Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

Published by the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, Calif.
© Copyright 2020 RAND Corporation
RAND® is a registered trademark.

Cover: Cover graphic by Dori Walker, adapted from a photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Weston Jones.

Limited Print and Electronic Distribution Rights
This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law. This representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for personal use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please visit www.rand.org/pubs/permissions.

The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

Support RAND
Make a tax-deductible charitable contribution at www.rand.org/giving/contribute

www.rand.org
The Black Sea region is a central locus of the competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe. The Kremlin is seeking to establish a sphere of privileged influence over neighboring countries in the region and limit their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while enhancing Russia’s regime stability and improving military capabilities for homeland defense and power projection.

This report documents research and analysis conducted as part of a project titled Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security Strategies. The report presents an assessment of Russia’s overall strategy in the Black Sea region and how Moscow is using various instruments of influence and its military capabilities to advance that strategy. The authors review how NATO members and partner states in Southeastern Europe and the Caucasus view Russia’s activities, areas of convergence and divergence in those nations’ interests, and areas for potential regional cooperation. The authors then present options for U.S. and NATO strategies and military actions that could enhance stability and deterrence in this critical region. The report’s findings will be of interest to policymakers, military planners, legislators, and defense analysts in the United States, southeastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and other NATO and partner countries.

This research was sponsored by U.S. European Command’s Russia Strategic Initiative and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

The research for this report was completed in May 2020 and underwent security review with the sponsor and the Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review before public release. Human Subject Protections (HSP) protocols have been used in this report in accordance with the appropriate statutes and Department of Defense regulations governing HSP. The views of the sources rendered anonymously in the report are solely their own and do not represent the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.
For more information on the RAND International Security and Defense Policy Center, see www.rand.org/nsrd/isdp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).
## Contents

Preface ................................................................. iii  
Figures and Tables ................................................... vii  
Summary ............................................................... ix  
Acknowledgments .................................................... xv  
Abbreviations ......................................................... xvii  

### CHAPTER ONE

**Introduction**  
*Stephen J. Flanagan.* .............................................. 1
Complex Political and Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region  
Methodology .......................................................... 5  
Organization of This Report ........................................ 6

### CHAPTER TWO

**The Black Sea Region in Russia’s Worldview**  
*Stephen J. Flanagan and the Project Team.* .................. 9
How Russian Leaders View the World  
How Russian Leaders View the West  
How Russian Leaders View Russia Itself  
Trajectories in Russia’s Worldview  
Implications for Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region  
Framing the Multidimensional Contest in the Black Sea Region

### CHAPTER THREE

**Russian Measures of Influence Short of Force**  
*Geoffrey Kirkwood and Dara Massicot.* ....................... 27
Media-Based Influences ............................................. 27
Energy Politics and Economic Influences ....................... 34
Clandestine and Covert Activities  
Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy
CHAPTER FOUR
The Military Role in Russia’s Black Sea Strategy
   Clint Reach .......................................................... 47
Russia’s Interests, Objectives, and Strategy in the Black Sea Region 48
Trends in Russian Military Capabilities .......................... 54
Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy .......... 73

CHAPTER FIVE
Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish Views on Russian Strategy and Posture
   Anika Binnendijk and Katherine Costello ....................... 75
Romania: Consistent Apprehension About Russia’s Intentions .... 76
Bulgaria: Caution in Balancing Concern with Opportunity ...... 81
Turkey: Concerns Overridden by Interests, for Now .......... 86
Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy ............ 90

CHAPTER SIX
Western Partners on the Black Sea’s Northwestern Shore: Ukraine and Moldova
   Irina A. Chindea ...................................................... 95
Ukraine: Seeking Stronger Ties to the West, Hindered by Aggressive Russian Interference .... 98
Moldova: Western Partnership Limited by Internal Divisions and Russian Pressure ... 115
Potential U.S. and NATO Actions in Ukraine and Moldova to Support a Countervailing Western Strategy 124

CHAPTER SEVEN
The South Caucasus and Black Sea Security
   Stephen J. Flanagan, Geoffrey Kirkwood, and the Project Team 127
Georgia: Euro-Atlantic Aspirations .................................. 127
Azerbaijan: Seeking Integration with the West but Susceptible to Russian Pressures 134
Armenia: Russian Ally Interested in Some Western Ties .......... 140

CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusions and Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy
   Stephen J. Flanagan .................................................. 147
Russia’s Intentions, Capabilities, and Redlines .................. 147
Recommended Elements of a Countervailing Western Strategy 149

References ................................................................. 153
Figures and Tables

Figures

S.1. Flashpoints in the Black Sea Region .................................................. xiii
4.1. Regional Naval and Air Facilities That Supported the Mediterranean Squadron, 1968 ................................................................. 56
4.2. Notional Employment of the SSC-5 (Bastion-P)................................. 67

Tables

4.1. Russian Trade with Black Sea States, 2016 ........................................... 49
4.3. Warship Additions to Russia’s Black Sea Maritime Forces, 2000–2018 .... 59
4.4. Projected Black Sea Fleet Warship and Submarine Order of Battle by 2025 .. 61
Summary

Issue

The Black Sea region is a central locus of the competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe. The region experienced two decades of simmering conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus even before Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea and initiation of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Russia has used military force against countries in the region four times since 2008. The Kremlin is seeking to establish a sphere of privileged influence over neighboring countries in the region and limit their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures while enhancing Russia’s regime stability and improving military capabilities for homeland defense and power projection. Despite this instability and the conflicts in the Black Sea region, U.S. and European officials and analysts have not given nearly as much attention to the region’s security challenges as they have given to such challenges in the Baltic region of Northern Europe.

In this report, we (the authors of the various chapters of this report) assess Russia’s strategy in the Black Sea region and how Moscow is employing a variety of nonmilitary and military instruments to advance its goals. We then consider how the region’s three North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) and five NATO partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) perceive and are responding to Russia’s activities and where those countries’ interests align and diverge. Drawing on this analysis, we identify possible elements of a countervailing Western strategy to protect mutual interests and then consider what each country might contribute to support elements of that strategy.

Approach

Our assessment of Russia’s strategy in the Black Sea region and how it is employing a variety of nonmilitary and military instruments to advance its goals is derived from an extensive review of Russian- and English-language sources, including strategic guidance documents, official Russian policy statements, and writings by Russian and international military analysts, as well as direct engagement with Russian officials and experts in private discussions and at major conferences in Moscow and other venues.
Our analysis of allied and partner perceptions and responses draws on insights from a review of European and North American literature, including a substantial body of previous RAND Corporation reports on the region. The analysis is also informed by discussions with civilian officials, military leaders, scholars, and journalists in Europe and the United States, as well as a March 21–22, 2019, workshop in Bucharest that brought together 24 experts and former officials from Europe and the United States for a dialogue on issues relevant to this aspect of our research. We then used a framework of comparative national interests to identify the scope for cooperation among U.S. allies and partners to protect mutual interests in the face of Russian interference and aggression.

Conclusions

The Black Sea region is an intersection of several core Russian concerns and a critical nexus for defending the Russian homeland, maintaining a sphere of influence, shaping the future of Europe, and projecting power into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Russian Strategy and Instruments to Advance That Strategy

- In Russian strategy, countries close to Russia’s borders are considered integral to the country’s security. Ukraine and Georgia, including the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, form the innermost circle of concern, but Moscow also strives to maintain leverage over Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and limit development of their ties to the West.
- Russia seeks to maintain a sphere of privileged influence in the Black Sea region through use of informational, diplomatic, economic, energy, clandestine, and military instruments. It also uses these tools to foster divisions among NATO allies and to thwart anti-Russia policies.
- Russia uses hybrid tactics when overt military action is too costly or risky. Intelligence operatives, special forces, military personnel, and private contractors have engaged in irregular warfare in Ukraine since 2014. But conventional military capabilities provide the essential underpinning for achieving Russia’s regional goals.
- Russia’s military buildup in Crimea, modernization of the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla, and increased ground forces in the Southern Military District are designed to secure Russia’s vital southwestern flank from an attack, dissuade and intimidate neighbors, and support wider power projection.
- The Black Sea Fleet received new priority in the 2011–2020 State Armaments Program, which included six new submarines, three frigates, and other smaller
surface vessels; however, there have been procurement delays. Long-range strike capabilities have grown, but individual platforms have limited salvos. The State Armaments Program for 2027 calls for qualitative improvements but a quantitative decline, given budget constraints and other requirements. It includes five corvettes and up to 12 small-missile ships (some with long-range strike capability)—not a force capable of operating far beyond Russia’s borders.

- In the annexation of Crimea, Russia recovered a small fraction of the Soviet Union’s strategic air defense space. Crimea provides a two-echelon outer layer of defense against an air attack emanating from the Eastern Mediterranean. And if Russia’s coastal defense brigades perform as designed in a contested environment, they pose a significant threat to enemy maritime forces within range.

- Russia has limited warfighting capabilities for large-scale operations in both the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean regions. Changes to ground-force posture provide the ability to move large combat units rapidly into Ukraine. Available and planned forces will be able to deal with the most likely conflicts in the Caucasus and Ukraine.

- The threshold for employing forces in non-NATO territory adjacent to Russia is arguably low. But Ukraine’s containment of Russia’s military incursion into eastern Ukraine and the West’s response, including painful economic sanctions on Russian entities and military assistance to Ukraine, might have increased that threshold. Through nonmilitary and perhaps military means, Russia will oppose any formal political or military integration with the West by the countries along its periphery. For Russia (and the Soviet Union), losing a perceived ally to the West has been a *casus belli* (i.e., act provoking or justifying war) but has not always led to military intervention.

- An adverse change in the political status of Russian interests is a reliable, though insufficient, indicator of possible Russian military intervention in the Black Sea region. NATO’s anticipated response would be a factor.

**Perspectives, Interests, and Capabilities of NATO and Other Partners**

The region’s three NATO allies have some overlapping and some divergent views of and policies toward Russia. The strategies of the five other countries in the region are shaped by varying interests in cooperating with the West and dependence on or fear of Russia. In particular,

- Romania is wary of Russia’s intentions and military capabilities. And although it is largely resistant to malign influence, it gives high priority to countering Russian hybrid threats.

- Bulgaria is committed to Western integration but is subject to various Russian influences, which often leads it to balance relations between Moscow and the West.
• Turkey still values the NATO guarantee but is willing to impede Allied initiatives and is systematically balancing relations between Russia and the West.
• The Romanian government favors more U.S. and NATO military presence and activities in the region. The Bulgarians are reluctant but likely would selectively support some additional presence. The Turks oppose such a move—fearing damage to relations with Russia at a precarious time—and believe that they can still manage Black Sea security cooperatively with Moscow.
• Ukraine and Georgia are committed to Western integration and deeper defense cooperation with the United States and other allies, but they are constrained by active armed conflicts.
• Moldova had a divided government that was seeking a middle road between Russia and the West before reorienting toward Moscow in 2019, but the nation has contributed to Western exercises and welcomed support on military reforms.
• Armenia is dependent on Russian security patronage but is open to diplomatic and limited security cooperation with the West.
• Azerbaijan pursues practical, measured relations with Russia and the West but can play a limited role in reducing Southern Europe’s reliance on Russian energy.

Recommendations

When developing a collective Western strategy and plan for engagement in the Black Sea region, leaders should consider assessments of Moscow’s redlines, asymmetries in Russian interests and regional military capabilities, and the commitment and risk tolerance of allies and partners. Moscow’s redlines are not known with precision and may shift over time, as they did when Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova signed association agreements with the European Union. A sustainable Western strategy to counter Russian aggression, protect common interests, and foster regional stability could include the following:

• selective and proactive responses to Russian influence measures, highlighting the benefits of Western integration rather than seeking to discredit pervasive false narratives
• redoubled NATO and European Union efforts to help countries in the Black Sea region counter diverse threats, including informational, cyber, economic, clandestine, and hybrid threats
• strong support for compliance with international laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Montreux Convention, that assure freedom of navigation and contribute to economic development and regional stability
• a more robust conventional deterrent posture, beyond the NATO Tailored Forward Presence—although it need not match Russian capabilities; it could include expanded U.S. and NATO naval presence and exercises, as well as further integration of existing maritime capabilities, asymmetric responses, and the deployment of advanced air and coastal defense systems in Romania and possibly Bulgaria to counter Russian missile threats

• continued security assistance to strengthen partner resilience and self-defense capabilities, backed by allied cohesion, which can temper Russian aggression (as seen in Georgia since 2008 and Ukraine since 2014)

• more-effective use of flexible multilateral partnerships and existing mechanisms for subregional cooperation, such as the South Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process.

Figure S.1
Flashpoints in the Black Sea Region
Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many officials, military officers, experts, and journalists from Russia, Southeastern Europe, and the United States who shared their insights on the Black Sea region. We are grateful to U.S. European Command’s Russia Strategic Initiative for sponsoring this project and particularly to Kenneth Stolworthy, director; Col David W. Woodworth, former chief of research; and Jules Silberberg, senior strategic adviser. Our research was enriched by partnering with Alina Inayeh, director of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation and the Bucharest office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, and Mircea Geoana, then president of the Aspen Institute of Romania, to orchestrate a March 2019 workshop in Bucharest that brought together 24 experts and former officials from throughout the Black Sea region to consider the challenges posed by Russia and common interests that could form the basis of a countervailing Western strategy. In addition, this report benefited from insightful peer reviews by William Courtney, adjunct senior fellow at the RAND Corporation and executive director of the RAND Business Leaders Forum, and Jeffrey Mankoff, distinguished research fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, Center for Strategic Research at National Defense University.

At RAND, Catherine M. Dale, who was a member of the project team at the outset, provided valuable insights on Russian strategic thinking, drawing on dialogues with Russian academics and officials. We greatly valued the support of several individuals in the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the National Defense Research Institute, including Christine Wormuth, director, and Michael McNerney, associate director. Mark Cozad, co-lead for RAND support to the Russia Strategic Initiative, also provided helpful advice. We are also very grateful to Cecile St. Julien for her support during the planning and execution of the research and to Allison Kerns for her superb efforts in editing and finalizing the report.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A2/AD</td>
<td>anti-access/area denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASCM</td>
<td>anti-ship cruise missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bcm</td>
<td>billion cubic centimeters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAA</td>
<td>Combined Arms Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>Commonwealth of Independent States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSTO</td>
<td>Collective Security Treaty Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCFTA</td>
<td>deep and comprehensive free trade area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRU</td>
<td>Glavnoye razvedyvatel’noye upravleniye (Main Intelligence Directorate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACM</td>
<td>land-attack cruise missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR</td>
<td>Motorized Rifle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATO</td>
<td>North Atlantic Treaty Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PVO</td>
<td>Voyska protivovozdushnoy oborony (Air Defense Forces, Soviet Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>surface-to-air missile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One

Introduction

Stephen J. Flanagan

The Black Sea region is a central locus of the competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe. The region experienced two decades of simmering conflicts even before Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and support for the separatist insurgency and subsequent military intervention in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Russia has used military and irregular forces against countries in the Black Sea region four times since 2008. The region figures prominently in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s overarching goals to restore the influence and control along Russia’s periphery that were lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union and to limit Western influences and the integration of regional states into the Euro-Atlantic community. However, despite the instability and conflicts in the Black Sea region, U.S. and European officials and analysts have not given nearly as much attention to its security challenges as they have given to such challenges in the Baltic region of Northern Europe.

In this report, we (the authors of the various chapters) assess Russia’s strategy in the region and how Moscow is employing a variety of nonmilitary and military instruments to advance its goals. We then consider how the national interests of the region’s three North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) and five NATO partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) align and diverge. Drawing on this analysis, we identify possible elements of a countervailing Western strategy to protect mutual interests and counter Russian malign influence and aggression in the region.

Complex Political and Security Dynamics in the Black Sea Region

The occupation and militarization of Crimea are central to achieving Russia’s goals of securing its southwestern borders; enhancing its influence over neighboring states; and providing a platform for regional power projection, from which long-range cruise missiles and coastal defense systems can more effectively threaten Western forces throughout the Black Sea and—to some extent—beyond. These and other military developments in the region since 2015 have provided Russia with a more effective anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) network to protect various interests. Having a foothold around the
Black Sea supports Russian interests well beyond the region’s geographic limits. Indeed, the Black Sea region is the springboard, and the Turkish Straits are the gateway, to Russian military power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. It is also the nexus for influencing energy economics in the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Southeastern Europe—and on into the heart of the European Union (EU).

The eight other countries in the Black Sea region have longstanding and complex ties with Russia. Each of the three NATO allies has been pursuing somewhat differing policies toward Russia while maintaining broad cohesion with NATO’s strategy and military posture. The five NATO partners have been forging independent national identities and seeking closer ties, to varying degrees, with the broader Euro-Atlantic region while managing relations with Moscow that have ranged from cooperative to active military conflict.

NATO Allies
Although Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1952, its relations with Russia have gone through cycles of cooperation and heightened tensions in the competition for influence in the region. Nevertheless, given Turkey’s disagreements with the United States and Europe on several issues and the requirement to cooperate with Moscow to advance Turkish goals in Syria (where Russia is the dominant power), Ankara has been balancing its Alliance relations with deepening diplomatic, economic, energy, and military ties with Moscow. Bulgaria, which is a former member of the Warsaw Pact and did not join NATO until 2004, still has strong economic, energy, and cultural ties with Russia. These factors, along with internal political differences, have led Sofia to pursue a cautious balancing strategy of maintaining close cooperation with NATO while avoiding actions that could cause the relationship with Moscow to become contentious. Romania, which had arms-length relations with Moscow during its Communist period, has proven to be a stalwart NATO ally over the past two decades, wary of Russian intentions and willing to take actions—such as agreeing to the deployment of NATO missile defense systems and regular rotational deployments of NATO forces on its territory—that have triggered Moscow’s ire.

Ukraine and Moldova
Just north of the Black Sea, Ukraine and Moldova have become a de facto buffer zone between Russia and many NATO and EU members, but this geostrategic situation has become increasingly perilous. Both Ukraine and Moldova are internally divided because parts of the populations there consider Russian their native language and have cultural and political affinities to Moscow. But divisions in Ukraine have weakened since Russia’s aggression in 2014 and the subsequent decline in economic links with Russia. As both Ukraine and Moldova have sought to deepen cooperation with the West, Moscow has pursued a variety of political, economic, energy, and military actions to keep them in its sphere of influence.
Russia’s attempts to regain control over its periphery have been most forceful in Ukraine, which remains a particularly neuralgic issue in Russian domestic politics. Because Ukraine is Russia’s second-largest trading partner and had a military-industrial complex previously intertwined with Russia’s, Moscow has moved to halt the fitful steps of various Ukrainian governments toward integrating with the EU and has instead sought support for the Eurasian Economic Union. After NATO leaders declared in 2008 that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members of NATO,” Moscow moved to preclude that course for Ukraine through political means in 2010 and then by force after the Euromaidan revolution of 2013–2014. Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 trampled the norms of the post–Cold War order in Europe, and its support for the ongoing separatist conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine left more than 13,000 people killed and as many as 30,000 wounded between April 2014 and early 2019. Nevertheless, Ukraine pressed ahead in signing an association agreement with the EU and has continued to deepen its political and military cooperation with NATO. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reaffirmed these goals after his April 2019 election with the support of a sizable majority in the parliament.

Ethnic tensions in Moldova erupted violently in 1992 in Transnistria, a Russian-dominated area on Moldova’s eastern border with Ukraine. The fighting over the status of Transnistria resulted in more than 800 dead and ended in a ceasefire in July 1992, when the Russian 14th Army took control of the territory from Moldova—and maintains that control today. Tensions in Transnistria flared up again as the conflict in Ukraine unfolded and as Kyiv took steps to limit the transit of Russian forces to Transnistria. Concerns about Russian pressures, along with internal political divisions, have led Moldova to take a cautious approach to relations with the EU and NATO. When Moldova signed an association agreement with the EU in 2014, including a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA), the Kremlin restricted Moldova’s access to the Russian market and threatened to curtail energy flows. Moldovan President Igor Dodon came to office in 2016 with overt pro-Russia policies, then shifted to what he called a pro-Moldova stance, underscoring the country’s neutrality and focus on Moldovan national interests. However, since a late 2019 change in government, Moldovan policies have reoriented toward Moscow. Moldova has also framed its cooperation with NATO as designed to advance the country’s defense and security sector reforms.

**Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia**

The three small states between the Black and Caspian Seas—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—have experienced considerable internal political challenges and interstate and ethnic conflicts since they gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Georgia has made substantial, though uneven, democratic progress but suffered from repeated Russian aggression and support to secessionist

---

movements. Azerbaijan has an authoritarian regime, and Armenia has made recent democratic gains. From 1992 to 1994, Azerbaijan and Armenia engaged in a hot war over control of Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority enclave within Azerbaijani territory. Despite a Russia-brokered ceasefire agreement, the state of war continues, with periodic flare-ups of violence in this so-called frozen conflict. Russia has used its military assistance to and alliance with Armenia as a lever of influence with Yerevan and as a way to shape aspects of Baku’s policies. At various points, there was also some risk that Turkey or Iran might be drawn into the military conflict, but this has not happened. In addition, Russia has used various measures of influence and limited economic investment to advance its hegemony in the region. In Armenia, Russian entities own substantial amounts of economic infrastructure. Each of these governments faces distinct, complex challenges in managing relations with Russia while maintaining engagement with the United States and the West in various spheres.

Russia’s engineering of the disputed independence of Georgia’s two breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and treatment of them as allies supports Moscow’s overarching goal of thwarting Georgia’s ambition to achieve full integration into NATO and the EU. Russia’s occupation of about 20 percent of Georgian territory allows Russian military forces to threaten critical Georgian infrastructure and major population centers and to limit Tbilisi’s coastal access. Despite these pressures, Georgia has continued to deepen its political and military cooperation with the United States and other NATO governments, including through the NATO-Georgia Commission established in 2008 as a mechanism to support Georgia’s reforms and integration goals. Although EU governments have deferred Georgia’s aspirations for EU accession, the EU and Tbilisi signed an association agreement with a DCFTA, including provisions enabling trade expansion, which entered into force in 2016.² The current Georgian Dream government has pursued a pragmatic policy in dealing with Moscow, leading to resumption of wine exports to Russia and a surge of Russian tourism in Georgia.

Azerbaijan has pursued a pragmatic approach to Moscow’s military, political, and economic influence in the South Caucasus. Although Russia is allied with Armenia, Moscow is also Baku’s primary military supplier, which has made for cordial but wary bilateral relations. The Azerbaijani government at one time hoped that Turkey and other NATO allies might take steps to balance Russian power in the South Caucasus; however, the limited Western response to Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia and the warming of Turkish-Russian relations have led Baku to enhance its own ties with Moscow. Nevertheless, reflecting its hedging strategy, the Azerbaijani government avows that integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is a strategic objective and has

² The EU’s DCFTA with Georgia is a preferential trade regime that increases market access by removing all import duties on goods and providing for broad mutual access to trade in services. It also facilitates corporate access and supports adapting Georgia’s regulatory framework to bring it closer to EU law, particularly in trade-related areas. DCFTAs with other EU Eastern Partnership countries have similar provisions and goals. See European Commission, “Countries and Regions: Georgia,” webpage, April 23, 2020.
continued to develop political and military cooperation with NATO, including participating in military exercises and contributing forces to NATO missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Azerbaijan’s energy assets, with substantial Western investment and export pipelines to Turkey, make its pursuit of these ties less vulnerable to Russian pressure than Armenia is, but authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan constrains Western ties.

Armenia’s enduring conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey’s economic and transport blockade have helped nudge Yerevan to enter into alliance with Moscow as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Russia remains Armenia’s arms supplier and operates a military base in Gyumri. However, Yerevan has evinced some discontent with this relationship in light of Russia’s lack of support for its proxy forces in Nagorno-Karabakh during a 2016 uptick in fighting, warming ties with Azerbaijan, and domination of the CSTO. Armenia participates in the Partnership for Peace and sometimes in NATO exercises and has contributed to peacekeeping missions. But most of its engagement with NATO has involved efforts related to military reform, governance, and aspects of interoperability. Nevertheless, the Armenian government remains committed to maintaining its dialogue with the United States and Europe and limited security cooperation outside the Black Sea region. The Pashinyan government, installed as a result of a popular revolution in 2018, has taken steps to deepen economic and political cooperation with the EU under a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement but has not sought to turn Armenia in a more westward direction, which would cause unease in Moscow.

Methodology

In this report, we first assess Russia’s strategy in the Black Sea region and how Moscow is employing a variety of nonmilitary and military instruments to advance its goals. This assessment is derived from an extensive review of Russian- and English-language sources, including strategic guidance documents, official Russian policy statements, and writings by Russian and international military analysts, as well as engagement with Russian officials and experts in private discussions and at major conferences in Moscow and other venues.

Next, for each nation in the Black Sea region, we examine its relationship with Russia, its relationship with the United States and other Western allies, and its key national interests. Our analysis draws on insights from an extensive review of European and North American literature, including a substantial body of previous RAND Corporation reports on the region, as well as dialogues with civilian officials, military leaders, scholars, and journalists in Europe and the United States. In addition, our project team and the Bucharest office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, in cooperation with the Aspen Institute Romania, organized a workshop
called “Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Strategy: Regional Perspectives,” which was held on March 21–22, 2019, in Bucharest, Romania. The workshop brought together 24 experts and former officials from Europe and the United States for nonattribution discussions on all of the aforementioned issues relevant to this aspect of our research.

**Organization of This Report**

In Chapter Two, the authors explore how the Black Sea region figures into Russia’s worldview and strategic priorities and explain how the region is an intersection of several of Russia’s core national security concerns close to home. They explore the implications of efforts by the United States and other Western allies and partners to protect their mutual interests against the challenges posed by Russia’s increasingly assertive behavior in the region. The authors of Chapter Three examine how Russia is using measures of influence short of force in the Black Sea region, including media-based influences, energy politics and economic influences, and clandestine and covert activities. They assess the effects of these measures and suggest possible ways to counter them. In Chapter Four, the author examines the Russian military’s role in advancing Moscow’s strategy in the region. He reviews the history of Russia’s regional military presence, key developments in its military capabilities and posture over the past decade, and projected developments over the next few years. He advances hypotheses about Russia’s redlines and thresholds that would lead Moscow to use force again in the future to advance it regional interests.

The authors of Chapter Five (1) outline how the three NATO allies in the region perceive Russian strategy and military posture and (2) consider key areas of divergence and commonality in the allies’ views. They then examine how each country is coping with Russian malign influence and efforts to foster fissures among the allies. Finally, they identify each country’s key national interests and assess what political and military contributions those allies might therefore make to a Western strategy to enhance security and deterrence in the Black Sea region. In Chapter Six, the author examines how Ukraine and Moldova view Russian strategy toward the Black Sea region and how they are addressing recent Russian pressure and aggressive activities, especially given the main internal challenges that both countries are facing. Furthermore, the author outlines Ukraine’s and Moldova’s key national interests and goals for partnerships with NATO, the EU, and the United States, as well as the potential contributions those countries could make to designing and implementing a coherent Western strategy in the area. In Chapter Seven, the authors consider how the governments and citizens of the South Caucasus view Russian strategy in the region and how they are coping with and accommodating Russian pressure and aggression. The authors outline Georgia’s, Azerbaijan’s, and Armenia’s key national interests and goals for partnering with the
West and consider the countries’ potential contributions to a Western strategy in the Black Sea region.

In the final chapter, the author considers the implications of the collective analysis of Russia’s strategy and the assessments of allied and partner interests and capabilities. He advances options for a countervailing Western strategy for force posture and engagement in the Black Sea region and ways to strengthen the capabilities of allies and partners to counter malign Russian influence and deter Russian aggression.
How do Russian leaders view the Black Sea region in their broader global strategy? How much does the Black Sea region matter to Russia, and in what ways does it matter? Answering these questions requires considering how Russian leaders think—in particular, how they view the global security environment, Russia’s adversaries, and Russia itself. In this chapter, we address those issues and explore the implications for efforts by the United States and the Alliance as a whole to contend with challenges from Russia in the region.

This analysis is based on Russian strategic guidance documents, official Russian statements, and direct engagement with Russian interlocutors, as well as some secondary literature. To be clear, Russia’s national security conversation is neither monolithic nor static; its contours reveal points of emphasis but are not predictive per se. Although our analysis emphasizes recent strategic guidance and statements, we also draw on Russia’s post-Soviet history as a whole. A focus exclusively on the events since 2014 would miss the remarkable continuities of the previous 25 years and the opportunity to consider the importance of those continuities.

How Russian Leaders View the World

Strategic guidance and our direct personal engagement with Russian officials and experts make clear that, when those in Russia’s national security community look out at the world from Moscow and survey the landscape, they view the world as a threatening place. The security sector tends to view Russia as surrounded—and, on some fronts, even embattled—with the main threats emanating from the West, not the South or the East. Other Russians may share some of these concerns but also see opportunities in the West. For example, many younger Russians are interested in studying or working in Western countries or migrating to them. The emergence of sustained anti-government protests in Russia reflects, in part, popular concerns about declining living standards; political restrictions; and ebbing support for the Putin regime, especially among the urban educated classes.
In his landmark speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, President Putin bluntly articulated Russia’s fundamental dissatisfaction with the current state of global affairs and Russia’s place in it. He decried unilateral U.S. and Western military interventions and the failure of the West to recognize the rise of “new centres of global economic growth.” He said flatly that NATO’s deployment of military forces on Russia’s borders was “a serious provocation” that he alleged violated guarantees made by Alliance leaders not to station NATO forces east of German territory. These fundamental themes and concerns have only been sharpened over the past decade, and Russia has used various instruments of national power—including military force four times in the wider Black Sea region—to counter these perceived threats and to maintain a sphere of privileged interests.

In Russian thinking, the state of global affairs is now—and always—dynamic. That dynamism is manifesting itself currently in at least two key ways. First, the global order is transitioning from bipolarity to multipolarity. The narrative, proclaimed in Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy and its 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, holds that the old two-bloc system has collapsed. A new multipolar, or polycentric, system is rising to take its place. Major conferences designed to communicate Russia’s strategic views of the world have featured the theme of multipolarity. The Russian national security community deploys the narrative of a global movement toward multipolarity as an analytical conclusion, but the narrative also reflects a prescriptive Russian eagerness to hasten that movement along.

Second, the global weight of emphasis is shifting inexorably toward Asia, and particularly China. Major strategic guidance documents reinforce this theme. Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy, in sweeping language, notes that Russia seeks “all-embracing partnership and strategic cooperation” with China. And the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept calls the Asia-Pacific region “a foreign policy area of strategic importance.” The document devotes far more space to that region than to any other and particularly stresses Russia’s intent to pursue every form of cooperation with China. Major conferences, including the 2017 Moscow Security Conference and the 2017 and 2018 Primakov Readings, have emphasized Asia by prominently featuring

---

2 Russian Federation, Russian National Security Strategy, trans. Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies, Moscow, December 31, 2015, paras. 7, 13, 30; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Moscow, November 30, 2016, Section II.
3 For example, the 2018 Primakov Readings opened with a panel discussion on “New Bipolarity—Myth or Reality?” during which the Russian participant asserted that the forming system is polycentric and unstable. See Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations, “First Session: New Bipolarity—Myth or Reality?” International Summit, Primakov Readings, May 29, 2018.
4 Russian Federation, 2015, para. 93.
5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, para. 78.
guest speakers from China and India. In our direct engagement with Russian experts, some noted that the public emphasis on Asia is a signal that Russia has other options for trade, security cooperation, and so forth.

Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine complements this theme with the idea of a global “redistribution of influence.” It contends that Western efforts are creating flashpoints of tension in Eurasia, which pose a challenge to Russian national interests, facilitate the overthrow of legitimate regimes, and provoke domestic instability and conflict abroad. The doctrine describes NATO as “a main external military risk” because the Alliance is expanding its military infrastructure toward Russian borders (a prospect noted as a “main external military danger” in the 2010 strategy).

During a visit to the Black Sea Fleet in February 2013, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that the “Mediterranean region was the core of all essential dangers to Russia’s national interests” and that the Arab Spring and its consequences increased the importance of this region. A month earlier, Russia conducted the largest naval exercise in the Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War, and Shoigu subsequently announced the decision to establish a so-called permanent operational formation of naval ships in the Mediterranean Sea (whose capabilities are discussed in Chapter Four).

In sum, these strategy documents present the world as dangerous for Russia and argue that the United States and its allies are making that world more dangerous, partly to limit Russia’s power and maintain their dominance of world affairs, which Russia’s independent foreign policy challenges.

How Russian Leaders View the West

When those in the Russian national security community look at the West, the United States is first and foremost in their minds. The Russian narrative does address NATO as a whole, but it is generally evident that Russians view the United States as the primary driver of the Alliance. Other NATO members are rarely mentioned by name in Russia’s strategic guidance. Despite Russian concerns about NATO increasing its force presence along its eastern flank, Russian guidance does not single out Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. And despite grave Russian concerns about growing missile defense capabilities in Romania and Poland, Russian guidance lays the blame for that concern with the United States or NATO as a whole. The EU is also seen as a significant threat to

---

Russian interests because of the overlap between EU and NATO membership; the alignment of EU and U.S. policies on many issues; and the EU’s promotion of democratic norms, the rule of law, and transparency throughout Europe and in countries closer to Russia.

An important corollary to that inherently hierarchical focus is the Russian national security community’s persistence in viewing the United States as Russia’s equal and opposite number. Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept states that “the two States bear special responsibility for global strategic stability and international security.”9 Russia’s narrative may insist on a global shift toward the East, and toward a more diffuse order, but deeply ingrained Russian national security thinking still views the United States as Russia’s singular real counterpart—in large part because of the nations’ predominant nuclear arsenals and other high-end military capabilities.

Russian leaders see the United States as a great, or super, power. As a great power, the United States naturally intends to drive events on the world stage, and it has the ability to do so. In addition, as a great power, the United States knows its own intentions and executes as planned. Thus, the United States closely integrates its efforts across all instruments of national power and all regions of the world.10 In this section, we outline three specific ways that Russian leaders view the United States and its role in the global security environment.

The United States and NATO Pose Threats to Russian Interests

Russian strategic guidance documents, and the Russian national security narrative in general, cast the United States as a direct threat that—with help from the EU and the rest of NATO—tries to contain Russia with political, military, economic, and information tools.11 The narrative stresses that, by spearheading NATO enlargement, the United States has pushed a NATO military presence up to Russia’s land border. The Kremlin contends that this presence is inherently destabilizing and a violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act.12 And our direct dialogues with Russian officials and

---


10 Russian officials and experts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018–2019. In multiple places in this report, we cite or mention our discussions with Russian officials and experts between 2017 and 2019. In particular, we had conversations with officials and experts in Moscow in June and July 2017 and in June 2018 at the Primakov Readings; nongovernmental experts at various research centers, such as the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, and the Russian International Affairs Council (all headquartered in Moscow); and Russian scholars and former officials and military officers involved in the International Luxembourg Forum in Geneva in June 2018 and at RAND’s Washington Office in November 2017 and October 2019.


12 In the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation, and Security, NATO pledged that in the “current and foreseeable security environment,” it would “carry out its collective defence . . . by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces.” The four multinational battlegroups deployed in Poland and the
experts made one thing clearer than Russian strategic guidance has: For the Russian national security community, the problem is NATO’s continued existence rather than any specific recent action. NATO’s four enhanced forward presence battle groups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, though seen as pernicious, are rightly assessed by serious Russian defense experts as having only limited warfighting capabilities.\textsuperscript{13}

The United States Is a Global Disrupter

Russian strategic guidance documents consistently make clear that the United States poses a national security threat not only to Russia but also to the global order because of what the documents characterize as malevolent actions designed to isolate Russia or reckless interventions to promote democracy and other interests around the world with little appreciation of the consequences. Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine, in its recitation of internal and external risks, reads like an indictment of U.S. malevolence and misguidedness. It particularly highlights the role that the United States plays in the “destabilization of the situation in individual states.” The doctrine uses that frame to characterize U.S. actions toward Russia, including efforts “at changing by force the constitutional system of the Russian Federation.”\textsuperscript{14} And the Foreign Policy Concept uses a similar frame, of “external interference,” to castigate the United States for the disastrous effects of its military interventions.\textsuperscript{15} Direct engagement with Russian officials and experts often highlights the point even more starkly that, with its interventions, the United States is fomenting instability around the world. In supporting this sweeping indictment, Russian narratives regularly cite the following cases, from the Russian perspective:

\begin{itemize}
\item In 2011, the United States stated that it wanted to prevent Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi from killing hundreds of Libyan civilians. But, as a result of the U.S. and allied military intervention, the narrative runs, thousands and thousands were killed, and Libya spiraled into all-out civil war. The United States, as a great power, must have known what the result would be and must have either wanted to sow chaos in North Africa or lacked the capacity and political will to stabilize the region.
\item In 2003, the United States claimed that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. But, given the extensive U.S. intelligence networks, U.S. leaders must have known that was not true and understood that removing Hussein’s regime would propel Iraq into years of bloody civil war and could give rise to
\end{itemize}

Baltic states are rotational, not permanently stationed, and are at levels well below any reasonable definition of \textit{substantial combat forces}. See NATO, “NATO-Russia Relations: The Facts,” August 9, 2019e.

\textsuperscript{13} Russian experts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018–2019.

\textsuperscript{14} Russian Federation, 2014, paras. 12b, 13a.

\textsuperscript{15} Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, para. 14.
deadly terrorist groups. So, those must have been the outcomes that Washington wanted to see, or perhaps the actions reflected gross incompetence.

- Russia’s national security community holds that, although the United States claims that its goal in Syria’s ongoing civil war has been to counter and defeat the Islamic State, U.S. involvement seems more focused on supporting opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Experts comment that this motive fits into a broader pattern—that the United States wants to remake the broader Middle East but lacks an understanding of how to achieve this goal.\(^\text{16}\)

- After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan. According to the Russian narrative, the years of fighting and instability and the rise of terrorist safe havens that have followed must somehow be part of a U.S. grand design. In fact, Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept singles out Afghanistan as a concern, calling it “a major security threat.”\(^\text{17}\) That is strong language, especially because the guidance documents typically point only to functional rather than geographic threats, aside from their critiques of the United States.

What is most problematic for Washington about all of these claims regarding the pernicious and destabilizing impact of U.S. interventions is that they have some truth. When U.S. officials argue that they acted on the basis of imperfect information and through a process of trial and error, Russians do not find the arguments convincing. And the castigation is not limited to defense-related arenas. Putin’s remarks at the 2018 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum made clear that U.S. perfidy also extends into the economic arena. By spearheading the imposition of economic sanctions, the United States is not merely targeting Russia but also undoing the global “system of multilateral cooperation that was built for decades [and] is being crudely destroyed.”\(^\text{18}\)

### The United States Is Out of Sync with the Times

Russia’s national security narrative also paints the United States and its global interests as out of sync with the times. Because Russia insists that the bipolar world is gone and that an emerging multipolar world is the obvious way of the future, Russia can argue that the United States is digging in its heels, blind to the way the world is headed, and insistent on its own rights and prerogatives—although it is destined to lose the battle. As the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept states, it is obvious that major blocs no longer have

---

\(^{16}\) Russian experts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018–2019.

