhancing cooperation, and advocating an increased US involvement in the stability and security of Central and Eastern Europe. The B9 can be regarded as Bucharest's most successful project so far, as it has arguably become the most relevant and influential Eastern format, displacing the Visegrad Four (Banasik, 2021, p. 31). The security-focused B9 complements the geoeconomic perspective of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), a regional format launched by Poland in 2015, in which Romania is also playing a prominent role. As its name suggests, the 3SI aims to facilitate inter-state cooperation within the geographical space between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas, especially in the fields of energy, transportation, digital communication, and trade (Schmidt, 2020, pp. 160–161).

The success of the latter two initiatives and the emergence of a "Warsaw–Bucharest axis" in the second half of the 2010s (Lewandowski, 2021) imply that Romania is in a much better position to cooperate with those Central and Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, which has similar threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia. In contrast, Romania's cooperation with Bulgaria and Turkey proved to be more difficult, as evidenced by the failure to create a permanent NATO naval task force in the Black Sea. The idea of setting

⁴Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.

up a multinational naval grouping under the aegis of NATO was proposed in 2016 by Klaus Iohannis, who was elected as Romania's president in 2014. The Black Sea flotilla would have relied primarily on the naval capabilities of NATO's three Black Sea members, but would have also allowed Ukraine and Georgia, the Alliance's two Black Sea partners, to join (Delanoe, 2016). The initiative represented an attempt to remake the regional power equilibrium in the wake of Crimea's annexation without altering the 1936 Montreux Convention (Dumitrescu, 2024, p. 48). While the Turkish political leadership appeared not to reject the Romanian proposal, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov vetoed it, stating that instead of military ships, he wanted to see "boats, yachts, tourists, peace, and love" in the Black Sea (Mutsushika, 2018, p. 8).

Divergencies and convergencies of Romania's and Turkey's strategic perspectives towards the Black Sea region

As the previous section suggests, Romania's strategic culture has been decisively shaped by the "unipolar moment," the post-Cold War era in which the United States enjoyed an unrivalled status within a unipolar system of international relations (Ghincea, 2021, p. 4). With its admission to NATO and the EU, Romania has embedded itself in the "liberal international order," and since then, it has been trying to counterbalance Russian influence by relying on the hegemonic power of the United States. In the context of Black Sea geopolitics, this has manifested in the various strategic initiatives that Bucharest has launched to internationalise the Black Sea. Romania has also demonstrated that it prioritises its security alliance with the United States over opportunities offered by the changing distribution of economic power in the world: as US-Chinese relations further deteriorated at the end of the 2010s, it took multiple steps to curtail investments coming from China, which by then had significantly strengthened its economic influence in the Black Sea region (Sanders, 2021, pp. 214–215).

The strategic perspective described above is difficult to reconcile with the regional agenda represented by Turkey, the strongest NATO power on the shore of the Black Sea. One of the most important geopolitical dynamics of the wider region following the Millennium was the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. In his highly influential 2001 book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (*Strategic depth*), former Turkish foreign and prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2016, p. 256) outlined that the institutionalisation of Black Sea regional cooperation can only succeed if Ankara and Moscow leave behind their Cold War reflexes and start to view the region as an area of shared economic interests. In the subsequent period, relations between the two countries developed accordingly, as they recalibrated their previously conflictual relationship in favour of a mutually beneficial economic partnership (Glebov, 2009, p. 351), which became particularly intense in the energy sector and resulted in Turkey's increasing dependence on Russian gas. Besides economic pragmatism, Ankara and Moscow moved closer together mainly because of their shared frustration with the United States and their mutual perception of being excluded by the EU (Hill and Taspinar, 2006, p. 351).

Especially after the US invasion of Iraq, which was a dangerous precedent of the US strategic overreach from the Turkish point of view, Ankara has embraced the discourse of "regional ownership," a concept identifying the rise of exclusive regional integrations as an alternative to a unipolar world order supervised by a global hegemon (Lechner, 2024, p. 79). In the words of Davutoğlu, the idea of regional ownership refers to the aspiration to "find regional solutions to regional problems, rather than waiting for other actors

from outside the region to impose their own solutions” (Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). To realise the concept in the Black Sea region, Turkey has launched multiple initiatives⁵ aiming to enhance cooperation among littoral states while limiting the regional involvement of the United States and other outside actors through the strict implementation of the Montreux Convention.⁶ Unsurprisingly, Turkey’s commitment to enforcing the Convention was warmly welcomed by Russia, which is vehemently opposed to further Western intrusion in the region (Proedrou, 2018, p. 451).

