Reconsidering the role of the Black Sea region for global security

Khylko Maksym

1 PhD., Associate Professor; Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Comenius University; Republic of Slovakia

Abstract.
For decades, the Black Sea region has rarely been considered among the most important strategic spaces in the world; the West has not had a coherent strategy for the region, and officials, experts and academia have not paid much attention to political and security developments in the Black Sea. This attitude changed only after the outbreak of the war, which changed the balance of power in the region and threatened the global security architecture. Officials and experts in Europe and the United States have finally recognised the region’s importance to global security, which gives hope that it will receive the proper attention in the future.

Keywords:
Black Sea
Black Sea region
Ukraine
security
NATO
For decades, the Black Sea was “rarely considered among the world's most important strategic spaces,” despite the fact that “an astounding 10 wars have taken place on or near the Black Sea littoral since the end of the Cold War, more than any other maritime space in the world,” as Maximilian Hess from Foreign Policy Research Institute rightly noted in his article “Welcome to the Black Sea Era of War” [1]. Stephen J. Flanagan from RAND Corporation also pointed out the lack of a coherent Western strategy on the Black Sea region and stressed that key EU and European NATO governments not only showed “limited interest in Black Sea security,” but even had no certainty “whether the Black Sea region is an integral part of Europe” [2, p.149].

And it was not only a problem of governments – the interest of the Western academic community in the Black Sea and the region was also quite limited. A search in the Web of Science Core Collection database conducted by the author on 11 May 2023, for the time period from 1 January 1992 to 31 December 2022 (that is, 31 years from the collapse of the USSR to the year of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine), revealed a total of 5,813 publications containing the wording “Black Sea” in the title, that is, an average of only slightly more than 187 publications per year [3].

The vast majority of these 5,813 publications were within the following categories: “Oceanography” (1,136 publications, that is, 19.54% of 5,813 publications with the wording “Black Sea” in the title), “Marine/Freshwater/Biology” (833 publications, 14.33%), Environmental Sciences (747 publications, 12.86%), Geosciences/Multidisciplinary (645 publications, 11.10%), Fisheries (466 publications, 8.02%), Geochemistry/Geophysics (292 publications, 5.02%), Zoology (267 publications, 4.60%), Meteorology/Atmospheric Sciences (244 publications, 4.20%), Ecology (229 publications, 3.94%), Multidisciplinary Sciences (163 publications, 2.80%).

Without in any way questioning the importance of the above-mentioned topics, it is still impossible not to note how little attention the academic world has paid to issues directly or indirectly related to the political and security problems of the Black Sea region. Thus, only 57 publications (per 31 years!) with the wording “Black Sea” in the title
were published within the category “Political Science” (that is, 0.98% of 5,813 publications), 78 publications – within the category “International Relations” (1.34%), 91 publications – within the category “Area Studies” (1.57%), and 158 publications – within the category “History” (2.72%) [3].

Eliminating duplications caused by the assignment of the same publications to different categories, we get a total of 339 different publications in the categories “Political Science”, “International Relations”, “Area Studies”, and “History”, that is, less than 11 publications per year. An analysis of the affiliation of the authors of these 339 publications reveals that five of the top 10 institutions by number of publications represent the Russian Federation, three – the United Kingdom, one – Turkey, and one – Ukraine. The top ten affiliated institutions are as follows: University of London, International Network Center for Fundamental and Applied Research, King College London, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Sochi state University, Russian Academy of Science, Volgograd State University VolSU, Kadir Has University, Ministry of Education science of Ukraine, University of Leicester [3]. Thus, despite some attention of British researchers to the problems of politics and security in the Black Sea region, it must be stated that in general, the interest of the Western scientific community in this area can hardly be considered high or proper. It should be noted, however, that, as noted above, Western governments' attention to the region has not been a high priority either.

Given the continued low attention of officials, experts and the academic community to political and security issues in the Black Sea region, it is not wonder that Russia's occupation of the Ukrainian Crimean peninsula in 2014 took the international community by surprise. It was only after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that the importance of the Black Sea region began to be reconsidered. It is still too early to analyse the change in the number of publications in academic databases, as indexing of publications is always delayed. Nevertheless, we can already speak of the growing recognition by officials, analysts and scholars of the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea and its role in regional and
global security.

Thus, on 20 October 2021, at a joint press event with the Romanian Ministry of Defense, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin acknowledged that security and stability of the Black Sea “are in the U.S. national interest and are critical to the security of NATO’s Eastern Flank.” He also noted that “Russia’s destabilizing activities in and around the Black Sea reflect its ambitions to regain a dominant position in the region and to prevent the realization of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace” [4].