\(^{17}\) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, para. 97.

a role to play. The United States is simply blind to the inevitable course of history, is selfishly defying it, or both.

The Russian national security narrative deploys the word *normalization* to underscore that the United States is out of sync. At the 2017 Primakov Readings, Minister for Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov asserted that the limited direct contacts and lack of negotiations in current U.S-Russian bilateral relations is “abnormal.” The Russian narrative tries to seize the high ground—the normal ground—by announcing the need for normalization.

### How Russian Leaders View Russia Itself

Russia’s national security community is no less forthcoming with insights into how Russian leaders view Russia. Indeed, Russian officials and experts communicate clearly and frequently—in a raft of strategic guidance documents, in official statements and remarks, and in private conversations. In this section, we outline several ways that Russian leaders view Russia and its role in the global security environment.

**Russia Prioritizes Its Great-Power Status**

Strategic guidance, official statements, and private discussions all reflect the perception of Russia as a “leading world power.” That means that Russia has both the will and ability to drive global events—as does the United States, in Russian thinking. Russians also see a fundamental rightness about that role. The great-power contest with the United States is necessarily zero-sum, and great powers play it to win. That is simply the nature of the game.

Russia’s overarching goals and a rough prioritization of those goals are clearly expounded in official documents. These goals include protecting Russia’s security; preserving the integrity of the Russian state; keeping a tight rein on events in the buffer zone that the “near abroad” provides, including preventing revolutions that could bring chaos to neighboring states, as an extension of Russia’s security; reestablishing Russia’s leading role on the world stage and driving outcomes there; maintaining the access Russia needs to play that role; and breaking down Western unity in order to remove the primary challenge to Russian aspirations.

---


Security Starts at Home
For Russia’s national security community, security starts at home. That includes the personal security of Putin, the strength of the regime, and the protection of the Russian state and territory. The creation of the praetorian-like National Guard, headed by Putin’s former chief bodyguard, illustrates that the Kremlin’s priority is personal and regime security. The 2014 Military Doctrine makes it clear that defending the homeland is the top priority of the armed forces, which are bolstered, if necessary, by mobilizing the population and national resources in established time limits.22 The 2015 National Security Strategy also makes it clear that the homeland is the top concern. A significant share of the document is devoted to ensuring a strong economy and developing human capital.23

Russian guidance documents—and our dialogues with Russian officials and experts—all highlight the same functional national security concerns—notably, nuclear, cyber, space, and terrorism concerns, among others. Russians’ writings and discussions about terrorism often have a raw edge. Of particular concern is the specter of terrorist fighters, recruited from the Caucasus or Central Asia, making their way back from the fight to Russia. In conversation, Muscovites describe their city filling up with migrants, and they associate migration with a potential terrorist threat—an available “hook” that leadership sometimes chooses to exploit and amplify. The National Security Strategy also highlights the pernicious effect of economic sanctions, and it points critically to attempts to spur color revolutions (the term for the series of pro-democracy protests in former Soviet countries that have led to changes in government).

The Closer a Country Is to Home, the Higher the Stakes
Russian strategic guidance and our dialogues with Russian officials and experts also make clear that, for Russia, the closer a country is to Russia’s borders, the higher the stakes. That is, Russian leaders consider the security of territory that borders Russia to be integral to Russia’s own security. Since the Soviet collapse, the Russian national security lexicon has used specific terminology to carve out a space between at home and abroad. In the early post-collapse years, Russia’s favorite term was near abroad; in the 1990s, the term was broadly and evenly applied to all of the non-Russian former Soviet republics. More-recent strategic guidance uses carefully chosen phrases to suggest that proximity has a special quality. For example, the 2015 National Security Strategy notes that Western support for Ukraine has created “chronic instability” in the “immediate vicinity of Russia’s borders.”24

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept also highlights, in both word and structure, the particular importance of proximity.25 It stresses the importance of “neighbourly rela-

---

24 Russian Federation, 2015, para. 17.
tions,” and its around-the-world review of Russian foreign policy interests begins with Ukraine and Belarus and then turns to other former Soviet states. From there, it spirals out around the globe to include Europe, the Arctic, North America, and the Pacific, among others. When Russia considers a country to be close to home, that assessment is based on more than just distances on a map. Our discussions with members of Russia’s national security community make clear that “home” has both a qualitative and a quantitative connotation.26

Ukraine is far and away the most highly charged topic in Russia’s national security discourse. It is close to home and personal for many. As a result, Russia expresses its concern over Ukraine in qualitatively different ways from how it expresses other national security concerns. As Putin has declared repeatedly since 2014, Russians and Ukrainians “are not simply close neighbours but . . . we are one people.”27 That declaration is echoed in countless conversations with Russian officials, experts, and people, for whom Ukraine is clearly very close to their own sense of identity. But many Russians are aware of fierce Ukrainian objections to this claim, and some would agree with those objections. In Russia’s national security lexicon, discussion of Ukraine refers only to the crisis in the Donbas. Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, in most Russian eyes, is not part of Ukraine at all. The narrative holds that the 1954 transfer of Crimea to the Ukrainian republic of the Soviet Union was unconstitutional, so the return of Crimea to Russia was merely the righting of a historical legal wrong. Crimea’s return is cast as a fait accompli, and Russia and the West simply need to agree to disagree on the matter. The Kremlin continually reinforces that message, for internal and external audiences, with a full array of information tools. The tone—and the efforts—sometimes feel deliberately deployed, but the underlying sense that Crimea is integral to Russian security and identity is quite real.28

The narrative around the Donbas is a bit different. The Donbas is part of Ukraine—a point that is important to Russia’s argument that it is brokering the settlement of the conflict. But Ukraine is still very close to home for Russians. As Foreign Minister Lavrov commented at the 2017 Primakov Readings, if Russia had not intervened in the Donbas to protect the Russians and Russian speakers there, “we would have betrayed our civilization which our forefathers developed over centuries.”29 However, prior to the intervention, Russians and Russian speakers in the Donbas region were not under threat, and no separatist fighting or insurgency was underway.

26 Russian national security experts and officials, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018–2019.
27 President of Russia, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” March 18, 2014.
28 For example, during a major book festival on Moscow’s Red Square in summer 2018, a major exhibition of books and treasures from each of “Russia’s regions” prominently featured a Crimea section. In June 2017, in the middle of a friendly conversation with one of the authors of this report, a young Russian scholar—whose age made the encounter all the more striking—asserted as a non sequitur that it was such a good thing that Russia had finally “restored its rightful geography,” including Crimea and Abkhazia.
29 Lavrov, 2017.
Although Ukraine is clearly at the top of Russia’s priority list of nearby nations, Georgia—even without the same kind of ethnic or linguistic ties—is not far behind. The Caucasus in general, and Georgia in particular, evokes deep, conflicting historical currents—ranging from frightful tales of Imam Shāmil, who led the fierce 19th-century North Caucasian resistance to Tsarist conquest, to Leo Tolstoy’s novella *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, which offered a more empathetic picture of the people of the region and their political struggles. On a cultural level, *lobio* and *khinkali*—staples of Georgian cuisine—are integral parts of the Russian culinary repertoire, and in the Soviet period, many Russians enjoyed holidays in Abkhazia. The Caucasus region is Russia’s long-standing, most readily available means of defining itself—not only what Russians stand for but what they stand against. To Russians, what happens in Georgia—almost as much as what happens in Ukraine—is personal.

Russia’s claims on Georgia’s two breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, figure prominently and disproportionately in Russian strategic guidance. Just as Russia frames Crimea as being separate from Ukraine, Russia recognizes the two Georgian territories as independent states. The 2014 Military Doctrine lists Abkhazia and South Ossetia as priorities for “allied” military cooperation to “deter and prevent military conflicts.” The 2015 National Security Strategy also singularly features Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept describes them as “modern democratic states” that Russia supports. Lest there be doubt about Russia’s view of these territories’ status, after the Foreign Policy Concept calls them “states,” there is an intervening paragraph about Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh before discussing Georgia proper; in other words, Russian leaders use the document’s structure to signal the lack of association between the territories and Georgia. As one panellist declared at the 2018 Primakov Readings, “There is no way that Georgia is ever getting Abkhazia back!”

Of course, Russian involvement in, and preoccupation with, Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not new. During the war in Abkhazia from 1992 to 1993, Russian Federation armed forces, along with militants from the North Caucasus, supported Abkhaz separatist fighters and provided them with some Russian military equipment. From the

30 Imam Shāmil was a spiritual leader and ruler of Chechnya and Daghestan who led the North Caucasian forces in resisting conquest by the Imperial Russian Army from 1834 to 1859. *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* is Leo Tolstoy’s 1872 novella that is based on an incident in which he and a fellow Russian military soldier were captured during their service in the Caucasus. Tolstoy wrote an empathetic account of the Caucasian people’s culture and struggles for independence in the face of Tsarist conquest (see Alexander Nazaryan, “Blood and Tragedy: The Caucasus in the Literary Imagination,” *New Yorker*, April 19, 2013).

31 Russian Federation, 2014, paras. 21h, 56b.


34 Notes taken by a member of the project team, who attended the conference.
1993 ceasefire to eruption of large-scale hostilities in 2008, Russia assiduously applied political and economic instruments, including passportization and borderization, that were designed to carve Abkhazia and South Ossetia away from the rest of Georgian influence and economic ties. Russia used its role as a formal participant in the respective peace processes to shape the prospects for negotiated conflict resolutions. In short, Russia appears to be deeply invested in Georgia—in some ways that are clearly captured in strategic guidance and in other, more-visceral ways that may continue to manifest themselves in Russian thinking and action.

Russia’s focus on nations close to its borders is also reflected in its concerns about Russians and native Russian speakers living outside the country. In the early 1990s, after the Soviet collapse, the issue seemed urgent for Russian leaders. For a Russia that had consistently viewed global engagement as a zero-sum game, it was natural for Russian leaders to be invested in the future of Russians outside the country. Russia’s fractious internal politics in the early 1990s raised the stakes even further: Nationalist and imperialist forces used the protection of Russians living in other countries as a cudgel to challenge the nominally reform-minded new President Boris Yeltsin and his team. Yeltsin yielded to this pressure and introduced the term *compatriots abroad* into the political lexicon in 1992. Yeltsin and subsequent Russian governments supported and developed ties to diaspora groups, decried the treatment of Russian minorities in the Baltics and elsewhere, and pledged to protect these communities, but Russia took few concrete actions to do so until 2014. Russian strategic documents since 2014 have dependably stressed Russia’s concerns about Russian “compatriots” — a theme that is echoed in public statements and private conversations. To some extent, that emphasis has come to feel obligatory, and the Kremlin has sometimes tempered its support to compatriots in other countries to avoid damaging relations with the West. But these ties remain a tool for Kremlin interference in foreign countries.

**Access Is Crucial**

Central to Russia’s strategic intent is maintaining the access that it needs—by air, sea, and land—to protect its own security and the security of its close neighbors and to support its aspirations to be a leader on the world stage. Unlike the other major

---


37 See, for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, para. 45.

38 For example, in June 2018, Putin announced publicly that Russia would not enact economic or political sanctions against Latvia in response to Riga’s elimination of Russian-speaking schools, saying that punitive measures would be counterproductive (Valery Engel, “Why Is Russia Not Stepping In to Protect Its Compatriots Abroad?” _Fair Observer_, July 26, 2018).
facets of Russian strategic intent, such as security and leadership, access does not figure prominently in the Russian national security narrative. In fact, Russia’s national security community plays down the idea of any Russian claims to territory far from home. In our discussions for this report, Russian officials and experts were quick to stress that Russia does not want military bases beyond the near abroad, except in Syria. They pointedly contrast that strategy with the U.S. global military footprint and its “destabilizing” effects. Nevertheless, establishing bases abroad is a key part of Russia’s overall approach (as discussed in Chapter Four). For example, Russia has naval facilities at Tartus and combat air facilities elsewhere in Syria, as well as land force headquarters in Georgia; Gudauta, Abkhazia; and Gyumri, Armenia. And Russia’s quest to secure warm-water ports is a major theme of Russian imperial history, as the Romanov dynasty sought to establish Russia’s role as a powerhouse on par with the rest of Europe. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin’s claims on the Kars province and what is now the Ardahan province in northeastern Turkey and his aggressive policies in the Bosporus eventually led to the Turkish Straits crisis in 1946 and to Turkey’s invitation to join NATO. Although Russia may claim not to want unimpeded access to warm Mediterranean waters, previous actions and current circumstances suggest otherwise.

Russia is the Indispensable Broker in Conflict Resolution

As part of Russia’s claim of being a global leader, key strategic documents cast Russia as the leading broker of conflict resolution—even with Ukraine. In this narrative, Russia is not a party to the conflict in Ukraine, of course—although Russians contend that if the Ukrainian government and forces were to attempt to seize territory by force, Russia would have no alternative but to respond. Instead, Russia is a wise facilitator that is eager to see the parties to the conflict in the Donbas region fulfill the terms of the Minsk agreements but is increasingly frustrated by Ukraine’s failure to do so. Russia continues to show its goodwill, the narrative adds, by proposing to introduce an international peacekeeping mission under the aegis of the United Nations, initially to separate the parties in conflict. Yet again, the narrative contrasts Russia’s broad-minded leadership role with the narrow, selfish aspirations of the West. In Ukraine, the narrative holds, the United States and the West writ large seek to create a significant, destabilizing security challenge close to Russia’s borders.

Russia’s self-proclaimed role as an honest broker does not stop there. In Azerbaijan’s breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has long driven the Minsk Process, which is led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

---

39 Russian officials and analysts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018–2019.

40 The National Security Strategy stresses Russia’s “role in resolving the most important international problems” (Russian Federation, 2015, para. 8). The Foreign Policy Concept notes that Russia tries to “make every effort” to facilitate a political settlement in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016, para. 56).

(OSCE) and includes the United States and France. In 2015—on the model of the Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) agreements for the Donbas, Ukraine, and for Abkhazia, Georgia, in 1993—Russia proposed a peacekeeping plan (known as the “Lavrov plan”) for Nagorno-Karabakh, and, in 2016, Russia claimed credit for calming a flare-up of violence on the ground between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces.42

Russia’s Actions Are Unpredictable, but Its Framing Is Consistent

Western scholarship and expert analysis have reached the broad consensus that Russia is able and willing to act opportunistically—which makes its actions difficult to predict.43 At the same time, Russia frames its approaches in some consistent, identifiable ways. Among these consistent qualities is a Russian comfort level with seeking to shape and influence events rather than control them. Determining whether Russia controlled a situation is the wrong lens for evaluating the success of Russian interventions and engagement more broadly. Russian tactics cast a wide net, and Russian leaders may be content to stir things up and see what sticks. Understanding Russian intent is critical for evaluating success in Russia’s eyes and understanding what lessons Russia is likely to take away from its engagements.

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, in which the real drivers are Armenia and Azerbaijan, is a good example. The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh stems from a long history of unresolved, conflicting claims to territory, alternately masked and exacerbated by years of Soviet rule. Because the scope and scale of the conflict were relatively limited, legacy Soviet military equipment that was left in the area at the time of the Soviet collapse played an outsized role in the fight; it did not take much to sway the balance. Against that backdrop, Russia has had an excellent opportunity to keep all the major stakeholders off balance and thus maintain a fractious Caucasus with weak states that are unable to assert themselves rather than a unified Caucasus with strong, effective states that might assert themselves in the energy and security arenas, among others. The region is too close to home for Russia to take a chance on it being too independent. (For more, see Chapter Seven.)

Another consistent quality is Russia’s practice of framing its proposals and actions in terms of institutions. That is a savvy way to frame arguments for Western audiences that are predisposed to believe in the rightness of operating within institutional parameters. After establishing that foundation of institutionalism, Russia’s national security narrative argues that validation can come from existing institutions or from new institutions that are properly authorized. In framing the argument that way, Russia creates rhetorical space for itself to build up, and justify its actions on the basis of, its own alternative institutional architecture.


The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept highlights the multilateral institutions that Russia effectively drives—the Eurasian Economic Union, the CSTO, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—to stress their centrality and legitimacy in advancing its regional priorities. This builds on a premise suggested in the 2014 Military Doctrine, which states that one of “the main tasks of the Armed Forces in peacetime” is to

participate in peacekeeping operations to maintain (restore) international peace and security, to take measures to avert (eliminate) threats to peace, and to suppress acts of aggression (violation of peace) on the basis of decisions of the [United Nations] Security Council or other bodies authorized to adopt such decisions in accordance with international law.\(^{44}\)

If one creates a body authorized to adopt decisions, then it has just found a stellar way to validate its actions.

A third consistent quality of Russia’s approach is grounding Russian thinking and action in “traditional Russian spiritual and moral values.”\(^{45}\) This reflects a growing emphasis on traditional Russian values, religion, and nationalism in the Russian narrative directed at domestic audiences. Striking examples of these efforts are the statue of Saint Vladimir, the Patron of the Russian Orthodox Church, unveiled outside the Kremlin wall in 2016 and the memorial statue of Mikhail Kalashnikov, developer of the AK-47 automatic rifle, unveiled in 2017.\(^{46}\)

Russia’s narrative use of “traditional values” serves an external purpose as well as an internal one: It echoes the way that Western governments frame their strategies—and thus implicitly validates Russia’s approaches. According to our conversations with Russian analysts, Russia’s national security community is deeply skeptical of the humanitarian-oriented “values” leitmotif that figures so prominently in Western national security rhetoric. Great powers, after all, act on the basis of their interests, so all of these values must surely be a smoke screen.\(^{47}\) But many Russians know that their government uses a different human rights yardstick—as shown, for example, in its repeated combat air attacks on opposition-controlled hospitals and other civilian targets in Syria.\(^{48}\)

---

\(^{44}\) Russian Federation, 2014, para. 32k.

\(^{45}\) Russian Federation, 2015, para. 76.


\(^{47}\) Russian analysts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018.

Trajectories in Russia’s Worldview

Although the main elements of official Russian strategic thinking on national security are communicated regularly and with disciplined coherence (e.g., Russia did not interfere in U.S. elections in 2016, Russian troops are not present in the Donbas), the conversation in Russia’s national security community is neither monolithic nor static. Russian national security culture is fairly consistent over time, and many major elements of focus are reasonably durable. However, the tone and tenor of Russia’s national security conversation do change in meaningful ways that could have powerful impacts on Russia’s strategic direction, actions, or both. The best way to gauge tone and tenor is through direct personal engagement and monitoring social and other media that offer opposing viewpoints. In 2018, a shift in two qualities of tone and tenor were particularly notable.

First, by mid-2018, Russia’s national security community was consumed with a marked new sense that the world was against Russia. Many captured that sentiment in the phrase, “Russia is automatically guilty of everything.” During our conversations, interlocutors pointed to the allegations that Russia was responsible for poisoning Sergei and Yulia Skripal in England and the Dutch and Australian announcement of intent to hold Russia accountable for the 2014 downing of the Malaysia Airlines passenger jet over Ukraine. They painted those developments as part of a longer, broader pattern of Western attitudes. Echoing these views, Foreign Minister Lavrov, speaking at the 2018 Primakov Readings, called for “normalization” of the U.S.-Russian relationship, but he immediately sneered that this could be achieved only through direct dialogue, “not through declarations [by Western officials] that they are in favour of cooperation with Russia as long as Russia meets all their demands.” The implication of this solidifying view is that Russia sees its efforts to cooperate and maintain peace with the West to be pointless: If there is no way for Russia to be believed or get a fair hearing, then why should it even try to restore normal relations with the United States? This mindset suggests increased prospects for miscalculation when making national security decisions.

And second, by mid-2018, Russia’s national security community had begun to think that relations with the United States would not improve under U.S. President Donald Trump, even though he was seen as wanting this outcome. Interlocutors suggested that, for some time, Russia was waiting to see if a new way of doing business with Washington would eventually become clear. Russia’s national security community seems to have reached the conclusion that the dust will not settle and Moscow’s relationship with Washington will remain strained. The community is disconcerted

49 Members of Russia’s national security community, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, 2018.

by all the mixed signals—and they say so. These circumstances also suggest increased prospects for miscalculation in national security decisions.\textsuperscript{51}

**Implications for Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region**

Russian views of the security landscape suggest three important ways that Russian leaders view the Black Sea region and Russia’s strategy there.

**The Black Sea Is Not a Single Region**

In Russian national security thinking, the Black Sea is a coherent region only up to a point. Certainly, the Black Sea is a singular geographic feature, with implications as military terrain, including warm-water ports. But treating the sea and its surrounding nations as one region risks imposing an inaccurate frame around Russian thinking. The Black Sea and its surrounding nations do not occupy some discrete slot on an overall list of Russian regional priorities. More accurately, the area is an intersection of several of Moscow’s core national security concerns, which vary in kind and intensity.

Most important among those concerns are the places that Russia considers to be close to home and therefore integral to Russia’s own sense of identity and security. These areas include all of Ukraine and Georgia: Russia has staked legal claims of different kinds to Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, so those territories have especially deep resonance, but both Ukraine and Georgia as a whole are part of Russia’s innermost external circle of concern. In a more practical sense, the Black Sea is important because of the significant access that it offers to Russia—in particular, access to global sea lines of communication and opportunities to project power at strategic distance and expand its air and coastal defenses. Also key among Russia’s national security concerns is the proximity of NATO forces and military operations. That proximity is a constant reminder to Moscow of the perfidy of the West not only in extending the boundaries of the Alliance but also in simply preserving an Alliance directed against Russia.

**The Region Poses Risks to Russia’s Security**

From a Russian perspective, there is a great deal at stake in and around the Black Sea. Any challenge to Abkhazia or Crimea—or to the rest of Georgia or Ukraine—directly affects Russia’s sense of its own security in a very intimate way. In turn, because Russia has staked its claim to leadership on the world stage partly on its roles as the protector of Crimea, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia and the deliverer of solutions in the Donbas, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, an adverse turn of events would affect not only Russia’s security but also its claim to great-power status. And with its security and its leadership at stake, challenges to Russian military access in the Black Sea—that is, its freedom

\textsuperscript{51} Russian analysts, discussions with the authors in Moscow and Washington, May 2018.
of navigation or its air defenses—would be viewed as challenges to the other core elements of Russian strategic intent.

The Region Also Presents Opportunities for Russia’s Security

In the Black Sea region, Russia is already vigorously pursuing some core elements of its strategic intent, and the region offers openings for Russia to pursue other elements. In particular, the region affords opportunities for Russia to confound Western initiatives and fracture Western unity, including the cohesion of NATO allies. For example, the inclinations and unpredictability of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offer Russia opportunities to frustrate the United States and the Alliance as a whole. And Russia continues to exploit both its cultural ties and ease of access in Bulgaria to complicate Bulgarian decisionmaking and make Alliance unity more difficult. The tools required to accomplish these goals are nonmilitary, so, although their exercise might prompt Alliance consternation, they do not raise the specter of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. Russian leaders do not view international politics as a popularity contest, and Moscow need not win over any of the Black Sea states to obstruct the West. It need only slow or frustrate Alliance decisionmaking. Fracturing NATO—or rendering it unable to act effectively—would, in Moscow’s view, remove the key obstacle to the trajectory that Russia has charted for itself.

Framing the Multidimensional Contest in the Black Sea Region

Russia’s national security strategy and public narrative, as well as their implications for Russia’s strategy in the Black Sea region, suggest the following important questions about how the United States and NATO as a whole frame analysis of Russia and the Black Sea region:

- Is it meaningful to rank regions of the world in terms of how important they are to Russia? Or is it sufficient—and more meaningful—to instead assess the extent of Russia’s concern about a region based on the core functional elements of Russia’s strategic intent (e.g., security, global leadership, and military access)?
- If the functional elements of Russian strategic intent (with their geographic implications, such as proximity to Russia) drive the way Russian leaders view the world, then to what extent are different geographic locations fungible? That is, if Russia wants to sow seeds of discord in NATO, for example, is one Alliance target as good as the next?
- Is it meaningful to think about the Black Sea region in terms of great-power competition, which is the favored frame of the U.S. National Defense Strategy? Or does competition imply a level playing field and roughly equivalent
motivations—in other words, a simple, binary game that poorly represents the dynamics in the region?

- To what extent is it also meaningful to think of the Black Sea region in terms of opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation on economic, energy, transportation, and environmental efforts? For example, Kazakhstani oil produced by Western joint ventures is exported to world markets through Russia’s port of Novorossiysk, and outsized imported equipment for those ventures comes via the Sea of Azov and the Volga-Don Canal. These connections are beneficial to both Central Asian and Western economies.

- In NATO contingency planning and force planning, how helpful is it to identify possible fissures between Russia and nations in the Black Sea region (and Russia's accumulation of military capabilities) and then predict how Russia would fight or respond? Does a close read of Russian strategic perspective suggest that Russia might view different fissures in qualitatively different ways—and respond in qualitatively different ways?

- In NATO contingency planning and force planning, how helpful is it to assume that having the capability to counter Russian capabilities will be sufficient to deter Russia from launching military operations? Do the nature and intensity of Russia's concerns about the core elements of its strategic intent supplement its correlation-of-forces calculus?

- To change Russia’s calculus and strategy in the Black Sea region, to what extent, if any, is it important for the West to put forward some plausibly achievable vision for the future of the region? From a U.S. perspective, is the current situation tenable or untenable? What role for Russia would the United States and other allies be comfortable with, and how much risk would the United States be willing to assume?

- How plausible is the prospect that Russia would launch a large-scale conventional fight in the Black Sea region? If Russia is unlikely to launch such a fight when the core elements of its strategic intent are threatened, what approaches might Russia choose that would be the next most perilous for the United States and NATO?

- If Western actions in the Black Sea region are precisely the actions most likely to threaten Russia’s core elements of strategic intent, then how can the West avoid making Russian leaders more nervous and deter them from taking military action?

The next two chapters of this report explore these political and military questions concerning Russian strategy in more detail. The balance of the report reviews how NATO allies and partners perceive and are reacting to Russian activities and offers some suggestions for an overarching Western strategy toward the Black Sea region.
In the Black Sea region, Russia employs a suite of measures short of force to shape public opinion and entice—or even pressure—the nations’ governments into taking stances that favor Russia and counter the West. In this chapter, we outline these measures of influence short of force in the following categories: media-based influences, energy politics and economic influences, and clandestine and covert activities (using available public information).

No single pattern of Russian influence operations in the region emerges from our analysis, largely because Russia’s goals are different and vary by country. For example, when Russia intends to destabilize a country, it will tailor its influence operations by using a larger percentage of clandestine and irregular warfare tools. In Moldova, Moscow is interfering in internal political affairs, including by making payments to the pro-Russia Socialist Party, with the long-term goal of drawing the country into Russia’s sphere of influence.¹ In Turkey, where Russia is attempting to entice a new partner, Moscow favors economic engagement, media campaigns, and diplomatic support. In Bulgaria, where Russian diplomatic efforts seek to keep national leaders conflicted or divided over their country’s European and Russian orientation, Russian actors guard their economic presence and pursue persistent but low-level social media and traditional media campaigns.

**Media-Based Influences**

**Penetrating Markets with Russian-Sponsored Media**

Market penetration by media entities controlled or sponsored by the Russian government, or originating in Russia, varies by nation across the Black Sea region. Some of the factors that facilitate Russian media penetration in a given nation are significant populations who speak or understand Russian, perceived shortfalls in the quality or credibility of domestic media sources, the continuing presence of media organizations that

¹ “Moldova Faces Political Turmoil Triggered by Russian Intrigue,” Warsaw Institute, June 14, 2019; and “Moldova Forms Pro-Russian Minority Government,” EURACTIV, November 15, 2019.
were established during the Soviet era, and the importance to the Russian government of cultivating influence in that nation. In Romania, for example, where pro-Russia sentiment is limited, evidence of significant Russian media penetration is not found. On the other extreme, in Moldova, much of the population can understand Russian, and Russian state media outlets are well established. Altogether, Russian media sources deliver news content that reaches approximately 40 percent of the Moldovan population. Sputnik.md, a version of Sputnik (the Russian state media network) designed for a Moldovan national audience, was visited by approximately 270,000 unique visitors each month as of late 2017.

Georgia and Turkey also have sizable Russian media footprints, although political and cultural differences between the two countries shape the extent and nature of Russian media’s impact. Polling in Georgia indicates that 18 percent of the population watches television channels that originate outside the country. When respondents were asked which non-Georgian channels they watched, the top three responses were the Russian stations Russia Channel 1 (Pervii Kanal), RTR, and Russia 1 (Rossiya 1). However, the overall influence of Russian media in Georgia appears to be limited by the fact that only the Russian ethnic minority (less than 1 percent of the population) seeks news from and trusts Russian media sources. Outside this minority, pro-Europe sentiment is high, and polling reveals a high level of skepticism regarding the trustworthiness of Russian news sources.

In Turkey, the Turkish-language edition of the Sputnik news agency (Sputnik Türkiye), Radio Sputnik, and the Turkish-language version of RT have adroitly filled the vacuum created by the decline in credible mainstream journalism in recent years under the government of Turkish President Erdoğan. By hiring well-regarded Turkish
journalists and providing uncensored coverage of domestic topics that are taboo in the government-controlled media, Sputnik Türkiye has appealed to Turks disaffected by the diminishing quality and reliability of domestic news sources; a 2018 poll found that 40 percent of Turks do not trust those news sources. Sputnik Türkiye’s online content and radio broadcasts are reported to reach “hundreds of thousands of readers and listeners” directly, and its indirect reach may be much greater as news stories are shared online. In mid-2019, Sputnik Türkiye’s Twitter account had approximately 780,000 followers, compared with 31,000 for Sputnik US (no longer active) and 4.21 million for the leading Turkish newspaper, Hürriyet Daily News.

Influencing Domestic Media in the Black Sea Region

Russia employs a variety of tools to influence domestic media in countries that border the Black Sea. These tools include financial ties, economic ownership, and formal and informal political links. Russia’s ability to shape other countries’ media content varies based on the nature or extent of Russia’s control and the types of inducement at its disposal. Methods of control and influence include directly owning an outlet, financially supporting an outlet, having a Russian or Russian-affiliated individual manage the business, and obtaining retransmission rights for Russian media content. As observed in a 2018 Center for the Study of Democracy report on Russian media influence in the Black Sea region, larger media companies in national markets that are influenced but not formally owned by Russians tend to exhibit more independence than smaller media outlets directly owned by Russians. In particular, in content produced by the more independent companies, Kremlin-slanted narratives are balanced to some degree by counterarguments and nuanced issue-framing. The smaller media outlets with direct Russian ownership ties tend to be more conspicuously biased toward Russian interests and policy preferences.

In Bulgaria, Russian informal influence in the domestic media helps advance pro-Russia narratives despite the limited reach of state-controlled Russian media. Although certain Bulgarian-language media platforms, such as Ruski dnevnik (Russian Diary), are directly linked to the Russian government, their limited presence dampens the direct impact of Russian propaganda compared with the influence of Russian media

---


11 Sputnik Türkiye, @sputnik_TR, Twitter account, undated; Sputnik US, @SputnikNewsUS, Twitter account, undated; and Hürriyet.com.tr, @Hurriyet, Twitter account, undated.


13 Filipova et al., 2018, pp. 6, 15, 29.

14 Filipova et al., 2018, pp. 7–8.
In other Black Sea countries. Yet many Bulgarian media outlets disseminate messages that align with Russian interests. In one example, the television channel Alfa (affiliated with the far-right party Ataka) disseminates pro-Russia and anti-NATO content. In another example, the Duma newspaper and website of the Bulgarian Socialist Party spread Russia-friendly content, such as the Rusiya dnes (Russia Today) newsletter. In the past, pro-Russia messages disseminated in Bulgaria have included support for the Russian military intervention in Syria and opposition to fracking, which could undermine Russia’s energy dominance in Bulgaria by increasing domestic production of natural gas. In a striking indication of Russia’s soft power in Bulgaria, some Bulgarian media appear to run Russia-friendly stories—absent any Russian pressure or malign influence—because of the “ready local market,” particularly among older and less-educated segments of the population, for positive stories about Russia and its foreign policy choices. For example, even after the 2014 annexation of Ukraine, reputable pollsters found that 50 percent of Bulgarians held positive views of Russia and that 61 percent were against new sanctions on Russia. National media entities, such as Bulgarian National Radio, bTV, Nova TV, and BNT, often feature pro-Kremlin guests and anchors who defend Russia’s economic presence in Bulgaria and espouse views consistent with Russia’s foreign policy. The openness of Bulgarian media to Russian views reflects the domestic pressures that successive Bulgarian governments have felt in recent years to balance relations with Moscow and Bulgaria’s Western allies (as discussed in Chapter Five).

In Moldova, direct media ownership by oligarchs linked to the Kremlin provides a direct means to influence media coverage in a pro-Russia direction. As many as 85 percent of media companies in Moldova are owned by such oligarchs. The Moldovan online version of Komsomolskaya Pravda, a Russian tabloid, is also highly traf-

---

15 Dimitar Bechev, *Russia’s Influence in Bulgaria*, Brussels: New Direction, 2015, p. 22; and Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 8. The 2018 Center for the Study of Democracy report identified that, of 77 Bulgarian media companies with foreign ownership, only two had Russian ownership (Filipova et al., 2018, p. 26).


18 Bechev, 2015, p. 22.


21 Alpha Research, homepage, undated.

22 Bechev, 2015, p. 22.

23 Cohen and Radin, 2019, p. 89.
fiddled by Moldovan readers. In addition, the ability of many Moldovan journalists to understand Russian opens up an additional avenue for Russian influence, as some reportedly turn to Russian media for story ideas. In Ukraine, where official Russian media sources are banned, Russia-friendly online news sources, such as Strana.ua and Vesti-ukr-ua (the web version of Vesti newspaper), toe a fine line by advancing anti-NATO narratives and exploiting tensions in Ukrainian society while refraining from crossing redlines that would get them banned—for example, by recognizing the legitimacy of Russia’s annexation of Crimea or endorsing Russia’s military aggression in eastern Ukraine. In Turkey, by contrast, Russian media influence is more evident in Kremlin-controlled news outlets, such as Sputnik Türkiye and RT, than in domestic media sources.

**Tailoring Messages to Influence Mass Audiences**

Russia complements its efforts to influence domestic media in the Black Sea region with social media information operations aimed at shaping public opinion and promoting pro-Russia narratives. Such information operations are part of Russia’s approach to foreign policy—a multifaceted campaign that aims to manipulate foreign populations by influencing their beliefs and perceptions rather than physically controlling their territories, which would be expensive. Russian propaganda efforts are opportunistic and adaptive, and messages are adjusted to resonate in the political cultures and social milieux of targeted audiences. In the Black Sea region, this means tailoring Russian propaganda in each country to exploit existing divisions and grievances in each society.

Participants in a March 2019 workshop organized by RAND and the German Marshall Fund noted that Russian influence operations have several related objectives. These operations seek to foster positive attitudes toward Russia, exacerbate tensions within and among Black Sea countries, and undermine European and transatlantic unity. Russian social media efforts often focus on influencing non-elite popular audiences with nationalist messages. Although themes differ by country, common themes include the cultural, religious, and linguistic ties that bind individual countries to

24 Filipova et al., 2018, p. 68.
25 Cohen and Radin, 2019, p. 89.
26 Filipova et al., pp. 58–59.
27 Russia’s social media techniques include “news tweets, nonattributed comments on web pages, troll and bot social media accounts, and fake hashtag and Twitter campaigns” (Todd C. Helmus, Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Joshua Mendelsohn, William Marcellino, Andriy Bega, and Zev Winkelman, Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2237-OSD, 2018, p. ix).
28 Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018.
29 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
Russia; Russia’s role as the protector of traditional values against the secular, decadent West; and the costs and disadvantages of EU and NATO membership. One major goal is to spread resentment and fear of economic marginalization, cultural liberalization, mass migration, and Islam among the non-elite populations of the Black Sea region.\textsuperscript{30} These themes are consistent with Russia’s diplomatic messaging to this region and the international community writ large. Russian leaders and diplomats often assert that globalist elites are downplaying the economic and social concerns of their people.\textsuperscript{31} The Russians contend that such organizations as NATO and the EU erode the national sovereignty of their members, particularly with respect to national security and economic decisions.

In Bulgaria, Russian messaging references Moscow’s historical role in liberating Bulgaria from Ottoman rule during the 19th century and opposing Nazi Germany during World War II (conveniently overlooking that the two countries were on opposite sides in both world wars).\textsuperscript{32} Russian influencers often highlight the religious and ethnic commonalities of Russia and Bulgaria as predominantly Slavic and Orthodox countries. Russia-friendly internet trolls play to this pro-Russia sentimentality, especially among less-educated Bulgarians.\textsuperscript{33} Shared history and ethnic and religious ties can be used to suggest that Bulgaria and Russia are natural partners and allies and that Bulgaria benefits from a strong Russia acting as the protector of traditional values in the region. Messaging is often tailored for Bulgarian audiences and includes anti-NATO content; common themes are that NATO is militarizing the Black Sea; Russia’s weapons are superior to NATO’s; and because of their extensive history together, Bulgarian soldiers will never fight Russians. These messages often spike during NATO exercises in the Black Sea region.\textsuperscript{34}

By contrast, in Turkey, where Russia cannot appeal to ethnic or religious bonds, Russia has developed a sophisticated multipurpose information strategy in which state-sponsored media—namely, Sputnik Türkiye, Radio Sputnik, and the Turkish-language version of \textit{RT}—are used to disseminate Kremlin-slanted news coverage, undermine cooperation between Turkey and the West, and exacerbate domestic polar-

\textsuperscript{30} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, pp. 3–4, 9.
\textsuperscript{32} Bechev, 2015, pp. 9–10.
\textsuperscript{33} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{34} Naydenov, 2018.
ization in Turkey. Sputnik Türkiye, for instance, has gained considerable readership even among Western-oriented readers by offering an apparently credible, secular alternative to biased and heavily censored domestic media coverage of Turkish politics. The news agency’s messages are designed sometimes to increase suspicion of the West and other times to undermine the Turkish government or stoke domestic tensions during periods of bilateral tension between Russia and Turkey. As previous RAND analysis has shown, Sputnik Türkiye and RT reinforced Russia’s position during the 2015 diplomatic crisis over Turkey’s downing of a Russian attack aircraft; in addition, to change the media narrative and increase pressure on the Turkish government, the news outlets published stories accusing Turkey of supporting and benefiting from the Islamic State’s oil-smuggling. More recently, Sputnik Türkiye published stories that apparently seek to foster goodwill toward Russia and undermine NATO unity, arguing, for instance, that Turkey’s acquisition of the S-400 surface-to-air missile system from Russia will increase Turkey’s strategic independence from NATO.

In Moldova and Ukraine, Russian propaganda is tailored to exploit conservative sentiments and increase opposition to integration with Europe and the West. Ukraine and Moldova both show high levels of cultural conservatism, with strong opposition to same-sex marriage and the integration of religious minorities. These sentiments open the door for Russian information operations that paint Europe as forcing cultural liberalism and pluralism on reluctant populations in Ukraine and Moldova. Beyond common appeals to cultural conservatism, Russia also advances country-specific narratives in Moldova and Ukraine that are designed to exploit tensions and vulnerabilities in each country. In Moldova, Russia has tried to instill resentment and fear toward Romania for its alleged desire to annex or occupy Moldova. At the same time, Russia works to stoke nationalism in Romania to increase support for unification with Moldova. This is a powerful example of Russia’s opportunistic use of information operations to divide neighbors who might otherwise have a common interest in banding together against a powerful neighbor. Russia presents Ukraine as a “historical mistake”

37 Katherine Costello, Russia’s Use of Media and Information Operations in Turkey: Implications for the United States, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-278-A, 2018.
38 Costello, 2018.
40 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
and a “country that emerged by accident” out of “the unity of Eastern Slavs.” This message serves to undermine Ukraine’s political independence and legitimize Russia’s violations of Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Russia has also advanced the view that U.S.-backed fascists have infiltrated pro-Europe political groups in Ukraine and pose a danger to the Russian-speaking population there.

**Energy Politics and Economic Influences**

The Black Sea region is economically important to Russia as a consumer of Russian energy and a springboard for capturing energy markets in the heart of Europe. Russia is likewise important to the economies of the region. It provides energy for domestic markets, offers the prospect of lucrative transit fees for transporting natural gas, supports local tourism and real estate markets, and imports agricultural products and other goods. Russia’s economic enmeshment in the region provides a powerful tool of influence for furthering Moscow’s political and security interests. The Kremlin has long used state-controlled businesses, such as the energy companies Gazprom and Rosneft, to further its political agenda.

Russia has a stick-and-carrot approach to leveraging its economic power as a tool of foreign policy. Economic incentives are used to reward governments and businesses that are aligned with Russia, and the threatened or actual imposition of economic costs is used to intimidate or punish those who take actions seen as inimical to Russian interests. Russia’s energy diplomacy is a prime example of its use of economic incentives in the region. As discussed later in this section, Russia has used energy incentives to separate Bulgaria and Turkey from NATO and the EU. Constructing new natural gas pipelines to carry gas from Russia to countries in the Black Sea region and beyond gives Russia leverage over elites and the population at large in Bulgaria, Turkey, and elsewhere. For consumers, these energy projects may mean cheaper and less-volatile energy prices. For local businesspeople, the projects offer the prospect of “lucrative infrastructure contracts and hydrocarbon profits.” And for political elites, gas pipelines offer the prospect of increased tax revenues from transit fees; improved relations

---

44 Filipova et al., 2018, p. 12.
45 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
47 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 3.
with Russia; and, in the case of colluding officials willing to exploit governance vulnerabilities, personal enrichment through corruption.\(^{50}\) Russia can thus translate the economic potential of regional energy projects into a multilayered and “opaque network of patronage” in the region.\(^{51}\)

Conversely, Russia uses economic threats to intimidate and coerce Black Sea countries. Russia has repeatedly restricted food imports from its neighbors to dissuade them from courses of action opposed by Russia. It banned Ukrainian chocolates and Moldovan wines in 2013, ostensibly for food safety reasons, as these countries considered signing association agreements with the EU.\(^{52}\) Russia similarly restricted imports of several Georgian goods, including wine, mineral water, and food products, in 2006 as Georgia pursued NATO membership.\(^{53}\) As a dominant energy supplier in the region, Russia has also threatened recalcitrant neighbors with energy price increases and supply shutoffs. Russia notably resorted to this measure in Ukraine, where Gazprom increased the price of natural gas after the 2004 Orange Revolution, making cheaper gas conditional on political demands related to Russian military basing rights in Ukraine and preconditions for Ukrainian NATO membership. In the years that followed, Russia repeatedly shut off gas supplies to Ukraine during pricing disputes with the Ukrainian natural gas provider.\(^{54}\) Although Moscow’s use of energy as a tool of political coercion against Kyiv had some success in 2004, it has failed to achieve the broader shifts in Ukrainian foreign and security policies that Moscow was seeking.

To reduce its dependence on Russian-controlled gas, Ukraine ended direct purchases from Gazprom in 2015 and started purchasing largely Russian-originated gas from European suppliers through reverse-flow arrangements. Ukraine has also welcomed support from the United States and Poland to develop the infrastructure that would allow Kyiv to increase imports of U.S. liquefied natural gas from terminals in Poland.\(^{55}\) In December 2019, Russia and Ukraine concluded a five-year agreement on gas transit to Europe, which will reduce the volume transiting through Ukraine to Europe from 65 billion cubic centimeters (bcm) annually in 2020 to 40 bcm per year


\(^{51}\) Conley et al., 2016, p. x.


between 2021 and 2024. This deal, which can be extended another ten years, will provide Ukraine with more than $7 billion in transit fees. But the two sides did not reach an agreement on direct gas supplies to Ukraine. And even though the transit agreement calmed anxieties elsewhere in Europe about further disruptions of gas deliveries through Ukraine, Russia is completing two pipeline projects that could ultimately replace the Ukrainian flows.

Although Russia has significant economic tools at its disposal, its economic power is not unlimited. Russia is economically reliant on energy exports, which limits the circumstances in which it can credibly threaten supply cutoffs. And Russian threats and coercion have been met by efforts to diversify energy supplies. Moreover, Russia’s energy-focused export economy lacks the capital and diverse export base to compete with the West, or China and the Persian Gulf, in many economic arenas.

The TurkStream pipeline project is a good example of how Russia is using energy ties to further its political and security interests in the Black Sea region and elsewhere in Europe. TurkStream comprises a pair of Gazprom-operated natural gas pipelines running under the Black Sea from Russia to western Turkey, close to the Bulgarian border. The first pipeline, which supplies natural gas to Turkey, began operation in January 2020. The second pipeline, for which onshore construction is continuing in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, is expected to deliver Russian natural gas to European markets by late 2020. TurkStream presents several opportunities to advance Russia’s political and security interests in the region. Notably, TurkStream serves to highlight “growing ties between Ankara and Moscow,” in accordance with Russia’s interest in realigning Turkey away from its NATO allies and the West. It will also increase Russia’s political leverage over Turkey by deepening Turkey’s dependence on Russian natural gas. Russia has already demonstrated its willingness to use TurkStream as leverage against Turkey. During the 2015 diplomatic crisis over Turkey’s downing of a Russian attack aircraft, Russia temporarily halted construction on the pipeline. TurkStream also advances Russia’s interests in the region by serving as an alternative to the South-

---

57 Robinson et al., 2018, p. 83.
60 Stronski and Himes, 2019, p. 5.
61 Costello, 2018.
ern Gas Corridor, a natural gas pipeline project supported by the EU that would reduce energy reliance on Russia by bringing natural gas to Europe from Azerbaijan.62

More broadly, TurkStream and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (which is being built to deliver Russian gas under the Baltic Sea directly to Germany) will give Russia alternative routes for delivering an amount of gas to Europe that represents most of the volume of gas that currently transits Ukraine, depriving Kyiv of billions of dollars in transit fees.63 These two alternative pipelines would also allow Russia to threaten Ukraine with natural gas shutoffs that cause less downstream harm to other European customers, so those customers would not need to come to Ukraine’s defense.

Bulgaria is another country where Russia uses its strong economic position to pursue its political and security interests. Russian businesses and those owned by Russia-friendly Bulgarian oligarchs are reportedly responsible for approximately one-third of Bulgaria’s annual economic production.64 Bulgaria gets most (90 percent) of its energy supplies from Russia, and its natural gas is almost entirely provided by Lukoil and Gazprom.65 Past EU analysis has shown that Bulgaria is “highly vulnerable” to a gas supply cutoff from Russia.66 Bulgaria was, in fact, harshly affected during a 2009 gas supply crisis when Russia stopped gas shipments through Ukraine.67 Bulgaria’s dependence on Russian gas clearly presents a source of leverage for the Russian government. Putin cut directly to the issue during a press conference with Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, noting that Lukoil alone accounts for 9 percent of Bulgaria’s gross domestic product (GDP) and saying, “that speaks volumes, don’t you think?”68 Russia is deepening this leverage with the completion of an onshore extension to TurkStream. Known as TurkStream 2, or Balkan Stream in Bulgaria, this spur will carry Russian gas from the Turkish landing point through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary on to European markets. The Bulgarian government, with


63 TurkStream has an estimated annual capacity of 31.5 bcm, half committed to Turkey and half to markets in Southern Europe. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline has a projected annual capacity of 55 bcm. This total annual throughput of 71 bcm is less than the 89 bcm of Russian gas that transited through Ukraine in 2018, but it is significantly more than the 65 bcm for 2020 and 40 bcm in the following four years that Russia and Ukraine agreed to in December 2019 (Steven Pifer, “Congress, Nord Stream II, and Ukraine,” Brookings Institution, November 12, 2019; Ivan Dikov, “Russia, Turkey Launch TurkStream Gas Pipeline with Bulgaria, Serbia,” European Views, January 9, 2020; and Nik Martin, “TurkStream: Who Profits, Who Loses Out?” Deutsche Welle, November 19, 2019).

64 Borzou Daragahi, “Are Bulgaria’s Strings Still Being Pulled by the Kremlin?” The Independent, April 23, 2019.

65 Bechev, 2015, p. 1; Conley et al., October 2016, p. 44.

66 Robinson et al., 2018, p. 79.


68 Daragahi, 2019.
support from the European Commission, has plans for Bulgaria to become a regional hub distributing gas arriving from TurkStream 2, the Southern Gas Corridor, and other sources to markets in Southeastern Europe. Moscow played to this aspiration and then, by threatening to pursue alternative routes, pressured Sofia to spend $1.2 billion to build the 294-mile section of TurkStream 2 across Bulgaria. However, Bulgaria would need to make significant additional investment in pipeline infrastructure, build gas storage facilities, and liberalize its gas market to become a Balkan gas hub. Bulgaria is likely to remain only a transit country for Russian gas for some time. Although this role will provide transit fees, it will also leave the country reliant on Russia for nearly all its imports of natural gas and vulnerable to price increases or supply restrictions should Russia seek to intimidate Bulgaria or its neighbors.

Clandestine and Covert Activities

Russia uses an extensive catalogue of clandestine and covert tools to apply nonmilitary pressure to Black Sea states. The Russian government—and its preferred proxy actors—provide concealed support to multiple pro-Russia groups, nationalist political parties, and media channels or websites in order to spread disinformation and carry out other activities that promote Russian interests and undermine relations between Black Sea states and the West.

Russian intelligence services are often reported to be active across the Black Sea region. Media sources describe a variety of Russian clandestine activities allegedly aimed at obtaining sensitive and strategically valuable information from countries in the region, intimidating and silencing domestic political opponents who have fled abroad, and undermining governments seen as pursuing policies hostile to Russian interests. Russian clandestine activities run the gamut from espionage, cyberintrusions, and cultivation of local spy networks to so-called active measures, such as targeted killings, support for local armed proxy groups, and even coup plotting. As with other Russian measures of influence short of force in the Black Sea region, the toolkit for clandestine activities appears to be tailored differently by country in light of domestic political contexts and Russia’s specific goals and capabilities.

---


70 Bulgaria’s annual national consumption of natural gas is about 3 bcm (Dikov, 2020; Assenova, 2018, p. iii).

71 Clandestine operations are intended to be hidden, while covert operations are both hidden and deniable. Covert operations are generally riskier and rarer than clandestine operations. See Ben Connable, Stephanie Young, Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, Raphael S. Cohen, Katya Migacheva, and James Sladden, Russia’s Hostile Measures: Combating Russian Gray Zone Aggression Against NATO in the Contact, Blunt, and Surge Layers of Competition, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2539-A, 2020, p. 29; and Mark Galeotti, Putin’s Hydra: Inside Russia’s Intelligence Services, London: European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2016, p. 7.
In Romania, current and former government officials have highlighted efforts by Russian intelligence services to penetrate the Romanian government, whose points of tension with Moscow include the deployment of a NATO ballistic missile defense system in Romania at Deveselu. The former head of the Romanian Intelligence Service noted in 2015 that Russia had tried but failed to hack into Romanian government systems in 2013. After Romania expelled one Russian diplomat in response to the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in England in 2018, Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Melescanu acknowledged that there was “a very solid presence” of Russian intelligence operatives in Romania. Romania and Russia have reportedly expelled each other’s undercover intelligence operatives several times in tit-for-tat escalations, and intelligence collection efforts by both sides have often been connected to bilateral tension over Moldova.

In Bulgaria, Russia uses political engagement and other personal connections to pressure the Bulgarian defense industry to use Russian military equipment—particularly for Bulgaria’s aging MiG-based Air Force. Researchers in Bulgaria believe that there may be some amount of Russian lobbying or domestic corruption slowing down the process of modernizing Bulgaria’s military using NATO equipment (Bulgarian defense budget issues notwithstanding). The Russian state has also reported financing the far-right Ataka party in Bulgaria. Some believe that Russia conducted an information operation against (via distorted polling and disinformation) or hacked into the country’s Central Election Commission in 2015, but these rumors are not corroborated. After winning the election, President Radev suggested that sanctions on Russia be relaxed and that “the Russian flag flies over Crimea and we cannot turn a blind eye to reality,” raising some initial concerns about his pro-Russia stance. However, his government has since not relaxed sanctions on Russia and continues to support NATO initiatives.

Russian intelligence operatives from the Federal Security Service (Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti), the Foreign Intelligence Service (Sluzhba vneshney razvedki), and the Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoye razvedyvatel’noye upravleniye [GRU]), as well as special forces, military personnel, and private military companies,

---

72 George Cristian Maior, “Russia's Silent War Against the West,” Financial Times, April 15, 2015.
74 Kremlin Watch, Kremlin Influence in Visegrad Countries and Romania: Overview of the Threat, Existing Countermeasures, and Recommended Next Steps, Prague: European Values and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, October 23, 2017, p. 32.
75 Naydenov, 2018, pp. 93, 102–105.
76 Bechev, 2015.
77 Cohen and Radin, 2018, p. 82.
have been engaged in full-spectrum irregular warfare in Ukraine since 2014. Russian intelligence services were active in Ukraine for years prior to the conflict, and armed irregulars affiliated with Russian intelligence were behind the occupation of government buildings and the assassination attempts on the Ukrainian mayors of Kharkiv and Kremenchuk. State-supported actors are also targeting the mobile devices of Ukrainian soldiers and their families to deliver intimidating messages. Russia has sent troops, including those without official status, to fight in eastern Ukraine; the latter forces are identified by Russian authorities as volunteers or military personnel fighting while on vacation.

Concealed Russian state involvement in Ukraine is suspected in other covert actions, such as the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in the eastern part of the country in July 2014. The Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team and research firm Bellingcat found compelling evidence that this event took place when three high-ranking former Russian military and intelligence officers and one Ukrainian national were in charge of military operations in the area. In charging the four with murder, Dutch prosecutors said that the individuals played a significant role in the Downing of the airliner and that the most senior officer, who was serving as minister of defense for the Moscow-backed Donetsk People’s Republic at the time of the incident, was in regular contact with Russian authorities. In addition, Russian private military companies fighting in the Donbas or Crimea may include Wagner, various Cossack groups, ENOT Corp, PMC MAR, and RSB Group.

79 Valeriy Shiryaev, “No Razvedka Nalozhila Tochno [But Intelligence Overlaid Exactly],” Novaya Gazeta, October 10, 2018; and Galeotti, 2016, p. 7.
84 James Bingham and Konard Muzyka, “Private Companies Engage in Russia’s Non-Linear Warfare,” Jane’s Intelligence Review, January 28, 2018; Anna Maria Dyner, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy,” Polish Institute of International Affairs, No. 64-1135, May 4, 2018; and Sergey Sukhankin, “From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts,” Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2019b.
Previous RAND research has documented that Russia employed a wide variety of hostile measures of influence against Georgia, beginning with the Rose Revolution in 2003 and continuing through October 2013, when Giorgi Margvelashvili, whose policies were less antagonistic toward Russia than those of his predecessor Mikheil Saakashvili, was elected President. Russia’s clandestine and covert activities in Georgia during that period emphasized active measures to support local proxy forces in the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to destabilize the national government. In addition, covert actions by Russian intelligence agencies intensified during the lead-up to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, beginning with extensive cyberattacks to disrupt servers in Georgia’s government and financial sectors. Russian intelligence services reportedly carried out acts of violence in Georgia to undermine the perception that the national government was able to maintain security and order, while the GRU supplied personnel to staff South Ossetia’s intelligence service. Georgia has claimed that the GRU trained a South Ossetian unit to undertake sabotage operations in Georgia before the outbreak of the war. More recently, the United States and several other Western governments declared that the GRU’s Main Center for Special Technologies, also known as Sandworm, conducted a widespread cyberattack in Georgia on October 28, 2019, that took thousands of government and private websites offline and interrupted television broadcasts. The timing and specific purpose of the attack were unclear, but as U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press statement, “These operations aim to sow division, create insecurity, and undermine democratic institutions.”

Russian clandestine activities in the Black Sea region do not always target the government or citizens of the country in which they transpire. Sometimes they are aimed at silencing Russian nationals who have earned the ire of the Kremlin and sought refuge in foreign countries. In Turkey, for example, Russian intelligence services have been linked to the assassinations of Chechens who may have been active in the Chechen resistance against Russia. In some cases, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service has been directly implicated in the assassinations. In other cases, it appears that Russian intelligence services may have trained, paid, or otherwise supported hitmen to carry out the killings. Russian covert activity is also suspected in the murder of Russian dissident politician Denis Voronenkov while he was in Ukraine.

---

85 Connable et al., 2020, pp. 37–40, Appendix B.
86 Jonsson and Seely, 2015, p. 20.
88 Galeotti, 2016, p. 4.
Use of Pro-Russia Proxy Fighters

Recruiting proxy fighters for conflicts is another way that Russian intelligence services are reported to be active in the Black Sea region. In 2017, Moldova expelled five Russian diplomats, accusing them of being undercover GRU agents after allegations that they were trying to find recruits in the Gagauzia region of Moldova to join militias in eastern Ukraine. Beyond espionage, Russian intelligence officers have been linked to martial arts clubs and paramilitary groups involving Romanians. In particular, Romania is home to a martial arts club where the Russian Systema method of martial art is taught, and Systema clubs across Europe have been linked to GRU efforts to recruit witting or unwitting Russian agents. In addition, Romanian nationals have been connected to a Bulgarian far-right paramilitary group that appears to have received training from a former member of the GRU.

In Bulgaria, there are many nationalist groups that have pro-Russia views and perhaps even some concealed ties to Moscow. Many of these groups are organized along religious lines (e.g., Orthodox Dawn), and others are xenophobic (anti-immigrant) or extreme nationalist groups (e.g., Military Union of Vasil Levski and BNO Shipka). Thirteen of these groups met in Bourgas in 2016 to exchange views and generally condemn the Western orientation of the government in Sofia. Some Russian government–organized groups or think tanks also support Russian efforts in the region. At one time, Leonid Reshetnikov, a former officer in Russia’s Committee for State Security (Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti) and Foreign Intelligence Service and a former director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (a Kremlin-funded think tank), openly called for Bulgarian President Radev to “to clean up the current elites from the Euro-Atlantic factor—or the ‘foam’ of the Bulgarian nation.” The think tank also publishes reports stoking or highlighting tensions with other Eastern European countries over their policy stances on Russia. Of note, Putin fired

---

95 Tervel Krumov, “The Ukrainian Scenario—A Pro-Russian Military Alliance Calls for a War Against Bulgaria,” Inform Napalm, April 21, 2016.
Reshetnikov in 2016, after the GRU was allegedly providing support to the failed Montenegro coup attempt.98

Russia also relies on proxy forces to support the conflict in Ukraine. Russian private military contractors and recruits from Crimea, Serbia, and elsewhere in Europe have fought in eastern Ukraine since 2014.99 Pro-Russia Cossack groups, which have a long-standing relationship with Russian security services and the military, have also been involved in the conflict.100 The pro-Russia Night Wolves motorcycle gang has reportedly provided support to the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine and—along with Dmitriy Sablin, a Russian politician and member of the Defence and Security Council—co-founded a pro-Russia group named Antimaidan.101 Furthermore, Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev has been sanctioned by the EU for his support to the conflict in the Donbas, and his leaked communications suggest that he coordinated his actions with the Kremlin and with Reshetnikov of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies.102

Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy

Russia’s measures of influence short of force in the Black Sea region take multiple forms; are adaptive; and stretch across the economic, political, and social domains. As a result, they present Western policymakers with special challenges. Identifying which Russian measures are the most harmful to the interests of Black Sea countries and the larger Euro-Atlantic community, and which responses are the most effective, would be a critical first step in developing a strategy for the United States, NATO, and their partners in countering malign Russian influence and deterring further Russian aggression. One guiding principle may be to respond to Russian measures proactively, on chosen terrain, rather than seeking to challenge every Russia-linked economic proj-


100 Dyner, 2018.


ect or to rebut every false claim from Russian state media and its online amplifiers. As previous RAND research has noted, the “rapid, continuous, and repetitive” nature of Russian propaganda makes it especially difficult for responsive propaganda efforts to counter its many claims.103 Additionally, the most-effective policies for countering Russian influence may have no direct connection to individual Russian actions. Instead, the policies may involve continually demonstrating how the Western system, encompassing liberal democracy, free and credible media, and market economies based on the rule of law, can contribute to the welfare and flourishing of the peoples of the Black Sea region. With that overarching principle in mind, in the remainder of this section, we offer several recommendations for countering Russian measures of influence short of force in the Black Sea region.

**Countering Russian Propaganda and Disinformation**

*Proactively highlight the benefits of European and transatlantic integration.* Support efforts by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence and other counter-messaging entities to craft convincing narratives highlighting the economic and security benefits of European integration and transatlantic unity. Also highlight the lack of economic opportunities that Russia can offer.

*Highlight the harmful intentions and methods of Russian information operations.* Develop narratives that go beyond rebutting specific Russian claims to show how Russia is using falsehoods and distortions to gain informational control over populations in the Black Sea region.

*Support efforts to build capable domestic regulators.* Provide technical assistance and other forms of support to improve the capacity of government agencies in Black Sea countries to provide regulatory oversight of the media sector and monitor social media for disinformation.

**Countering Russian Economic Pressure**

*Bolster alternative supplies of natural gas.* Support energy projects, such as the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline project to transport gas to Europe from Azerbaijan, that increase diversification of energy supplies in the Black Sea region.

*Consider encouraging the private sector to accelerate development of alternative energy sources.* Consider increasing the deployment of alternative energy sources, such as renewable energy, which could lessen the Black Sea region’s reliance on natural gas and oil and hinder Russia’s ability to use its energy dominance as a tool of coercion.

*Consider retaliatory economic measures.* Such measures could include targeted sanctions against entities and oligarchs linked to the Kremlin as a way to accelerate the

---

flow of financial capital from Russia. These steps could weaken the Kremlin by depriving it of resources critical to maintaining growth.\textsuperscript{104}

**Countering Russian Active Measures**

*Increase intelligence-sharing to help identify clandestine threats and active measures and help policymakers develop selective and coordinated or complementary responses.* Intelligence-sharing can take place through bilateral mechanisms, NATO’s new Joint Intelligence and Security Division, Europol, and other European mechanisms with allies and partners. This cooperation is particularly important in helping strengthen the capacity of some allies and partners.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Military Role in Russia’s Black Sea Strategy

Clint Reach

After the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, the Soviet Union expanded its influence in the Black Sea region by making territorial changes, such as re-annexing Bessarabia (most of present-day Moldova), and helping form Communist governments in Bulgaria and Romania, which were closely aligned with Moscow. The founding of the Warsaw Pact in 1955 further solidified the Soviet Union’s position in the region, even though Soviet troops were withdrawn from Romania in 1958 and Bucharest thereafter pursued autonomous defense and foreign policies.1 Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union enjoyed political, military, and economic preeminence from Burgas to Batumi. At the same time, the accession of Turkey into NATO in 1952, and the ability of U.S. and other allied forces to operate from bases in that country, imposed a regional balance of power that Moscow was forced to acknowledge.

Several factors led Soviet leaders to seek and maintain influence in the Black Sea region. Briefly, between the 17th and 20th centuries, the Russian Empire fought more than a dozen wars with the Ottoman Empire, which also desired political and economic influence, particularly on the Crimean Peninsula. During World War II, the Soviets saw Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine become instruments of the Nazis, who sought to crush the Red Army in southern Russia and control the oil along Moscow’s southern flank in the Caucasus. Politically, the Soviets wanted to expand their ideology, viewed as incontrovertible and inevitable, to alleviate the world from the cruelty and injustice of democratic capitalism, the encroachment of which into Eastern Europe was seen as an existential threat to the Soviet Union. Although economic influence was certainly a factor in the Soviet regional strategy—especially in Ukraine, which was a key component of the Soviet military-industrial complex—it was more of a means than an end, given the small size of the economies of the littoral states in the Soviet sphere of influence.

1 Although Romania did not participate in the Warsaw Pact integrated military structure or field training exercises, the Soviets retained access to air and naval bases in the country, and Soviet divisions in southern Ukraine and the Moldavian Republic were in close proximity (Dennis Deletant, “New Evidence on Romania and the Warsaw Pact, 1955–1989,” Washington, D.C.: Woodrow International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, CWIHP e-Dossier No. 6, July 7, 2011).
The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the Russian Federation of much of the influence and regional security it possessed around the Black Sea during the Cold War. Although Russia retained access to its primary naval infrastructure on the Crimean Peninsula, the political loyalty among each of its former Black Sea allies was dubious at best. Indeed, revolutions in 2003 and 2004 in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, saw the rise of staunchly pro-West (and anti-Russia) leaders. Bulgaria and Romania became members of NATO in 2004 and members of the EU in 2007, and, in 2008, U.S. President George W. Bush exhorted other NATO leaders to declare that Georgia and Ukraine would join the military alliance. These matters became acute for Russia as relations with the West and particularly the United States began to deteriorate significantly in 2011.

Given this relatively rapid decline in influence in the region, Russia was forced to reconsider its role as a Black Sea power and develop a new strategy to protect its interests there even prior to 2014. Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea that year accelerated the need to act against the Western backlash that followed the crisis. In light of the intensification of the confrontation with the West that has resulted from the conflict in Ukraine, it is important to understand how Russia perceives its interests in the region and the strategy that it is pursuing to secure those interests. In the next section, I seek to explain Russia’s strategy in the Black Sea region and how its political-military posture supports its interests and desired objectives.

Russia’s Interests, Objectives, and Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Interests
As mentioned in Chapter One, Russian interests in the Black Sea region largely center on security, political, and economic influence reflective of the country’s great-power status. In the security realm, Russia’s military forces in the region exist to protect areas critical for economic production, interdict illegal activity, ensure the safety of navigation, and assist in executing foreign policy actions in economically important maritime zones (e.g., business visits, joint exercises, peacekeeping operations).² Strategically, Russian forces in the region, including nonmilitary security organizations (e.g., the Federal Security Service), are intended to secure Russia’s southwestern flank from an attack against the homeland and dissuade and intimidate neighbors from pursuing policies contrary to Moscow’s interests, by force if necessary. Indeed, the ability of these organizations to conduct joint operations was demonstrated in the Russian attack

on Ukrainian Navy ships and the detention of 24 personnel onboard near the Kerch Strait on October 25, 2018.³

In addition to its security interests, Russia has political interests in all of the Black Sea states, although the dynamics have been more challenging in the post–Cold War period, given that Bulgaria and Romania are members of the EU and both, as well as Turkey, are members of NATO. Recent history has shown that Russian political influence in Ukraine and Georgia is less negotiable from Moscow’s point of view, regardless of the inclinations of those in power in those countries (see Chapter Two). In general, as has always been the case, Moscow seeks to support those who favor friendly relations with Russia and to push back against those who do not.

As for Russia’s economic interests, Turkey and Ukraine are Russia’s largest trading partners in the region, by a wide margin (see Table 4.1). Russia primarily exports natural resources to all of its Black Sea trading partners, but other aspects of trade and tourism are also sources of Russian economic influence. For example, in late 2015, Moscow imposed sanctions that limited agricultural imports from and travel to Turkey after Ankara’s downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber that violated Turkish airspace. From its Black Sea neighbors, Russia imports metals and machines (Ukraine and Romania), agriculture and transportation parts (Turkey), foodstuffs (Georgia), and packaged medicaments (Bulgaria). Russia also has an interest in protecting the critical port of Novorossiysk, through which 117 million tons of freight passed in 2013, far surpassing other major Russian ports.⁴

A key element of how Russia perceives its interests in the region, and how those interests may be under threat, is the nature of Russia’s relationship with the West. In the early years of Putin’s Russia, the Kremlin sought a cooperative relationship with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Imports to Russia ($U.S. billions)</th>
<th>Exports from Russia ($U.S. billions)</th>
<th>Total Trade Volume ($U.S. billions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the United States and its allies. For example, not long ago, there was a certain degree of security cooperation between Russia and the West in the Black Sea region, even after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to NATO and the EU (as discussed later in this chapter). It was not clear a decade ago that Russia necessarily defined its security, political, and economic interests in the region and those of the West in zero-sum or confrontational terms. But since the sharp deterioration of relations following the crisis in Ukraine, Moscow may now perceive Russian interests in the Black Sea region, particularly in the security realm, to be under greater threat. At the same time, there is likely a minimum degree of influence that Russia believes it must maintain in its neighborhood regardless of the state of relations with the West. Indeed, recent history has shown that Russia may draw some redlines when it comes to activity it will tolerate in Ukraine and Georgia.

**Objectives**

Russia's desired objectives for the Black Sea region are not stated in meaningful detail in official strategic documents, such as the Naval Doctrine, Military Doctrine, or National Security Strategy. Rather, the objectives must be surmised based on Russian interests and behavior and subsequently characterized along a spectrum of outcomes that include both what Russia would prefer and what it would accept. Putin and other leading officials and foreign policy analysts, particularly since 2011, have emphasized the idea that Russia is a Eurasian power. What this appears to mean in practice is that, although Russia clearly benefits from trade and other engagement with Europe, Russian leaders would prefer to create a sphere of privileged influence by establishing an integration mechanism in the former Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). In the Black Sea region, this integration project would provide Russia with greater security and political and economic influence in Ukraine and Georgia (as well as Moldova and Armenia). The end result could ultimately take any number of forms, but the key issue for Russia would be to maintain influence in Ukraine and Georgia and prevent, by any means, their integration to NATO or the EU. Given the current low point of relations between Russia and both countries, Russia may continue to accept westward-leaning governments in Kyiv and Tbilisi as long as those countries lack NATO or EU membership.5

As for the countries that are already integrated into NATO (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey), the prospects of drastically altering their geopolitical orientation are slim, and it is not clear the extent to which Russia is willing to pursue this outcome. At a minimum, as elaborated in Chapter Two, Russia will likely seek to undermine or

---

counter any perceived anti-Russia policies emanating from within the region and will opportunistically support actions that advance Russian interests of increased political and economic influence or security. Put another way, Russia’s desired outcome is one in which leaders, particularly in Ankara and Sofia, are sympathetic to greater engagement with Russia and induced to act on those inclinations, ideally in ways that sow division and uncertainty in the West. To some extent, this goal has already been realized. At a minimum, Russia desires that the ruling regime in each country respects Russia’s status as a leading power and does not permit the development of a security situation that legitimately threatens Russia’s southwestern flank—a subjective measure, to be sure.

A long-term threat to the Russian regional vision is the possible integration of Ukraine and Georgia into the EU, NATO, or both. Such integration would undermine Russian interests across every key domain. Moscow would see the countries’ EU membership as further truncating its Eurasian Economic Union and deepening Western political influence along Russia’s periphery. And Moscow would view these countries’ NATO membership as unacceptable and a direct threat to Russia’s national security; that view is underscored by Russian military interventions in both countries since 2008.

The most vexing point of friction between Russia and Turkey primarily exists outside of the Black Sea region, in the ongoing conflict in Syria. As demonstrated when a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian military aircraft in 2015, the security environment in the greater Middle East is fraught with many unintended consequences that could spiral out of control, despite the warming of Russian-Turkish relations over the past few years. Thus far, Russia has managed to use primarily nonmilitary actions in areas where it has leverage, such as trade, to mitigate the threat of relations with Turkey falling below a tolerable threshold.

The final threat to Russian interests in the region is the presence of missile defense infrastructure and increased NATO forces, including the establishment of a Tailored Forward Presence military posture in Southeastern Europe in 2016 and expanded NATO exercises and training activities since then. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union had to consider Turkey as the region’s sole NATO member, while the remaining littoral states were firmly in the socialist camp. But today, the diminished Russian military (relative to its Soviet predecessor) must contend with NATO members or NATO-friendly nations on all sides of the Black Sea region.

---

Strategy
Russia’s strategy to achieve its desired outcomes in the Black Sea region consists of a mix of nonmilitary and military tools, the content and application of which depend on the context in each country and whether the country is aligned with Russia or the West.

Russia’s regional political strategy is highly dependent on such factors as history, culture, security considerations, and current geopolitical realities. The former Soviet republics are a particular focus for Russia because they are nearby—some are even contiguous—and they have shared histories. In 2013, Russia made a concerted effort to dissuade Ukraine and Georgia (and Armenia and Moldova) from signing association agreements (with DCFTAs) with the EU. Armenia unexpectedly abandoned pursuit of an association agreement and joined the Eurasian Economic Union after a meeting between Putin and Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan. Russia was likely seeking a similar course reversal in Kyiv and Tbilisi but failed to achieve that goal.

Putin argued in a 2015 documentary interview that he believed that the West was deliberately attempting to undermine Russia’s so-called Eurasian integration efforts. In response to a question about relations between Russia and the West in regard to Ukraine and other issues, Putin replied,

On Ukraine, and generally the post-Soviet space, I am convinced that the position of our Western partners—Europeans and Americans—is not centered on protecting the interests of Ukraine. But rather [their position] is tied to an attempt to disrupt an attempt to recreate the Soviet Union. And no one wants to believe that we do not have a goal of recreating the Soviet Union. But the very hypothetical possibility of coming together [of former Soviet republics] within the framework of modern (I want to emphasize this word) economic integration processes, which would unquestionably make Russia and Ukraine more competitive in the global economy, and that would allow Russia and Ukraine to occupy their proper places in the modern system of division of labor in global markets. Even this hypothetical possibility doesn’t allow our partners to sleep soundly. And I think the primary task [of the West] is to disrupt this joining of effort. . . . Why can the European Union form but the Eurasian Union cannot?7

From the standpoint of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, drawing closer to the rich and vibrant EU was more attractive than joining the relatively poor Eurasian Economic Union, which Russia sought to dominate for its own interests.

As examined in more detail in Chapter Two of this report, Russia has employed a variety of political, informational, economic, and clandestine activities in these and other countries in the region to change policies that the Kremlin viewed as unsatisfac-

---

tory. For example, in Bulgaria, Russia has employed elements of history, culture, and religion to drum up support for Russian initiatives and generate antipathy toward the West. The Kremlin also directly threatened the use of force against Romania in 2016 in response to Bucharest’s decision to host U.S. missile defense infrastructure on its territory. Following the activation of the system, Putin warned, “We are now forced in a corresponding manner to react, and if yesterday those parts of the territory of Romania did not know what it is like to be in the cross-hairs . . . then today we will have to take certain actions that will ensure our security.” Romanians may have viewed this threat as akin to Moscow’s earlier rhetoric in response to Romania joining NATO.

As mentioned earlier, Russian military strategy in the Black Sea region not long ago involved several cooperative engagements with NATO. As Dmitry Gorenburg noted in a 2018 article,

> Just 10 years ago, the Black Sea was touted as a model of naval cooperation among former adversaries. Collaborative naval activities such as BlackSeaFor and Black Sea Harmony, as well as regular Russian participation in NATO’s Active Endeavor, promised a future where all Black Sea littoral states worked together to ensure regional security and mitigate security threats such as smuggling. This cooperation started to falter after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war but elements were maintained through 2013 as a result of the combined efforts of Russia and NATO members—especially Turkey.

With the annexation of Crimea, the war in the Donbas, and the resultant deterioration of relations with the West, the cooperative element of Russian military strategy has shifted toward confrontation with NATO and competition for military presence in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean regions.

As I discuss later, the emphasis on small missile ships and Kilo-class submarines suggests a desire to hold land- and sea-based targets in the Black Sea region at risk from precision-guided munitions within the current resource constraints of the Russian government. The relatively small number of large warships, such as frigates, indicates that Russia does not presently have designs on transforming the Black Sea Fleet into its blue water—capable Soviet predecessor. At the same time, the reappearance in 2013

---

8 See Chapter Three of this report, as well as Bechev, 2015; and Cohen and Radin, 2019.
10 Dmitry Gorenburg, “Is a New Russian Black Sea Fleet Coming? Or Is It Already Here?” War on the Rocks, July 31, 2018. Practical NATO cooperation with Russia was suspended in March 2014 in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine, but channels of political and military communication have remained open to exchange information on issues of concern (NATO, 2019c).
11 A blue-water navy is a maritime force that is capable of operating in the deepest of oceans globally. The term is used in contrast to green- and brown-water navies (capable of operating in littoral and river waters, respectively).
of a much reduced version of the Soviet-era Mediterranean Squadron, now known as the permanent operational formation of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea (Postoyannoe operativnoe soedinenie Voenno-Morskogo Flota Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Srednizemnom more), also points to an intention to rebalance naval presence in the region between Russia and the United States and its allies. The purpose of this formation, which is a mixed-fleet rotational force consisting of ten to 15 warships, amphibious ships, and auxiliary vessels, is to provide another layer of defensive depth to Russia’s southwestern flank and to facilitate Russia’s pursuit of political, economic, and military objectives in North Africa and the Middle East. As observers have noted, given the current composition of the U.S. 6th Fleet and the Standing NATO Maritime Group 2, the Russian formation could challenge the West in the immediate period of a crisis situation. Finally, the reintroduction of Russian firepower in Crimea via air forces, strategic air defense, and coastal defense missile systems creates a more robust southern layer of defense should Russia ever decide to conduct large-scale operations in Ukraine or South Caucasus.

Trends in Russian Military Capabilities

As Putin has stated on multiple occasions, including in a March 2018 speech to the Federal Assembly in which he announced the development of new strategic weapons, Russia views its hard power as a key means to ensuring its security and to achieving desired foreign policy objectives. In the Black Sea maritime zone, Russia’s military order of battle and posture are intended to support the pursuit and protection of vital interests that are expanding as Russia reemerges after two decades of retrenchment.

In this section, I review Russia’s maritime forces, A2/AD capabilities, ground forces, and thresholds for military action.