This shows that both Romania and Turkey have made efforts to construct and strengthen the “regionness” of the Black Sea area. Their approaches, however, differ based on their contrasting views on whether a stronger US presence would stabilise or destabilise the region. Their perspectives started to seemingly converge only after Russia’s direct intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2015. The Russian military operation to secure the Assad regime was perceived by Ankara as an incursion into its sphere of influence and an obstacle to the realisation of its plans in Syria. Rising geopolitical tension triggered a breakdown of Turkish–Russian relations in late November 2015 and resulted in a 7-month-long bilateral crisis (Çelikpala, 2019, pp. 21–23). The clash with Russia led to a dramatic, albeit temporary, shift in Turkey’s Black Sea policy. In May 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan echoed the arguments of Romanian officials, as he stated that NATO must respond to Russian revisionism by extending its military presence in the region, otherwise the Black Sea would turn into a Russian lake (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, 2016). Accordingly, Ankara did not oppose Romania’s aforementioned initiative to establish a Black Sea flotilla under the aegis of the Alliance. It should also be understood in this context why some authors hypothesised at the time that the trilateral cooperative framework established by the governments of Romania, Poland, and Turkey in 2012 would conceivably evolve into a more robust multilateral regional entente, which could redraw the balance of power in the wider Black Sea region (Balcer, 2015). In other words, Ankara’s brawl with Moscow over Syria raised the prospect that Turkey could be integrated into the regional cooperation framework that emerged after the annexation of Crimea, under the leadership of Romania and Poland, to contain Russia.

While Romania’s strategic alliance with Poland intensified in the second half of the decade, the Romanian and Turkish strategic perspectives started to drift apart once again in the summer of 2016, as Turkey normalised its relations with Russia at an unexpected pace, while its relations with the United States and the EU deteriorated dramatically. The change was primarily driven by developments in Turkish domestic affairs. In the wake of a failed coup attempt against the president in July 2016, the elimination of political opponents and the consolidation of power became Erdoğan’s absolute priority, which prompted him to move further away from Western democratic values and forge closer ties with Vladimir Putin’s autocratic regime (Cagaptay, 2023). Turkey’s foreign policy, meanwhile, has become more assertive, particularly in the context of searching for autonomous action in the regions surrounding Asia Minor, sometimes in sharp confrontation with the interests of its NATO allies (Lazăr and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022, p. 179). Following their rapprochement, Turkey also managed to establish a working collaboration with Russia in the Syrian warzone, after it sidelined its earlier aim of overthrowing the Assad regime and shifted its strategic focus to preventing the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous entity in Northern Syria (Cheterian, 2023, pp. 1276–1277). The benefits of preserving its restored

⁵A notable example is *Black Sea Harmony*, a naval operation initiated by Turkey in 2004, which was later joined by the other littoral states. According to Çelikpala and Erşen (2018, p. 75), *Black Sea Harmony* can be interpreted mainly as a response to NATO’s plans to expand its military influence into the Black Sea through Operation Active Endeavour.

⁶In 2008, after the outbreak of the Russo-Georgian war, Turkey invoked the Montreux Convention to prevent two American ships from entering the Black Sea via the Turkish STRAITS (Çelikpala and Erşen, 2018, p. 76).

partnership with Russia drove Turkey to return to its previous Black Sea approach, which is based on the assumption that regional stability can be maintained through the appeasement of Russia and the exclusion of outside actors (Gaber, 2020, p. 48). Accordingly, Turkey expressed concerns regarding NATO's decision to extend its military presence in the region in February 2017 and held a joint naval exercise with Russia 2 months later (Çelikpala and Erşen, 2018, p. 84).

Despite the divergencies in their strategic perspectives, relations between Romania and Turkey developed positively during the last two decades, especially in the economic field. The two governments have also recognised the need to maintain close collaboration in the security field. They signed a Strategic Partnership Declaration in 2011 and since then have been regularly discussing security issues on a bilateral basis as well as in the framework of the Romania–Poland–Turkey trilateral format. Considering Turkey's geopolitical importance and in order not to undermine the fragile cohesion of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, Bucharest has refrained from expressing open criticism towards Turkish foreign policy decisions and sought to find common ground with Ankara (Lazăr and Butnaru-Troncotă, 2022, pp. 178–179). Turkey, on the other hand, has from time to time demonstrated a willingness to support NATO's activities in the Black Sea, as long as they did not violate the Montreux Convention. Most notably, Turkish navy continued to participate in NATO's multinational military exercises in the Black Sea after the Russian annexation of Crimea, including the Romanian-led annual Sea Shield and the United States and Ukraine co-hosted annual Sea Breeze naval drills (Pénzváltó, 2019, p. 91). Nevertheless, the diplomatic statements emphasising harmony between the two states' strategic interests only partially cover the reality.

Romania's engagement in NATO's Black Sea strategy

In his influential book, *The grand chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997, p. 47) identified Turkey as a primarily important geopolitical pivot, which “stabilises the Black Sea region, controls access from it to the Mediterranean Sea, balances Russia in the Caucasus, (...) and serves as the southern anchor for NATO.” During the 2010s, however, the increasingly authoritarian character of Turkish domestic politics, Turkish-US disagreements over the Syrian war, and Ankara's decision to acquire Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile systems despite American objections strengthened the perception in Washington and other Western capitals that Turkey is gradually turning away from the West (Pénzváltó, 2019, p. 87). While the country's withdrawal from NATO remains highly unlikely, Western confidence in Turkey's reliability has weakened, especially after the July 2016 coup attempt. The crisis in Turkish-American relations is also reflected in Turkish public perceptions: according to the annual opinion survey of Kadir Has University, between 2016 and 2022, those within the Turkish population who perceived the United States as a threat to Turkey's security were consistently in the majority (Aydın, n.d.).⁷

In the context of deteriorating Turkish-American relations and rising tensions in the Black Sea, Romania's strategic importance for the United States has increased. As an assessment published by the research service of the American Congress puts it, “Romania's strategic Black Sea location, steadfast commitment to its security partnership with the United States, and shared concerns about Russia make it a key US ally in the region” (Garding, 2022). Grygiel and Mitchell's (2017) influential book, which offers a comprehensive

⁷According to Kadir Has University surveys, the percentage of those who perceived the United States as a threat was 44.1% in 2016, 66.5% in 2017, 60.2% in 2018, 81.3% in 2019, 70% in 2020, and 42.7% in 2022.

geostrategic vision for the United States, is also a testimonial to the shifting perceptions of the United States towards regional players. The authors, both of whom held advisory positions in the first Trump administration, did not envisage any role for Turkey in the US grand strategy. In contrast, they described Romania and Poland as “balancers” who follow a consistent policy of military resistance vis-à-vis Russia (Grygiel and Mitchell, 2017, p. 110) and urged the United States to promote greater military coordination between Bucharest and Warsaw (Grygiel and Mitchell, 2017, p. 172).

It should be noted that Romania possesses a navy with very limited capabilities, compared to that of Turkey and controls only 240 km of the Black Sea coastline,⁸ with Constanța being its only main deep-water port (Delanoe, 2014, p. 377). The country’s strong Atlanticist commitment, its strategically valuable geographical location, and its control over the Danube Delta, however, compensate for its weaknesses and have enabled it to become a new centre of gravity in NATO’s deterrence strategy (Hodges *et al.*, 2020, p. 62). While anti-US and anti-Western sentiments in Turkey intensified after 2016, the pro-Western stance of the political elite in Romania has remained unchanged. As political analyst Colibășanu (2025) points out, until 2024, there was a broad consensus among major Romanian parties in favour of NATO, the EU, and the country’s pro-Western orientation. This elite consensus has also been confirmed by public opinion: according to the annual surveys of GLOBSEC, the public support for the EU and NATO between 2020 and 2024 was consistently above 70%, with the majority identifying the United States, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom as Romania’s most important strategic allies and Russia as the greatest threat to its security (Szicherle, 2024, pp. 7–11).

Another factor that contributed to the growth of Romania’s strategic importance was NATO’s belated willingness to recognise the geopolitical significance of the Black Sea and its surroundings. The organisation’s first summit in the aftermath of Crimea’s annexation did not produce any tangible results concerning the region. It took another 2 years and another summit for NATO to outline the contours of a Black Sea policy and to take more decisive actions (Melvin, 2018, p. 27). The 2016 Warsaw Summit initiated the Tailored Forward Presence strategy, a set of measures tailored to the Black Sea region, aiming to contribute to the Alliance’s strengthened deterrence and defence posture (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], 2016). NATO’s approach towards the region has, thus, shifted in the direction Romania has taken a decade before Crimea’s annexation, which explains the country’s increasingly prominent role in the Alliance’s regional strategy. Between 2015 and 2020, three new NATO headquarters⁹ were opened on Romanian soil. In 2016, the United States initiated the first land-based element of its Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence System at the Deveselu Military Base, located in the south of Romania (Melvin, 2018, p. 33). Meanwhile, the Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base near Constanța has become a crucially important military site, used by the United States as a logistical hub and a platform for power projection (Hodges *et al.*, 2020, p. 44).

At the same time, Romania has been eager to demonstrate that it is not only a platform but also an actor contributing to Europe’s security. Since 2014, it has been playing a central role in multinational naval exercises in the Black Sea, has been the leading advocate for raising the priority of the region, and has become a key part of NATO’s efforts to build a stronger security relationship with Moldova (Melvin, 2018, p. 39). Last but not least, Bucharest has also taken steps to enhance its anti-aircraft capabilities, as part of its

⁸The length of Turkey’s Black Sea coastline is 1,595 km.

⁹Multinational Brigade Southeast in Craiova, Multinational Division Southeast in Bucharest, and Multinational Corps Southeast in Sibiu.

ambitious military modernisation programme, by purchasing the Patriot air defence system and the HIMARS long-range artillery system from the United States (Vişan, 2020).

Romania's role in the dynamics of Black Sea geopolitics amid the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has highlighted the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the Black Sea region. From a territorial point of view, Russia has so far achieved major long-term gains only in southeastern Ukraine, where its forces established a land bridge connecting the Donbas with Crimea (Cropsey *et al.*, 2023, p. 3). The Russian attempts to advance towards Mykolaiv and Odesa after capturing Kherson in the spring of 2022 suggest that Moscow's geostrategic objective would be to conquer the entire northern shore of the Black Sea, turning Ukraine into a landlocked country (Hill and Stent, 2022).

Because of the country's geographical proximity to the war zone, the conflict has radically reduced Romania's level of security. Russian missiles targeting the city of Odesa and Ukraine's Danube port infrastructure landed near the Romanian border (Gardocki, 2023, p. 210). Russian drone parts have also been reportedly found on Romania's territory, indicating a violation of its sovereign airspace (Cropsey *et al.*, 2023, p. 9). In addition, the potential territorial expansion of Russian military aggression represents an existential threat to Moldova, with which Romania has close historical and cultural ties. The combination of the above-mentioned factors prompted Bucharest to give a swift and decisive response. The Romanian political elite condemned the invasion with an overwhelming consensus, which was reinforced by a series of concrete steps taken by the presidential administration and the government. These included the decision to support the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia by the EU, closing the Romanian airspace to Russian aircraft, and blocking the RT television channel and other Russian-funded online news portals (Pieńkowski, 2022). Bucharest also made efforts to further enhance its defence and deterrence capabilities. Five days after the start of the invasion, President Iohannis announced that Romania would increase its defence spending to 2.5% of GDP to modernise its armed forces (Roman, 2022). In line with this objective, Bucharest decided in 2024 to purchase 32 5th-Generation F-35 Lightning II aircraft from the United States (Wesolowsky, 2024).¹⁰

Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Romania has been providing military hardware to Kyiv, which reportedly includes rocket launchers, howitzers, and armoured vehicles (Wesolowsky, 2024). In October 2024, Romania also donated one of its Patriot anti-aircraft missile launchers to Ukraine, which has enhanced the air-defence capabilities of the Ukrainian army (Denisova, 2024). Ukrainian military pilots have been receiving training since September 2024 at a Romanian military air base near the southeastern town of Fetesti (Wesolowsky, 2024). In October 2024, the Romanian parliament approved President Iohannis' proposal to establish a training centre for Ukrainian marines, with the assistance of the United Kingdom (Radchuk, 2024). In this respect, Romania's policies are in line with those of Turkey, as Ankara has also condemned the Russian aggression, upheld Ukraine's territorial integrity, and provided military support to Kyiv (Lechner, 2024).

¹⁰With the \$7.2 billion deal, Romania has become a member of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Programme, from which US President Donald Trump excluded Turkey in 2019 after Ankara received the first parts of the S-400 missile defence system it bought from Russia.

Russia has, apart from a transitional period,¹¹ continuously tried to halt Ukrainian commercial shipments by imposing a naval blockade on Odesa to deprive Kyiv of the revenues needed to continue the war. This has had global ramifications, given that Ukraine is one of the largest grain exporters in the world, whose supplies are crucial for the food security of import-dependent countries in Africa and the Middle East (Scutaru and Watkins, 2024, p. 19). Bucharest responded by contributing to the sustainability of Ukraine's economy amid the war, serving as a crucial transit hub for Ukrainian grain exports (Radu, 2022). By enabling Ukraine to access world markets through its ports, Romania has not only helped Kyiv but also contributed to maintaining global supply chains.¹²

Russia's efforts to restrict the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea are also intertwined with the issue of energy security. Since the start of the invasion, the EU has been seeking to rapidly reduce its dependence on Russian gas and oil by encouraging the development of renewable energy sources and looking for alternative major suppliers (Kardaś, 2023). In this context, the offshore natural gas fields discovered in the early 2010s in Romania's exclusive economic zone (EEZ)¹³ in the Black Sea have become even more valuable. The exploitation of these deposits will not only ensure Romania's energy security but can also support southeast European countries like Moldova and Bulgaria, which are still heavily dependent on imports from Russia. The largest deposit in Romania's EEZ is the Neptun Deep Block,¹⁴ with an estimated 100 billion cubic meters of natural gas reserve. The drilling of the production wells is planned to begin in 2025, while the first delivery of gas is expected in 2027 (OMVPetrom, n.d.). Another noteworthy initiative aimed at improving Europe's energy security is the EU-backed quadrilateral cooperation of Hungary, Romania, Georgia, and Azerbaijan to build a 1,195-km-long underwater power cable from Azerbaijan to Romania through the Black Sea to help Europe transition away from Russian energy sources (Lancaster, 2023, p. 15).

Given Russia's apparent disinterest in European energy projects designed to weaken its geoeconomic influence, Romanian security experts fear the increasing risk of Russian hybrid warfare actions aimed at damaging energy infrastructure (Cropsey *et al.*, 2023, p. 4). These concerns are indeed justified, as Russia is reported to have previously committed acts of sabotage on Baltic undersea cables (Quinville *et al.*, 2024). In addition, the ambiguity as to whether a hybrid attack in a member state's EEZ could trigger NATO's Article 5 on collective defence reduces the Alliance's deterrent capability.¹⁵ Consequently, Romania has a vested interest in the reinforcement of naval presence in the Black Sea by the United States and other NATO allies to deter Russia from restricting the freedom of navigation and damaging critical energy infrastructure. This, however, has not been possible since 28 February 2022, when Turkey, invoking the Montreux Convention, closed the Turkish straits to warships of all coastal and non-coastal states.

¹¹Under the terms of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, an international agreement signed in Istanbul in July 2022, Russia agreed to allow Ukrainian grain shipments to pass through the Black Sea. In July 2023, Russia unilaterally withdrew from the initiative.

¹²The importance of Romania's role in this regard is demonstrated by the 14 million metric tons of grain Ukraine is estimated to have exported through the port of Constanța in 2023 (Wesolowsky, 2024).

¹³As defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the exclusive economic zone is a maritime area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, which extends up to 200 nautical miles from a state's baseline. In its EEZ, the coastal state has sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage natural resources. It is, however, not considered to be a part of the state's sovereign territory.

¹⁴The exploration, development, and production rights for the Neptun Deep Block are owned by OMV Petrom, a Romanian integrated oil company, controlled by Austria's OMV, and Romgaz, a gas production company, 70% owned by the Romanian government, each title holder with a 50% stake (OMVPetrom, n.d.).

¹⁵In the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration, NATO (2024) members reiterated that "hybrid operations against Allies could reach the level of an armed attack and could lead the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5." The document, however, does not clarify whether this applies if the attack takes place in a member state's EEZ, which is not considered its sovereign territory.

Ankara's decision to close the straits on these terms¹⁶ fits perfectly into Turkey's "regional ownership" doctrine and has affected the dynamics of the war in two ways. On the one hand, it prevented Russia from reinforcing its Black Sea fleet, which has been severely weakened by Ukrainian strikes targeting the ports of Crimea. On the other hand, it blocked warships of the United States and other non-littoral countries from entering the Black Sea, which means that since February 2022, NATO's naval presence there has been reduced to Turkish, Romanian, and Bulgarian units (Isachenko and Swistek, 2023, p. 4). By taking advantage of its geographical location, Turkey is, thus, pursuing two objectives simultaneously: to counterbalance Russia by supporting Ukraine, and to consolidate its own position by limiting NATO's naval presence (Gaber, 2024, p. 6). At the same time, Turkey has maintained its economic collaboration with Russia, which continues to be its number one supplier of natural gas. The Turkish Stream pipeline, connecting the two countries via the Black Sea, not only supplies gas to the Turkish market but also remains the only viable alternative for Russian gas supplies to Europe, since the neutralisation of the Nord Stream pipelines and the termination of transit through Ukraine (Ögütçü, 2025).¹⁷

The possibility of Turkey changing its position on the straits before the war ends appears highly unlikely (Gaber, 2024, p. 11). Consequently, in the absence of the naval presence of its non-littoral allies, Romania is obliged to be satisfied with enhancing its naval cooperation with Turkey and Bulgaria. Ankara's autonomous policy has, thus, paradoxically both highlighted the differences between Turkish and Romanian strategic perspectives and provided the impetus for closer collaboration between them. With regard to the latter, the first major step was taken in January 2024, when a memorandum of understanding was signed by Ankara, Bucharest, and Sofia for the formation of a trilateral initiative to eliminate the danger of floating mines in the Black Sea, stemming from the war in Ukraine (Buyuk, 2024). As Turkey and Romania are both interested in rapidly developing their natural gas exploitation projects (Kacziba, 2020), the next logical step could be to extend their naval cooperation to include joint missions to protect critical infrastructure in their EEZs (Scutaru and Watkins, 2024, p. 14).

The effectiveness of Turkish-Romanian collaboration in the Black Sea depends, at least partially, on how Turkey's regional policy will evolve in the future. As mentioned earlier, a radical change is hardly possible. Nevertheless, recent geopolitical developments in the Middle East can influence its direction in some respects. One factor that has made Turkey cautious vis-à-vis Russia in the Black Sea in the post-2016 period is that it was only able to assert its security interests in northern Syria with Moscow's consent. The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the expected evacuation of Russian forces from Syria would, however, create a new geopolitical environment. In the new environment, the United States will be the only major external power in Syria, and Turkey would have to negotiate with the United States if it wants to conduct further military interventions in the Kurdish-controlled parts of the country. Arguably, this could raise the prospect of Ankara moving to some extent towards the Black Sea perspective that Bucharest represents. At the same time, Turkey remains interested in maintaining its privileged economic partnership with Russia, which continues to limit the possibilities for strategic cooperation with Romania.

¹⁶According to the Montreux Convention, Turkey had the option to close the straits only to warships of the belligerent parties.

¹⁷In January 2025, Ukraine reportedly carried out an unsuccessful attack on the pipeline. Up to the time of writing, Turkey has not yet responded. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the incident seriously tests its strategic partnership with Kyiv.