Just a week later, on 27 October 2021, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held a special hearing entitled “Black Sea Security: Reviving U.S. policy Toward the Region.” At the hearing, a senior fellow of the Atlantic Council think tank Ian Brzezinski called the Black Sea region “a region of geopolitical significance” and simultaneously a “zone of Europe’s most intense confrontation and violent conflict” that is “driven by Moscow’s revanchist ambitions, which it has advanced by applying the full spectrum of Russian power, including brute military force.” Ian Brzezinski warned that “Moscow’s military build-up and assertiveness have transformed the Black Sea into a lake dominated by the Russian military.” He also stressed a need for the Western comprehensive strategy to enhance Black Sea security, noting that such a strategy should include cooperative actions of the U.S. with their European allies and partners in the military, informational, economic and diplomatic dimensions [5].

Another witness at the aforementioned U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations’ hearing, Dr. Alina Polyakova, president and CEO of the Center for European Policy Analysis, also emphasized a need for a strategy for the Black Sea region, and a “broader lens of security as resilience rooted in three domains: military, economic, and democratic.” She also proposed a number of specific steps to strengthen regional security, including the following: establishing a 6+1 dialogue on Black Sea security (Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Turkey, Ukraine + the U.S.); establishing an operational hub in the region; engaging the EU, NATO and non-regional allies, such as the United Kingdom, to align
strategic priorities and enhance capabilities; encouraging economic investment in the region as a tool for broader regional cooperation and cohesion; and investing in long-term democratic resilience in the region [6].

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 became a trigger reshaping the entire security architecture in the Black Sea region and across Europe. Ukrainian diplomats and experts, interviewed in 2022 within the research project “Black Sea Cooperation for Stronger Security: Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan,” stressed that the full-scale war shifted the Black Sea region from the periphery to the centre of the Euro-Atlantic security processes. The war also indicated that the Black Sea region should be considered not separately, but as a part of the whole European security system [7]. Majority of experts from Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan, surveyed within the project, noted the necessity for their countries to strengthen cooperation with NATO in order to contribute to strengthening security in the wider Black Sea region. Over 90% of surveyed Ukrainian and Georgian experts expressed opinion that their countries should join NATO, and majority of Azerbaijani experts believed their country should develop partnership relations with the Alliance [8]. The increased demand for cooperation with NATO was driven by the recognition that without more active involvement of the Alliance in Black Sea security issues, it will be impossible to restore and maintain the balance of power in the region, which was destroyed by the war.

On 12-13 April 2023, the First Black Sea Security Conference of the International Crimea Platform took place in Bucharest, which gathered Romanian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan defence ministers and top diplomats, who signed cooperation agreements aimed at strengthening security in the region. In his address at the conference, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba openly called “to turn (the) Black Sea into what the Baltic Sea has become – a sea of NATO” [9].

During the expert panel of the First Black Sea Security Conference, Alina Frolova, deputy chairperson of the Centre for Defense Strategies, stressed in her speech that the Black Sea region “plays a major role in the security of the world community,” and the example of the Black Sea should be used
“to solve the problem of Russia’s aggression and extrapolate the result on the security of the whole of Europe.” Yevgeniya Gaber, deputy director of the Hennadii Udovenko Diplomatic Academy of Ukraine, stressed the importance of not only restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity, but also ensuring “a security system in the Black Sea region that will make repeated acts of aggression by Russia impossible” [10].

On 19 May 2023, Dr. Mara Karlin, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, in her speech at the Black Sea and Balkans Forum, strongly emphasized the global importance of the Black Sea: “First and foremost, the Black Sea region is an area of critical geostrategic importance. It links Europe to the Middle East and beyond, and it is a key node for transit infrastructure and energy resources. It is also a key frontline for transatlantic security” [11].

Thus, officials and experts in Europe and the United States have finally recognised the importance of the Black Sea region for global security, which gives hope that in the future the region will be given due attention and will finally have a chance to become a region of security, stability, partnership and prosperity. For this to become a reality, it is necessary to restore the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and to establish such a balance of powers in the Black Sea that would make it impossible for exclusive A2/AD zones to exist, guarantee the security of all littoral states, restore freedom of navigation and maritime trade, and provide conditions for mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

References:


(June 19–20, 2023).

Prague, Czech Republic

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMICS
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS


