

THE GEO-STRATEGIC AND GEO-POLITICAL SITUATION OF THE CAUCASUS AND THE BLACK SEA REGION AT THE BEGINING OF XXI CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Historians' opinion is unanimous in considering that the Cold War was a war between the two dominant political and social systems: capitalism and socialism.

In fact, this war ended with the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union. With the USSR a crucial geopolitical pole disappeared from the Pontic area and more than ten independent states occurred - Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, etc. - involved in regional and international structures different in interests, orientations and forces, and some still dependent on Moscow, to a lesser or greater extent.

Naturally, the effects of this phenomenon have been passed on the Pontic basin. The Cold War at the beginning of the last decade of the last century, turned the Black Sea into a sum of states, of threats and interests, a phenomenon that profoundly altered the geopolitical reality of this space.

In the Black Sea region, with a vast economic and purchasing potential, live over 325 million inhabitants, which makes it become a huge market, still unsaturated, attractive for investments in various areas of cooperation, such as: transport, communications energy, tourism, etc. This region is endowed with all *energy sources*: oil, natural gas, coal, minerals, wood, etc., representing, in economic terms, a *significant economic force*.

The Black Sea region has considerable potential deriving from geographical location and common history. Reform and structural adjustment processes, geographical proximity and transport facilities along the Black Sea coast bring it in the heart of Europe and give it incomparable advantages over other regions.

The Black Sea basin has a high potential for the expansion of trade from the Urals to the Danube. Due to the favorable location, regional markets can be relatively easily integrated in the large markets in Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Keywords: *Cold War, Black Sea, Wider Black Sea, Danube, Geopolitical*

1. INTRODUCTION

Most historians, political and military analysts, specialists in international relations consider that, between 1945-1991, Europe and the world lived a period of Cold War¹, that is „a failed peace and an undeclared war which was threatening to spread all over the world”². Throughout the half century of the Cold War there were intense suspicions and rivalries between superpowers. Rivalry could be found in different arenas: military, political, ideological, psychological coalitions, espionage, industrial and technological development (mostly space race) and, also, the costs of the nuclear arms race³.

The well-known author of one of the most famous history about the Cold War, André Fontaine, shows in his work the fact that this historical process, this phenomenon, modified profoundly the evolution of the world in the XXth century, “it modified all of us”. “The Cold War”, writes the author, “affected our trust and

faith, our life style, at San Francisco or Beijing, in Havana or Leopoldville; it devised countries and nations, put arms in the hands of millions of people; killed many and put many in jail; it was a source of enthusiasm, sufferings and let scars, gave birth to both the evil and the good just like all human temptations.⁴”.

Of course, there were numerous regrettable aspects regarding the Cold War: the threatening of everybody's future; the resources used for useless arms; the consequences on environment and people's health implied by massive military-industrial complexes; the repressions that darkened the lives of lots of generations; the loss of human life that often came after all these.⁵ Historians' opinion is unanimous in considering that the Cold War was a war predominantly between two social and political systems: capitalism and socialism. Although “the beginning of the end” took place at the end of the 1980's, when the Soviet leader Mihail Gorbaciov negotiated with the American president Ronald Reagan, negotiations determined by the Soviets' wish to reduce the costs of arming, because of the country's weakened economy, the end of the Cold War

¹ The plastic expression „Cold War” was formulated in an essay in 1945 entitled *You and the Atomic Bomb*. It has its origin in about the same period with the famous speech in which W. Churchill uttered for the first time the expression „The Iron Curtain”, to describe the unwanted barrier the Soviets threw in Europe, from Stettin to Trieste. The idea had been emitted before. In the XIIIth century, Don Juan Manuel would use the Spanish expression „guerra fria” to describe the ideological tension between Christianity and Islamism in the Medieval Spain. (Castelden (2011), p. 427).

² Tutula (2001), p. 131.

³ Gaddis (2009), p. 342.

⁴ Apud Buzatu (2001), p. 41.

⁵ No tyrant ever had executed anywhere one fifth of his own population, but the Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, did this after the Vietnam War. The future will surely remember this atrocity, when many other things about the Cold War have been forgotten, still, almost no one outside Cambodia noticed it at that time. There was no trial for crimes against humanity: Pol Pot died in a hut on the border with Thailand in 1998 and was cremated without any ceremony on a pile of trash and old tires (Gaddis (2009), p. 342).

came when the programs of the Soviet Union domestic reform led to demands for self determination from the member states⁶. In December 1989, Gorbachev and the American president George Bush Sr. had a high-level meeting in Malta and officially declared the end of the Cold War. The Soviet alliance system was collapsing, the Communist leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries had their power undermined. The Soviet Union was in a state of collapse⁷. In fact, the Cold War ended with the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union.

In 1991, on Christmas Day, the Russian flag was hoisted at the Kremlin, replacing the insignia of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Mikhail Gorbachev gave the presidential powers to President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, who was installed in 48 hours in the presidential office. On the night of December 31, 1991, at midnight, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, "extraordinary event without equal in modern history"⁸.

With the USSR, a crucial geopolitical pole disappeared from the Pontic area and more than ten independent states occurred - Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, etc. - involved in regional and international structures various as interests, orientations and forces, and some still dependent, to a lesser or greater extent, on Moscow.

The Wider Black Sea Region⁹ and the evolutions of its security environment in the post Cold War period became an independent subject of study rather late and in conjunction with other specific areas of interest. The concept, as such, was released in a study by researchers Ronald D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson¹⁰ only in 2004, in connection with the development of some similar concepts.

A world of ancient traditions and diverse cultures, located between Europe and Asia, between Christianity and Islamism, between Slavs, Turks and neo-Latins, the Black Sea was, at least until the Ottoman conquest in the fifteenth century, a commercial maritime traffic center "hub"¹¹ of great traffic and international trade, where Europe, Asia and even Africa found a point of convergence and of elaboration of some economic prospects which were going to break the old medieval scheme, crashing the isolated economic cycle of the Western system, opening the doors to the modern era.

The periodization of the Black Sea region's history was based on the geopolitical argument of the competition and domination over the Pontic area, thus, one can distinguish the stage of the Byzantine "lake", the "Mongol peace" and the Genoa monopoly, on the

assertion of the late medieval coastal states, including the Romanian Principalities and Moldavia, of the "Turkish lake" and of the nearly three hundred years old attempts of Russia's claim to hegemony¹².

In the competition for the Black Sea, characterized in particular by the confrontation of the two concepts, that of the "open sea" and that of the limited access for the fleets of war, in particular of the inland states, the Romanian state, due to its very geopolitical determination, was the supporter of free navigation, of the open sea, the guarantee of its freedom¹³.

In order to analyse properly the concept of "**the Pontic space as a geohistorical entity and a geopolitical ensemble**", we have to start from the idea that geopolitics studies the space-politics report on the whole, without discriminating or separating the aspects of internal and external politics of a state¹⁴. Starting from this statement a geopolitical ensemble is a geographic area with conditions specific for the creation of a climate which is characteristic to a region. This climate can be influenced by the presence or the absence of a great power or a regional power, by the position towards the main gravity poles of the system of international relations, by the demographic and ethno confessional map, by the regional economic interdependence, by the isolation or the large opening of the region determined by natural factors as the configuration of the country, and also by internal barriers: mountains, deserts, international rivers, seas. A geopolitical ensemble includes whole states, but it can also include parts of some immense states or states situated on the border of some geopolitical ensembles, such as Russia and Ukraine.¹⁵

After 1991, six states have direct access to the Black Sea: Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, for the last four ones, the Pontic route representing the only maritime access. But, thanks to the Danube and to the rivers flowing into the Pontic basin, the Black Sea represents the gate toward the Planetary Ocean for much more European states.

That is why, taking into consideration that the complex theme of this paper over exceeds the issue regarding strictly the Black Sea riparian states, we consider it necessary to start by defining the concept of **Pontic space**, thus sketching the geographic area where the phenomena that mark post Cold War evolution in the "*extended region of the Black Sea*", a concept more and more used nowadays in the world of the specialists in geopolitics and geostrategy, develop, act and interact. In terms of physical geography, when we refer to the Pontic region we refer implicitly to the basin of the rivers which flow into the Black Sea (Danube, Dnieper, Dniester and so on) and into the Azov Sea (Don etc.), and to the following countries: Romania, Moldova¹⁶, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Ukraine, Turkey,

⁶ Werth (2000), p. 129

⁷ Castelden (2011), pp. 435-436.

⁸ Judt (2008), p. 601.

⁹ The concept of the "Black Sea" was used in an extended sense, including countries in the Balkans, the Aegean and even the East of the east of the Mediterranean Sea and the Caucasus and Central Asian countries, and in a limited sense only riparian states. Today it is commonly called Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR), designating, in addition to geographically riparian states, the neighboring ones also, which, by their interests, initiatives and actions, influence the security environment of the whole area such as Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and so on, as well as the Balkan Peninsula countries which are not on the Black Sea coast. (Duță (2005), p. 129).