Conclusions

The first conclusion of the study concerns Romania's foreign and security policy towards the Black Sea and its position in regional power dynamics. Over the last two decades, Bucharest has pursued an active regional policy centred on the dual objectives of facilitating the region's integration into the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and containing Russian revisionism. As the above analysis demonstrates, Romania's foreign and security policy in the Black Sea has been shaped by both external (structural) and internal (domestic) variables. The most important structural factor is the power dynamics produced by the strategic behaviour of two great powers. Russia, aspiring to become a regional hegemon, has been taking increasingly aggressive steps since 2008 to gradually dismantle the post-Soviet regional order and extend its dominance in the Black Sea and its surroundings. Meanwhile, the United States, which assumed the role of global hegemon after the Cold War, increasingly sees the Black Sea region as a critical geostrategic flank in the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. In the period following the illegal annexation of Crimea, Washington reinforced its military presence and enhanced NATO's deterrence posture in the region, but remained reluctant to directly confront Moscow in the Black Sea or to pressure Turkey into modifying its strict adherence to the Montreux Convention. Due to its geographical location, Romania is inevitably at the centre of the structural dynamics affecting the region. Bucharest's strategic responses, however, have also been shaped by domestic factors, in particular the perception, shared by the political elite and most of the population, that Russia poses a direct threat to Romania and that the country's security can only be guaranteed by its pro-Western orientation and close strategic alliance with the United States and Western European powers.

The above-mentioned external and internal factors have led to Romania's emergence as a key regional ally of the United States and a stable pillar of NATO in the wider Black Sea region. The future role of the country, however, has become precarious due to changes currently unfolding at both structural and domestic levels. Donald Trump's return to power has increased global geopolitical uncertainty and shifted the world towards a post-hegemonic order marked by the intensification of great power competition and the re-emergence of spheres of influence (Toft, 2025). Meanwhile, in Romania, a widespread and deep-rooted frustration over increasing social inequalities and the electorate's disillusionment with mainstream political parties (Dumitrescu, 2024, p. 45) led to the growing popularity of right-wing populist, anti-establishment political movements, which challenge the consensus on the country's commitment to the West by advocating for a "sovereignist" foreign and security policy inspired by Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. Although neither Călin Georgescu, banned from standing for re-election, nor George Simion, who lost the May 2025 elections to the anti-establishment liberal Nicușor Dan, could win the presidency, Romania's political stability has been shattered, which can have a negative impact on the country's strategic outlook in the future.

The second conclusion of the study concerns the complex relationship between the Black Sea policies of Romania and Turkey. As the analysis pointed out, the regional interests of the two states converge in some respects. Neither Bucharest nor Ankara is interested in a scenario in which Ukraine is transformed into a landlocked country and Russia gains direct control over the entirety of the Black Sea's northern shores. This explains the military support both states have been providing to Kyiv. In addition, Romania and Turkey have a mutual interest in the stability of the region, the freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, and the security of critical energy infrastructure, all of which are threatened by Russia's aggressive pursuit of regional dominance. These mutual interests drive the two countries to engage in joint military exercises, maritime security operations, and regional diplomatic platforms.

The convergence reflects common systemic pressures stemming from Russian revisionism, great power rivalry, and regional instability. As the analysis has shown, however, the strategic approaches of the two countries towards the region differ sharply in several ways, which highlight the influence of internal variables on their foreign policy behaviour. The differences emerge, above all, from diverging threat perceptions. While Bucharest views Russia as a direct threat, Ankara perceives Russian revisionism as a strategic challenge that endangers Turkey's privileged position in the regional order that emerged after break up of the Soviet Union. From the Turkish perspective, the presence of Kurdish militias in northeastern Syria poses a more direct threat, and Ankara needed Moscow's consent to deal with the issue in the period before the collapse of the Assad regime. In addition to that, the increasingly authoritarian character of the Erdoğan regime, Ankara's desire for strategic autonomy from the West, and the country's dependence on Russian energy resources have also encouraged Turkey not to antagonise Russia.

The two countries also disagree on the assessment of a greater American involvement in regional affairs. Bucharest sees a stronger US military, political, and strategic presence as essential to deter Russia, guarantee NATO credibility, and anchor Romania's security in the increasingly volatile geopolitical environment of the region. This explains the country's consistent advocacy over the past two decades for permanent NATO and US troop deployments and naval operations in the Black Sea. In contrast, Ankara is concerned that the permanent naval presence and increased strategic assertiveness of the United States could escalate tensions with Russia, undermine the regional *status quo*, and decrease Turkey's influence over regional affairs. Following the doctrine of regional ownership, Turkey has been limiting the military presence of the United States and other extra-regional powers in the Black Sea through its control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, codified by the Montreux Convention. The relationship between the Black Sea strategies of Romania and Turkey can, therefore, be described as a mixture of convergence, rooted in common security interests, and divergence, fuelled by distinct threat perceptions, domestic political dynamics, and regional ambitions.

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