Maritime Forces

From Moscow’s perspective, the Black Sea provides valuable depth that allows land-based operations and the overall defense of southwestern Russia and its periphery to

12 Fedysyn, 2013.
14 President of Russia, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Moscow, March 1, 2018a.
be conducted more effectively and safely.16 Because of its geography, the Black Sea is essentially an enclosed space whose sole entrance and exit point can be easily threatened or closed; thus, using the Black Sea to project naval power into the Mediterranean Sea and beyond is possible only insofar as transit through the Turkish Straits remains uncontested. As one military historian pointed out, Russian naval forces in the Black Sea region historically served as “an instrument of presence and intervention on the maritime flanks of Russian armies in the Caucasus.”17 But since the Cold War, a Western navy has exerted de facto control on the Mediterranean side of the Turkish Straits. As a result, in the event of a crisis in which NATO was able to bring superior naval and airpower, whatever Black Sea Fleet naval forces remained on that side of the straits would be effectively trapped.18 Nevertheless, Crimea is a strategic asset that offers a platform from which offensive operations could be launched into the Balkans and the Caucasus, while naval forces deployed in either the Black Sea or the eastern Mediterranean Sea could provide (and indeed have provided) multiple defensive barriers in the direction of the straits, constraining entry by a potential adversary.19

In the early years of the Cold War, Soviet naval forces were deployed from the Black Sea to “strengthen diplomatic efforts of the Soviet Union in certain countries in the Mediterranean region through [a display of] military-naval force.”20 Basing rights obtained at Pasha Liman in the People’s Republic of Albania from 1958 to 1961 briefly facilitated such efforts. In the late 1950s, 12 diesel attack submarines were based there to stretch Soviet military presence into the Eastern Mediterranean region.21 In 1964, the Soviets created a formal Mediterranean Squadron, consisting of surface ships and

16 Southwestern Russia includes the vast Volga River Basin, where 40 percent of Russia’s residents live and which accounts for 50 percent of the country’s agricultural and 45 percent of its industrial production, including major segments of the defense industry (Olga Gorelits and Igor Zemlyanov, “The Volga River Basin: History of Development and Modern Hydrological Regime Under the Changing Climate,” presentation slides, Water and Climate Meeting of the Great Rivers of the World, Rome, October 24, 2017).


18 During NATO’s Operation Unified Protector in Libya in 2011, the naval blockade was enforced by six NATO vessels, “with an additional ten more on offer.” Given the standing Russian naval force that was stood up in 2013 in the Mediterranean Sea, NATO might need to be able to generate more naval power than it did in 2011, depending on the scenario (Brooke A. Smith-Windsor, NATO’s Maritime Strategy in the Libya Crisis as Seen from the Sea, Rome: NATO Defense College, Research Paper No. 90, March 2013, p. 5).


submarines, to operate year-round in the maritime zone both to extend defensive lines and to support political interests in the region. Figure 4.1, based on a map from a declassified Central Intelligence Agency report, depicts regional naval and air facilities that supported the squadron’s operations. The report concluded that the squadron was “probably more important to the Soviets from a political than from a military point of view” in that it improved “the image of the [Soviet Union] as defender of Arab interests and [lent] weight to Soviet diplomatic and propaganda attacks on Western interests in the Middle East and North Africa.”

The primary mission of the Soviet fleet stationed in the Black Sea was to ensure the security of Russia’s southwestern flank. Although the Soviets could not bar NATO vessels from entering the sea during peacetime, naval exercises during the Cold War focused on eliminating threats on both sides of the Turkish Straits, depending on the disposition of forces at the outset of a conflict. The Soviets worked closely with the Romanians and Bulgarians to maintain naval supremacy in the maritime zone. The primary mission of the navies of the littoral Warsaw Pact countries in wartime was to assist in destroying “enemy naval forces in the Black Sea, and [to bar] entry of NATO forces into it.” In peacetime, these navies could assist the Soviets in monitoring U.S.

Figure 4.1
Regional Naval and Air Facilities That Supported the Mediterranean Squadron, 1968

SOURCE: Directorate of Intelligence, 1968, p. 10.

22 Directorate of Intelligence, 1968, p. 12.

6th Fleet vessels that entered the Black Sea. Throughout the 1970s, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet regularly exercised with the aforementioned Warsaw Pact navies to hone coordination in response to a potential conflict with NATO. In 1973, for example, an exercise concentrated on transferring information about the enemy among the three participants in order to launch multiple coordinated joint fires. Table 4.2 shows a general naval order of battle (i.e., the estimated unit strengths) of the Black Sea Fleet and the Bulgarian and Romanian navies in 1980. Not surprisingly, the Soviet navy provided the capability to manage the NATO threat, while Bulgaria and Romania offered additional amphibious, minesweeping, and strike capabilities. By the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Black Sea Fleet comprised 833 combat and auxiliary vessels, which did not include allied navies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by the near collapse of the Black Sea Fleet, which became a shadow of its Soviet predecessor (further exacerbated by Romania and Bulgaria joining NATO in 2004). A 1993 agreement between Russian President Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk left Crimea as part of the newly independent Ukraine, with allowances for Russia to maintain its naval presence on the peninsula. The agreement also mandated a roughly 80/20 division of assets between Russia and Ukraine, which decreased the total number of warships, submarines, and auxiliary vessels in Russia’s Black Sea Fleet to 525. Prominent figures from the Russian naval establishment (along with nationalists in the Russian government) were vehemently opposed to the agreement, particularly the status of Crimea. Vice-Admiral Kazimir Stalbo publicly renounced the agreement, saying that any proposed arrangement between Russia and Ukraine that did not address the “illegal” and “unconstitutional” transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was a nonstarter. Aside from the legality of the transfer of Crimea, Stalbo contended that the large number of valuable military assets, particularly air bases, scattered far beyond Sevastopol meant that the entire peninsula should be considered the home of the Black Sea Fleet and, implicitly, should be part of Russia. Yeltsin, of course, chose to pursue a different

---

24 “Reidovyi sbor i uchenie soyuznykh voenno-morskikh flotov na chernom more [Offshore Assembly and Exercise of Naval Fleets in the Black Sea],” Informatsionniy sbornik shtaba ob”edinennykh vooruzhennykh sil gosudarstv-uchastnikov Varshavskogo dogovora [Information Herald of the Staff of the Unified Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact], No. 6, 1974, pp. 132–135.


27 Kazimir Stalbo, “Razgovor o razdele flota ne imeet znacheniya, poka ne budet reshen vopros o kryme [Discussion on the Division of the Fleet Is Meaningless Until the Crimea Question Is Resolved],” Rossiiskaya gazeta, June 19, 1993.

28 “K 100-letiyu so dnya rozhdeniya vitse-admiral K. A. Stalbo [For the 100th Birthday of Vice Admiral K. A. Stalbo],” Morskoi sbornik [Maritime Journal], No. 1, 2013, p. 36.
policy, arguing in 1993 against Russian sovereignty over even Sevastopol: “The problems of the Black Sea Fleet and the town where it is based must be solved both calmly and gradually. . . . Otherwise, what do you want me to do—fight with Ukraine?”

Black Sea Fleet Forces Through 2018

Although Russia did ultimately maintain naval presence in Crimea, the Black Sea Fleet was largely neglected for nearly 25 years. From 1991 until 2014, it did not receive a single major surface combatant or submarine. In fact, the only new warships delivered to the fleet during that period were three minesweepers and a small missile ship. An implication of this production gap is that, even as Russia attempts to rebuild its Black Sea Fleet today with different military capabilities, the Soviet legacy ships are or soon will be retired, creating a sharp quantitative decline despite qualitative improvements in capability among key surface vessels. Indeed, prior to 2014, the Black Sea Fleet consisted of just 33 warships and one attack submarine, supported by naval aviation and a naval infantry brigade.

The modernization of the Russian Navy, including the Black Sea Fleet, was prioritized in the ten-year State Armament Program for 2011 to 2020. From 2014 to 2018, the fleet received six new Kilo-class submarines, three frigates, and several other smaller surface vessels (see Table 4.3). After Russia invaded Ukraine, Paris canceled Moscow’s purchase of two new Mistral-class amphibious warships that were ordered after deficiencies in Black Sea warships became evident in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.

The naval acquisitions demonstrate that Russia is seeking to rebuild a long-range strike capability in the Black Sea, in addition to other roles that these platforms are intended for, but Moscow is not presently building a significant blue-water force of large warships and amphibious vessels to project combat power into the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, the new diesel attack submarines and the frigates are capable of firing either land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) or anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). Assuming that the military-industrial complex has also delivered the requisite missiles, these platforms will allow Russia to project power beyond the immediate region and hold NATO assets and territory at risk from long-range precision strikes. Russia has indeed moved such vessels out of the Black Sea to participate in strikes against targets in Syria.

31 Specifically, there were five Soviet-era, principal surface combatants; 19 patrol and coastal combatants; nine amphibious vessels; and one attack submarine (International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Russia and Eurasia,” in Military Balance 2014, London: Routledge, 2014, pp. 188–189).
33 Gorenburg, 2018.
Russia’s rebuilding of a naval strike capability in the Black Sea should be kept in perspective, however. As can be seen in Table 4.3, the acquired platforms are not capable of launching large salvos. Hypothetically, even if all of the long-range shooters identified in the table were equipped with LACMs and launched their full magazines, the strike of 64 missiles would be roughly equivalent to the April 2017 U.S. strike against the Al Shayrat airfield in Syria, during which two destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean Sea launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles.35 Furthermore, such a missile loadout would mean that the platforms would be left with very little anti-ship capability and would be wholly reliant on coastal anti-ship systems (see discussion later in this chapter) until the ships could be resupplied. The trade-off created by large

Table 4.3
Warship Additions to Russia’s Black Sea Maritime Forces, 2000–2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Primary Armament</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patrol boat</td>
<td>8 Igla SAMs</td>
<td>Vasily Bykov</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small missile ship</td>
<td>8 LACMs</td>
<td>Vyshniy Volochek</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small missile ship</td>
<td>8 LACMs</td>
<td>Orekhovo-Zuevo</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minesweeper</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Ivan Antonov</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided-missile frigate</td>
<td>8 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>Admiral Makarov</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-268 Velikiy Novgorod</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-271 Kolpino</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided-missile frigate</td>
<td>8 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>Admiral Grigorovich</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided-missile frigate</td>
<td>8 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>Admiral Essen</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-262 Stary Oskol</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-265 Krasnodar</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-261 Novorossiysk</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>4 LACMs or ASCMs</td>
<td>B-237 Rostov-on-Don</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minesweeper</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Vice-Admiral Zakhar’in</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minesweeper</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Valentin Pikul</td>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small missile ship</td>
<td>8 anti-ship missiles</td>
<td>Samum</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: SAM = surface-to-air missile.

---

LACM and ASCM loadouts was not a dilemma that Russia had to seriously consider in Syria.

Long-range strike is but one of the missions of the Black Sea Fleet and is probably secondary to others, in most cases. In peacetime, surface warships protect sea lines of communications for the transport of goods and weapons through the Turkish Straits and throughout the Black Sea. In wartime, as alluded to earlier, some portion of the primary surface fleet (12 corvettes and frigates, one guided-missile cruiser) could hold at risk surface vessels attempting to enter the straits while landing vessels and other ships support operations in the South Caucasus. In the brief war with Georgia in 2008, for example, a Russian naval detachment consisting of two large landing ships carrying approximately 500 troops and 100 pieces of equipment to Ochamchir, Georgia, were supported by a small missile ship, a small anti-submarine warfare ship, and two minesweepers. The detachment arrived on station, however, after fighting had ended. This delay is one of the reasons the Russian Navy ordered the Mistral-class warships.

As of mid-2019, the amphibious capability of the fleet had not changed much since the Russo-Georgian War. In addition to five landing craft, the Black Sea Fleet has seven large landing ships in its inventory, three of which were commissioned in 1966, 1968, and 1975, respectively. The other four large landing ships, each of which has a cargo capacity of only 500 tons, have done the heavy lifting for the Syrian Express, which followed a sea route between Russia and Tartus, Syria. Precedent suggests that the ships may have perhaps another decade of useful service life. Russia purchased aged Turkish cargo ships to augment existing amphibious capability in support of operations in Syria, but the ships ultimately turned out to be of little utility. The existing amphibious capability is thus not very robust, although it has been suitable to support the relatively small Russian force grouping in Syria—approximately 3,000 official military personnel as of 2018. For contingencies in the southwestern strategic direction of Russia within the confines of the Black Sea, the amphibious capability could play a small supporting role in what would primarily be a ground-centered operation out of Russia, as was the case during the Russo-Georgian War. Although there are a few potential long-term solutions to modernize Russia’s amphibious capability, according

---

36 Mikhail Barabanov, Anton Lavrov, and Vycheslav Tselueiko, Tanki avgusta [Tanks of August], Moscow: Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2009, p. 73.
37 For comparison, a U.S. Lewis and Clark—class cargo ship has a cargo capacity of 7,300 tons.
to one analysis, “there is no plan to renew the fleet of medium and large landing ships, extensively used in Syria.”

**Black Sea Fleet Forces Through 2025**

In 2018, Russia approved a State Armament Program for 2018–2027, which determines the plan for weapon delivery to the armed forces. But, given problems and delays with shipbuilding, the State Armament Program for 2011–2020 is perhaps just as instructive on where the Black Sea Fleet is headed in 2025. According to plans from that armament program, which may not be fulfilled until at least 2022 or 2023, Russia intends to acquire additional ships with long-range strike capability, with an emphasis on small missile ships. Although the development of some of these ships has been delayed by the breakdown in relations with Ukraine and Germany (manufacturers in both countries had supplied gas turbines to Russia), Russia may add three frigates, five patrol boats (corvettes), and as many as 12 small missile ships to the Black Sea Fleet by 2025; see Table 4.4 for an estimated order of battle of the major combatants, based on possible decommissioning or lack of seaworthiness of ships that are more than 40 years old. The addition of long-range precision munition platforms is consistent with the Naval Doctrine that President Putin approved in July 2017, which calls for strengthening the Navy’s abilities to defend Russia’s maritime approaches and littoral waters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Estimated Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diesel submarine</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guided-missile cruiser</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large anti-submarine warfare ship</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small anti-submarine warfare ship</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frigate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrol boat (corvette)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missile ship</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seagoing minesweeper</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large landing ship</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4.4**

Projected Black Sea Fleet Warship and Submarine Order of Battle by 2025

Sources: Gorenburg, 2018; Russian Ships, 2020.

---

40 Delanoe, 2019, p. 17.
41 Gorenburg, 2018.
42 Gorenburg, 2018.
doctrine also envisions improving the Navy’s capabilities to strike targets at long range with conventional and nuclear weapons and to project power in strategically important regions of the world with expanded surface and submarine forces.

Even with these enhancements, the projected 2025 Black Sea Fleet is orders of magnitude smaller in every category of major combatant than the Soviet version of the fleet was. Furthermore, there do not appear to be any short-term plans to drastically return to an order of battle with comparatively large quantities of submarines and major surface combatants. As Gorenburg observed,

the pattern of Black Sea Fleet ship acquisitions highlights the Russian military’s decision to focus on a combination of submarines and smaller ships equipped with highly capable long-range missiles that do not require heavy tonnage to be employed—especially in the narrower Black and Mediterranean Seas.43

The standing U.S. and NATO maritime presence in the Black Sea is also relatively limited. The U.S. 6th Fleet maintains a rotational presence in the Black Sea in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, which is designed to enhance deterrence and collective defense of the region. This presence includes periodic deployments of Arleigh Burke–class guided-missile destroyers from the Forward-Deployed Naval Forces Europe in Rota, Spain, and other vessels. The U.S. Navy also plays a leading role in organizing the annual Sea Breeze exercise in the Black Sea, which involves several NATO allies and partners.44 Elements of NATO’s standing naval forces (two Standing NATO Maritime Groups and two Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Groups) also undertake regular deployments in the Black Sea in support of the Alliance’s Tailored Forward Presence posture and the annual NATO Breeze exercise.45 Finally, any net assessment of NATO’s Black Sea forces would need to take into account the capabilities of the Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish fleets, which are discussed in Chapter Five. Such a net assessment is beyond the scope of this report.

In sum, Russia is rebuilding its Black Sea maritime forces after a nearly 25-year pause to carry out a more limited mission, given Russia’s budget realities and other defense requirements. Key warfighting assets, such as large amphibious ships and long-range strike platforms with large magazines, are relatively limited for large-scale operations in the Black Sea or the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Russia does not have the resources at present, and likely will not have them in the near term, to consistently and robustly project power from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean Sea, as the Soviets did during the Cold War using the Mediterranean Squadron. Although the previously

43 Gorenburg, 2018.


45 NATO, “NATO Ships Exercise in the Black Sea,” July 19, 2019d.
mentioned permanent operational formation in the Mediterranean Sea is assigned to the Black Sea Fleet, which regularly provides many of the operational formation’s vessels, sustaining this blue-water presence has required the rotational deployment of ships from all other Russian fleets and the Caspian Flotilla. At the same time, the primary purposes of the Black Sea Fleet maritime forces are to support ground-based operations in areas of strategic interest in the region during wartime and, during peacetime, to protect strategic lines of naval communication and deter adversaries. The current forces available to the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla, as well as those forecast to be delivered in the near term, are likely to be successful in the most likely conflicts that Russia might confront in Ukraine and the South Caucasus for the foreseeable future.

**Anti-Access/Area Denial Capabilities**

**Air Defense**

During the Cold War, the idea of A2/AD, which is not an explicitly Russian concept, was to deploy large quantities of air defense systems and fighter aircraft along the outer edge of the Soviet Union, stretching from Crimea in the southwest to Leningrad in the northwest, to protect critical military and civilian infrastructure and strategic entry points deeper into the Soviet Union.46 In 1988, the Kyiv-based 8th Air Defense Army of the Soviet Air Defense Forces (Voyska protivovozdushnoy oborony [PVO]) was responsible for protecting Soviet air space and infrastructure in the southwest strategic direction. Two PVO corps covered a large portion of Ukraine (and part of Moldova), with SAM regiments and brigades based in Mariupol’, Donetsk, Nikopol’, Zaporozh’e, Odessa, Chişinău, Uman’, Crimea, and elsewhere.47 In all, prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were 18 SAM regiments and brigades, which consisted of 132 strategic SAM battalions, in the PVO’s 8th Air Defense Army.48 That number of battalions is roughly equivalent to the number of battalions in Russia’s strategic SAM force today, although there has been significant qualitative improvement in long-range Russian SAM capability since the late 1980s.49 The Soviet air forces, which were divided into air defense and regular air force units, comprised 49 air regiments.50 In Crimea,

---

46 In addition to air defense, in this section, I also discuss other Aerospace Forces (Vozdushno-kosmicheskiye sily) assets that may not be directly assigned to an air defense mission.


49 By strategic SAM, we mean the SAM systems that are subordinate to PVO or other aerospace forces and have a national defense mission.

50 Grebenyuk, 2016.
there were several air bases and at least one SAM brigade—the 206th (Unit 65318); because there were two long-range SAM regiments on the peninsula at the time of Russian annexation, there were likely several other SAM brigades in Crimea during the Soviet era.51

Russian strategic air defense in the southwest was thus significantly diminished with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With just the Black Sea Fleet remaining in the possession of the Russian Armed Forces, there was virtually no A2/AD capability west of Novorossiysk beyond what the maritime forces could provide. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 allowed Russia to return a fraction of the strategic air defense presence that it lost in 1991 by extending that air defense approximately 300 km to the west of the former Soviet border. However, if much of Ukraine could previously be counted on as an air defense buffer offering significant obstacles to an adversary’s approach to the Russian homeland from the southwest, today Russia must concentrate its defense capability in a much smaller space.52 Nonetheless, the Southern Military District, which is responsible for Russian military forces in Crimea, has increased A2/AD capabilities significantly since 2014. After annexing Crimea, Russia formed the 27th Composite Air Division in Bel’bek, which is about 10 km northwest of Sevastopol. The units of this division include the 37th Composite Aviation Regiment, the 38th Fighter Regiment, and the 39th Helicopter Regiment (see the section on ground forces later in this chapter). Russia also confiscated three SAM regiments from the Ukrainian military: The 50th and 174th regiments comprised two SA-10d battalions (some sources listed three battalions for the 174th, but this appears not to be the case), and the 55th regiment comprised three SA-11 Gadfly batteries.53 Ukraine’s two long-range SAM regiments in Crimea were renamed 18th (Guards) and 12th Anti-Aircraft Rocket Regiments and were subordinated to the 31st PVO Division, which is itself subordinate to the Aerospace Forces’ 4th Air and Air Defense Army of the Southern Military District. By 2018, all of the previous SA-10d battalions were reequipped with the more capable SA-21 Growler (in Russia, the S-400) system.54 Each SA-21 battalion is provided with its own air defense by the SA-22 Greyhound (Pantsir-S1) missile sys-

51 “Konets gruppirovki vooruzhennykh sil Ukrainy v Krymu [The End of the Ukrainian Grouping of Armed Forces in Crimea],” bmpd blog, Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, March 26, 2014.

52 The same is true of Russian defenses in the Baltic region, where there were once dozens of strategic SAM battalions and fighter aircraft, and in Kaliningrad, where Russia’s western air and coastal defenses are now concentrated.


typically, there are six SA-22 systems in a battery, and, in the past, there was one battery per PVO regiment (thus, perhaps two or three SA-22 systems per battalion). In late 2016, there were reports of a battalion of SA-23 Gladiator/Giant (S-300V4) systems being moved into Crimea from the battalion’s home unit, the PVO’s 77th brigade in Korenovsk, which is approximately 300 km east of the peninsula.

Geographically, the four long-range SAM battalions of the Aerospace Forces’ two regiments are situated around the perimeter of the Crimean peninsula, with two on the western edge and two in the east. Although these SA-21 battalions are often discussed in the context of A2/AD, their missions may be tied to protecting infrastructure and defending the general area. The battalion of the 12th regiment located in Sevastopol, for example, is likely there to protect the naval base. Given the location of the naval base, this may appear to be a distinction without a difference in that the battalion could also serve as an outer layer of protection against an enemy attack against mainland Russia; however, the distinction is important because, in all likelihood, assets from the battalion would be strictly tied to the base during a conflict. The additional western battalion is located in Yevpatoria, home to an important port in Crimea. The battalion in the northeast, subordinate to the 18th regiment, is located in Dzhankoi, which is a key transportation hub; in particular, there is a junction of the two major railways in Crimea, which provide the only rail access into mainland Ukraine. The fourth battalion is located in Feodosiya, in the southeast corner of the peninsula. Feodosiya is home to another port and some important military infrastructure, such as a coastal defense brigade and a ship repair yard. Individually, the SA-21 battalions likely are intended to provide point defense of important military and civilian infrastructure. Collectively, they serve as a two-echelon, outer layer of defense against an air attack emanating from the Eastern Mediterranean. This layer of air defense could be part of a strategy to deter a NATO response to potential Russian operations in southern or eastern Ukraine or in the Sea of Azov, although air defense coverage of much of the remainder of Ukraine would have to be provided by other means from Russia or Belarus.

56 “Moskvu s oseni budut zaschischat’ uzhe dve zenitnye baterei ‘Pantsir-S’ [Beginning in the Fall Two ‘Pantsir-S’ Batteries Will Be Protecting Moscow],” RIA Novosti, June 20, 2012.
59 For a perspective on a potential large-scale Russian incursion into much of the eastern part of Ukraine, see Mikhail Barabanov, “Pribuzhdenie k miru 2.0: blizhazhishaya perspectiva Rossii na Ukrainu [Compel to Peace 2.0:
Coastal Defense

The origins of Russia’s current land-based coastal defense in the Black Sea region date to the early 1960s, with the formation of the 51st Independent Coastal Missile Regiment of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, which was based in Sevastopol in Crimea. For much of the post–Cold War period, land-based coastal defense of Russian interests in the Black Sea was the responsibility of the 11th Coastal Missile-Artillery Brigade, which remains based in Utash, near the coastal town of Anapa, Russia. As part of an agreement with Ukraine in 1997, Russia did not deploy long-range coastal defense missile systems in Crimea. After annexation, elements of the 11th brigade were transferred to Sevastopol to form the 15th Independent Coastal Missile-Artillery Brigade. The force structure of the two coastal defense brigades is virtually the same. The 11th brigade in Utash is the more capable of the two because it has two SSC-5 Stooge (K300P Bastion-P) batteries instead of the 15th brigade’s one such battery. Each brigade has one battery of the SSC-6 Sennight (3K60 Bal) system. From Sevastopol and Utash, the missile systems have the capacity to launch 40 and 48 missiles, respectively, before launching a second round, assuming that the reloader vehicles are present. The difference between the SSC-5 and the SSC-6 systems lies in the range of the missiles, the type of missiles fired, and the type of targets engaged. The SSC-5, which fires the Oniks supersonic missile, is intended to engage larger maritime targets reportedly up to 300 km from Russia. The mission of the SSC-6, a battalion of which has 32 subsonic Kh-35 missiles, is to destroy groups of enemy ships closer to Russian shores at a range of up to 120 km. The two coastal missile-artillery brigades currently constitute the coastal defense portion of Russia’s A2/AD infrastructure.

On paper, these two coastal defense missile systems present a challenge to maritime forces operating within the maximum ranges of the respective coastal defense missiles. However, there is some skepticism that the systems will perform as advertised in a contested environment. In the case of the SSC-5, whose missile has a reported range of up to 300 km, it requires enablers to see over-the-horizon targets. According to an analysis by the Swedish Defence Research Agency, “the organic fire control radar

The Near-Term Perspective of Russia in Ukraine],” Rossiya v global’noi politike [Russia in Global Affairs], January 19, 2015.


61 “Chernomorskii flot [Black Sea Fleet],” Milkvakaz, June 6, 2017. K300S is the stationary version of the system, while "P" is the annotation for the mobile version.

62 According to one Russian source, the reloaders are not always present (Vladimir Pasiakin, “Prikryli s morya [Covered from the Sea],” Rossiiskaya gazeta, November 3, 2016).

of the Bastion-P cannot see beyond the radar horizon (normally 40 km at sea level). This limits the effective range of the system unless an external (airborne or forward-based) sensor can be used.\textsuperscript{64} As shown in Figure 4.2, the coastal missile system would need to interact with perhaps a helicopter and other ships to provide a precise location to the launcher.\textsuperscript{65} According to notes in the graphic—which originated from the manufacturer, NPO Mashinostroyenia—targeting information can be transferred by military assets, such as a helicopter or ship, via very high frequency electromagnetic waves at a distance of up to 40 km or via satellite communications. Disruptions to this kill chain, which could occur in a variety of ways, would reduce the coastal defense system’s capability.

**Ground Forces**

In 2010, the North Caucasus Military District was dissolved and replaced by the Southern Military District. At that time, the district consisted of the 58th Combined Arms Army (CAA) and subordinate elements (approximately 70,000 personnel), the 20th motorized division, and the 7th Airborne Division, among other formations.

---

\textsuperscript{64} Dalsjö, Berglund, and Jonsson, 2019, p. 34.

The Southern Military District subsumed all of the personnel and equipment and added the re-formed 49th CAA, the 4th Air and Air Defense Army, the Black Sea Fleet, the Caspian Flotilla, railroad forces, and several other assets. The number of military personnel in the Southern Military District may be around 200,000 today, including conscripts.66

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the ground force posture (and structure) in and around the Southern Military District changed considerably. In 2015, the 33rd Independent Motorized Rifle (MR) Brigade moved west to the border with Ukraine from Maikop, in southern Russia. This brigade became the basis for the 150th MR Division. The 8th CAA was reconstituted in early 2017 to command the 150th MR Division, the 20th Independent MR Brigade, and other combat and support units, although significant infrastructure is still being constructed to support these new deployments.67 The 22nd Army Corps, whose predecessor was transferred to Ukraine in the early 1990s and disbanded in 2003, was re-formed in Crimea. The corps comprises a coastal defense brigade, a reconnaissance brigade, a logistics and supply brigade, an artillery regiment, an electronic warfare center (electronic reconnaissance and jamming capability against a variety of land-, sea-, and air-based targets), and the aforementioned coastal defense missile units.68 The Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation stood up an airborne battalion in Crimea in 2017 and announced plans for it to become the third regiment of the 7th Air Assault Division.69 A squadron of 16 Ka-52 helicopters was transferred to Crimea to become part of the newly formed 39th Helicopter Regiment (subordinate to Aerospace Forces) in Dzhankoi.70 Perhaps the most-significant changes in ground forces since 2014 happened just outside of the Southern Military District, along the northern part of Russia’s border with Ukraine: The 20th CAA, which is subordinate to the Western Military District, moved its headquarters back to Voronezh from Mulino (east of Moscow) in 2015, and the primary combat units of the 20th CAA, which are still being formed on the basis of existing MR brigades, now reside along the Russian border with Ukraine in El’nya, Klintsy,

---

66 Expert on Russian military personnel, informal correspondence with the author, October 2018.
Boguchar, Valuiki, and Soloti.\textsuperscript{71} Construction of military bases and infrastructure to support these units continued in 2018.\textsuperscript{72}

In all, what these ground force posture changes amount to is the ability to move large combat units rapidly into Ukraine from the northwest (144th MR Division, 20th CAA); west (3rd MR Division, 20th CAA); southwest (150th MR Division, 8th CAA); and, to a much lesser degree, south (22nd Army Corps, 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, 7th Air Assault Division). Notably, the creation of divisions was a departure from the philosophy of the 2008 reforms, which virtually eliminated divisions in favor of brigades. Although that decision to transition to a brigade structure was never universally popular among Russian military officers, the increased threat of combat involving larger fronts, among other reasons, apparently stimulated at least a regional reversion to Soviet practice.\textsuperscript{73}

Ready reinforcements could be provided by units from the 49th CAA around Stavropol, as well as other military districts; it is unknown the extent to which assets from the 58th CAA, which is responsible for security in the Caucasus, would be available in a crisis. How command and control might be handled to manage a joint force from two military districts—through Joint Strategic Command (Obyedinennoye strategicheskoye komandovaniye) in wartime—is an open question. A large portion of the force could be from Joint Strategic Command West, although the commander of that group or the commander of Joint Strategic Command South—likely the former—presumably would have operational control of the overall force grouping. But not all of these forces would necessarily be required; forces from the Southern Military District alone could be sufficient, depending on assigned objectives—for example, a limited incursion into Donetsk and Mariupol’. Although it would alleviate potential command and control issues if all forces called up for a conflict were drawn from a single military district, Russian military strategy at present is, to some extent, built on bringing in follow-on forces from other military districts. Indeed, reinforcement forces from the Western and Central Military districts were part of the Kavkaz-2016 strategic exercise, which was a test of the armed forces to be able to respond to a significant security crisis in the southwestern strategic direction.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} Given the stagnation in Russian personnel numbers since 2016, some observers have expressed skepticism that Russia will be able to bring these new units to full strength. See, for example, Charles Bartles, “The Path Already Taken: A Return to Cadre Formations?” \textit{OE Watch}, Vol. 9, No. 7, July 2019, p. 7.


\textsuperscript{73} The assertion about larger fronts is my own assessment based on the timing and location of many new divisions. Officially, the partial return to a division structure occurred to correct a “bias toward brigades” and because “in some places highly mobile brigades are needed, in others, divisions” (Oleg Falichev, “Vozvrashchenie divizii [The Return of Divisions],” \textit{Voenno-promyshlennyi kur'er [Military-Industrial Courier]}, February 8, 2016).

Thresholds for Military Action

Given the force posture changes since 2014, there can be little question that Russia is urgently rebuilding its military capability in and around the Black Sea region. The plan to reequip the Black Sea Fleet and other forces of the Southern Military District, however, predated the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, and the general fallout in Russia’s relations with Kyiv and the West. Even if there had been no Euromaidan protest movement in Ukraine, Russia still would have been delivering modern weapons to its armed forces in relatively large numbers. This is because Russian leaders believe that, under virtually any geopolitical conditions, Russia needs a military that can credibly deter potential external aggression and be strong enough to coerce regional actors if necessary. So, Russia had a security strategy before the crisis with Ukraine: In particular, the enhanced capabilities for the Southern Military District that were part of the State Armament Program that began in 2011 would have ensured quantitative overmatch against local militaries and, to some extent, served as a deterrent against Western intervention in the event of a regional crisis. And strategic deterrence is supported primarily by Russia’s strategic nuclear forces (strategic rocket forces, naval strategic forces, strategic aviation, and tactical nuclear weapons), while conventional deterrence against NATO in the Black Sea region could involve increased long-range strike capability from surface combatants and submarines, the aforementioned A2/AD assets, and the other general-purpose forces in the region.

The annexation of Crimea and the corresponding deterioration of Russia’s relations with Ukraine and the West altered Russia’s plan for its military, in two ways. First, acquiring Crimea allowed Russia to shift a considerable amount of military capability 300 km to the west to augment the fleet and naval infantry that were already there. Given the current and likely future state of relations between Russia and the West, this enhanced capability allows Moscow to threaten NATO further from the Russian heartland and from potential theaters of military operations, such as Ukraine; the South Caucasus; and, to a lesser extent, Moldova, given the NATO-friendly territory along all axes, with the exception of the southeast. The other way in which the plan changed for Russia was to reposition and restructure a relatively large amount of combat power along much of Russia’s border with Ukraine. In many respects, this repositioning does not cost Russia much, given that the major security threats today emanate from Russia’s west, and the forces deployed along the border with Ukraine could be moved north in the event of a crisis there (although, presumably, Russia would be accepting some greater risk in Ukraine, or perhaps Georgia, depending on the number of forces that were redeployed). This assertion will likely hold true so long as there is not a major breakdown between Russia and China over activities in Central Asia or the Far East, which could demand that Russia draw on existing forces con-
centrated in one or two key theaters in the western part of the country. In the event of a crisis elsewhere, securing the southwestern flank would be more precarious for Russia than it was for the Soviet Union, which had a much larger human and financial resource pool at its disposal.

The threshold for Russia employing these newly concentrated forces in non-NATO territory adjacent to Russia is arguably quite low. Historical evidence and recent Russian behavior and rhetoric all suggest that the former Soviet space is central to Russia’s political, economic, and security objectives. Indeed, and as discussed in Chapter Two, Russian leaders have explicitly stated on many occasions in speeches, remarks, and official strategic documents that reintegration of former Soviet Union states in some form or another is a key policy goal. Given Russia’s actions in Ukraine since 2014—which, at least to some degree, were connected with Russia’s attempt to involve Ukraine in the Eurasian integration project—it remains unclear how willing Russia will be over the long term to accept that Ukraine (as well as Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia) resides outside of these Eurasian integration processes. What seems to be clear today is that Russia has conceded that some of its neighbors may sign association agreements with the EU. But Moscow will oppose, certainly through nonmilitary (see Chapter Two) and perhaps military means, any formal political or particularly military integration with the West, such as NATO or EU membership.

Historically speaking, the potential loss of a perceived ally to the West has been a casus belli (i.e., act provoking or justifying war) for Russia (and the Soviet Union), although this has not always led to military intervention. For example, neither the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 nor the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 led to overt military action by Russia. More recently, as discussed in Chapter Seven, the popular revolution in Armenia in 2018—which saw an ally of the Kremlin, Serzh Sargsyan, swept from power and replaced by the leader of the revolution—did not result in Russian military intervention. On the other hand, the Russian war with Georgia in 2008 and Russia’s intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine did occur in the context of those countries’ potential closer Western alignment, although the circumstances were different in each case. In Georgia, Russia deployed troops to reinforce its grip on South Ossetia, which the Saakashvili regime was threatening. In Ukraine, Russia sent forces into Crimea after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who was friendly toward Moscow, fled the country and a government supportive of the West was formed in Kyiv, potentially threatening many Russian interests, including the naval base in Crimea. Furthermore, a perceived high probability of success was likely important in these and other cases of direct military action that took place when the Russian homeland was not under immediate threat. As it turned out, Ukrainian forces and volunteer and irregu-
lar units halted the advance of Russian-backed rebels in summer 2014, and since then, Russian ground forces and rebels have been locked in a military stalemate.

Clearly, the decision to intervene militarily is complex and can depend on many factors and actions, some of which may not originate in Moscow. And there is much that is not yet known about the Kremlin’s decisions regarding the aforementioned crises. However, what is known is that neither the Soviet Union nor the Russian Federation has deployed military forces into a NATO country with the intent to seize territory or change the political status quo by force. On several occasions—Hungary, 1956; Czechoslovakia, 1968; Afghanistan, 1979; Georgia, 2008; Crimea, 2014; eastern Ukraine, 2014—Moscow did deploy forces in areas of perceived strategic interest when there was little to no chance of a clash with NATO. Historical research has shown that the low likelihood of NATO intervention in Afghanistan in response to a Soviet invasion was a factor in the Politburo’s decision during deliberations at that time. As one former Soviet military leader put it,

The Soviet leadership decided to exploit a favorable situation, counting on the fact that the Americans were most concerned on how to solve the problems in Iran where Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic revolution had overthrown the Shah and, on November 4, the US embassy in Tehran was seized and would not stand in the way of our actions in Afghanistan.79

Russia’s 2015 intervention in Syria—where U.S. troops were present and there was a declared U.S. policy, however informal, against the continuation of the Assad regime—was an outlier, to some extent. On the other hand, given the small number of U.S. forces there, Moscow was perhaps relatively confident that war with the United States was unlikely.80 Publicly, Putin has suggested that Russia intervened in Syria to prevent the spread of terrorism and to preclude an outcome—the fall of the Syrian government—that resembled actions taken by the West in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya.81 In considering a future large-scale intervention in Ukraine or in the South Caucasus, Moscow would likely study the probability and capability of NATO to respond militarily, in addition to other military forecasts.82 In general, a change (or

---


81 President of Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 22, 2015; and President of Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 27, 2016.

82 For a historical example of Soviet military planning considerations during a period of increased tensions, see Vitalii Tsygichko, Modeli v sisteme priyatiya voenno-strategicheskikh reshenii v SSSR [Models in the System of Military-Strategic Decision Making in the USSR], Imperium Press, 2005, p. 20.
possibility of change) in the political status quo at the expense of Russian interests and in favor of the West appears to be a relatively reliable, though insufficient, indicator of possible Russian military intervention in the Black Sea region.

**Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy**

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian Federation inherited considerably less influence in the Black Sea region than its Soviet predecessor had, as well as fewer overall resources to mitigate perceived threats. At the same time, recent history has demonstrated that Russian interests in the region have remained largely unchanged, particularly with respect to the former Soviet republics. This dynamic has added a degree of urgency and tension to the region that, arguably, was less intense during the Cold War because of Soviet influence in the capitals of the littoral states and the greater maritime zone. Russian interests primarily center on the desire to maintain varying levels of political and economic influence in each littoral state, keep the Black Sea safe for oil exports and other shipping through the port of Novorossiysk, and prevent a security deficit vis-à-vis NATO that could lead to NATO forces penetrating the Kremlin’s southwestern flank. Russia’s strategy in pursuit of these interests is built around employing diplomatic, information, and economic tools that are backed up by an increasingly credible military capability. Moscow’s calculus on the future use of force in the Black Sea region will be shaped by many factors.