¹⁰ Asmus, Jackson (2004), passim.

¹¹ Brătianu (1988), p. 76.

¹² Ionescu (2006), p. 8. Introduction to the volume *The Black Sea from the "Byzantine Lake" to the XXIst Century Challenges*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Serebrian (2006), p.15.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Due to the maritime Danube, with which it borders on a 0,8 km length, The Republic of Moldavia is considered a country bordering the Black Sea. (Serebrian (2006), p. 10).

Georgia, Russia, Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro¹⁷. The Black Sea region includes physical-geographical areas belonging to other river basins and excludes those that from the socio-geographical point of view, fit into other regional groupings such as Austria and Belarus.

Thus, we have to do, geographically and socially speaking, with the Balkans (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Greece and Bulgaria), the Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), Romania, Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and even Cyprus¹⁸.

Considering this reality, the Black Sea Black Sea appears to be the common element of the geographical area of Balkan-Caucasus-Black Sea basin and of the numerous regional ethnic or religious conflicts.

Important for all the countries from the mentioned area, the Black Sea is to the Caucasus region in particular, the window of communication with the outside world, a single outlet that allows the Caucasians to get out of the Roso-Turkish-Iranian encirclement.

Certainly, the Caspian Sea has become an equally important factor for the regional policy, due to the increasing riparian independents and to the discovery of some important deposits of hydrocarbons in the submarine platform and coastal regions.

It is the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian basin - Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan – that have brought geopolitical and geo-economic additional value to the Caucasus and, by ricochet to the Black Sea region, which serves as pathway via the Caucasus towards the gas and oil fields from the Caspian basin¹⁹.

The Pontic Area, as a **geopolitical ensemble**, is a heterogeneous and diverse region, made up of different people with different religions and cultures, where geopolitical transformations, occur extremely rapidly.

From this perspective, the Black Sea region is "*a relatively small area, traversed in time by forces from the North-East (Russia, via-Ukraine and / or Georgia), from the South (Turkey) and from the West (European powers: France Germany, Austria, UK or states as Romania and Bulgaria)*"²⁰.

The participating states, mentioned above, are a powerful diversified group. Although Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Greece are not Black Sea littoral states, history, proximity and close ties make them natural regional actors²¹.

This space was characterized by **political** instability. Being a border area and a region of the dispute between Habsburg, Tsarist and Ottoman Empires in the Black Sea Area, there were many wars that have left their mark in the collective mind.

Over time, the countries of the Black Sea have been known "*more for their conflictual potential than for their regional solidarity*"²². This "historical heritage" can be found in recent history, known as the disputes and armed conflicts as: Armenia against Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh), Russia against Ukraine (Crimea and the Black Sea fleet), Georgia with South Ossetia and Adjara because of the secessionist tendencies of the latter;

Moldova clashes between the indigenous and the minority Russians, the old conflicts between Turkey and Greece etc.

As a competition area, the Black Sea was less an area of cooperation, which was tested only in the interwar period and especially now after the Cold War and the Soviet Union unraveling²³.

Herein tumultuous history, the Cold War saw the unchallenged dominance of the USSR on the Black Sea. Controlling more than two-thirds of the coastline through its own territory and its satellites of that time, Romania and Bulgaria, the USSR tried to control the whole area through direct pressure on Turkey, the only one among littoral states which was not under its dominance²⁴.

From the **economic** point of view, in the Pontic area *there are developed countries and others less developed*. Economic regimes in the region are coordinated and underdeveloped, as follows: customs regime is inadequate, making harmonization difficult; goods standardization and certification are very difficult to achieve; member countries lack the legal and institutional framework; the concrete benefits of the liberalization of agricultural production are unlikely in the short term perspective; there are no incentive structures and there is no efficient allocation of resources, their economies are facing the problem of inflation and unemployment; agriculture is subsidized; military spending is still at a high level²⁵.

Most states have **limited financial resources**. The support of international financial organizations is necessary to finance projects.

In the Black Sea region, with a vast economic and purchasing potential, over 325 million inhabitants live, which makes it become a huge market, still unsaturated, attractive for investment in various areas of cooperation, such as: transport communications energy, tourism, etc.

This region is endowed with all *energy sources*: oil, natural gas, coal, minerals, wood, etc., representing, in economic terms, *a significant economic force*.

In short, the Black Sea region has considerable potential deriving from geographical position and common history.

Reform and structural adjustment processes, geographical proximity and transport facilities along the Black Sea coast, bring it in the heart of Europe and give it incomparable advantages over other regions.