As for possible elements of or implications for a countervailing Western strategy, there are at least two key takeaways from the discussion in this chapter. First, Russian interests in the region are not equal. Russia’s relations with NATO members Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey are secondary to its relations with Ukraine and Georgia. In thinking about future policy toward the latter countries, the United States and NATO must determine their own commitment, risk tolerance, and prioritization of policy while keeping in mind likely Russian redlines. Second, although it is not necessarily a predictor of future actions, Russian behavior over the past two decades has shown that Russia does not seek a military confrontation with NATO and will endeavor to avoid any scenario involving a large-scale deployment of its ground forces, which are neither structured to wage a protracted, large-scale war nor backed by a large economy (relative to the West’s). A large-scale military intervention in the Black Sea region cannot be ruled out, but Russia’s aversion to committing a significant portion of its ground forces suggests that continued, persistent demonstrations of NATO cohesion and political resilience in NATO partner countries could be key factors in deterring Russian intimidation and coercion in the region.
CHAPTER FIVE

Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish Views on Russian Strategy and Posture

Anika Binnendijk and Katherine Costello

The Black Sea region has long been defined by political and cultural diversity. One core challenge for any NATO initiative in the area is the variation in national interests and perceptions of Russia among NATO’s three littoral members: Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey. In this chapter, we review the prominent perspectives toward Russia in each of these three NATO members and consider key areas of divergence and commonality. We then examine how each country is coping with Russian malign influence and efforts to foster fissures among the allies. Finally, we identify the key national interests that each of the three countries is prepared to defend and then assess what political and military contributions they might therefore be willing and able to make to a Western strategy to enhance security and deterrence in the Black Sea region.

Political leaders in Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey have, at times, viewed Russian activities in the Black Sea region with concern. For example, former Romanian President Traian Băsescu famously called the Black Sea “a Russian lake” in 2005.1 Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov warned that Bulgaria would not allow itself to be attacked by Russia.2 And Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan resurrected the “Russian lake” term during the 2015–2016 crisis in Turkish-Russian relations as a warning that NATO was insufficiently postured in the Black Sea.3

Nevertheless, there are differences in the extent to which each country perceives Russian strategy and posture as a threat. In Romania, most of the political leaders and the attentive public see Russia as posing a consistent danger through informational and hybrid tactics. Romanian distrust and apprehension toward Moscow have grown since the Ukraine crisis, which has stimulated fears of further Russian aggression in the

---

Black Sea region, especially Moldova. Romania’s confidence in NATO, its conflict-ridden historical relations with Russia, and its lack of trade and energy dependence on Russia serve as key contributors to its outlook. To address the regional insecurity that it perceives as being fueled by Russia, Romania advocates an increased NATO presence.

In Bulgaria and Turkey, perceptions of Russian hostile intent have been tempered by other factors. In Bulgaria, generally positive cultural and historical ties, as well as the deterioration of the traditional Bulgarian media, have facilitated the effectiveness of Russian information operations and contributed to relatively positive public sentiments about Russia, which have reflected in polling and electoral decisions. Bulgarian energy dependence and interest in future gas deals through the TurkStream project have created economic incentives for a more generous interpretation of Russian behavior. For the Turkish government, frustrations with the EU and increasingly with the United States, as well as strong energy ties and a need to cooperate with Russia in Syria, appear to have temporarily outweighed traditional Turkish concerns about Turkish-Russian Black Sea competition. In both Bulgaria and Turkey, the lack of popular confidence in NATO allies’ willingness to uphold the Alliance’s security commitments, as demonstrated in polling data and leader statements, may contribute to a more conciliatory overall approach to Russia.

**Romania: Consistent Apprehension About Russia’s Intentions**

**Government Perspectives**

Romanian officials have long expressed concern about Russia’s intentions in the Black Sea region and beyond. Prior to 2014, statements from Bucharest lamented a perceived U.S. underestimation of the Russian threat. Former U.S. Ambassador to Romania Jim Rosapepe recalled in 2014 that Romanian officials sought to convince him in 1998 that the United States was too naïve in its views of Russia. Nearly two decades later, after the Russian intervention in Ukraine, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Titus Corlățean expressed apprehension about potential Russian activities extending near Transnistria. Advocating a “solid U.S. presence” in Romania, Corlățean noted that, although the United States had “believed in a different sort of relationship with Russia, being less naive is a must.”

---

4 Kremlin Watch, 2017, p. 32.
5 Joja, 2018.
6 Filipova et al., 2018, p. 49.
7 Jim Rosapepe, “They Told Me So,” Baltimore Sun, March 27, 2014.
Russia’s own statements and actions contribute to Romanian government perceptions of Russia’s aggressive intent. For example, Moscow has sent explicit threats to Romania about its efforts to host NATO forces and equipment, particularly its decision to host SM-3 missiles as part of NATO’s missile defense system. After the missile defense system became operational, President Putin publicly threatened to put Romania in Russia’s “cross-hairs.”9 Russian officials have also stated that they perceive Romania, as host to NATO troops and missile defense elements, to be a “clear threat” to Russian security.10 And former Romanian President Băsescu has claimed that such Russian sentiments are not a new result of Romania’s hosting the missile system; instead, Russia has seen Romania as a target ever since the latter joined NATO.11

In addition, Romanian ministers have commented on Russia’s opportunism, persistence, and multifaceted approaches to aggression. Interpreting the actions of President Putin during Russian operations in Ukraine, Corlățean assessed that Putin “counted on the weaknesses of the Western world, and we have to prove a firm attitude and solidarity among the Europeans and our Euro-Atlantic allies.”12 Romanian Defense Minister Mihai Fifor stated in June 2018 that he does not believe “there’s a single day without a challenge” from Russia in Romanian airspace or territorial waters, as well as “interference in the political zone, interference with minorities . . . and economic war.”13 Explicitly highlighting Russian naval modernization and expansion of military posture in the Black Sea region as a motivator, Fifor announced Romanian intent to increase defense spending in 2018.14

Romanian threat assessments and defense planning place a priority on countering asymmetric and hybrid actions. Romania’s 2015–2019 National Defense Strategy identifies this goal as the third of eight lines of strategic action, just before deepening the strategic partnership with the United States by consolidating military cooperation in the Black Sea region.15 This prioritization reflects the government’s assessment that,

---

12 Corlățean, 2014.
14 In particular, Fifor stated, “Russia is increasing its military capacity on the Crimean peninsula practically every day; we are talking about new naval capacities, new frigates, new submarines,” highlighting Romanian plans to increase defense spending to 2 percent of GDP in 2018 and “demonstrate that it is a pillar of stability and security” (“Romania Minister Says Country Facing Cyber-Attacks, Russians,” 2018).
although risks of a conventional or nuclear conflict in the region persist, “we have a conflict in full swing—the hybrid one . . . [T]he issue that creates today’s serious concern is the high level of coordination and the sophistication of tools used.” The National Defense Strategy notes the difficulty of identifying and delimiting asymmetric and hybrid threats from classical ones. It calls for integrated action by various state institutions and the whole of society to enhance resilience and responsiveness in order to deter hybrid attack by denying benefits and imposing costs. In addition to national efforts, Romania became the 19th member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in November 2018; as the only member from Southeastern Europe, Romania seeks to share its regional and functional expertise with that organization.

Public Perspectives

Public opinion polling indicates that a majority of Romanian citizens consider Russia a major threat but also have some affinity for the Russian people and may see some benefits to Russia’s strength. When a 2016 Gallup poll asked respondents to name the one country that poses the biggest threat to them, 57 percent of Romanians named Russia, one of the highest percentages in the region. Conversely, in a 2016 Pew poll, 52 percent of Romanians surveyed agreed that a strong Russia was necessary to balance the influence of the West. A survey conducted by the Romanian Academy found that Romanian public attitudes toward the Russian people were relatively positive (60 percent), acceptability of the Russian Federation government was more negative (40–45 percent), and respondents were highly opposed to Russian policies (75 percent).

Factors That May Influence Romanian Perspectives

*Relatively high confidence in NATO and the United States.* Romania has sought to enhance the NATO military presence in Southeastern Europe in order to address the perceived threat from Russia. A Gallup poll in Romania indicated that about half of Romanians associated NATO with the protection of their country, and only 8 percent

---


17 European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “Romania Becomes a Member of Hybrid CoE,” press release, November 14, 2018.


considered NATO to be a threat. In particular, the Romanian government gives high priority to its strategic partnership with the United States, which Romanian leaders view as a reliable bilateral guarantor of Romania’s security. In addition, the Romanian government has prioritized the preservation of NATO security guarantees in its bilateral engagements: Notably, it was during Romanian President Klaus Iohannis’ June 2017 state visit to Washington, D.C., that U.S. President Trump first publicly reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO’s Article 5, amid growing allied concerns.

Fractious relations with Russia. Although the Russian Empire assisted Romania in gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1877, Romanian-Russian relations over the past 100 years have generally been tense, including conflict over modern-day Moldova and other Romanian-speaking regions that have historically changed hands among Russia, Romania, and the Soviet Union. The Communist government of Romania had arms-length relationships with Moscow and the Warsaw Pact countries during much of the Soviet period. It negotiated the withdrawal of Soviet ground forces from Romania after 1958 and subsequently refused to accept Warsaw Pact military exercises on its territory or to participate in them elsewhere. The democratic Romanian government has had tense relations with the Russian Federation since Romania declared its intention in 1993 to seek integration into NATO and the EU. The Russian-Romanian relationship has also been heavily shaped by “the status of Transnistria and by the question of Moldova’s identity, either as a part of the Romanian nation or as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence.” Transnistria is a region of Moldova that sees itself as a de facto state and where the majority of people are ethnic Russian. Romania is wary of Russia taking actions in Transnistria that could further undermine Moldova’s sovereignty; for example, Russia might foster a separatist insurgency, as it did in eastern Ukraine. As of late 2019, Russia maintains

22 “President Iohannis: U.S. a Guarantor of Romania’s Security,” Consulate General of Romania in Los Angeles, undated.
24 The Economist writes that, “To Romanians, Russia is a predator. It took an eastern province from them in 1812. Romania regained it in 1918 and lost it again to the Soviet Union in 1940–41” (“The New Kids on the Block,” The Economist, January 4, 2007; see also Torie Rose DeGhett, “Romania Is Starting to Freak Out About Russian Designs on Transnistria,” Vice, October 6, 2015).
27 DeGhett, 2015.
about 1,500 troops in Transnistria, which include about 440 peacekeepers who were originally sent after the 1990 military conflict between pro-Transnistria forces (who were backed by the Russian 14th Army) and Moldovan troops. The Moldovan government has challenged the legal basis for the continuing presence of these forces. Moldovan government. (See Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion of the Transnistria issue.)

Limited cultural relations with Russia. Unlike Bulgarian, which is a Slavic language, Romanian is a Romance language, linked to Italian and French. As an article in The Economist put it, Romanians feel part of the European mainstream and “see themselves as a Latin outpost in a sea of Slavs.” Orthodox Christian religious ties could account for the fact that 62 percent of Romanians believe that Russia has an obligation to protect Orthodox Christians outside its borders, but those ties do less to explain the 74 percent of Romanians who believe that Russia has an obligation to protect ethnic Russians outside its borders.

Energy and trade relations. Because it has its own energy production and domestic energy stores, Romania is less dependent on Russia for energy than other regional countries are. So, Romania benefits from trade and business ties with Russia while avoiding dependencies. However, certain Russian business and financial activities have raised some concerns. In particular, Russian companies have substantial investments in Romanian heavy industry.

The elite class’s ties to Moscow. Ties between the Romanian and Russian elite are limited, with some exceptions. For example, Romanian Constitutional Court President Valer Dorneanu visited St. Petersburg in 2018 to attend a Russian government-sponsored international legal forum despite the Romanian Foreign Ministry recommending that he not attend. Informed experts see the Romanian elite as immune to Russian propaganda and manipulation.

29 International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019, p. 209.
32 Diamant, 2017.
34 Kremlin Watch, 2017, p. 31.
35 Victor Lupu, “Constitutional Court President, Valer Dorneanu, Pays Visit to Russia, Although the Foreign Ministry Has Recommended Him to Avoid It,” Romania Journal, May 17, 2018.
36 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
Russian influence operations. Because of widespread historical antipathy, language, and other barriers, overt pro-Russia propaganda and information operations, as described in Chapter Three, have gained little traction in Romanian society. However, analysts have identified Russia’s use of traditional and social media, including internet trolls, to stoke governance and social issues and anti-EU sentiment, as well as to perpetuate nationalist narratives among the wider public in Romania.\(^{37}\) RT and Sputnik operate Romanian-language news websites that promote official Kremlin narratives and sensationalist stories in the hope that these will be picked up by mainstream media in Romania and Moldova.\(^ {38}\)

Bulgaria: Caution in Balancing Concern with Opportunity

Government Perspectives

Official Bulgarian government interpretations of Russian strategy and posture have oscillated between the explicit acknowledgment of concerns about Russia’s intent and capabilities and the desire to avoid rhetoric and actions that could unsettle Sofia’s significant economic and energy ties with Moscow. In September 2017, the cabinet of Prime Minister Borissov, leader of the center-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party, adopted a 2016 national security report naming Russia as one of Bulgaria’s primary national security risks. The report notes hybrid warfare and states that “the actions of Russia as a source of regional instability also threatens our basic goal of a united, free and peaceful Europe.”\(^ {39}\) The report sparked heated debate in the Bulgarian National Assembly, particularly among opposition parties, and did not receive final parliamentary approval.\(^ {40}\) The subsequent 2017 report, adopted by the cabinet in 2018, cites negative changes in the “geostrategic security environment in the immediate vicinity of our territory” and a “disturbed balance of forces” in the Black Sea but does not mention Russia by name.\(^ {41}\)

Political divisions in Bulgaria have contributed to the policy fluctuation. The opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party—successor to the Communist Party, which main-

---


\(^{38}\) Oancea, 2019, pp. 118–119.


\(^{40}\) Leviev-Sawyer, 2017.

tained close ties with Moscow throughout the Cold War—supports what it characterizes as a “balanced” policy toward Moscow. As reported in the Sofia Globe, Bulgarian Socialist Party deputy Anton Kutev argued during the debate on the 2016 national security report that “Maintaining good relations with Russia would not mean giving up on Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic direction. . . . On the contrary, Bulgaria, as a member of NATO, could be a ‘bridge’ between Russia and the other world powers, ‘and we must, because we have a common history.’”

The 2016 Bulgarian presidential and 2017 parliamentary elections empowered forces that were more sympathetic to Russian positions. For example, President Rumen Radev, elected in November 2016 amid hints of Russian interference, has called for an end to EU sanctions against Russia and a “pragmatic” response to Russia’s Crimea annexation.43 After a ten-year hiatus from summits between Bulgarian and Russian leaders, Radev agreed to a 2018 meeting with President Putin in Sochi. In advance of a second meeting in June 2019 at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Radev called for expanding bilateral economic cooperation with Russia “despite sanctions and counter-sanctions.”44 In addition, he noted Bulgaria’s heavy dependence on Russian hydrocarbon imports, which constituted 75 percent of imports from Russia; sizable trade in agricultural commodities and construction; and tourism.

Radev, a former commander of the Bulgarian Air Force who attended U.S. military schools, also contended that Sofia needs to continue aspects of military cooperation with Moscow, given that budget constraints will require continued reliance on legacy Soviet military equipment to maintain the readiness of Bulgaria’s ground and air forces, even as Western-originated equipment is procured and integrated into the armed forces.45

During a joint press conference with Putin at their second meeting, Radev noted that the continuing high-level dialogue “sends out a clear message about new dynamics in our bilateral relations, which rest on profound historical, cultural and spiritual ties.”46 Prime Minister Borissov has generally pursued a circumspect approach to Russia, and he came under additional pressure to moderate his positions after March 2017 parliamentary elections that doubled the seats held by the Bulgarian Socialist Party.47

Overall, persistent ties with Moscow—as well as concerns about retaliation—have generally yielded what Bulgarian scholar Dimitar Bechev describes as a “cautious, risk-

46 President of Russia, “Meeting with President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev,” June 6, 2018c.
averse attitude, with successive governments in Sofia trying their best to balance the competing demands of Moscow and Bulgaria’s Western allies.\footnote{Bechev, 2015, p. 1.} Prior to Bulgaria’s accession to the EU, Russian Ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov called Bulgaria “Russia’s would-be Trojan horse in the EU.”\footnote{Bechev, 2015, p. 1.} This may be Moscow’s ambition. However, Sofia’s efforts to maintain solidarity with EU and NATO governments have, at times, led it to take actions contrary to Russian positions. For example, in 2016, a high-ranking Bulgarian Foreign Ministry official advocated renewing economic sanctions against Russia and extending the duration from six months to one year in light of Moscow’s lack of progress in meeting EU conditions for Russia’s role in Ukraine.\footnote{Denica Yotova, “View from Sofia: In the Shadow of Elections,” Sofia Globe, October 15, 2016.} Despite President Radev’s calls to end sanctions against Russia, the Bulgarian government has continued to support the EU conditions for lifting sanctions, including during its EU presidency in 2018, likely in recognition that Bulgaria would pay a high cost for breaking ranks with the rest of the EU.\footnote{“Bulgaria Chairing in EU to Pursue Policy of Sanctions Against Russia,” UNIAN Information Agency, January 8, 2018.} However, Bulgarian concerns about potential Russian retaliation have had concrete implications for NATO activities in the Black Sea region. Prime Minister Borissov declined to join EU partners in expelling Russian diplomats in response to the poisoning of the Skripals in England, citing a need to maintain open channels of communication with Moscow.\footnote{Angel Krasimirov and Tsvetelia Tsolova, “Bulgaria Says Will Not Expel Russian Diplomats over Spy Poisoning,” Reuters, March 30, 2018.} And although Bulgaria agreed to NATO’s Tailored Forward Presence regional initiative at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, the Bulgarian government warned against militarizing the Black Sea and declined to support Romania’s proposal to expand NATO naval exercises in the Black Sea, after Russian leaders publicly warned against it.\footnote{Angel Krasimirov, “Bulgaria Says Will Not Join Any NATO Black Sea Fleet After Russian Warning,” Reuters, June 16, 2016.}

Public Perspectives

Regional analysts report that, in Bulgaria, “most sectors of society [are] aligned behind the view that Russia is not necessarily a hostile actor.”\footnote{Popescu and Zamfir, 2018, p. 28.} Indeed, in a 2017 Pew Research Center poll, 56 percent of Bulgarians believed that a “strong Russia” was “necessary to balance the influence of the West.”\footnote{Pew Research Center, “Views on Role of Russia in the Region, and the Soviet Union,” in Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, Washington, D.C., May 10, 2017.}
The electoral successes of Western-skeptical, pro-Russia candidates and policies in Bulgaria’s 2017 presidential and parliamentary elections revealed public sentiments, and they may have foreign policy implications. As one report notes, foreign policy positions that are sympathetic to Russia can be attributed primarily to a response to popular will rather than individual rent-seeking. Overall, politicians have had to strike a balance between supporting stronger ties to the West and strengthening relations with Russia, because “sympathies toward Russia among their constituency raise the cost of abandoning this middle ground.” Social and political organizations sustain this pressure.

Factors That May Influence Bulgarian Perspectives

Mixed confidence in NATO and the EU. A plurality of Bulgarians believe that the United States would not use force to defend Bulgaria in the event of a serious conflict with Russia. Similarly, 2017 Gallup polls in Bulgaria found that only about 28 percent of Bulgarians viewed NATO as a source of protection, 20 percent viewed NATO as a threat, and 34 percent viewed the Alliance as neither. Senior Bulgarian officials have highlighted an absence of Western support after Bulgaria complied with Western pressure to abandon the Belene nuclear reactor project with Russia. As of 2017, popular views of the West were mixed, with a little less than half of Bulgarians (48 percent) agreeing that it is in Bulgaria’s interest “to work closely with the U.S. and Western powers.” Some analysts cite growing resentment of the West and a sense that there was “little dividend” from joining Western institutions.

Strong cultural ties. Linguistic and cultural ties generally serve as a positive factor for Bulgarians’ interpretation of Russian actions. In particular, the Orthodox church

---

56 Popescu and Zamfir, 2018. In particular, Bulgarian alignment with the pro-Russian bloc within the EU (which seeks accommodation with Moscow, opposes sanctions and implies that the annexation of Crimea should be regarded as a fait accompli) is prompted by constituencies back home, not only by the private interests of rent-seeking individuals in power. (Popescu and Zamfir, 2018, p. 28)

57 Popescu and Zamfir, 2018, p. 33.

58 Bechev highlights “political parties and social organisations and lobby groups proudly wear their links to the Kremlin, extoll the benefits of closer cooperation in energy, argue fervently against the Western sanctions, and often point a finger at the EU and US as the root of all evils befalling Bulgaria since 1989” (Bechev, 2015, p. 1).


60 Smith, 2017.

61 Gotev, 2016. In particular, noting that Bulgaria would not allow itself to be attacked by Russia, Prime Minister Borissov reportedly recalled in one interview, “You remember how our nuclear reactors from the Belene central left for Turkey. Not a single colleague spoke in my defense when President Putin, in the presence of Erdogan, waived his finger at me, saying that Bulgaria lost everything.”


reinforces common Slavic and religious ties,\textsuperscript{64} and because many Bulgarians speak Russian, they naturally turn to Russian outlets as a source of foreign news.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Positive historical associations.} According to a report by the GlobalFocus Center, Bulgaria’s ties with Russia are reinforced by Bulgarian “history education, which emphasizes moments of convergence over conflict [with Russia, and] contributes to brushing aside the memory of relations that have not always been harmonious.”\textsuperscript{66} Bulgarians generally credit Tsarist Russia with liberating Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire and note the modernization associated with communist rule.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{Energy relationships.} Bulgaria is nearly 100-percent dependent on Russian gas and is currently investing in efforts to persuade Russia to extend the second part of the TurkStream pipeline to Bulgaria’s border rather than to Greece.\textsuperscript{68} As of September 2016, the overall debt of Bulgaria’s National Electricity Company to Atomstroyexport (Russia’s nuclear power equipment and service exporter) stood at €628 million in compensation for the terminated Belene nuclear power plant project.\textsuperscript{69} In 2018, Bulgaria revived plans to develop the plant and publicly expressed its openness to Russian participation in the project.\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{Russian influence operations.} Bulgarian experts and analysts acknowledge Russian efforts to influence the Bulgarian information space.\textsuperscript{71} Themes in Russian-funded media sources remind Bulgaria that its military infrastructure is increasingly vulnerable to Russian missile attacks.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{65} Radin, 2019, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{66} Popescu and Zamfir, 2018, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{67} “The New Kids on the Block,” 2007.

\textsuperscript{68} Tsvetelia Tsolova and Alissa de Carbonnel, “Bulgaria to Build New Link to Turkey in Hope of Russian Gas,” Reuters, June 26, 2018.

\textsuperscript{69} Yotova, 2016.


\textsuperscript{72} Military observer Viktor Litovkin stated, “Sevastopol Bay creates unique opportunities for Moscow. Together with the new base in Novorossiysk, Russia can fully control the Bosphorus, the military infrastructure in Bulgaria and can neutralize the threat posed by the U.S. missile defense base in Romania” (Nikolai Litovkin, “‘Black Hole’: What Makes Russia’s Newest Submarine Unique?” Russia Beyond the Headlines, November 29, 2016).
Turkey: Concerns Overridden by Interests, for Now

Government Perspectives

Although shared economic interests and a friendly personal relationship between Putin and Erdoğan have, at times, appeared to indicate a strong bilateral relationship between Turkey and Russia, the Turkish government has also occasionally expressed concerns about Russian ambitions in the Black Sea region. These concerns may have been based on statements by Russian officials that reflect a new regional balance in power between Moscow and Ankara. Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov referenced the changing military dynamics in the Black Sea in September 2016 when, prior to a visit to Turkey, he stated that Russia is now capable of striking the Bosphorus Straits and noted that “several years ago the capability of the [Russian] fleet was sharply contrasted, in particular, with the Turkish navy, when it was said that Turkey is virtually the master of the Black Sea. Now everything is different.”

Turkish media reported that such Russian statements “push Turkey closer to NATO at a time when Moscow’s strategy appears to be to drive a wedge between Ankara and its European partners.”

Russia has also been willing to leverage Turkish economic vulnerabilities for its own ends. After a Turkish fighter jet shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber in November 2015, Putin called the action a “stab in the back delivered by the accomplices of terrorists” that would lead to “serious consequences” for Turkish-Russian relations. Shortly thereafter, Moscow retaliated with sanctions on Turkey, including banning certain products, preventing new Turkish construction and contract extensions for Turkish laborers in Russia, and disrupting mutual tourism. Additionally, Russian statements and media reports suggested that Russia had suspended TurkStream as a result of the plane incident (although Erdoğan also claimed to be the one who had put the project on hold). These actions demonstrate that Russia is willing to follow up on its threats and use its leverage.

Generally, Turkish government positions on Russia have varied based on whether U.S. or Russian positions were perceived as more beneficial or threatening to Turkey’s national and Erdoğan’s political interests at the time. One article notes that “switch-

---

74 Kucera, 2016.
77 “Russia Halts Turkish Stream Project over Downed Jet,” RT, December 2, 2015; and “Turkey Has Shelved Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline Project, Says President Erdoğan,” Hürriyet Daily News, December 5, 2015.
ing partners” is a common practice for Turkey. During the course of Turkey’s 2015–2016 crisis in relations with Russia, Erdoğan reversed his traditional reluctance about a wider NATO presence in the Black Sea and instead advocated for a more robust posture, indicating his insecurity with Russia’s naval buildup. Yet Russia and Turkey held a joint Black Sea naval exercise in 2017 that could be interpreted as Turkey’s turning away from the West and toward Russia amid tensions in relations with the EU and the United States.

In light of recent U.S.-Turkish disagreements, Erdoğan has warned that the United States will need to “come to terms with the fact that Turkey has alternatives.” Moreover, since the unsuccessful 2016 coup attempt in Turkey—for which Erdoğan and many Turks blame the West and particularly the United States for hosting the alleged mastermind, cleric Fetullah Gülen—Russia has redoubled its efforts to cast itself as Turkey’s best ally and defender of sovereignty against nefarious influences, which has resonated strongly in Turkey. Meanwhile, Russia aims “to incentivize Ankara not to oppose Russia’s resurgence in the Black Sea region in return for concrete boosts to Turkish prosperity, which Erdoğan needs to sustain his domestic political position.”

However, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu has argued that Turkey’s relationship with Russia is not an alternative to the relationship with the United States or the EU, and Turkey is able to “perfectly balance” its relationships—which he noted was necessary because “living in this part of the world, we shouldn’t prefer between this country or that country[;] we don’t have a luxury to choose either one.”

When it comes to the crisis in Syria, interests and pragmatism have moderated Turkish concerns about Russia, but divergent interests between the two countries could ultimately undermine the Turkish-Russian relationship. Because of its ongoing conflict with the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê), Turkey views a unified Kurdish region in northern Syria as a threat to its national security. So, throughout

---


79 Jones and Hille, 2016.


the Syria conflict, Turkey has undertaken military actions to reduce the prospects of such an outcome and to limit the expansion of the People’s Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel), a Kurdish militia that has received extensive training and support from the United States, as well as some assistance from Russia. Russia’s central role in the conflict makes it a useful partner for Turkey, given Turkish desires for a continuing role in determining the Syrian end state through diplomatic vehicles, such as the Astana process that was initiated by Russia, Iran, and Turkey in 2017. However, divergences in the desired outcome in Syria have led to enduring frictions, particularly over Russian support to Syrian offensives that threatened Turkish-backed rebels and nearby Turkish forces. Although an August 27, 2019, bilateral summit avoided a breach, tensions between Moscow and Ankara flared again in early 2020 when a new push by Syrian forces to capture Idlib led to the death of 16 Turkish soldiers and created more than 900,000 refugees, many of whom could be expected to head to Turkey.

Public Perspectives

Turkish citizens’ views of Russia fluctuate, but polls have trended more positively since 2017. According to the Pew Research Center’s Global Indicators Database, the percentage of those in Turkey who responded that they had a favorable view of Russia was 32 percent in 2017 and 39 percent in 2019, whereas, in prior years with existing data, this percentage had not risen above 19 percent. A recurring poll by Kadir Has University similarly revealed that the percentage of Turks who identified Russia as posing a threat declined from 34.9 percent in 2016 to 12.4 percent in 2018; meanwhile, the percentage who identified the United States as a threat increased from 44.1 percent in 2016 to 66.5 percent in 2017, declining somewhat in 2018 to 60.2 percent. The Kadir Has poll also indicated fluctuations in perceptions of Turkish-Russian relations and the degree of cooperation between the two countries. The top three areas of cooperation between Turkey and Russia identified in 2019 were energy, trade/economic, and tourism. The top two reasons for enmity identified in 2017 were Russia’s support to Kurdish forces in Syria and historical rivalry. Russia’s aggressive policies toward its neighbors were cited as the second reason for enmity in the 2019 polling.

---

88 Kadir Has University, “Kadir Has University Announces the 2017 Results of the Survey on Turkish Foreign Policy,” press release, July 21, 2017; and Mustafa Aydın, Sinem Akgül Aşikseven, Mitat Çelikpala, Soli Özel, Cihan Dizdaroğlu, and Mustafa Gokcan Kosen, “Public Perceptions on Turkish Foreign Policy,” presentation slides, Istanbul: Center for Turkish Studies, Kadir Has University, July 4, 2019, slide 26.
89 Kadir Has University, 2017.
90 Kadir Has University, 2017; Aydin et al., 2019, slide 67.
Factors That May Influence Turkish Perspectives

Limited confidence in NATO security guarantees and relations with the United States and NATO. The recent warming in Turkish-Russian relations is partly in response to criticisms that the U.S. and European governments have directed at Turkey over its repression of civil and human rights and the decline in the rule of law.\(^{91}\) In contrast, Turkish officials have expressed appreciation for the fact that the Russians “treat us with respect.”\(^{92}\) Cooperation with Russia provides Erdoğan an important counterweight to the West and manifestation that Turkey is a strong country that can forge various partnerships to advance its national interests, which strengthen his domestic support.\(^{93}\) Turkey’s purchase of an S-400 missile defense system from Russia—which NATO opposes because of security risks and because it is not compatible with NATO systems, among other reasons—represents a “lever in Turkey’s diplomatic maneuvering.”\(^{94}\) Turkey has tended to turn to NATO for support in times of need, including multiple invocations of Article 4 during times of crisis.\(^{95}\) Still, NATO allies reportedly discouraged Turkey from invoking Article 5 in relation to Syria.\(^{96}\) Deep frustration also persists with Turkey’s lack of traction on EU membership. Polling in 2017 found that 27.6 percent of Turks thought that strategic cooperation with Russia could be an alternative to EU membership (up from 14.8 percent in 2016), while only 7.5 percent thought that improving relations with NATO and the United States could be an alternative to EU membership (down from 19.8 percent in 2016).\(^{97}\)

Historical relations with Russia, including wars and rivalry. For the better part of the past four centuries, the relationship between Turkey and Russia has been defined by intense rivalries across the Black Sea region, including more than a dozen wars

---

\(^{91}\) CNA's Michael Kofman posits that warm ties might ultimately be a ploy and "a means to pressure the Alliance and show Turkey has geopolitical options" (Majumdar, 2017).


\(^{94}\) Bilginsoy, 2018.


\(^{96}\) According to one February 2016 account, “While NATO has taken no official position on the question of Article 5—not surprising, since no formal request has been made—through back channels the alliance has been telegraphing a resounding ‘no’ to Turkey for weeks. Last week, Luxembourg’s Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn told Germany’s Der Spiegel that ‘NATO cannot allow itself to be pulled into a military escalation with Russia as a result of the recent tensions between Russia and Turkey’” (Moran, 2016).

\(^{97}\) Kadir Has University, 2017.
between the 16th and 20th centuries. Despite various upswings in relations and rapprochements, Turkish-Russian relations have always been fractious. Regardless of the era, “Turkey sees the expansion of Russian power as a threat to both itself and the regional balance of power.”

**Energy and trade relationship.** Erdoğan has prioritized trade and investment with Russia, and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs cites economic relations as “the most important component” of the bilateral relationship. Russia is Turkey’s second-largest trade partner (after Germany), the primary importer of Turkish exports, a critical market for Turkish construction services, and a major source of tourist revenue. Turkey’s reliance on Russian oil and gas—as well as technology for its planned nuclear reactor—also make the country potentially susceptible to Russian economic pressure. The robust energy relationship between Turkey and Russia may be further enhanced by Russia’s planned TurkStream gas pipeline through Turkey.

**Russian influence operations.** Russian disinformation campaigns have sought to exacerbate anti-U.S. discourse in Turkey, stoking anti-U.S. and anti-NATO sentiments; however, these sentiments existed in Turkey before Russian media’s attempts to exacerbate them.

### Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy

All three of the NATO allies bordering the Black Sea have expressed varying degrees of concern about Russia’s enhanced military posture and aggressive actions in the region, but their overall positions on Russia—and corresponding support for Western defen-

---

98 Igor Torbakov, “Turkey-Russia: Competition and Cooperation,” Eurasianet, December 27, 2002. Erdoğan has worked to expand trade and investment and develop limited security cooperation with Russia. The 2002 Justice and Development Party platform stated, “The relations established with the Russian Federation, Central Asia and the Caucasus will be based not on competition but friendly cooperation” (Fatih Özbek, “The Relations Between Turkey and Russia in the 2000s,” Perceptions, Vol. 16, No. 3 Autumn 2011, p. 71).


100 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Turkey’s Commercial and Economic Relations with Russian Federation,” webpage, undated.

101 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, undated.

102 Bugajski and Doran, 2016, p. 3. According to a report by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Russia supplies over half of Turkey’s natural gas and is that country’s third-largest source of oil. Turkey is pursuing a nuclear power program precisely to lower its dependency upon imported gas and oil. The rub here is that Turkey has chosen Russia to supply the nuclear technology and expertise it needs. Russia is the lead partner in building the first Turkish nuclear power plant at Akkuyu on the Mediterranean coast. (Michael A. Reynolds, “The End of a ‘Strategic’ Relationship? How American-Turkish Relations Hit Historic Lows,” Philadelphia, Pa.: Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 30, 2018)

sive activities in the region—are influenced by a variety of economic, political, and security interests.

In its 2015–2019 National Defense Strategy, the Romanian government, long wary of Russian military and political malign influence, underscored the need to guarantee Romanian “national character, sovereignty, and independence” and to protect Romanian democracy and rule of law.\textsuperscript{104} The document further cites as core interests the need to ensure NATO’s collective defense guarantees and EU consolidation and integration.\textsuperscript{105} In the absence of compelling Russian economic or cultural influence, these Romanian interests can help explain robust Romanian support for expanded U.S. and NATO military presence in the Black Sea region, as well as Romanian leadership on countering hybrid threats. To address political threats, the Romanian government also used its platform during a 2019 presidency of the EU Council to draw high-level attention to the challenge of hybrid threats and improve EU approaches to bolstering resilience and improving strategic communication.\textsuperscript{106} Since the onset of Russian military aggression in Ukraine in 2014, Romanian leaders have led calls for increased Western troop deployments in NATO’s eastern flanks, as well as an increased presence of NATO fighter jets, airborne warning and control systems, and naval assets.\textsuperscript{107} At the February 2019 Munich Security Conference, Romanian President Iohannis lauded the uptick in NATO regional initiatives since 2014 but called for further strengthening of NATO’s defense and deterrence posture in the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{108} Romania, which has maintained its support of hosting elements of NATO missile defense even in the face of explicit threats from Russian leaders, would likely support additional defense architecture on its soil, including advanced air and coastal defense systems. Although Romania’s naval assets are modest in their quantity and capabilities, plans to modernize existing platforms, acquire new frigates, and potentially purchase three new submarines could enhance Romania’s contributions to a Western maritime presence.\textsuperscript{109}

For Bulgaria, cultural ties, energy interests, and a positive spin on Bulgarian-Russian historical relations has prompted a more conciliatory approach to Moscow. Bulgaria remains committed to Western integration but subject to Russian influence; it often balances relations between Moscow and the West. This prioritization of bal-

\textsuperscript{104} Romanian Presidential Administration, 2015, pp. 16–20.

\textsuperscript{105} Romanian Presidential Administration, 2015, pp. 16–20.


\textsuperscript{107} Corlățean, 2014.

\textsuperscript{108} Klaus Iohannis, “Address by the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, at the Munich Security Conference,” Munich, February 16, 2019.

ance and stability is reflected in Bulgaria’s 2011 National Security Strategy, which cites “a favorable and predictable security context,” “maintenance of good neighbor relations and of regional security and stability,” and “development of regional Black Sea cooperation” as national interests. For this reason, Bulgaria has been hesitant to support NATO maritime initiatives that might escalate tensions in the Black Sea or elicit reprisals from Russia. Bulgarian Prime Minister Borissov underscored his country’s interest in maintaining regional stability in his public rejection of Romania’s Black Sea initiative prior to the Warsaw Summit, stating his desire that the Black Sea remain a place for “sailboats, yachts, large boats with tourists and not become an arena of military action. . . . I do not need a war in the Black Sea.” However, Bulgaria also continues to value its role in NATO and has supported some elements of NATO presence, including hosting the annual Breeze exercise for NATO allies and hosting U.S. and other NATO troops for rotational training at the Novo Selo military facility. In 2011, the Bulgarian government offered to host the TPY-2 radar necessary for NATO missile defense if negotiations with Turkey failed, despite clear statements of concern by Russia. Thus, although Bulgarian interests could lead the Bulgarian government to hesitate to take major steps that would upset relations with Russia, Bulgaria might also plausibly contribute selectively to NATO by hosting elements of a Western response.

Turkish concerns about the shift in the regional balance of power in Russia’s favor have, for now, been overshadowed by common economic interests, Ankara’s need to work with Moscow in crafting the end state in the Syria conflict, and the need for a political counterweight to the West. Erdoğan’s relationship with Putin provides Turkey with a partner in Russia that unequivocally denounced the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey, is uncritical of the Turkish government’s repression of political and human rights, and is an alternative source of political support and military equipment. Turkey’s desire to maintain an instrumental role in the Syrian end state—as well as flows of Russian tourists and discounted Russian gas—disincentivizes actions that might damage relations with Russia at a precarious time. The Turkish government still views NATO security guarantees as in its best interest, particularly at times of heightened tension with Russia. However, Turkey has also proven willing to risk critical Alliance relationships when competing interests dictate, as evidenced by the decision to purchase Russian S-400 systems in the face of acute NATO and U.S. dissent. Of tensions between Russia and NATO, President Erdoğan has previously stated that he “will

110 National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria, Sofia, February 25, 2011, p. 31. The document also lists the following as core interests: Bulgarian adherence to constitutional democracy, rule of law, individual rights, and territorial integrity.


112 Krasimirov, 2016.

113 “Bulgaria to Host Elements of NATO Missile Defense If Turkey Refuses,” Novinite, June 24, 2011.
not allow Turkey to be pushed entirely to either side. We will act as Turkey’s national interests require.” In the absence of overt Russian aggression that threatened Turkish interests, Turkish leaders would likely believe that they could still manage Black Sea security with Moscow. Peacetime Turkish contributions to a Western strategy in the Black Sea, therefore, are likely to be limited to Turkish participation in NATO exercises and offers to host noncontroversial military systems that could enhance Turkish security without scuppering the Turkish-Russian relationship.

The United States and other NATO allies may have little influence over some of the interests that drive Romania’s, Bulgaria’s, and Turkey’s decisionmaking in the Black Sea region or their willingness to contribute to Western defense activities. However, to the extent that a turn toward Russia reflects frustration in relations with the United States or a lack of faith in NATO’s collective security guarantees, a more proactive approach by the United States to engender confidence and collaboration on areas of mutual security interest might contribute to more-coherent regional perceptions and policies among the region’s NATO allies.

Ukraine and Moldova are two Western partners on the Black Sea’s northwestern shore. Both have been members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace since 1994, and both are EU Eastern Partnership countries with association agreements that include DCFTAs. Since 2014, Ukraine has turned more westward and has been a beneficiary of substantial security assistance from the United States and other NATO allies, as well as even larger amounts of humanitarian and development assistance from the EU, the United States, and Canada. Moldova has maintained active engagement with the West, but President Igor Dodon is now pursuing policies oriented more toward Russia. Moscow would like both Ukraine and Moldova to be de facto neutral buffers between Russia and the NATO and EU members, and some Western officials and analysts have advocated a similar status. The countries’ buffer role and engagement with the West have become increasingly perilous since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Russia’s war in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine.

As examined in Chapter Four, Russian aggression in Georgia and Ukraine was followed by a significant military buildup on the Crimean Peninsula, further modernization of the Black Sea Fleet, and expansion of ground forces in the Southern Military District. These developments highlight the importance of Western partnerships with

---

1 The United States alone provided more than $1.6 billion in security assistance to Ukraine from 2014 to November 2019 (U.S. Department of Defense, “5 Things to Know About the U.S.-Ukraine Defense Relationship,” November 7, 2019). About two-thirds of overall assistance to Ukraine has come from European countries. The EU is the largest aid donor to Ukraine, providing, on average, more than $710 million annually in humanitarian and development assistance between 2014 and 2018, almost twice the U.S. average of total assistance during that period. European financial institutions have provided similar amounts in investments and loans. See Ian King, “Not Contributing Enough? A Summary of European Military and Development Assistance to Ukraine Since 2014,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 26, 2019.


Russia, NATO, and Black Sea Security

Ukraine and Moldova in deterring further Russian military incursions and countering malign influence throughout the Black Sea region.

Sustaining these partnerships presents Ukraine and Moldova—as well as Western governments and institutions—with complex political, economic, and security challenges. In both countries, part of the population’s first language is Russian—29.6 percent in Ukraine and 9.7 percent in Moldova—and many have cultural and political affinities to Russia. The presence of Russian citizens and ethnic Russians in both countries has made it easier for Russia to justify intervention in their internal affairs and to exploit and deepen Ukrainian and Moldovan nationalist and regional divisions. In Moldova, the first ethnic tensions in the post–Cold War environment erupted in March 1992. They were mainly concentrated in Transnistria, a Russian-dominated area on Moldova’s eastern border with Ukraine. The fighting over the status of Transnistria resulted in more than 800 fatalities and ended in a ceasefire in July 1992, when the Russian 14th Army took control of the territory from Moldova. Prior to Russia’s takeover in 2014, Crimea was the only region of Ukraine to have a majority of ethnic Russians: Approximately 58 percent of the population identified as Russian at the last pre-annexation census in 2001.

In the aftermath of the occupation of Crimea, separatists backed by Russia mounted an insurgency in the Donbas region, and Putin argued that “he was simply protecting the rights of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.” In fact, there was only limited concern about discrimination against ethnic Russians. There was no backing for Russian intervention to support the rights of ethnic Russians (and even those who considered themselves ethnic Russians were evenly divided on the matter).

---


In the face of Ukrainian gains in 2014, Russian forces became directly involved in the Donbas fighting, and as of August 2019, several thousand Russian military personnel were believed to still be advising separatist units.\(^{11}\) Between April 2014 and January 2020, the Donbas conflict resulted in more than 14,000 deaths, including more than 3,300 civilians, and as many as 30,000 wounded; another 1.5 million people were displaced.\(^{12}\)

Together with the territorial disputes in Georgia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, discussed in Chapter Seven, the frozen conflict in Transnistria and the low-intensity fighting in eastern Ukraine represent Russia-fueled and -supported conflicts that surround the Black Sea.\(^{13}\) These conflicts aim to frustrate the countries’ attempts at forging closer ties to the West, but they have largely backfired. As Charap and Colton argue,

> While Russia can effectively prevent the West from winning this competition by preventing resolution of these disputes, it cannot achieve outright victory. By stoking separatist conflicts, it has alienated elites and publics alike in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Its integration offerings remain far less appealing to decision-makers in these countries.\(^{14}\)

The unintended consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbas has been reduced Ukrainian support for Russian policies and a reorientation of the country toward the West. A June 2019 poll showed that, “[f]or the first time since Ukraine regained independence in 1991 . . . a plurality, and sometimes even a majority, of Ukrainians favor joining NATO.”\(^{15}\)

In this light, I examine in this chapter how Ukraine and Moldova view Russian strategy toward the Black Sea region and how they are addressing recent Russian pressure and aggressive activities, especially given the main internal challenges that both

---

\(^{11}\) The involvement of Russian forces and tanks in the Battle of Ilovaysk in the Luhansk region in August 2014 has been documented from open sources by the independent British group Forensic Architecture. Bellingcat and the Ukrainian military have documented cross-border shelling of Ukrainian forces in Donetsk from Russia earlier that summer (“British Investigators: More Evidence Found of Russian Role in Donbas,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 19, 2019). Former U.S. Army Europe Commander Lieutenant General Ben Hodges estimated that there were about 4,500 Russian officers and senior enlisted personnel still advising separatist forces in the Donbas in late 2018 (Kyle Rempfer, “Why Russia Is Swallowing the Black Sea and Won’t Stop Until It Has ‘Choked Out Ukraine,’” *Military Times*, December 31, 2018b).


countries face. In addition, I outline Ukraine’s and Moldova’s key national interests and goals for partnerships with NATO and the United States, as well as the potential contributions these Black Sea countries could make to designing and implementing a coherent Western strategy in the region.

Ukraine: Seeking Stronger Ties to the West, Hindered by Aggressive Russian Interference

Perceptions of Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Both Ukrainian officials and the Ukrainian public are acutely aware that the Kremlin and many Russian citizens regret the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the independence of many of the states formed in its aftermath, particularly Ukraine. Russian sentiment is rooted in the facts that Ukraine “has been viewed historically as a part of Russia” and that Ukraine made significant contributions to the Soviet Union’s economy from 1920 to 1991. As noted in Chapter Two, President Putin has repeatedly stated since 2014 that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people.” Furthermore, in a speech at the April 2008 NATO-Russia Council in Bucharest, Putin “described Ukraine as an ‘artificial’ country and questioned its eastern and southern borders.”

Such statements, in tandem with Russian actions in Ukraine and neighboring states, have exacerbated Ukrainian fears that Moscow is seeking to regain political control over the former Soviet countries and keep them in Russia’s sphere of influence, including through coercive means. Although Putin described the December 1991 creation of the CIS as “a mechanism for civilized divorce,” it was also an early Russian attempt to maintain a sphere of influence in 11 of the 14 former Soviet states that joined. The CIS Customs Union and subsequently the Eurasian Economic Union—or

---


17 President of Russia, 2014.

18 Kuzio, 2017, p. 5.


20 Kathleen Moore, “USSR Breakup: Ten Years After, Russia Fights for Influence over CIS States (Part 2),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 14, 2001; and Charap and Colton, 2017, pp. 94–110, 179–180. A 1995 decree issued by President Boris Yeltsin states, “In the territory of the CIS our main vital interests are concentrated in the field of economy, defense, security, protection of the rights of Russians, the provision of which forms the basis of the national security of the country,” and a main objective of Russian policy toward the CIS is “strengthening of Russia as the leading force in the formation of a new system of interstate, political and eco-
“Russia’s counter to the European Union”\textsuperscript{21}—are two of the more recent expressions of Moscow’s interest in exercising influence and control in its neighborhood.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{Political Interference}

Russian intervention in Ukraine’s internal political affairs has persisted since the country’s independence in 1991. To express its alarm with Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution, Russia employed a variety of political and economic threats.\textsuperscript{23} The Kremlin’s preferred tools of political influence in Ukraine have been regulating the flow of natural gas and maintaining artificially low prices as long as Ukraine complied with Russia’s directives.\textsuperscript{24} As Ukraine increasingly expressed interest in deepening its ties with Euro-Atlantic structures, Russia retaliated by augmenting gas prices and demanding prompt payment of old gas debts.\textsuperscript{25} In 2006 and 2009, Russia shut down the flow of natural gas to Europe through Ukraine and increased energy prices in an attempt to intimidate and pressure Ukraine.\textsuperscript{26} Given Russia’s coercive use of natural gas, Ukraine has worked to diversify its supply of gas and increase imports of reverse-flow gas from EU countries (as discussed in Chapter Three).\textsuperscript{27}

The Kremlin has also worked to influence domestic Ukrainian politics from the top down. Ukrainian political leaders—such as Viktor Yanukovych, the former Ukrainian president and leader of the Party of Regions, whose base of support was in the predominantly Russophone east and south of the country—demonstrated a strong

\textsuperscript{21} McFaul, 2018, p. 393. In the book, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul cites a December 2012 statement that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made regarding the Eurasian Economic Union as representing a Russian “move to re-Sovietize the region.”


\textsuperscript{24} Freedman, 2019, p. 71. Also, “by the end of 2005, Ukraine was paying up to four times less for gas than Gazprom’s European customers” (Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 79).


inclination toward Moscow and sometimes even outright support of Russian interests and positions. Yanukovych’s pro-Russia stance and his last-minute refusal in November 2013 to sign the EU association agreement with a DCFTA, opting instead for deeper ties with Russia, sparked the 2013–2014 Euromaidan crisis. In February 2014, Yanukovych fled the country to Russia, and in March, Russia seized control of and annexed Crimea.

This crisis highlighted the “zero-sum clash between Western and Russian integration schemes.” The EU DCFTA precludes membership in any other customs union, so if Russia could have locked Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union’s Customs Union, such a move would have precluded Ukraine from pursuing the EU offer. Charap and Colton note that Yanukovich faced a binary choice between Russia and the EU and that, although “Kyiv made plain that it did not want to choose,” it was ignored by the EU and Russia.

**Opposition to Western Integration**

As discussed in Chapter Two, Russia has perceived Ukraine’s post-independence efforts to deepen its integration with NATO and the EU as a direct threat to Russia’s security and control of the region. In 1994, Ukraine became the first CIS country to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace program. At that time, the Ukrainian government did not see joining the program as a path to NATO membership, as did many of its Central and Eastern European neighbors. Rather, as Plokhy and Sarotte argue, “Signing the agreement seemed to be a way to escape isolation and get badly needed financial assistance.”

In May 2002, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma publicly expressed Ukraine’s interest in NATO membership, and in 2006, following the Orange Revolution, President Viktor Yushchenko announced that gaining a NATO Membership Action Plan was a high priority, only to soon after have Yanukovych, then prime minister, back-track on Ukraine’s interest in obtaining the plan. As noted elsewhere in this report,

---

30 Miller, 2018; see also Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 86.
32 NATO, “Relations with Ukraine,” November 4, 2019f.
Ukraine’s membership in NATO has long been a clear redline for Moscow. In 2008, President Yushchenko revived the idea of the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine; at the same time, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush decided to pursue further enlargement of NATO, to include Georgia and Ukraine, and aimed to start accession procedures for the two countries at the 2008 Bucharest summit. Ukrainian membership faced strong opposition from Western European leaders, so no Membership Action Plan was offered to Ukraine. But to reassure the Ukrainians and Georgians that the door to membership was not closed permanently, NATO leaders took the unprecedented step of declaring that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members of NATO” in the future. However, when Yanukovych became president of Ukraine in 2010, he took NATO membership off the table.

Ukraine has expressed interest in joining the EU since 1994, when it signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU; in 1998, President Kuchma “asserted EU membership as a strategic objective.” Ultimately, after Yanukovych fled Ukraine in February 2014, the country completed the political part of the association agreement with the EU and later the DCFTA.

**Russian Aggression and the Minsk Agreements**

Russia’s attempts to regain sway over its periphery by force have been particularly visible in Ukraine, where control over the country has been considered “central to Russia seeking great power status.” Conversely, a pro-Europe Ukraine is likely to represent “a ‘strategic defeat and humiliation’ for Putin.” In this light, the concept of *Novorossiya*, or New Russia, started to be propagated when Russia lent support to the separatist insurgency in Ukraine’s Donbas region in March 2014.

---

35 Former Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov warned “that admission of any ex-Soviet republic [into NATO] hereafter was ‘unacceptable’ and would traverse a ‘red line’ for Russia” (Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 47).
37 Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 87; and Sergey Sukhankin, “Ukraine’s Thorny Path to NATO Membership: Mission (Im)possible?” International Centre for Defence and Security, April 22, 2019a.
39 NATO, 2008a; Rempfer, 2018b.
44 McFaul, 2018, p. 405. *Novorossiya* in Russian means literally “New Russia,” sometimes called “South Russia.” The term refers to a province of Imperial Russia south of Dnipropetrovsk and north of Crimea along the full length of modern Ukraine’s coastline with the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The term should not be confused with today’s city and port of Novorossiysk in southern Russia. See Cross, 2015, p. 158.
However, as Freedman and Kuzio aptly note, Russia’s support for the separatists was uneven, and both the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” control only parts of the respective provinces, which account for a small percentage of the Donbas region.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, Russia initially hoped to mobilize Russian speakers outside the Donbas but was unsuccessful. According to Kuzio, “The NovoRossiya project never got off the ground because it is beyond the comprehension of Putin and Russian nationalists to understand Ukraine’s Russian speakers as Ukrainian patriots” who would rather flock to Kiev and not to Moscow.\textsuperscript{46} This assessment is supported by an opinion poll conducted in late 2014 revealing that “50 percent of the Donbas supported Ukrainian territorial integrity and 35 [percent supported] separatism;” of the 35 percentage points backing separatism, “20 backed an independent Donbas and 15 were in favour of a union of their region with Russia.”\textsuperscript{47}

The September 2014 ceasefire, brokered by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine—which included officials from Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE—and signed in Minsk by those parties and representatives of separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk, did not support the separatists’ goal of independence. The agreement (now known as Minsk I) called for the withdrawal illegal armed units from Ukrainian territory; OSCE monitoring of the ceasefire and buffer zone along the Ukrainian-Russian border; release of prisoners; and provisions to improve the humanitarian situation, allow some devolution of local governance, and promote national dialogue.\textsuperscript{48}

As fighting continued in the Donbas, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande brought Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Russian President Putin together in Minsk in February 2015 to agree to a 13-point plan that included a ceasefire and withdrawal of all foreign fighters and equipment, as well as a political process to end the conflict and permit restoration of full Ukrainian sovereignty in Donetsk and Luhansk.\textsuperscript{49} Minsk II, as the accord became known, did not result in an end to the violence or the development of a viable peace process. Rather, a military stalemate in the Donbas region ensued, with persistent low-level fighting and casualties. By spring 2015, the “Kremlin’s Novorossiya project was over.”\textsuperscript{50}

Russia’s aggression in the Donbas has been successful in blocking Ukraine’s integration into NATO and the EU. As long as the conflict in the Donbas continues, it

\begin{itemize}
  \item Freedman, 2019, p. 95; Kuzio, 2017, p. 192.
  \item Steven Pifer, “Minsk II at Two Years,” Brookings Institution, February 15, 2017.
  \item Freedman, 2019, p. 2; and Jeffrey Mankoff, “Putin’s Mixed Signals,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 29, 2015b.
\end{itemize}
is unlikely that Ukraine will be invited to join either NATO or the EU, as neither institution would welcome a member with an open conflict with Russia. Since the conflict erupted, Western governments have grown even more reticent about Ukraine’s membership in NATO and the EU. In this context, the Kremlin may see an advantage to continuing to aliment the low-intensity conflict in the Donbas by keeping “the violence at a high enough level to prevent peace in Ukraine, but low enough to deter outside intervention.” Russia has also advanced one of its strategic goals toward Ukraine (and toward other countries in Russia’s sphere of influence), which “centers on efforts to sow divisions between the United States and its European allies, as well as among the Europeans themselves.” However, Western solidarity in sustaining Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia have held, and Kyiv’s ties with NATO have deepened, including through the provision of military training and equipment. On the Ukrainian side, support for NATO membership has increased as the fighting in the Donbas has progressed; a January 2019 survey showed “46 percent in favor as opposed to 32 percent against.”

Plokhy and Sarotte argue that the aim of the Donbas war has been “to make the ‘federalization’ of Ukraine necessary, with each of its provinces deciding foreign policy issues on its own, because that would spell the end of Ukraine’s pro-Western aspirations.” Indeed, in both Minsk I and Minsk II, the Ukrainian government agreed to compromise on the need for “more autonomy for the troubled regions.” In line with its strategic interests in Ukraine, in Minsk I, “Russia did not endorse full independence for the enclaves, let alone annexation,” but it aimed for the regional representatives from Donetsk and Luhansk to, ideally, be able to frustrate Ukraine’s attempts to become more deeply integrated with the West. When the Minsk I agreement was signed in September 2014, Kuchins and Mankoff argued that “[t]he ceasefire

---

51 For more details, see Lorne Cook, “EU Warns Balkans Hopefuls No Entry Until Disputes Resolved,” Associated Press, February 6, 2018. A NATO study on enlargement notes,

States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance. (NATO, Study on NATO Enlargement, Brussels, November 5, 2008b, Chapter 1, point 6)

52 Barber, 2019.


54 Jeffrey Mankoff, “U.S. Trainers to Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 21, 2015a.

55 Pifer, 2019b.


58 Freedman, 2019, p. 119.
also allows Moscow to insert itself as a direct participant in the process of determining the future status of Donetsk and Luhansk— as well as of Ukraine itself.”

The Minsk II agreement “overlapped significantly with Minsk I but reflected the separatists’ and Russians’ gains on the battlefield, which Putin used to garner several key concessions from Poroshenko.” Constitutional changes regarding the decentralization of Ukraine and the specific sequencing of the provisions represented the main tenets of the Minsk II peace process, and the sequence in which various steps of the agreement were to be implemented was the most contentious point between Russia and Ukraine. The Russian position is that “Russia would only have to return control of rebel-held areas of the border after Ukraine ratified the constitutional amendments,” but Ukraine demands that Russia first “1) Ensure the separatists abide by a ceasefire; 2) Withdraw military equipment; 3) Foreign troops and mercenaries should leave Ukraine; 4) Prisoners of War are exchanged; 5) Ukraine resumes control over its border with Russia.” According to the agreement, only after these steps “are undertaken, Ukraine will hold elections under OSCE observation and Ukrainian law and adopt constitutional changes to establish a ‘special status’ for [Donetsk and Luhansk].”

However, to move beyond the impasse generated by the disagreement over sequencing and secure a meeting with Putin, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who took office in May 2019, made several concessions to the Kremlin, including committing Ukraine to implementing the so-called Steinmeier Formula, which calls for a permanent special status for the Donbas in exchange for holding internationally observed local elections. Ultimately, Zelensky secured an inconclusive December 2019 summit with Putin in Paris under the Normandy format. The Paris Summit resulted in a commitment to arrange a prisoner exchange, a limited ceasefire, and agreement to meet again in April. Zelensky expressed a willingness to proceed with decentralization in the Donbas but made it clear after the meeting that federalization was “strictly off the table.” However, Putin reportedly took a rigid position, and comments after the

---

61 Kuzio, 2017, p. 245.
63 Kuzio, 2017, p. 245.
64 Kuzio, 2017, p. 245.
meeting suggested that Moscow has no intention of returning control of Ukraine’s eastern border to Kyiv.  

During the course of the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Russia seized two-thirds of Ukraine’s Black Sea ships, which were stationed in Sevastopol, including its most capable warships and (limited) naval aviation assets. Although Russia has returned some of the smaller Ukrainian vessels it seized, Ukraine was left with a fleet comprising a single major surface combatant (a *Krivak*-class frigate), seven patrol and coastal combatants (two of which were seized by Russian forces in the Kerch Strait in November 2018), a medium landing craft, and ten support vessels based in Odessa. Odessa is a commercial port with limited military infrastructure and shallow adjacent waters. The Ukrainian Navy also lost the majority of its personnel and access to military infrastructure and defense industries on the Crimean Peninsula. These developments left the Ukrainian Navy with limited capacity to protect its coastal areas, exclusive economic zone, and sea lines of communication in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov.

**Efforts to Isolate Eastern Ukraine**

Since the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the increasing militarization of the peninsula, Russia has undertaken steady efforts to isolate eastern Ukraine economically, including by constricting access to the Sea of Azov and transit to the ports of Mariupol’ and Berdyansk. The Ukrainian government assesses that Russia’s actions are designed to legitimize its claims to territorial waters around occupied Crimea, put pressure on Ukrainian industry, and eventually turn the Sea of Azov into a virtual “Russian lake.” The seizure of Crimea gave Moscow control of both sides of the Kerch Strait, which connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov and separates the Crimean peninsula from southern Russia. Russian authorities now claim that the strait is part of Russia’s territorial waters rather than part of the inland sea over which Ukraine and Russia have had joint control. Moscow constructed a 12-mile-long bridge over the Kerch Strait between 2016 and 2018 to gain a surface transit option between Crimea and mainland Russia.

---


69 Ukrainian Navy officer, discussion with a member of the project team, Washington, D.C., December 14, 2018.

70 The Sea of Azov is treated as an inland sea under Article 123 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and Russia and Ukraine (as the littoral states) are obliged to cooperate on maritime issues. In 2003, the two governments signed a treaty agreeing to jointly manage these shared territorial waters and assuring free passage through the straits. Russia now regards the treaty as defunct because Russia controls both sides of the strait. See David B. Larter and Matthew Bodner, “The Sea of Azov Won’t Become the New South China Sea (and Russia Knows It),” *Defense News*, November 28, 2018.
The height of the Crimean Bridge restricts vessels taller than 35 meters from circulating through the Kerch Strait, and Russia has claimed the need for additional security measures to protect its $3.7 billion infrastructure investment. Since 2018, Russian authorities have increased the number of specious inspections and arbitrary detentions of commercial vessels transiting the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov to reach Ukrainian ports, causing shipping companies costly delays in transit times. This effort to restrict Ukraine’s maritime access is a debilitating threat to the country’s overall economy because one-fourth of Ukraine’s GDP is generated by the five regions with access to the sea. In addition to crippling the eastern Ukrainian economy, Russia has seized eight Ukrainian gas fields in the Sea of Azov.

To protect Ukraine’s interests in the Sea of Azov, the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council announced plans on September 6, 2018, to build a naval base at Berdyansk and deploy several coastal patrol vessels there. The following week, Ukrainian officials announced that a Gurza-M artillery boat was deployed in the Sea of Azov and that the State Border Guards Service would deploy 270 personnel in the region to protect shipping. On September 24, President Poroshenko announced that two other Ukrainian navy vessels passed through the Kerch Strait and docked at Mariupol’ without incident.

On October 22, 2018, four small Ukrainian Navy vessels left Odessa for Berdyansk in two groups. They transited the Crimean coast outside the 12-nautical-mile, Russian-claimed exclusive economic zone and passed in range of several Russian coastal radar systems. The Ukrainian Navy ships contend that they radioed the Russian Coast Guard twice on November 25 from outside the 12-mile limit to announce their approach to the Kerch Strait but received no response. As the Ukrainian ships approached the strait, they were intercepted by 15 Russian Federal Security Service Coast Guard and Black Sea Fleet vessels. A Russian Coast Guard corvette slammed into a Ukrainian tug that was escorting the detachment, and Russian Coast Guard and Navy vessels fired on the Ukrainian detachment, badly damaging two vessels.

71 Delays of vessels bound for the Ukrainian Sea of Azov ports of Mariupol’ and Berdyansk rose from an average of seven hours in June 2018 to more than five days in November 2019, according to the Maidan of Foreign Affairs, a Ukrainian think tank. The Ukrainian government reports that cargo at Mariupol’ and Berdyansk declined almost 70 percent and 50 percent, respectively, between 2014 and early 2019, with nearly $400 million in lost revenues for the ports and the region. See David Bond, Roman Olearchyk, and Max Seddon, “Russian Bridge to Crimea Strangles Ukraine Ports,” Financial Times, May 16, 2019; and Ruslan Minich, “Russia Shows Its Military Might in the Black Sea and Beyond,” UkraineAlert blog, Atlantic Council, November 6, 2018.

72 Saunders, 2018, p. 62.


74 “Two Ukrainian Warships Enter Sea of Azov to Become Part of Newly Created Naval Base,” Ukrinform, September 24, 2018.

75 This discussion draws on the Ukrainian Navy’s accounting of the incident, as described in Ukrainian Navy, 2018, and other independent media accounts.
Russia said that its forces fired on the Ukrainian vessels because they were maneuvering dangerously and planned to destroy the Crimean Bridge. After further harassment, three Ukrainian vessels were boarded by Federal Security Service special forces and towed to Kerch port, and the crews were detained. Ukrainians claimed that communications intercepts revealed that this highly coordinated attack was orchestrated from Moscow. Russian authorities held the 24 Ukrainian personnel until a September 7, 2019, prisoner exchange concluded by Presidents Putin and Zelensky.76

Key Domestic Challenges That Complicate Countering Russian Malign Influence
Ukraine’s efforts to counter Russian malign influence and activities over the past three decades have been hampered by several domestic challenges, including political polarization, rampant corruption, poverty, and volatile changes in leadership.

Since independence in 1991, Ukrainian politics have been afflicted by divisions, rooted in culture and identity, between a more European-oriented western part of the country and those in the eastern parts that have favored better relations with Russia.77 The country “has pursued a stop-and-start process of deepening ties with the EU,” as parliamentary and presidential elections have been disputed between pro-Russia and pro-EU candidates.78 Both the 2004 and 2010 presidential elections represented a contest between two such contrasting visions regarding the future of Ukraine. However, this divide was less present in the 2019 elections, and “[s]upport for pro-Russian parties who used to dominate in the east has dissipated since the conflict in Donbas began.”79

The political polarization of the country was especially obvious in the results of the 2010 presidential election: The pro-Russia candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, received almost 90 percent of the votes cast in eastern Ukraine (a largely Russian-speaking area), and his pro-EU rival, Yulia Tymoshenko, received a similar share of the vote in western Ukraine.80 Tymoshenko lost favor with the public “after she agreed [to] a 2009 gas import deal that saw prices rise,” and Yanukovych won the 2010 election.81 With his departure from power in February 2014 and the impulse of the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine returned to its pursuit of closer ties with Euro-Atlantic structures.82

78 Damien Sharkov, “Ukraine’s PM Predicts EU Membership in 10 Years,” Newsweek, June 13, 2016c.
80 Ash and Shapovalov, 2019.
82 Sharkov, 2016c.
President Poroshenko vowed to implement “pro-Western reforms and . . . to hold a referendum on joining NATO whenever reforms are complete.”

The Russian-backed war in eastern Ukraine has led to a stronger consensus in Ukraine to pursue closer alignment with the West.

Corruption has also stymied implementation of reforms. In 2019, the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Ukraine in 126th place of 180 countries. Rampant corruption impedes economic growth and helps keep per capita income in Ukraine far below most other European countries, at $3,095 GDP per capita for 2018.

Corruption has not only impeded Ukraine’s political and economic development but also has contributed to the advancement of Russian geopolitical goals in Ukraine, as well as in Moldova, other countries in the region, and beyond. Carpenter argues that Putin did not decry Yanukovich’s fleeing Ukraine out of any “special affection” for him but rather because Putin feared that, without Yanukovich, “the oligarchic system of influence through which the Kremlin controlled Ukraine” would disintegrate. Carpenter argues that, “in this tributary system, oligarchs were allowed to enrich themselves at public expense as long as they maintained fealty to the Kremlin.” The front organization that brought together and supported this network of corruption was the pro-Russia Party of Regions, which disintegrated in spring 2014 after Yanukovich fled the country. However, under Poroshenko, the aspirations of accountability from the Maidan Revolution remained unfulfilled. With Poroshenko being “himself an oligarch and a founding member of the Party of Regions,” it is no surprise that “the promised deoligarchization never took place,” and “almost no one from the previous regime was held accountable.”

A March 2019 Gallup poll revealed that only “9 percent of Ukrainians had confidence in their government—among the lowest such level in the world.” This explains why Zelensky, who had been a professional actor and comedian, focused his cam-

---

86 World Bank, “GDP per Capita (Current US$)—Ukraine,” webpage, undated-b.
89 Carpenter, 2019.
campaign on fighting corruption and boosting the economy rather than on a nationalist or pro-Russia platform.\textsuperscript{91} In addition, his campaign emphasized the role of education conducted in Ukraine, and he promised to carry out “direct negotiations with Russia” over Crimea and to end the separatist conflict in the Donbas, all without forsaking these regions.\textsuperscript{92}

In July 2019 parliamentary elections, Zelensky’s Servant of the People Party won 43.7 percent of the popular vote and, with the addition of candidates chosen from party lists, garnered 254 (59.9 percent) of the 424 seats in the Rada. This enabled Zelensky to form the first noncoalition government in Ukraine’s post-independence history.\textsuperscript{93} His party’s agenda mirrored many of the promises Zelensky himself made on the presidential campaign trail. Besides Zelensky’s and his party’s victories, a notable outcome of the 2019 parliamentary elections in Ukraine was that “more than two thirds of the vote went to forces that support closer ties with the European Union and NATO.”\textsuperscript{94}

Although Zelensky has the backing of his own party, whose resounding parliamentary victory means that it does not need to form a coalition to rule, his lack of political experience—as well as that of many in the party\textsuperscript{95}—raised concerns about how effective he can be.\textsuperscript{96} Moreover, Zelensky’s connection to billionaire Igor Kolomoisky, who owns the television channel where Zelensky’s shows were distributed, raises additional doubts about his ability to fight corruption, stand up to powerful oligarchic interests,\textsuperscript{97} successfully implement long-needed domestic reforms, and counter Russian activities in Ukraine.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{91} “Ukraine Hands President Zelenskiy’s Party a Majority,” Deutsche Welle, July 22, 2019.

\textsuperscript{92} Ash and Shapovalov, 2019.

\textsuperscript{93} “Ukraine Hands President Zelenskiy’s Party a Majority,” 2019; and Sean Stephens and Hind Hassan, “How a TV Comic Is Changing the Face of Ukrainian Politics,” Vice, July 29, 2019.


\textsuperscript{95} Mankoff and Gabidullina, 2019.

\textsuperscript{96} Stephens and Hassan, 2019.

\textsuperscript{97} Verbyany and Krasnolutska, 2019. See also Gabidullina and Mankoff, 2019.

\textsuperscript{98} Equally worrisome is the fact that, until 2016, Kolomoisky controlled PrivatBank, a financial institution whose “collapse would have brought the rest of Ukraine’s economy down with it.” Furthermore, in the words of Chris Miller,

With their bank too big to fail, PrivatBank’s leaders extracted $5.5 billion from it, knowing that they could always stick the government with the bill. Rather than making loans to credible businesses or individuals, PrivatBank’s leadership extended credit to themselves; by late 2016, an independent investigation by the company Kroll found, more than 95 percent of the firm’s loans had been made to “parties related to former shareholders and their affiliates.” Many of those loans were extended to offshore entities that disguised the true recipient. It was, the auditor reported, a “large-scale money-laundering scheme. (Chris Miller, “Ukraine vs. the Oligarchs,” Foreign Policy, December 3, 2019)
Key National Interests
Moving forward under Zelensky’s leadership, Ukraine’s key national interests are improving the economy and living standards, restoring territorial integrity, preventing Russian interference, preserving freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, deepening ties with the EU and NATO, and enhancing bilateral security cooperation with the United States and other NATO countries.

Given Russia’s continued interests in certain areas of eastern Ukraine, including the ports of Odessa and Mariupol’, it is of paramount importance to Ukraine to preserve and restore its territorial integrity and insist on the withdrawal of Russian troops and irregulars from the Donbas region. Zelensky maintains that, in the efforts to end the fighting in eastern Ukraine, he will not give up any Ukrainian territory, including Crimea and the Donbas. However, the cultural and demographic situation in Crimea is very different from that in the Donbas. In Crimea, ethnic Russians constitute the majority and support the annexation to Russia; in the Donbas, the majority of people are Russian-speaking ethnic Ukrainians who favor simultaneously having a closer relationship with Russia while remaining part of Ukraine.

These demographic and cultural realities render it very difficult to reverse the annexation of Crimea. In addition, continued Russian efforts to meddle in Ukraine’s internal affairs and influence its foreign policy further complicate efforts to restore the territorial integrity of eastern Ukraine. On the other hand, the war in the Donbas is less popular in Russia than the annexation of Crimea has been. Western sanctions, costs associated with the Donbas war, and subsidies to prop up Crimea and the Donbas enclaves, together with a fall in oil prices, have led to a decline in Russian household incomes.

Similarly, for both security and commercial reasons, Ukraine aims to protect its freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. With increasingly aggressive Russian activities in this area since 2014, Ukraine fears that, through incremental gains, Russia seeks to transform the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov into virtual internal waterways, where Russia can have freedom of action similar to what it has achieved in the Caspian Sea.

---

99 Dilleen, 2018.
102 “Ukraine and Russia Are Both Trapped by the War in Donbas,” The Economist, May 25, 2017.
In a March 2016 discourse, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker “dashed Ukraine’s hopes of joining the EU and NATO anytime soon, estimating that it will take at least two decades before the former Soviet state is a member of either.” But in light of an increasing consensus in Ukraine to pursue these goals, membership in both NATO and the EU remains an official goal of the government. The previous Poroshenko administration declared in September 2015 that EU and NATO membership was a top objective of his administration, and Andriy Parubiy, the speaker of the parliament, declared NATO membership to be “a strategic goal for the country.” Membership in the EU also represents a “strategic goal” since 2002, and goals to join both institutions became enshrined into the country’s constitution through an amendment that the Ukrainian parliament overwhelmingly approved in February 2019.

President Zelensky reaffirmed these goals and emphasized his commitment to “keep Kiev firmly on a path towards EU integration and NATO membership” and to advance reforms that will bring Ukraine closer to integration in the two organizations. Zelensky has also proposed holding a referendum before NATO and EU accession with the aim of providing popular and nationwide legitimacy to the process—which, in the past, has seen fluctuating levels of support across various Ukrainian governments—and prevent the reversal of NATO or EU accession by subsequent administrations that might come to power in Ukraine.

**Relations with NATO and the EU**

To protect Ukraine from an encroaching Russian presence and to support advancing its integration into NATO and the EU, Ukraine is seeking to deepen its ties with key governments belonging to the two organizations, such as Canada, Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and become more involved with the overall organizations. For example, in 2009, Ukraine joined Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus,
Georgia, and Moldova in becoming a member of the EU’s Eastern Partnership. After 2014, partly to diminish its dependence on Russian gas, Ukraine has moved closer to the EU and started to import natural gas directly from EU members, including via reverse flows of Russian gas, as previously mentioned.

Ukraine’s dialogue and cooperation with NATO began in the early 1990s, when the country became a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (1991) and the Partnership for Peace (1994). Engagement with NATO was further advanced by the signing of the 1997 Charter on a Distinctive Partnership, which established the NATO-Ukraine Commission, and by a 2009 declaration, whereby the allies agreed to use the commission to redouble efforts to support and undertake an annual review of progress on Ukraine’s national reform goals.

This cooperation has deepened further since Russia’s aggression in Crimea and the Donbas. After the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO’s collective efforts to assist Ukraine were combined into a comprehensive assistance package designed to support Ukraine’s ability to provide for its national defense and advance various security sector reforms. The package includes eight trust funds, led by various allies. For instance, Ukraine’s participation in the trust fund for command, control, communications, and computers, led by Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, not only contributes to Ukraine’s modernization of related structures and capabilities but also increases interoperability with NATO members.

Now one of NATO’s most extensive partnerships, the relationship between NATO and Ukraine includes regular political consultations at various levels and diverse support for reforming Ukraine’s security and defense sectors, including education and training, all of which underpin the country’s self-defense capabilities. Ukraine has been involved in NATO peace-support operations in Afghanistan and the Balkans, exercises to enhance military interoperability, information exchanges, civil preparedness planning, and public diplomacy. Since 1995, Kyiv’s International Peacekeeping and Security Centre near Yavoriv in western Ukraine has hosted dozens of Partnership for Peace and other exercises with NATO member and partner countries.

In addition, the Ukrainian armed forces regularly participate in multilateral exercises with NATO and partner countries. For example, parallel with NATO’s Sea Shield

---


117 Miller, 2018.


119 NATO, 2019f.


121 NATO, 2019f.
2019 multinational exercise in the Black Sea, Ukrainian military forces conducted joint exercises with NATO countries. Over the past 20 years, Ukrainian forces have participated and, in some cases, co-led the annual Sea Breeze exercise sponsored by U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa. The July 2019 iteration of this exercise included more than 3,000 personnel and 32 vessels from 17 other countries and involved “maritime interdiction operations, air defense, special forces training, anti-submarine warfare, damage control tactics, search and rescue and amphibious warfare.” Ukraine has also participated in Saber Guardian, a biennial, land force exercise co-led by U.S. Army Europe and the Romanian Land Forces; in 2017, the exercise involved some 25,000 soldiers from 23 allied and partner countries operating in Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary.

In 2011, Ukraine was the first partner country to participate in the NATO Response Force and, since then, has committed specialized capabilities, such as strategic airlift. Ukraine has also been deepening bilateral military cooperation with key NATO allies to enhance their self-defense capabilities. The United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Lithuania, and Poland established the Joint Multinational Training Group in 2015 at the Yavoriv Combat Training Center. Ukrainian units undergo a training program designed to NATO standards and led by Ukrainian instructors, who are mentored and supported personnel from all of the contributing nations. The goal is to enhance Ukraine’s national self-defense capabilities and long-term force development. Units from the Ukrainian National Guard, regular Army, special operations forces, and naval infantry have benefited from this program.

In 2018, the Trump administration agreed to sell Ukraine 210 Javelin anti-armor missiles and 37 launch units, reversing the Obama administration’s policy of providing only nonlethal assistance. The transfer of the Javelins to Ukrainian forces was designed to help deter further escalation of the Donbas conflict. In addition, in September 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense began providing an additional $250 million in security assistance to enhance the capability of Ukraine’s Navy, Naval Infantry

---


Corps, Ground Forces, and Special Operations Forces.\textsuperscript{127} In October 2019, the United States approved the sale of $39.2 million in military equipment to Ukraine, including another 210 Javelin missiles and 37 launch units.\textsuperscript{128} Between 2014 and November 2019, U.S. security assistance to Ukraine totaled $1.6 billion.\textsuperscript{129} In June 2020, Congress approved Department of Defense plans to provide another $250 million in fiscal year 2020 to support further training, equipment, and advisory efforts for Ukrainian forces, and the State Department requested congressional approval of the sale of 16 fast patrol boats and materiel worth $600 million to enhance Ukraine’s ability to protect its maritime interests.\textsuperscript{130}

**Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy**

Ukraine can make several contributions to the development and implementation of a Western strategy to counter Russian malign influence and aggression in the Black Sea region. Ukraine’s contributions could include political, diplomatic, and informational cooperation with NATO and the EU; participation in bilateral or multinational military exercises; and the development of its national self-defense capabilities, including the Ukrainian Ground Forces, National Guard, and small-ship naval forces that would help deter further Russian aggression in the region.

Prior to the annexation of Crimea, NATO’s strategy in the region was focused on addressing nontraditional security threats, such as terrorism and illegal trafficking. After the 2014 crisis, fears of Russian aggression in the region grew, and NATO and member governments increased their rotational presence and the number of naval exercises in the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{131}

Ukraine’s participation in military exercises conducted either bilaterally or multilaterally with NATO members, such as Sea Shield 2019, allows the country to enhance its self-defense capabilities and improve interoperability with NATO members. Ukraine has also been very supportive of naval initiatives in the region, such as the February 2016 Romanian proposal to establish “a permanent naval task force by Romania, Turkey and Bulgaria, with German, Italian and U.S. logistical and direct


\textsuperscript{129} U.S. Department of Defense, 2019.


military support.” Although the initiative ended up not receiving Bulgarian support, the idea has resonated with many NATO allies and partners in the region and has not gone away for good.

Finally, after losing two-thirds of its naval vessels in 2014, as noted earlier, Ukraine has started to develop a so-called *mosquito fleet*—a formation of many small ships that could engage asymmetrically with Russia’s larger fleet. The purposes of the mosquito fleet are to enhance Ukrainian maritime security, ensure commercial vessels’ access to the Sea of Azov, and help deter any malign operations that Russia’s Black Sea Fleet might attempt in the region. The Ukrainian Navy’s strategy through 2035 calls for improved coastal defenses and the ability to protect against landing forces. These capabilities will require increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and maritime domain awareness.

**Moldova: Western Partnership Limited by Internal Divisions and Russian Pressure**

**Perceptions of Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region**

On August 31, 1989, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic declared the Moldovan language—a version of Romanian—to be the country’s official language and shifted from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. The move toward Moldova’s independence from the Soviet Union culminated on August 27, 1991, with a parliamentary declaration. However, as in Ukraine, Russian interference in the internal affairs of Moldova continued after independence. For example, the former Soviet 14th Guards Army, also known as the Operational Group of Russian Forces, has been posted in the country since 1946. Russian intervention in Moldova’s internal affairs became most obvi-

---

132 International Crisis Group, 2019. Ukraine’s support of the Romanian proposal is according to an off-the-record conversation with a participant in the RAND-organized Black Sea Security Workshop, Bucharest, Romania, March 2019. For the proceedings of that event, see Flanagan and Chindea, 2019.


135 See Mankoff, 2014.


138 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 18; and “Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova,” *Global Security*, undated.
ous in 1990–1992, when Russia provided military support to the separatist movement in Transnistria.  

In September 1990, Transnistria declared that it was independent from Moldova and that it belonged to the Soviet Union as a Soviet republic, but its independence has yet to be recognized by any internationally recognized state, including Russia. Fearing the post-1991 revival of Romanian nationalism and a possible reunification of Moldova with Romania, the Russian minority in Transnistria became restless. Ultimately, violence broke out in March 1992, and the Russian troops present on Moldovan territory provided arms and support to the Transnistrian Republican Guard and various paramilitary units for use against Moldovan forces. The conflict resulted in between 800 and 1,000 casualties and ended in July 1992, when the two sides agreed to a ceasefire. Since then, the ceasefire has been enforced by the Joint Control Commission, which is made up of three battalions of some 500 peacekeepers each, representing the three main parties to the conflict: Moldova, Transnistria, and Russia. In 1998, ten Ukrainian observers were added to the group.

Since 1992, the situation in Transnistria has remained a “frozen conflict,” with no more fighting taking place but the situation being “far from stable.” Russian troops have remained despite repeated requests by the Moldovan government for their unconditional withdrawal. Over the past decade, most of Russia’s 14th Army personnel stationed in Transnistria have been withdrawn, and the remaining 1,500 troops have two officially declared core tasks: protect Soviet-era explosive warehouses, which amount to some 42,000 tons, and engage in peacekeeping operations next to

---


142 “Moldova Concerned over Russian Troop Movements in Breakaway Region,” 2018.

143 “Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova,” undated.


146 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 17.


149 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 18.

150 “Operational Group of Russian Forces in Moldova,” undated.
Moldovan and Transnistrian troops.\textsuperscript{151} Moldova considers the Transnistrian troops, which are integrated into Russia’s 14th Army,\textsuperscript{152} to constitute an illegal paramilitary organization.\textsuperscript{153}

Tensions in the region flared up after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Ukrainian parliament’s May 2015 decision to cancel Russian “military transit rights through the Odesa region to Transnistria.”\textsuperscript{154} As a result of this measure, Russia had to provide funds instead of goods and supply its forces in Transnistria by air.\textsuperscript{155} The air supply has given the Moldovan government some degree of control over the weapons and munitions that enter Moldova,\textsuperscript{156} as well as over the rotation of Russian peacekeeping troops that now need to land in the Chișinău International Airport on their way to Transnistria.\textsuperscript{157} Soon after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, officials in not only Moldova but also Ukraine, Romania, and the United States feared that Transnistria could be vulnerable to a future crisis initiated by Russia.\textsuperscript{158}

These fears were understandable in light of Russia’s recent aggressive actions in the region; the increase in the number and scale of joint military exercises between the Transnistrian military and Russian peacekeepers,\textsuperscript{159} despite the opposition voiced by the Moldovan government;\textsuperscript{160} and unauthorized movements of military vehicles with Russian license plates in Transnistria in June 2018.\textsuperscript{161} The number of Russian military exercises in Transnistria also rose from 48 in 2016 to more than 150 in 2017, and they resembled the exercises that Russian troops performed near the Georgian border prior to Russia’s August 2008 military intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.\textsuperscript{162} When joint military exercises between Russian and Transnistrian troops took place in summer 2018—for a third consecutive year—Russian soldiers did not allow Moldovan

\textsuperscript{152} Conley and Ruy, 2018.
\textsuperscript{153} Touma, 2017.
\textsuperscript{154} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{155} Lungu, 2016.
\textsuperscript{157} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{158} Will Englund, “Transnistria, the Breakaway Region of Moldova, Could Be Russia’s Next Target,” Washington Post, March 24, 2014.
\textsuperscript{159} “Russia Holds Military Games in Breakaway Transnistria,” Balkan Insight, August 9, 2018.
\textsuperscript{160} Touma, 2017.
\textsuperscript{161} “Moldova Concerned over Russian Troop Movements in Breakaway Region,” 2018.
\textsuperscript{162} Conley and Ruy, 2018. For a more detailed discussion on the role of the military exercise that Russia conducted on August 2, 2008, across the border with Georgia and the chronological unfolding of events leading to the breakout of the conflict, see Charap and Colton, 2017, pp. 91–94.
and OSCE observers to inspect the military equipment.\textsuperscript{163} In this context, Moldovan perceptions that Russia poses a security threat to the region have significantly intensified. Many Moldovans also fear that Russia is likely to support and incite the federalization of Moldova in an attempt to “give the Russian-controlled breakaway region of Transnistria veto power over the country’s security and geopolitical decisions.”\textsuperscript{164}

Although diplomatic efforts and confidence-building measures aiming to bring the frozen conflict in Transnistria to an end are still ongoing,\textsuperscript{165} the Russian military presence in the region provides Russia with a lever of influence over the Moldovan government and constrains its policy options, especially those regarding any possible rapprochement with the EU and NATO. Currently, Moldova is not a member of either of the two organizations, but one of the country’s officially stated goals is to become a member of the EU. In September 2013, in an attempt to intimidate Moldova into not signing an association agreement with the EU, Russia banned exports of Moldovan wine to Russia and engaged in other episodes of “economic bullying.”\textsuperscript{166} However, despite Russia’s efforts, in June 2014, Moldova signed the association agreement, which also includes a DCFTA. In response, the Kremlin implemented additional bans on the sale of Moldovan wine, restricted the access of other agricultural products to the Russian market, and “threatened to cut off natural gas.”\textsuperscript{167}

In addition to seeking closer ties to the EU, Moldova joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994 and that program’s Planning and Review Process in 1997. Furthermore, Moldova has an Individual Partnership Action Plan that outlines the details of its cooperation with NATO and is updated every two years.\textsuperscript{168}

As Moldova has made various attempts to forge closer ties to the West, Russia has made sustained efforts to sabotage or outright prevent those closer ties. Russian efforts in the past were more overt, but since 2014, they have become subtler. For example, Russia’s involvement has relied heavily on information propaganda tools and “attacks on the information and communication infrastructure;” both threats were mentioned in Moldova’s National Security Strategy and the Action Programme for 2016–2018.\textsuperscript{169} In addition, Russia attempted to “de-geopoliticize” its relationship with the Moldovan


\textsuperscript{164} Alina Inayeh, “Moldova’s Latest Political Crisis Has Wider Implications,” German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 10, 2019b.

\textsuperscript{165} Devyatkov, 2017.

\textsuperscript{166} Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{167} Charap and Colton, 2017, p. 104.

\textsuperscript{168} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 15.

government by keeping the focus “on social and economic issues instead of thorny political matters.”

For convenience and financial reasons, local broadcasters in Moldova have largely relied on retransmitting Russian media rather than producing their own programs, which facilitates the reach of Russian propaganda into the country. According to an April 2017 poll, 43 percent of Moldovans—including those who support closer alignment with the West—receive their news through Russian-language broadcasts, and 54 percent of those respondents trust those sources. In addition, 62 percent of Moldovans “named Putin as their favorite foreign politician,” while support for European integration plummeted to 38 percent in 2016, down from 67 percent in 2009. The heavy influence that Russia exercises in Moldova through Russian-language media led the government in Chișinău to pass legislation in February 2018 outlawing the “retransmission of Russian radio and TV programs,” which are perceived to be an extension of Russian foreign policy.

Key Domestic Challenges That Complicate Countering Russian Malign Influence

Two of the major (and interrelated) domestic challenges that have affected Moldova’s efforts to counter Russian influence in the country are the polarization of society and political deadlock, which are directly related to the country’s economic stagnation and its struggle to implement reforms. President Dodon’s pro-Moldova policy has also been an impediment in this area.

Although Moldovan elites predominantly support closer ties to the West and are in favor of the country’s “gravitating towards [the] Euro-Atlantic community,” divisions between those in the wider public who harbor pro-Russia sentiments and those who are anti-Russia deepened after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. In 2015, 40 percent of Moldovans considered the annexation legitimate, and 39 percent condemned it. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, support for European integration has fallen precipitously since 2009.

These domestic circumstances are partly the result of the economy being poorly managed by the pro-Europe parties that came to power after 2009; rising energy prices, among other things, also contributed. These parties’ poor performance in government has backfired and had a negative effect on Moldovan perceptions of European integration. This decline of pro-Europe parties, combined with Russian propaganda supporting local political allies, has boosted pro-Russia parties, such as the Socialist Party of

---

170 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
171 Alla Rosca, “Media in Moldova: Between Freedom and Monopoly,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 13, 2017.
the Republic of Moldova. The party has been on the rise since 2014, and in the February 2019 parliamentary elections, it received 32 percent of the votes, closely followed by the reformist, pro-European “NOW” Platform DA and PAS (ACUM Platforma DA și PAS in Moldovan) electoral bloc, which received about 27 percent of the votes. A third political party—the Democratic Party, which represents the interests of the local oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc—trailing the NOW bloc with 24 percent of the votes. The results show that the level of polarization of Moldovan society has remained steady since the annexation of Crimea. Because no party received a majority of the vote to be able to rule independently, all three had to negotiate to form a leading coalition in the parliament.

During the three months of negotiations that followed, Moldova experienced political deadlock. In June 2019, an unlikely coalition between the Socialist Party and the NOW bloc emerged in a concerted attempt to “rid the country of the influence of Plahotniuc, the man who captured Moldova’s institutions and practically controls the state.” The Constitutional Court contested the formation of the coalition and suspended President Dodon for an apparent breach of parliamentary procedure; a constitutional crisis ensued. By July 2019, the crisis was resolved, and Maia Sandu became prime minister of a government whose priorities were “combating corruption and money laundering, reforming the banking sector, and promoting energy security.” However, in November 2019, Sandu was forced to resign after President Dodon orchestrated a no-confidence vote against her. The alliance that Sandu led between the Socialist Party and the NOW bloc had the effect of, among other things, neutralizing Plahotniuc, whom the Kremlin no longer trusted. After Plahotniuc fled Moldova and Sandu’s government started to advance reforms and push for an independent court system, the pro-Europe NOW bloc was removed from power. The government that replaced Sandu’s coalition halted the structural reforms launched in June 2019 and has a pro-Russia orientation.

---

173 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 16.
174 Leaders of the Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate (PAS, Party of Action and Solidarity) and the Partidul Platforma Dignitate și Adevăr (PPDA, Dignity and Truth Platform Party) formed the ACUM DA and PAS electoral bloc to solidify democratic, pro-EU forces in the February 2019 parliamentary elections.
175 Inayeh, 2019b
176 Inayeh, 2019b.
178 Dodon’s call for a no-confidence vote came in the context of Sandu’s attempt “to alter the procedure for appointing the general prosecutor,” which would have limited Dodon’s influence over the process (Nataliya Bugayova, Mason Clark, and Andre Briere, “Russia in Review: The Kremlin Reverses Setbacks in Moldova,” Institute for the Study of War, December 6, 2019).
179 Una Hajdari, “Moldova’s Failed Revolution Is Not Over Yet,” Foreign Policy, November 22, 2019; and “A Pro-Western Government Has Been Pushed Out in Moldova,” The Economist, December 12, 2019.
Since its 1991 independence, Moldova has struggled to implement political and economic reforms, and corruption has been a major impediment. The influence and interference of powerful businessmen in politics and revelations of mass fraud have led Transparency International to rank Moldova 120 out of 180 countries. Sandu’s removal was a major reversal in efforts to reduce corruption and the influence of oligarchs. Similar to the situation in Ukraine, Russia has relied on the local oligarchs to advance its own goals in Moldova and deliberately weaken Moldovan society through corruption.

The combined effects of corruption, polarized politics and society, and Russian interference have hampered Moldova’s overall economic performance and limited the capacity to counter malign Russian influence. At $3,227 in 2018 U.S. dollars, Moldova’s nominal GDP per capita is one of the lowest among European countries, and its economy largely depends on remittances from Moldovans who work abroad. Moreover, Moldova is still largely dependent on Russian energy imports and, ironically, is responsible for footing the bill for Transnistria’s energy consumption, despite the region’s claims of independence.

Alongside the political and societal polarization and the economic hardship, the 2016 presidential win of socialist Dodon—who is largely perceived as pro-Russia—has also tilted the balance in Moldova in Russia’s favor and “at the expense of relations with the EU, NATO, Ukraine and Romania” for at least the first years of his mandate and potentially longer. Dodon supported an older Russian proposal to federalize Moldova, and, on the campaign trail, he “pledged to restore full-fledged economic relations with Russia, have the EU Association Agreement cancelled through a referendum and develop the country while relying on the Orthodox faith as ‘the moral fibre of Moldovans.’” As an alternative to the association agreement with the EU and the DCFTA, Dodon has been in favor of Moldova joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union.

Dodon slightly shifted his approach from his previously overt pro-Russia stance to what he calls a pro-Moldova approach, in which the country maintains its neutral-

---

182 For example, between 2010 and 2014, in the “Russian Laundromat” scheme, tens of billions of U.S. dollars of “illegally obtained funds from Russia” moved through Moldovan banks. In another scheme, three banks colluded in “stripping Moldova of an estimated 12 percent of its GDP in the process” (Hajdari, 2019).
185 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 16.
186 Conley and Ruy, 2018.
ity, is joining neither the pro-Russia nor the pro-West camp, and balances the two sides in a way that is conducive to Moldova’s national interests. Similar to Russia’s strategy toward Moldova, Moldovan leaders have embraced de-geopoliticization and aim to maintain focus on social and economic policies in relations with the Kremlin.¹⁸⁷

**Key National Interests**

Moldova’s 2011 National Security Strategy states that the country’s key national interests are “to ensure and uphold the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, inalienable state borders, and public safety, and the respect and protection of human rights and freedoms, as well as the strengthening of democracy that will allow the developing of a state of law and market economy.”¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, the strategy identifies “poverty, economic underdevelopment and energy dependence” as key threats to the national security of Moldova.¹⁸⁹ Moldova’s Action Programme for 2016–2018 also emphasized the importance of improving the “welfare, safety and quality of the life of citizens . . . by economic development and facilitating well paid job creation, eradication of corruption and ensuring the rule of law,”¹⁹⁰ and a 2016 draft of the National Security Strategy included among its objectives the “development of a sustainable economy.”¹⁹¹ In this light, Moldova aims to restore its territorial integrity and end the Russian military occupation of Transnistria; prevent political interference in its internal affairs; improve economic relations with both the EU and Russia; deepen cooperation with the EU and NATO (membership in either is a long shot); and preserve its positive relations with Romania and Ukraine, two of its closest neighbors and allies in the region.

Article 11 of the Moldovan Constitution proclaims the country’s “permanent neutrality” and prohibits “the stationing of any foreign military troops on its territory,” and various administrations have taken steps toward ending the presence of Russian military forces.¹⁹² Moldova has sought to restore its territorial integrity by bringing the Transnistrian conflict to an end, although Moldova’s current leadership is not very

---

¹⁸⁷ Flanagan and Chindea, 2019.
¹⁸⁸ Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 22; see also Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2011.
¹⁸⁹ This statement is based on our translation of the Moldovan-language version of the strategy: “principalele amenințări la adresa securității naționale: sărăcia, subdezvoltarea economică și dependența energetică” (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2011).
¹⁹⁰ Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 22; see also Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2016.
keen to negotiate with Russia on the region’s status.\textsuperscript{193} Moreover, Russia has a strong interest in maintaining a military presence in Transnistria to control the level of stability (or instability) of the region, reducing even further the prospects of a resolution to the conflict.\textsuperscript{194}

In this context, Moldova’s membership in the EU and NATO is most unlikely. Part of President Dodon’s pro-Moldova policy is to maintain the association agreement with the EU—Moldova’s top export market (66 percent of total exports)—while tightening economic relations with Russia.\textsuperscript{195} Dodon has also sought to uphold limited cooperation with NATO while maintaining Moldova’s “fourth path”—as opposed to a path that favors the West, Russia, or reunification with Romania.\textsuperscript{196} According to Moldova’s Action Programme for 2016–2018, the “welfare, safety and quality of life of citizens” is likely to be improved through the implementation of the association agreement with the EU and the DCFTA,\textsuperscript{197} which entered in force on July 1, 2016.\textsuperscript{198}

Primarily as a way to advance reform and modernization of its defense and security sectors, Moldova has pursued security cooperation with NATO, particularly in ways that develop limited interoperability with Western armed forces.\textsuperscript{199} For example, Moldova and NATO cooperate in the Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiative, which is “tailored to fit the specific needs of the recipient country.”\textsuperscript{200} However, even when security cooperation programs are in place, there is some dissen- sion in the Moldovan government about their implementation. President Dodon tried twice in 2017 to block Moldovan military personnel from participating in exercises in Ukraine with Ukrainian and NATO forces, but he was overruled by other elements of the government.\textsuperscript{201}

Last but not least among the key national interests, Moldova aims to maintain close ties to both Romania and Ukraine, two strategic partners supporting Moldova’s rapprochement to the EU, the modernization and reform of the country’s defense sector, and settlement of the conflict in Transnistria.\textsuperscript{202} Romania is Moldova’s “fore-

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{193} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{194} Dascalu, 2019.
\textsuperscript{195} Conley and Ruy, 2018.
\textsuperscript{196} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{197} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 22; see also Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2016.
\textsuperscript{198} Naja Bentzen, “Implementing the EU-Moldova Association Agreement,” Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, November 2018.
\textsuperscript{199} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, pp. 22–23.
\textsuperscript{200} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{201} Flanagan and Chindea, 2019, pp. 10.
\textsuperscript{202} Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 25.
\end{flushleft}
Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy

Moldova has the potential to engage in limited political, diplomatic, and informational cooperation with NATO and the EU. Although Western nations and organizations would desire closer ties and a deeper level of Moldovan engagement in cooperation activities, the reality on the ground—which includes political and social polarization, Russian information operations, the frozen conflict in Transnistria, economic difficulties, and corruption—makes those outcomes problematic, but not impossible.

As part of its efforts to strengthen engagement with NATO, Moldova could ensure continued participation in military exercises with NATO forces in Romania and Ukraine, which would enhance Moldovan national defense capabilities in the long term and contribute to the professionalization of its military forces. Moldova has contributed limited personnel to United Nations missions in Africa and to the NATO mission in Kosovo, and those initiatives could be a starting point for further efforts to engage Moldova’s defense forces moving forward.

Potential U.S. and NATO Actions in Ukraine and Moldova to Support a Countervailing Western Strategy

Even before Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the West has lacked a comprehensive strategy toward the Black Sea region. Although the United States, European governments, and Canada have provided invaluable political, economic, and military support to Ukraine since its independence—and in a more substantial fashion since 2014—and maintained engagement with Moldova, more could be done to help each country pursue their differing goals for relations with the West and enhance regional stability and cooperation.

Moving forward, given the importance of Ukraine and Moldova to the security of the transatlantic community, Western nations and organizations might consider the following actions:

- Provide additional resources to advance military and security-sector reform and modernization, as well as additional military training to Ukraine and technical assistance to Moldova.

203 Kremlin Watch, “Romania,” webpage, undated.
204 Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, 2016, p. 28.
• Assist Ukraine with the development of its mosquito fleet of naval forces and other measures to enhance maritime domain awareness that would help it maintain freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov, protect its coastal areas, and deter further Russian aggression in the region.

• Develop enhanced mechanisms for crisis consultations and management with NATO under Paragraph 8 of the 1994 Partnership for Peace Framework Agreement—and, in the case of Ukraine, the Charter on a Distinctive Partnership and the NATO-Ukraine Commission, which has been a venue for more-regular consultations since 2014.

• Foster other elements of regional security cooperation through reinvigoration of the South Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process. Set up in the late 1990s, the process is a series of meetings that convene the ministers of defense, deputy ministers of defense, and deputy chiefs of defense of countries of Southeastern Europe. It could provide a fruitful venue to promote regional security initiatives and enhance defense-sector cooperation.206

The three states of the South Caucasus—Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia—each face distinct, complex challenges in managing their relations with Russia while maintaining engagement with the West in various spheres. As Chapters Three and Four outlined, through diverse measures of influence, limited investments, and the periodic use of military force, Moscow has gained political leverage, military access, and economic and informational capacity to constrain the policies of its southern neighbors. Moscow’s efforts to abet protracted conflicts in Georgia and Azerbaijan support these goals and provide the Kremlin with expanded leverage in fitful negotiations to resolve those conflicts and in the future course of Georgia’s and Azerbaijan’s internal affairs and foreign and security policies. In this chapter, we consider how the governments and citizens of the South Caucasus view Russian strategy in the region and how they are coping with and accommodating Russian pressure and aggression. We outline each country’s key national interests and goals for partnering with NATO and the United States, and we consider the countries’ potential contributions to a Western strategy to counter Russian malign influence and aggression in the Black Sea region.

**Georgia: Euro-Atlantic Aspirations**

Since Georgia gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the primary question defining its foreign relations has been whether it is aligned more closely with Euro-Atlantic institutions or with Russia. Although Tbilisi’s primary strategic goal is full integration into Western political, economic, and security frameworks and despite considerable progress toward reforms, substantial growth in economic relations, and contributions to Western security initiatives, Georgia has not achieved its main aims of accession to NATO and the EU. Furthermore, Russia currently occupies about 20 percent of Georgian territory and continues its creeping annexation policy of borderization—that is, seizing small parcels of land near South Ossetia and construct-
ing barriers and limitations on the movement of people between (1) the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and (2) other parts of Georgia.¹

Reinforcing these barriers makes it easier for Russian forces deployed in South Ossetia to threaten critical Georgian infrastructure, particularly the main East-West Highway that connects Tbilisi to the Black Sea coast, the Baku-Tbilisi-Cayhan and the Baku-Supsa oil pipelines, and major population centers. Russia’s occupation of Abkhazia also reinforces Russian dominance of the Black Sea littoral, denying half of Georgia’s traditional coastline. This control was further cemented following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, when Russia refurbished the small naval base in Ochamchire;² however, capacity limitations mean that the modest port will never replace Sevastopol, as some pro-Russia leaders in Abkhazia had hoped.³ Despite the Ochamchire port’s relatively small size, about 4,000 troops reportedly landed there on their way to support the fighting in 2008—although they arrived after the fighting had ended.⁴ In 2016, a European Parliament report noted that Russian personnel based in three training groups in Abkhazia were “actively involved” in exercises in the Southern Military District, and this involvement is ongoing.⁵ Furthermore, Russia’s deployment of S-300s to Abkhazia enhances Moscow’s A2/AD capabilities in the region.⁶

In 2012, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s United National Movement, which had dominated Georgian politics since 2004 and pursued sometimes confrontational policies toward Russia, lost elections to a newly formed opposition coalition known as Georgian Dream, led and financed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. Georgian Dream candidates moved to normalize relations with Russia on the basis of pragmatic economic interests rather than ideological grounds. During the 2012 campaign, Ivanishvili wrote an editorial contrasting himself with Saakashvili, saying, “We will be realistic about Georgia’s possibilities. We will abandon saber-rattling and recognize that Georgia is a small regional power in a very dangerous neighborhood.”⁷ He pledged to normalize diplomatic relations and restore trade and economic ties with Russia,

¹ Russian efforts have been most pronounced along the Administrative Boundary Line demarcating the Georgian boundary with the South Ossetia region. Most of Abkhazia is demarcated by the natural boundary of the Inguri River. See Kornely Kakachia, “How the West Should Respond to Russia’s ‘Borderization’ in Georgia,” PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 523, April 2018.
asserting that it was possible to achieve these goals in tandem with deepening Georgia’s ties with NATO and the EU.

Ivanishvili served as prime minister for only a year after the 2012 elections, but he remains the Georgian Dream party leader and still exerts enormous political and economic influence in the country. Since the pivot in strategy, Georgia’s economy has benefited from renewed trade with Russia, especially the resumption of wine exports; a boom in Russian tourism; and remittances from many thousands of Georgians working in Russia. Many Georgians hoped that the more conciliatory approach toward Moscow would produce progress on ending hostile Russian activities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, Moscow’s disregard for Georgian sovereignty has persisted. Frustrations on this front, coupled with growing concern about various Georgian Dream policies that were perceived by many Georgians as appeasement of Moscow, led to mass protests in summer 2019.8 The protests revealed public skepticism of the limits of normalizing relations with Russia and of Russia’s overall intentions.

Perceptions of and Responses to Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Georgian leaders continue to view Russia as the country’s main national security threat. Although it acknowledges other threats besides Moscow, Tbilisi sees Russian designs as fundamentally predatory and believes that “dangers posed by Russia must dominate Georgia’s national security and defense planning.”9 These threats were underscored in 2009–2010, when Russia formalized security pacts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including a long-term lease on the 7th Military Base in Abkhazia, where at least 4,000 Russian troops are believed to be deployed along with Abkhaz forces. Parallel basing arrangements were made in South Ossetia, where a similar number of Russian troops are stationed, along with South Ossetian armed forces at the 4th Guards Military Base.10

Georgia’s Strategic Defence Review for 2017–2020 describes the Black Sea regional security environment as “complex and unstable,” assessing that Russia’s buildup in the Southern Military District and the Black Sea “will weaken the West’s access to the Caucasus region, and, accordingly, decrease its capability to balance Russia.”11 The document also states,

Russia’s key strategic objective remains to gain and maintain control over regional energy sources and distribution networks. Ensuring energy security and main-

8 Kornely Kakachia and Bidzina Lebanidze, “Georgian Dream Meets Georgia’s Nightmare,” Foreign Policy, June 25, 2019.
Maintaining its transit function for energy supplies will remain the main challenge for Georgia. Therefore, Georgia is committed to deepening its cooperation with regional partners over energy, political, economic and military issues.\textsuperscript{12}

To respond to the Russian threat, the Strategic Defense Review includes structural reorganizations, such as eliminating the Naval Planning Department and creating a naval capability planning cell within the J-3 Planning Department. The document concludes by calling for closer cooperation with NATO allies and partners “to ensure security and stability in the South Caucasus and Black Sea region.”\textsuperscript{13}

In addition to these changes, Georgia has recently reoriented its ground-based military strategy toward territorial defense, following similar efforts in Baltic countries that have prioritized investments in land-based area denial capabilities.\textsuperscript{14} These efforts include increasing the focus on interoperability; preparing special operations forces to deal with hybrid threats, air defense, and anti-armor systems; and aligning more closely with Western formations and ensuring continued rotations of Western troops through Georgia.\textsuperscript{15} In late 2017, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency approved the sale of 410 Javelin anti-armor missiles, with the first delivery arriving in early 2018.\textsuperscript{16} In 2019, Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria stated that Tbilisi intended to buy mobile air defense systems from France, augmenting a short-range French system that was delivered in late 2018; counter-mobility systems from Germany; and more reconnaissance and surveillance systems from the United States.\textsuperscript{17}

Although Georgia’s military remains outmatched by Russian forces, these efforts are intended to build deterrence by raising the costs of any future invasions and to defend against future hybrid threats.

As another tool to mitigate the threat from Russia, Georgia has been supportive of economic integration in the Black Sea region, particularly to enhance stability and limit its vulnerability to Russian economic pressures—including trade bans, border closures, and energy threats—while seeking to promote norms against their use.\textsuperscript{18} Georgia was a founding member of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Georgian Ministry of Defence, 2017, p. 58. \\
\textsuperscript{14} Brooks Tigner, “Georgia to Place Ever-Greater Emphasis on Territorial Defence,” \textit{Jane’s Defence Weekly}, March 27, 2019. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Jane’s, “Georgia: Army: Executive Summary,” \textit{Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: Russia and the CIS}, May 8, 2019a. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Tigner, 2019; and “Georgian Defence Minister Leaves for France to Sign a New Deal on Purchase of Air-Defence Systems,” Agenda.ge, December 6, 2018. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Grigol Mgaloblishvili, “Georgia’s View of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC),” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011.
\end{flushright}
Cooperation, which, with strong leadership from Turkey, was established in 1992 to promote development through cooperation among countries and enterprises in the region. Although its national aspirations for full EU and NATO membership have stalled, Georgia supports the integration of Black Sea countries into Euro-Atlantic and Western institutions and has encouraged wider EU involvement in the region. In 2017, Georgia hosted a high-level EU conference titled “Connecting the Region Through Marine and Maritime Cooperation.” And Georgia’s 2012 National Security Concept cites the Black Sea as the second among five key regions affecting Georgia’s security; in particular, the document states that “Georgia contributes to regional security through cooperation in multilateral and bilateral international frameworks.”

Countering Russian Malign Influence

Tbilisi views Russian soft power and diverse instruments of malign influence as significant security threats, recognizing their potential effect on political and social perceptions and outcomes in Georgia. The Strategic Defence Review for 2017–2020 concludes,

> Russia will strengthen its efforts to undermine Georgia’s national unity and attempt to initiate conflict among ethnic and religious groups to create managed destabilisation. The Kremlin will particularly focus on reinforcing the elements of its soft power to ensure the weakening of state institutions, strengthening of pro-Russian civil and political movements and discredit[ing of the] pro-Western foreign policy agenda.

> Using political, economic and information tools, Russia continues its attempt to limit international political support for Georgia and weaken cooperation directed at strengthening Georgia’s defence capabilities.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Russian media have limited influence in Georgia, except among the small ethnic Russian minority. Overall, Russia has few effective channels for propaganda in Georgia, but a 2019 study found that certain demographics are susceptible to media manipulation. Russian information operations have targeted senior citizens and areas with sizable populations of ethnic and religious minorities,

---

19 The Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation is a forum for cooperation on a wide variety of issues—particularly trade, economic development, and transport—among Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine. It has a Permanent International Secretariat in Istanbul, and members reaffirmed their commitment to the principles and objectives of the organization at a May 2017 Summit celebrating the 25th anniversary of its founding. See Black Sea Economic Cooperation, “BSEC at a Glance,” webpage, undated.


such as adherents of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgia’s Ajaria region (where the population is about one-third Muslim) and the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (where about half the population is ethnic Armenian) have been subjects of messaging against the Georgian government.\(^\text{23}\)

Although Russian media’s emphasis on shared traditional values and Orthodox Christianity provides avenues for reaching more-conservative elements of Georgia’s population, there is a strong faction in the church that supports closer ties to the West and provides a counterweight to Russian messaging, suggesting its appeal will remain limited.\(^\text{24}\) Russia has had some success, however, in bolstering voices that advocate closer ties to Moscow, particularly Eurosceptic political parties, which have gained seats in parliament and regional assemblies.\(^\text{25}\)

As in other countries, corruption is a key element of Russian influence in Georgia. There is considerable evidence of growing corruption linked to Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia, who made his fortune in Russia and still has strong ties to Russian oligarchs. He appears to have inordinate influence over the government and decisions on large real estate and infrastructure developments in Georgia. Transparency International has issued several reports revealing that dozens of former employees of Ivanishvili’s companies have been elected or appointed to senior positions in the Georgian government, legislature, and judiciary. In addition, there is evidence that Ivanishvili intervened behind the scenes to disrupt development of the Georgian port of Anaklia on the Black Sea near Abkhazia, which would strengthen Georgia’s role as a transit hub in the region and offer an alternative to routes through Russia.\(^\text{26}\)

**Key National Interests**

Georgia’s primary geopolitical objectives are the return of its lost territories, the strengthening of its economy and living standards, and full integration into Euro-Atlantic political and security institutions. In pursuit of these goals, Georgia is engaged in a broad variety of initiatives designed to build relations and deepen cooperation with key Western powers.

Georgia has been a member of NATO’s Partnership for Peace since 1994, and NATO leaders agreed at the 2008 Bucharest Summit—and have regularly recon-


\(^{25}\) Kanashvili, 2017.

The South Caucasus and Black Sea Security

firmed since that time—that Georgia will become a NATO member, provided it meets the necessary requirements. However, allied governments have been unwilling to offer Tbilisi a Membership Action Plan, partly because of concerns that it could provoke a crisis with Russia. Other factors are Georgia’s weak economy, territorial disputes, and questions about defensibility at the eastern end of the Black Sea. Georgia’s shelling of South Ossetia at the outset of the 2008 war caused concern in NATO about national security decisionmaking.

A NATO-Georgia Commission was established in 2008 as a mechanism to foster political dialogue and practical cooperation in support of Georgia’s reforms and integration goals. Since the 2014 NATO Wales Summit, the Alliance has undertaken concrete initiatives, under the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, to help strengthen Georgia’s self-defense capabilities and advance its membership preparations. These initiatives include establishing the NATO-Georgian Joint Training and Evaluation Center in Georgia for advanced training of Georgian and other partner armed forces, as well as the Defence Institution Building School. Georgia also hosts and co-leads the Agile Spirit and Noble Partner exercises in concert with U.S. Army Europe.

EU governments have deferred Georgia’s aspirations for EU accession for a variety of considerations, including Georgia’s poverty, likely adverse Russian reaction, and a lack of political support in member countries for further enlargement. This situation is likely to remain for the indefinite future. Nevertheless, the EU and Georgia concluded an association agreement, including a DCFTA, which entered into force in 2016, and the two parties agreed in 2018 to 25 measures to enhance EU-Georgia cooperation. In 2017, the EU Commission also granted Georgian citizens visa-free travel to the Schengen area for trips of up to 90 days. The EU is especially important to Georgia because it is the country’s leading trading partner, accounting for 27 percent of its total trade.

Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy

Georgia is highly supportive of Western engagement in the Black Sea region and encourages deeper political and military involvement. Washington and Tbilisi share a priority of preserving and restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity and ability to protect its borders, and improving the country’s self-defense capabilities has been a focus of more-recent U.S. efforts. In earlier years, U.S. efforts put more emphasis on helping Georgians undertake international peacekeeping missions and participate in coalition stabilization operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

---

27 NATO, “Relations with Georgia,” March 26, 2019b.


Strategic goals that Georgia shares with NATO include improving information-sharing, cyber defense, and interoperability at sea. The Substantial NATO-Georgia Package includes a maritime security initiative, recognizing Georgia’s desire to improve its maritime domain awareness and Coast Guard capabilities.\(^\text{30}\) Reflected in the NATO-Georgia Commission Declaration at the Brussels Summit, this program is designed to improve Georgian resilience and enhance engagement between Georgia and NATO’s Standing Naval Forces.\(^\text{31}\) These efforts will not transform the balance of power in the Black Sea, but they can enhance Georgia’s ability to monitor its coastal waters, improve reaction times, and lay a foundation for longer-term capability development.

The United States, NATO, and the EU should remain judicious in their messaging and commitments as they continue to support Georgia’s reforms and closer alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Although increased military support can improve Georgia’s defensive capabilities and deterrent posture, Washington and its allies should take steps to ensure that Western political support keeps pace with military efforts and be cognizant of asymmetries between Western and Russian interests and likely Russian redlines. Further deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations or a deepening of Turkey’s ties with Russia could narrow Georgia’s options for engagement with NATO and the EU. In particular, Turkey has been a firm supporter of Georgia’s membership in NATO, so Turkey’s closer alignment with Russia would make extending credible security guarantees to Georgia even more challenging.

Azerbaijan: Seeking Integration with the West but Susceptible to Russian Pressures

Perceptions of and Responses to Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Azerbaijan’s approach to Russia’s regional presence is practical, measured, and mindful of Moscow’s considerable hard military power and political and economic influence. Although Russia is closely allied with Armenia, Moscow is also Baku’s primary military supplier,\(^\text{32}\) ensuring that Azerbaijan remains cordial but also wary in its relations with the regional hegemon. This calculation is becoming more complicated as Turkey, Azerbaijan’s closest ally, becomes an increasingly unpredictable partner and less reliable link to the West.

At the same time, Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia put Azerbaijan’s military inferiority in stark relief, adding to the delicacy of Baku’s position and lowering expecta-
tions that the West intended to balance out Russia in the region. This experience likely contributed to a recalibration of Baku’s foreign policy alignment more toward Russia.33

This necessary balancing act was particularly visible in late 2015, during a spike in Russian-Turkish tensions following Turkey’s downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber on the Turkish border. Despite Moscow’s economic sanctions and threats of harsher retaliation against Turkey for its aggressive action, Azerbaijan’s deputy prime minister sought to defuse tensions between the two powers without taking sides, emphasizing that “Azerbaijan does not want friendly countries to confront each other.”34

In this context, Baku identifies “integration with Euro-Atlantic structures” as a strategic objective and expresses interest in limited but deepened cooperation with NATO across a variety of platforms.35 A May 2019 statement from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the partnership with NATO “one of the important directions” of Azerbaijan’s security policy, underscoring this hedging strategy. Baku’s cooperation with NATO has developed in the context of the Partnership for Peace, which Azerbaijan joined in 1994. The cooperation includes Azerbaijan’s annual Individual Partnership Action Plan since 1997, a Defence Education Enhancement Program agreed to in 2008, and involvement in the Partnership Interoperability Initiative since 2014.36 These initiatives seek to improve interoperability, standards, professional military education, and alignment on a variety of levels. These and other arrangements have allowed for various staff and training exchanges, participation at exercises, coordinating initiatives, and troop contributions to NATO missions in Kosovo and Afghanistan.37

Although Azerbaijan lacks the formal NATO membership that Turkey has and the enthusiasm for reform and full Western integration that Georgia has, its economic options and energy wealth make it less vulnerable to Russian pressure than Armenia is, thus granting more freedom of affiliation. And because Azerbaijani elites have jealously guarded their economic interests against the encroachment of Russian business elements, Azerbaijan is less susceptible to certain types of Russian economic pressure than other regional countries are.

Baku nevertheless surprised some observers in summer 2017 first by dropping out of two exercises with NATO and partner countries in Georgia and the Black Sea (Sea Breeze) and then by electing not to participate in a major ground-force exercise

---

36 NATO, “Relations with Azerbaijan,” October 26, 2018c.
in Romania that year (Saber Guardian), despite involvement in previous iterations of that training. No official reason was given, but Moscow had made its displeasure with the exercises known, claiming that the “incessant” drills eroded regional security and “threatened” Russia.38

Another sign of closer ties between Baku and Moscow arose in late 2018, when an Azerbaijani parliamentary committee chairman raised the idea of his country’s accession to the Russian-led CSTO.39 Membership in the CSTO would offer Azerbaijan some benefits, particularly discounts on weapon purchases from Moscow, but it seems unlikely in the near term. For example, the CSTO would not be an effective forum for Baku to pursue its Nagorno-Karabakh claims against Yerevan, which remain an overriding strategic priority.40 Airing the possibility, however remote, also serves as a means to prod Yerevan and remind the West of Baku’s options.41 During a visit to Armenia in September 2019, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuriy Borisov said that Russia would not object to granting Azerbaijan “observer” or “partner” status in the CSTO. Yerevan expressed its opposition, noting that the CSTO Charter requires an observer or partner to have diplomatic relations with all members of the organization—which Azerbaijan and Armenia lack—and consensus among all members, which Borisov duly noted.42

Azerbaijan’s prioritization of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is reflected in Baku’s strategic documents,43 as well as its military exercises, posture, and acquisition decisions, all of which focus on conventional capabilities and readiness for medium- to high-intensity conflict against a relatively well-matched and entrenched competitor.44 The 2007 National Security Concept lists protection of territorial integrity and borders as the first of nine national interests, and it lists attempts against “sovereignty”

and “territorial integrity” as the first of 11 national security threats, citing Armenia’s policy as an example of this threat. Considerable attention is paid elsewhere to the dispute.

According to a Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment, Azerbaijani security officials are believed to be paying particular attention to Russia’s campaigns in Ukraine, although the officials must know that their options against such tactics would be limited. Jane’s currently assesses Azerbaijani capabilities to be highest in air defense and artillery, with moderate abilities across the rest of the land domain and most air capabilities, besides bombers and strategic weapons.

In addition to carefully considering its security relationships, Baku carefully calibrates its diplomatic and economic ties. For instance, the government failed to sign an anticipated strategic partnership agreement with the EU in May 2019, instead agreeing simply to “priority” areas for cooperation, possibly because the terms offered were not enticing enough to balance out the cost of Russian displeasure at the arrangement. Alternatively, accession to the Eurasian Economic Union seems possible under certain circumstances. Azerbaijani elites would probably be open to at least certain membership options if membership were also extended beyond former Soviet countries, if free trade agreements could be negotiated, and particularly if Turkey were involved in certain ways. But such conditions are unlikely to be met anytime soon.

Countering Russian Malign Influence

One of Moscow’s most powerful tools for influencing Azerbaijani views toward Russia is the popularity of Russian-language media in Azerbaijan. Most Azerbaijanis report at least “basic” knowledge of Russian, and there is a persistent view in Azerbaijan that Russian-language schools are better than their Azerbaijani-language counterparts. This perception contributes to the success of Russian-language educational programs and creates new audiences for Russian-language media over the long term.

---

state-controlled media in Azerbaijan include Sputnik Azerbaijan and Interfax. Sputnik Azerbaijan has had success recruiting Azerbaijani journalists because it can offer better salaries than local media outlets can. Domestically produced Russian-language media, such as Turan News Agency, Zerkalo, and Ekho, are popular in Azerbaijan as well, and Russian-speaking Azerbaijani journalists are known to look to Russian media for news content.

Russian media messages in Azerbaijan push pro-Russia policies and sometimes seek to undermine the Azerbaijani government; for example, during Azerbaijan’s 2016 clashes with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian media propagated false news stories suggesting that Azerbaijan was in league with the Islamic State or the United States. In addition, Russian messages often seek to drive a wedge between Azerbaijan and the Euro-Atlantic community—for example, by promoting Eurasian cooperation under Russian leadership as an alternative to deeper economic and security integration with the West. And Russian media have tried to influence Azerbaijani public opinion on the Ukraine conflict by placing blame on Western “interference” in Ukraine’s “internal affairs.”

Moscow’s efforts to further its own interests through Russian-language media have not gone unnoticed in Azerbaijan. Russian media have been criticized for slanted news coverage and for hostility toward Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The government restricted Russian television broadcasting in 2006–2008, so Russian media are now accessible only through cable television. Although Russia’s media reach in Azerbaijan is still considerable, it should not be overstated. In a 2016 poll, 61 percent of Azerbaijanis claimed to never consume Russian media content of any form, compared with only 10 percent of respondents in Armenia. Observers have generally not credited Russian media with significantly shifting Azerbaijani public opinion toward Russia. But, in some cases, Russian media messages may have had an impact. In a 2015 survey, for instance, a majority of Azerbaijanis said that the United

---


53 Aliyev, 2018.

54 Flanagan and Chindea, 2019; Aliyev, 2018.

55 Aliyev, 2018.


57 Aliyev, 2018.

58 Aliyev, 2018.


60 Shiriyev, 2019.
States and its Western allies were responsible for the Ukraine conflict, despite Azerbaijan’s official backing of the Ukrainian government.61

Another source of Russian influence in Azerbaijan—as in the other South Caucasus states and Moldova—is labor migration. According to the 2010 Russian census, more than 600,000 Azerbaijanis were then living in Russia. These workers sent home an estimated $531 million in remittances in 2017, and they often become Russified during their stays. In 2013–2014, to pressure Baku into joining the Eurasian Economic Union and forgoing signing an association agreement that would deepen Azerbaijan’s ties to the EU, Moscow threatened to expel Azerbaijanis working in Russia. The tactic is effective because Azerbaijanis’ ability to migrate for work provides a political safety valve for an unpopular regime in Baku.62

Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy
Recent U.S. security assistance to Baku has likely been intended more to encourage Azerbaijan to enforce sanctions against Iran rather than to balance against Russia. The support has been focused on land and maritime border control and includes small boats, trucks, all-terrain vehicles, radars, and radios to be delivered to the city of Astara on the Caspian Sea and Iranian border.63 Azerbaijan has also facilitated logistical support for the Afghanistan campaign, but the significance of this support has declined as operations have diminished. The United States is unlikely to request or rely on significant military contributions from Azerbaijan during any future regional contingencies, but Baku can play a limited role in reducing Southern Europe’s reliance on Russian natural gas imports by providing another option to satisfy regional demand in the face of any disruption of gas flows from Russia.64 Although it is not directly connected to the military balance in the region, energy diversification is a key component of ensuring strategy autonomy for Europe and reducing Russia’s leverage over the EU.

63 Joshua Kucera, “Amid Iran Crisis, U.S. Offers Big Military Aid Boost to Azerbaijan,” Eurasianet, August 9, 2019b.
64 Azerbaijan is working to expand its natural gas exports to Europe after 2020 with additional production from the Shah Deniz 2 and Absheron fields through the three pipelines of the Southern Gas Corridor, which runs from Georgia and Turkey into Southeastern Europe. The European Commission has made completion of the Southern Gas Corridor a priority, and European markets have contracted for 62 percent of the expected annual natural gas production from Shah Deniz 2. Completion of the final segment of the corridor, the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline from the Turkish-Greek border to Albania and Italy, is expected in late 2020. See Emily Sandys, “Azerbaijan to Become a More Significant Supplier of Natural Gas to Southern Europe,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 14, 2019; and Georgi Gotev, “Commission Eager to See the Capacity of Southern Gas Corridor Doubled,” EURACTIV, February 26, 2019.
Armenia: Russian Ally Interested in Some Western Ties

Perceptions of and Responses to Russia’s Strategy in the Black Sea Region

Long-standing disputes with Turkey and Azerbaijan have left Armenia heavily dependent on Russia’s security patronage. Wary of rekindled hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Yerevan has looked to Moscow for low-cost arms, defense cooperation deals, and security commitments and has facilitated Russian power projection in the region. Deep insecurity around the perceived threat from Baku and Ankara has led Yerevan to embrace Moscow as a security guarantor and the many strings that entails. However, this relationship has not been entirely satisfying for Armenia, following Russia’s failure to support its client in the 2016 flare up in Nagorno-Karabakh, warming Russian ties with Azerbaijan, and frustrations with the CSTO.

Most of Armenia’s military equipment is based on legacy Soviet systems, some of which have been shown to be significantly out of date. Like Azerbaijan, Armenia has invested heavily in artillery units, which are assessed to be the most capable among its land forces. Command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities are particularly weak, and air capabilities are consistently low. Armenia’s air defense systems are supposedly integrated into Russian systems, although the operational implications of this arrangement may not be fully clear. Between 2016 and 2017, Russia offered loans totaling $300 million, intended to facilitate Armenian investments in artillery, anti-air, and aviation capabilities. Half of Armenia’s 41,850-member Army is composed of professional officers and soldiers—compared with the Azerbaijani counterpart, which has a conscripted force—and it is augmented by integration with the 20,000-member Artsakh Defence Army in Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, Armenian troops are still overmatched militarily by Azerbaijani forces, which have invested heavily in upgrading and diversifying equipment.

Although there is resentment among Armenian elites over the one-sided relationship with Russia, Armenia’s 20th-century history and geographic situation have shaped and limited its options to a considerable extent. Pressure from Russia was evident in late 2017, when Armenia abruptly withdrew from planned NATO exercises in Georgia. Only token participation had been planned, but the move was seen as resulting from Russian displeasure and reflects the fine balancing act that Yerevan has

---


66 Melvin, 2018, p. 23

67 Artsakh is the Armenian word for the region known as Nagorno-Karabakh.

sought to walk in relations with the West. Armenia has sent troops to participate in NATO exercises in the past, but participation has generally been modest. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan summed up the country’s delicate position well in 2017: “No doubt, the CSTO and NATO pursue different goals, but . . . our practice shows that it is possible that a country finds ways for cooperation in different formats to ensure its national security.” This approach has led to participation in NATO’s Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process, Partnership Action Plan on Defense Institution Building, Defence Education Enhancement Program, Building Integrity Programme, and Partnership Interoperability Initiative. These programs are designed to support complementary force planning, civilian control, professional military education, good governance, and interoperability; although they are limited in scope and intensity, they provide avenues for engagement and cooperation.

However, Armenian involvement in CSTO exercises has been extensive and deep. In the 2017 Combat Brotherhood series of drills, special forces units from member militaries staged out of Armenia’s Bagramyan base for multiple phases of the exercises. Months later, a surprise Russian exercise terrified residents of Panik village, in what was the latest in a series of flashpoints stemming from the Russian base at Gyumri. Russia claimed that there was a mistake in communicating the location of the exercise, but some observers believe the incident was intended as a warning to the government following attendance at a NATO summit. These sorts of tactics, whether deliberate or not, have contributed to a growing ambivalence among many Armenians regarding Russia’s military presence in the country, and some other high-profile incidents have contributed to open resentment toward Moscow. Despite these frustrations, Armenia did ultimately acquiesce to Russian requests for support in the Syria campaign, sending a small contingent of engineers and doctors on a rotation to Aleppo in 2019.

70 Kucera, 2017a.
76 Joshua Kucera, “Russian Soldier Accused of Killing Six Members of Armenian Family,” Eurasianet, January 12, 2015a. For a more recent example, see Kucera, 2018.
Armenia is landlocked and thus not a direct stakeholder in Black Sea equities, but it has had a profound effect on the regional security environment by hosting Russian forces and, in recent years, accepting the deployment of several battalions of S-300 air defense systems. This further expansion of Russia’s A2/AD umbrella was underscored in the middle of 2016, when Armenia formally ratified an agreement on joint air defense with Russia.\(^\text{78}\) The Erebuni air base outside Yerevan is also understood to host a Russian helicopter squadron and 16 MiG-29s, although it is not clear under what circumstances these forces would fight in a conflict with Azerbaijan.\(^\text{79}\) Capable Russian radar systems also deployed in Armenia complement these assets and further strengthen Russia’s A2/AD presence in the region.\(^\text{80}\)

Despite these ties, Yerevan has been frustrated by the CSTO recently. When the Armenian Secretary General was recalled after being charged over his handling of protests a decade earlier, Armenia sought to nominate a successor for the remainder of the term. But that request was blocked by Belarus, which was next in line for the position and argued that its candidate should be able to take over early. Russia and all other CSTO members supported Minsk with varying degrees of openness, leading to a stalemate; the position is likely to remain unfilled for the duration of the term.\(^\text{81}\)

Countering Russian Malign Influence

In addition to affecting Armenia’s international relationships, Russia’s reach extends into Armenia’s domestic politics. Moscow appears to be taking advantage of its extensive media ties with Armenia to advance pro-Russia narratives and buttress support for Russia’s foreign policy initiatives. Russian-language media outlets are a common source of information in Armenia, and several Russian channels are available on public television free of charge.\(^\text{82}\) In a 2016 poll in Armenia, 90 percent of respondents said that they consumed Russian news sometimes, often, or exclusively.\(^\text{83}\) Russian TV channels, such as Pervy Kanal, RTR Planeta, and Kultura, broadcast Russian viewpoints with varying degrees of sublety.\(^\text{84}\) News.am, a popular news website with a monthly audience of more than 14 million visitors, offers a Russian-language version with sto-

\(^{78}\) As noted earlier, however, the operational implications of this arrangement are unclear (Abrahanyan, 2016).


\(^{80}\) Melvin, 2018, p. 23.


\(^{83}\) Ecorys, 2016.

\(^{84}\) Filipova et al., 2018.
ries portraying Russia in a positive light.\textsuperscript{85} Russian state-controlled media are present in Armenia too; in particular, Sputnik Armenia provides a direct route for Moscow to broadcast its views.\textsuperscript{86} Russian media narratives in Armenia promote broad themes that support Russia and oppose the West, as well as specific messages tailored to Armenia’s economic situation and domestic concerns. Many messages echo those propagated by Russian media across the Black Sea region. Russian media in Armenia frequently praise Russia’s foreign policy, especially its actions in the Middle East, and denigrate the EU as weak, divided, and culturally decadent.\textsuperscript{87} More-targeted messages capitalize on concern about the plight of the Armenian community in Syria in order to generate support for Russia’s intervention in the civil war there. For example, Sputnik Armenia has carried stories asserting that Russia’s involvement in the Syrian civil war has benefited the Armenian community in Syria by bringing peace and stability back to the war-ravaged country.\textsuperscript{88} In the economic sphere, Russian-language media have sought to reduce concerns about Armenian reliance on Russian natural gas. A story on News.am, for example, cast doubt on the ability of alternative suppliers to offer natural gas in Armenia more cheaply than Russian companies do.\textsuperscript{89}

Although their precise impact is open to debate, it is clear that Russian media messages are reaching a large audience in Armenia. In recent years, the role of Russian-language media in promoting pro-Russia narratives has attracted attention and criticism in the Armenian government and among media watchers. In 2019, Armenian lawmakers asked whether Russian programs should be removed from state television.\textsuperscript{90} Although concern about Russian media manipulation may be real, some reports suggest that Armenian politicians are more alarmed by Russian news stories that criticize Armenia’s current government than by Russian media manipulation more broadly.\textsuperscript{91}

**Key National Interests**

Armenia’s acute sense of vulnerability to both Turkey and Azerbaijan contributes to its high degree of alignment with Russia, compelling Yerevan to accept the various conditions that accompany Russian assistance and pushing it toward membership in such organizations as the CSTO (despite its frustrations with both Moscow and the alliance)
and the Eurasian Economic Union. Armenia declares that resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a top priority and calls for self-determination for the people of Artsakh. This long-standing issue dominates most security and military planning and has profound second- and third-order strategic effects, including the closure of both the western border with Turkey and the eastern border with Azerbaijan, for example.

Enhancing democratic governance has become a top priority of the Armenian government since 2018. That year, Sargsyan, who had served as president since 2008, made a gambit to extend his leadership by becoming the country’s first prime minister under a newly designed parliamentary system. This power grab triggered peaceful mass protests, led by Nikol Pashinyan, an opposition leader in the parliament. The protests resulted in Sargsyan’s resignation in April 2018. Dubbed the Velvet Revolution, the movement led to a free and fair election in Armenia for the first time in more than two decades, which Pashinyan’s Civil Contract Party and My Step Alliance won with 70 percent of the vote.

Beyond resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, Yerevan’s second foreign policy priority is sustaining its partnership and alliance with Moscow, which forms the pillar of Armenia’s security policy. Prime Minister Pashinyan has supported this relationship even though Moscow has been somewhat uneasy about the popular revolution that brought him to power and about the arrest of former President Sargsyan, a favorite of the Kremlin. Pashinyan has underscored that his movement is neither pro-West nor pro-Russia. Rather, it is focused on advancing the political, social, and economic reforms in Armenia that gained widespread support.

Following these two foreign policy priorities are Armenia’s relationship with the United States and, finally, its ties with Europe. Traditionally, the relationship with Russia has heavily outweighed ties with the United States and the wider West; however, the EU is Armenia’s leading export market. Although Armenia’s relationship with the West is unlikely to change dramatically in the near future, some recent developments could contribute to a recalibration. First, Russia’s warming ties with Turkey and Azerbaijan may contribute to growing doubt in Yerevan about the value and reliability of the relationship. Second, Armenia’s recent democratic developments, while not themselves directly transformative of foreign policy, may create more opportunities for less-lopsided foreign relations, as well as incremental transformation with the benefit of a greater democratic mandate. The Pashinyan government has expressed an interest in deepening cooperation with Brussels under the EU-Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which entered into provisional application in June 2018. The agreement, though not as broad as an association agreement, provides a framework for economic and political cooperation in such sectors as energy, trans-

---


Implications for a Countervailing Western Strategy

Given the geopolitical context discussed in this chapter, the United States and NATO will not look to Armenia for direct military contributions in the event of regional contingencies. Armenia has made valuable contributions to several peacekeeping missions, however, including in Kosovo, Lebanon, and Afghanistan. In 2014 and 2015, Armenia made modest contributions to Western exercises, and in 2017 it inaugurated a training facility renovated with U.S. support, part of broader assistance that Western countries have provided to Armenian peacekeeping capabilities in particular. Extra-regional peacekeeping missions are a key way in which Armenia can continue to support wider security objectives in the future. The United States and its allies should continue to invest in the relationship and capability-building efforts they have established thus far and should look for ways to enhance and deepen these ties, all while supporting the broader Armenian-led political reform efforts that have been reenergized since 2018.

---


When framing a U.S., NATO, and EU strategy for the Black Sea region, leaders must weigh several factors. One of the most important of these factors is the asymmetry of interests and regional military capabilities between Russia and NATO. In addition, leaders should carefully assess Russian redlines and conduct a clear-eyed evaluation of the commitment, capabilities, and risk tolerance among allies and partners. In this chapter, I discuss many of these factors and then present recommendations for a Western strategy for force posture and engagement in the Black Sea region and ways to strengthen the capabilities of allies and partners to counter malign Russian influence and deter Russian aggression.

Russia’s Intentions, Capabilities, and Redlines

As noted in Chapter Two, Russia does not have a unified strategy for the Black Sea region, but the region is an intersection of several of Moscow’s core national security concerns. In particular, Russian strategy identifies countries close to Russia’s borders as integral to the country’s security. Ukraine and Georgia, including the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, form the innermost circle of concern, but Moscow also seeks to maintain sway over Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and limit their ties to the West.

Russia’s military buildup in Crimea, modernization of the Black Sea Fleet and Caspian Flotilla, and increased ground forces in the Southern Military District, as discussed in Chapter Four, are designed to secure Russia’s vital southwestern flank from an attack, dissuade and intimidate neighbors, and support wider power projection. The Black Sea provides Russia with significant access to sea lines of communication, as well as opportunities to expand its air and coastal defenses forward and to project power at strategic distance. Moscow remains extremely wary of the proximity of several NATO members and the uptick in NATO operations and exercises in the Black Sea region, and it is determined to prevent Ukraine, Georgia, and other neighboring states form joining the Alliance.
Moscow’s threshold for employing military capabilities against non-NATO countries along its periphery is arguably low, particularly if the probability of success is assessed to be high and the risk of a forceful Western response is perceived to be low. The analyses in this report make clear that Russia will oppose, certainly through nonmilitary and perhaps military means, states along its periphery having any formal political or particularly military integration with the West. The potential loss of a perceived ally to the West remains a *casus belli* for Russia, as it was for the Soviet Union.

Such a development would threaten Moscow’s security calculus on several levels. It would not only bring the perceived threat from NATO closer to Russia’s borders but also undermine Russia’s role as protector of the regions close to the homeland and its claims of great-power status. This judgment is borne out by the factors that led to the Russian war with Georgia in 2008 and Russia’s intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine since 2014. Although the circumstances were different, both military actions were designed to disrupt these countries’ further integration with the West and preclude their NATO membership. If Russia were to assess overt military action as too costly or risky, it might again resort to using intelligence, special forces, military personnel, and private contractors in irregular warfare, as it has in eastern Ukraine since 2014. However, hard military power will continue to provide essential underpinning.

Russian behavior over the past two decades has demonstrated an intent to eschew a military confrontation with NATO and any scenario involving a large-scale deployment of its ground forces, which are neither structured to wage a protracted, large-scale war nor backed by a large economy relative to that of the West. Russia has limited warfighting capabilities for large-scale operations in the Black Sea or the Eastern Mediterranean regions. But Russia’s ground-force posture changes provide it with the ability to move large combat units rapidly into Ukraine. Available and planned forces would be able to deal with the most-likely conflicts in the South Caucasus and Ukraine. However, they may be insufficient to seize and, in a contested environment, hold most of eastern and southern Ukraine, or Novorossiya, which Putin in 2014 implied was a Russian interest. Although a large-scale military intervention in the Black Sea region cannot be ruled out, Russian aversion to the commitment of a significant portion of its ground forces suggests that continued, persistent demonstrations of NATO cohesion and support to political and societal resilience in neighboring countries could be critical factors in enhancing their sovereignty and regional stability.

Meanwhile, Russia is continuing to pursue efforts to confound Western initiatives in the Black Sea region and fracture cohesion among NATO allies. President Putin’s cultivation of a close relationship with Turkish President Erdoğan and development of a strategic partnership with Turkey are designed to foster a more cooperative and balanced stance by Ankara on regional issues. And Moscow has been using energy dependence, cultural ties, and other measures of influence to encourage similar balancing by Bulgaria. Fracturing NATO cohesion in ways that frustrate NATO decisionmaking is another element in Russia’s strategy to shape the regional security landscape.
Recommended Elements of a Countervailing Western Strategy

The various and sometimes divergent interests of countries in the Black Sea region make it difficult to frame a comprehensive Western strategy to protect common goals and counter malign Russian influence and intimidation. Romania is looking more to what is happening to the north and northeast in Ukraine and Moldova, while Bulgaria is more concerned about developments to the south, including migration from Syria, development of energy transit corridors, strains in Turkey’s relations with the EU, and a resurgence of the radical Islamist threat. Nevertheless, the analyses in this report suggest several elements of a coherent and sustainable Western strategy in the region.

The main impediment to defense cooperation among states in the Black Sea region is the lack of a common threat perception similar to the one the Baltic and other Northern European states share. For example, in the run-up to the 2016 Warsaw Summit, Bulgaria was not supportive of the Romanian proposal to expand NATO naval exercises in the Black Sea. For its part, Turkey insists on maintaining the status quo in the region, acting as if it is still Russia’s peer in the naval power. In contrast, Ukraine and Georgia are more acutely concerned about the Russian threat, welcomed the Romanian proposal, and support Romania’s advocacy of an increased NATO military presence and expanded regional defense cooperation. Thus, the policy preferences of these two NATO partners in the region (Ukraine and Georgia) are more aligned than are the stances of the three NATO members in the region (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey).

Furthermore, even as the Baltic states and Poland have benefited from the EU’s and NATO’s relatively broad acceptance of the looming Russian threat to Northern Europe, key EU and European NATO governments have shown limited interest in Black Sea security. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany are more focused on current policy crises, such as migration, the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU (Brexit), and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, than on the concerns of Southeastern European countries.

This lack of a common threat perception has led to NATO’s fairly limited Tailored Forward Presence posture in the Black Sea region. The more capable European governments seem uninterested in contributing troops to the multinational brigade in Romania or augmenting the NATO maritime presence but have taken steps to enhance the NATO Air Policing mission in the region. The U.S. military presence in Romania is largely a bilateral arrangement with rotational forces.

The lack of a coherent Western strategy also stems from the divergent views among European nations about whether the Black Sea region is an integral part of Europe and the EU or is merely in the EU’s neighborhood. The governments that see the Black Sea region as part of Europe and the EU support policies that promote prosperity, security, and stronger efforts to help these countries resist Russian aggres-
The countries that view the region as being only in the neighborhood focus on policies limited to enhancing trade, development, and stability and avoid pushing back too forcefully on provocative Russian activities. The former approach envisions fuller integration that leads to the countries’ membership in the EU and NATO over time, whereas the latter approach envisions indefinite maintenance of a cooperative but arm’s-length relationship. Critics of the former approach fear that it risks provoking further Russian aggression, while critics of the latter approach fear that it cedes too much to Russian sensitivities and risks encouraging further meddling and aggression in partner countries.

Another hurdle to achieving a common Western strategy concerns the East-West divide in military capabilities. Most of the former Warsaw Pact countries in the Black Sea area have outdated military equipment with capabilities that are not on a par with Western NATO members. In light of the U.S. suspension of Turkey’s involvement in the F-35 program following Turkey’s acquisition of the S-400 missile system from Russia, the divide in military capabilities is likely to widen. Deploying the S-400 could also put Turkey on a path to further military cooperation with Russia.

U.S. retrenchment, which started prior to the Trump administration, is also a factor. U.S. credibility in the region has been waning. Among the people we spoke to in the region, there is a general perception that Russia has a coherent strategy, while the United States does not speak with one voice and has become less predictable and more transactional in its engagements. In the absence of active U.S. leadership and a clear commitment to the region, there are few prospects that the littoral countries and other European NATO members would be able to craft a coherent strategy to counter Russia.

An additional impediment to crafting a common strategy to deal with Russian aggression is the damaged perception of the West in some countries in the region. As international politics have become more chaotic and the EU and the U.S. have become more internally focused, the standing of the EU and NATO among the countries in the Black Sea region has diminished. Persistent Russian attacks and influence operations against the West are partly to blame, but Brexit, U.S. trade policies, the deterioration of relations with Turkey, and Turkey’s declining secularism and growing nationalism were also cited by our interlocutors as contributing factors. In the aftermath of the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, regional leaders have raised questions about the usefulness of aligning with the West when the West did little to protect Georgia and Ukraine in their hour of need. In this context, prior to developing a coherent strategy, Western leaders need to restore the West’s damaged reputation and buttress relations with Turkey, which for decades was seen as a reliable ally.

An effective Western strategy to enhance security in the Black Sea region must first do better to compete with Russia for the aspirations of citizens in the Black Sea region. Doing so requires more-effective and better-integrated strategic communica-
tions, as well as assistance in countering cyber threats and active measures. Such elements of a Western strategy could include the following:

- Issue selective responses to Russian influence measures by the U.S. State Department’s Global Engagement Center, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, and other counter-messaging entities highlighting the benefits of European integration and transatlantic integration rather than seeking to discredit the steady stream of multiple false Russian narratives.
- Redouble efforts by NATO and EU members to assist countries in the region to counter diverse threats, including informational, economic, clandestine, and hybrid. For example, such efforts could include technical assistance and other forms of support to improve the capacity of government agencies in Black Sea countries to provide regulatory oversight of the media sector and monitor social media for disinformation.
- Strongly support compliance with international laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Montreux Convention, that assure freedom of navigation and contribute to economic development and regional stability.
- Expand intelligence-sharing through bilateral mechanisms, NATO’s new Joint Intelligence and Security Division, Europol, and other European mechanisms with allies and partners, which can help security services identify clandestine threats and active measures and help policymakers develop selective and coordinated or complementary responses.

Political and financial support to various energy projects would increase diversification of energy supplies in the Black Sea region and diminish Moscow’s leverage with several countries there. The energy projects include the Southern Gas Corridor pipeline to transport natural gas to Europe from Azerbaijan; various interconnectors, such as the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline from the Turkish-Greek border to Albania and Italy (discussed in Chapter Seven); links to new liquefied natural gas facilities, such as the import terminal on Krk Island along Croatia’s Adriatic coast, which is co-financed by the EU and is expected to become operational in 2021; and energy efficiency initiatives. More-visible Western engagement in the region on nonmilitary issues, including reenergized peace negotiations, economic projects, regional infrastructure, and integration initiatives, could also enhance regional security.

In the defense realm, a more robust NATO presence in the region would bolster deterrence. Romania and Bulgaria cannot confront Russia by themselves, and Turkey’s commitment to the Alliance in a future crisis with Russia has become uncertain.

---

NATO and like-minded partners in the region do not need to match Russian military capabilities across the board, but the following efforts could help deter Russian aggression in the region:

- An enhanced deterrent posture could include expanded U.S. and NATO naval presence and exercises and further integration of existing maritime capabilities, asymmetric responses, and the deployment of advanced air and coastal defense systems in Romania and possibly Bulgaria to counter Russian offensive missile threats across the Black Sea.
- Continued assistance to Ukraine and Georgia to develop their national defense capabilities, as the United States and other governments have been doing since 2014, also contributes to regional deterrence.
- NATO allies would do well to ponder what they might be willing to do to assist Ukraine and Georgia in the event of further Russian military aggression, including issuing a serious warning backed by credible threats of timely military aid or retaliation.
- One way to bridge divergent interests among allies and partners in the Black Sea region would be to form ad hoc bilateral and multilateral partnerships on mutual priorities and allow opt-ins and opt-outs for potential spoilers while bringing in Turkey, NATO, and the EU where and when possible.
- Existing mechanisms for regional cooperation, including the Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process, could be used to pursue limited new regional initiatives on common concerns.

We propose these initiatives as elements of a more coherent and sustainable Western strategy to advance common interests of NATO allies, EU members, and other partners in the Black Sea region in countering malign Russian influence and intimidation and enhancing security, stability, and prosperity. Achieving most of these initiatives will take a commitment of political capital by the United States and European governments; skillful diplomacy (including engagement with Russia); and prudent military planning, operations, and investment. However, implementation of even some of these initiatives could go a long way in ensuring that the Black Sea region does not remain a zone of simmering conflicts and potential military confrontations.

“A Pro-Western Government Has Been Pushed Out in Moldova,” The Economist, December 12, 2019.


Alpha Research, homepage, undated. As of August 28, 2019: http://alpharesearch.bg


Barabano, Mikhail, “Prinuzhdenie k miru 2.0: blizhaishaya perspectiva Rossii na Ukraine [Compel to Peace 2.0: The Near-Term Perspective of Russia in Ukraine],” Rossiya v global’noi politike [Russia in Global Affairs], January 19, 2015.

Barabanov, Mikhail, Anton Lavrov, and Vycheslav Tselueiko, Tanki avgusta [Tanks of August], Moscow: Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2009.


European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, “Romania Becomes a Member of Hybrid CoE,” press release, November 14, 2018.


References


———, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” Foreign Policy, March 5, 2018.


———, “Commission Eager to See the Capacity of Southern Gas Corridor Doubled,” EURACTIV, February 26, 2019.


Iohannis, Klaus, “Address by the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Iohannis, at the Munich Security Conference,” Munich, February 16, 2019.


———, “Armenia: Armed Forces: Executive Summary,” Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment: Russia and the CIS, September 18, 2019e.


Kadir Has University, “Kadir Has University Announces the 2017 Results of the Survey on Turkish Foreign Policy,” press release, July 21, 2017.

Kakachia, Kornely, “How the West Should Respond to Russia’s ‘Borderization’ in Georgia,” PONARS Eurasia website, Policy Memo 523, April 2018.


Kremlin Watch, “Romania,” webpage, undated. As of August 30, 2019: https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/romania/

———, Kremlin Influence in Visegrad Countries and Romania: Overview of the Threat, Existing Countermeasures, and Recommended Next Steps, Prague: European Values and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, October 23, 2017.

Krumov, Tervel, “The Ukrainian Scenario—A Pro-Russian Military Alliance Calls for a War Against Bulgaria,” Inform Napalm, April 21, 2016.


———, “At Last Minute, Armenia Drops Out of NATO Exercises in Georgia,” Eurasianet, September 4, 2017b.


———, “Amid Iran Crisis, U.S. Offers Big Military Aid Boost to Azerbaijan,” Eurasianet, August 9, 2019b.


Lupu, Victor, “Constitutional Court President, Valer Dorneanu, Pays Visit to Russia, Although the Foreign Ministry Has Recommended Him to Avoid It,” Romania Journal, May 17, 2018.


Maior, George Cristian, “Russia’s Silent War Against the West,” Financial Times, April 15, 2015.


———, “U.S. Trainers to Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 21, 2015a.


Mgaloblishvili, Grigol, “Georgia’s View of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC),” Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011.


———, “Ukraine vs. the Oligarchs,” Foreign Policy, December 3, 2019.


“Moldova Faces Political Turmoil Triggered by Russian Intrigue,” Warsaw Institute, June 14, 2019.


“Moskovu s oseni budut zaschischat’ uzhe dve zenitnye baterie ‘Pantsir-S’ [Beginning in the Fall Two ‘Pantsir-S’ Batteries Will Be Protecting Moscow],” RIA Novosti, June 20, 2012.


NATO—See North Atlantic Treaty Organization.


Petrovskaya, Oksana, “Sanktsii protiv Rossi in meshayut bolgaro-pol’skoi druzhbe [Sanctions Against Russia Hinder Bulgarian-Polish Friendship],” Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, October 9, 2017.


———, “NATO’s Ukraine Challenge: Ukrainians Want Membership, but Obstacles Abound,” Brookings Institution, June 6, 2019b.


Piper, Elizabeth, “Mayor of Central Ukrainian City Shot Dead,” Reuters, July 26, 2014.


“President Iohannis: U.S. a Guarantor of Romania’s Security,” Consulate General of Romania in Los Angeles, undated.


———, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Moscow, March 1, 2018a.


———, “Meeting with President of Bulgaria Rumen Radev,” June 6, 2018c.


“Reidovyi sbor i uchenie soyuznykh voenno-morskikh flotov na chernom more [Offshore Assembly and Exercise of Naval Fleets in the Black Sea],” Informatsionnyi sbornik shtaba ob’edinennykh voenno-voznemykh sil gosudarstv-uchastnikov Varshavskogo dogоворa [Information Herald of the Staff of the Unified Armed Forces of the Warsaw Pact], No. 6, 1974.


Ristic, Marija, “Facebook Reveals Serbian Fighters’ Role in Ukraine War,” Balkan Insight, December 27, 2017.


Rosapepe, Jim, “They Told Me So,” Baltimore Sun, March 27, 2014.

Rosca, Alla, “Media in Moldova: Between Freedom and Monopoly,” Foreign Policy Research Institute, September 13, 2017.


“Russia Halts Turkish Stream Project over Downed Jet,” RT, December 2, 2015.

“Russia Holds Military Games in Breakaway Transnistria,” Balkan Insight, August 9, 2018.


“Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked,” Bellingcat, November 22, 2018.


———, “Ukraine’s PM Predicts EU Membership in 10 Years,” Newsweek, June 13, 2016c.

———, “Ukraine’s Parliament Fully Behind Joining NATO: Speaker,” Newsweek, June 14, 2016d.


South Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process, homepage, undated. As of August 23, 2019: https://www.sedmprocess.org


Sputnik Türkiye, @sputnik_TR, Twitter account, undated. As of June 19, 2019: https://twitter.com/sputnik_TR


Stalbo, Kazimir, “Razgovor o razdele flota ne imeet znacheniya, poka ne budet reshen vopros o kryme [Discussion on the Division of the Fleet Is Meaningless Until the Crimea Question Is Resolved],” Rossiiskaya gazeta, June 19, 1993.


Sukhankin, Sergey, “Ukraine’s Thorny Path to NATO Membership: Mission (Im)possible?” International Centre for Defence and Security, April 22, 2019a.

———, “From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts,” Jamestown Foundation, June 25, 2019b.


“Two Ukrainian Warships Enter Sea of Azov to Become Part of Newly Created Naval Base,” Ukrinform, September 24, 2018.

“Ukraine and Russia Are Both Trapped by the War in Donbas,” The Economist, May 25, 2017.


Vesti, “Miroproyadok: Dokumental’nyi fil’m Vladimira Solov’eva [World Order: Documentary by Vladimir Solov’yev],” video, YouTube, December 20, 2015. As of August 15, 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNhYzYUo42g


“Zelenskiy Suggests Holding Referendum Before Ukraine’s Accession to EU, NATO,” Kyiv Post, April 1, 2019.


The Black Sea region is a central locus of the competition between Russia and the West for the future of Europe. The region experienced two decades of simmering conflicts even before Moscow’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Russia has used military force against countries in the region four times since 2008. The Kremlin is seeking to establish a sphere of privileged influence over neighboring countries in the region and limit their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures while enhancing Russia’s regime stability and improving military capabilities for homeland defense and wider power projection into the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Despite this instability and conflict, U.S. and European officials and analysts have not given nearly as much attention to the region’s security challenges as they have to those in Northern Europe. In this report, the authors first assess how Russia is employing a variety of nonmilitary and military instruments to advance its goals. They then consider how the three North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) and five NATO partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) in the Black Sea region perceive and are responding to Russia’s activities and where those countries’ interests align and diverge. Finally, the authors identify possible elements of a Western strategy to protect mutual interests, counter Russian malign influence and aggression, and foster regional stability.