The Black Sea basin has a high potential for the expansion of trade from the Urals to the Danube. Due to the favorable location, regional markets can be

¹⁷ Serebrian (2006), p. 12.

¹⁸ The Caucasus and the Balkans, despite the distance that separates them, have more commonalities than the Caucasus and Central Asia on the one hand, and the Balkans and Apennines, on the other hand, this is because of the decisive events in this space that created historical and cultural similarities. (*Ibidem*, p. 13).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

²⁰ Bordonaro (2005), p. 102.

²¹ Atanasiu (2011), pp. 1-4.

²² Buzăianu (2005), pp. 41-42.

²³ Ionescu (2006), p.10. *Introducere...*

²⁴ King (2004), p. 229.

²⁵ Atanasiu (2011).

relatively easily integrated in large markets in Europe, Central Asia and Middle East²⁶.

Black Sea countries are based on a large variety of complementary industries and agriculture: some of them have **cheap hand work** (Romania and transcaucasian countries), **others have well developed and advanced technologies** (Turkey), in some countries there is a strong **heavy industry** (Ukraine and the Russian Federation) and others have well-developed **agricultural sector** (Ukraine) or **food industry** (Bulgaria).

Countries in the region can make use of comparative advantages, mainly for the development of trade through the ports and shipping routes down to the Black Sea²⁷.

In **socio-political** terms, the wider Black Sea region - is characterized by a variety of specific problems and phenomena of transition from authoritarian government and economy to pluralist democracy and free market economy.

Unlike other areas of the Euro-Atlantic area, where specific developments of the post-Cold War are visible, in the wider Black Sea region the overcome of the problems associated with the Soviet legacy is long overdue.

At the same time, the geopolitical Balkan-Caucasian-Pontic ensemble, whose binder is the Black Sea, has a **strategic settlement** thanks to the direct presence of European Union and Russia, as well as to the proximity of the hydrocarbon basin in the Persian Gulf and the one around the Caspian Sea, particularly important for the global energy situation.

The geostrategic importance of the Black Sea also stems from this context of international relations. Worldwide, there are two main factors which coordinate the policies of the strategic actors, be them states or international organizations: the need for energy and terrorist organizations' threat²⁸, often intertwined elements.

Due to its geographical position, the Black Sea has the answers to both problems listed above. First, it is a single strategic corridor, linking Western Europe with Central Asia and the Middle East, connecting the energy need of European and American markets with existing resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea markets²⁹.

On the other hand, regarding the threat of terrorist organizations in recent years, **the Wider Black Sea**, a phrase that pushes the geographical boundaries of the region beyond the borders of the countries with direct access to the Black Sea basin, won an unprecedented strategic importance, demonstrated both by the international campaign against terrorism and the expansion of NATO and the European Union.

Managing to integrate into NATO, countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, joined Turkey trying to influence the West to declare the Black Sea a "more

important strategic priority"³⁰ and that is because *the Black Sea is today, for all intents and goals, the eastern border of Europe.*

The proximity of the outbreaks of tension in the Near and Middle East increases the value of this region in the context of global geopolitics.

This also explains the increase of the American interest in the Black Sea region and also the reanimation of some alien presence that had not been felt in the area for a long time, such as France and Germany.

Referring to this, political analyst Federico Bordonaro said that the geopolitical structure of the Black Sea region would be marked at this time by the substitution of ex Russian influence with American influence, which in turn competes with the ambitions of France and Germany³¹. Without contradicting this statement, it can not be denied the fact that a great contemporary power, Russia, and two regional powers, Ukraine and Turkey, are building their strategic political and economic conceptions, taking into consideration the sea and its adjacent area.

The great Romanian historian Gheorghe I. Brătianu said in his well-known work *The Black Sea*, that "*the theatre offered by the Black Sea basin, favors, more than others, considerations beyond regional issues and reports to the forces acting on the field of the world history.*"³²

The obvious interest of the two superpowers of the beginning of the third millennium - the EU and the U.S., increasingly more present in the area, confirms the correctness of the Romanian historian's assertion³³.

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²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁸ Bordonaro (2005), p. 110.

²⁹ The system of pipes: Caspian Pipeline Consortium, Blue Stream, Odessa-Brody (already existing), Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (in construction), as well as other plans in progress.

³⁰ Asmus, Jackson (2004), pp. 18 - 19.

³¹ Apud Roncea (2005), p. 82; see also Serebrian (2006), p. 19.

³² Brătianu (1988), p. 76.

³³ For details see Asmus, Dimitrov, Forbrig (2004), *passim*.