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**PhD Thesis Abstract**

**Eastern Europe between NATO and Russia  
Black Sea Security Challenges**

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**I. KEY WORDS:** NATO, Russia, Black Sea, balance of power, defense, international security, eastern flank, geopolitics, cooperation, conflict, power projection, Romania.

## **II. SYNTHESIS OF PhD THESIS**

The PhD thesis is structured in four chapters, which include the events that took place in Eastern Europe in the period after 1989. The central theme of the research is the balance of power between NATO and Russia and the manner in which the two powers have shown their influence in Eastern Europe, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Special attention is given to the analysis of the Black Sea region and the existing security issues in the area.

### **Chapter I: The Balance of Power in the New Eastern Europe after the Cold War**

The first chapter begins with an analysis of the international context at the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, as well as the evolution of NATO's relations with the USSR and then with Russia in that period of major changes at the international level.

Mikhail Gorbachev's election as the leader the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985 would mark the beginning of the end of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. The West had become attractive to the Soviet space, and the capitalist model seemed a suitable solution for the Soviet space as well. Mikhail Gorbachev had a very good relationship with Ronald Reagan. Thanks to the two leaders, in the late 1990s, relations between the United States and the USSR reached the peak of their collaboration. Mikhail Gorbachev was encouraged to reform the Soviet space and lead it to a democratic system and a market economy, but the republics entered a broad process of democratization and independence. Although based on innovative ideas and projects, the implementation of his famous reforms included in the two major country projects "Glasnost" and "Perestroika" in the reality of the Soviet space at that time resulted in a great failure. Moreover, the establishment of the Soviet-style economic and political system among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe led to protests within them, due to growing dissatisfaction with the communist regimes. The series of events unfolding in 1989 led to the collapse of communist dictatorships, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. The rebirth of democracy on the continent and the fall of the Iron Curtain led to a reconfiguration of Europe. The end of an era and the rebirth of hope in a free future lived in democracy.

After the events of 1989, Europe underwent a reconfiguration of Eastern space, with the emergence of new democracies and new independent states, that were now seeking their own identity and foreign policy direction. With that moment, a new struggle for power and influence began between

Russia and the West. Plans were already being made in Moscow for a new Union, while the West was looking for solutions to support the new states in their democratization process. The issue of NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe was of concern to Russia long before the discussion about the possible accession of ex-Soviet states to Euro-Atlantic bodies, such as Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova. Discussions on NATO's enlargement to the East were held in the context of negotiations on German reunification, with US Secretary of State James Baker's promise to Gorbachev at the February 9, 1990 meeting that NATO would not expand "not an inch to the east." The declassification of several documents in 2017 by the National Security Archive at George Washington University has once again created a wave of discussions on the legitimacy of NATO's enlargement to the East. Those documents showed that several Western political leaders had positioned themselves in the early 1990s against NATO enlargement to the East and that Gorbachev's openness to German reunification was based on those assurances that NATO would not expand and that Soviet interests in the region would not be affected. Subsequently, the need for NATO enlargement was justified by the desire to ensure the security of EU Member States and in their neighborhood. However, the first signs of interest in this space have been visible since the NATO Summit in London in July 1990, when an invitation was made to Eastern states, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria or Romania, to establish diplomatic relations with NATO.

During the transition from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the emergence of the Russian Federation, several stages of foreign policy were completed, in which Russia, led by Boris Yeltsin, was set to define its directions and objectives for the next period. In the early stages, an attempt was made to delimit Russia from the Soviet Union and identify its own national and foreign policy interests, resulting in the idea of restoring to Russia the status of a great power, lost by the USSR. The creation of a new Union was another desire, in order to keep the former Soviet republics close. At that time, the Russian state was operating in parallel with the Soviet Union, during the latter's last months of existence. However, by the end of 1991, Russia had absorbed the USSR, taking over its diplomatic service and its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. As successor, Russia took over the entire strategic arsenal of the USSR, as well as the commitments of the international treaties to which it was a part. The period before the 2000s was rather characterized by a reorientation of foreign policy towards the Middle East and the Far East, especially towards the People's Republic of China. However, the arrival of Vladimir Putin at the helm of Russia entailed a redefinition of Russia's external directions and objectives. Claiming the status of a great power and realigning the country on the international stage were absolute priorities of the new Kremlin leader, for whose fulfilment he later proved he was willing to resort even to aggressive actions in his neighborhood.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was an increased danger of regional conflicts, therefore the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was conceived as a way of organizing and collaborating with the former Soviet states in the period of transition to democracy and independence. Russia wanted to keep the new states in its sphere of influence yet they were already pursuing their own foreign policy directions. The formation of the CIS was established by an agreement signed by the leaders of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine in December 1991, with Minsk being the capital of the Commonwealth. The Baltic states have chosen a different path from the rest of the republics and have not joined the CIS. Initially, 11 of the 15 former Soviet republics were part of the CIS, and two years later Georgia joined. Among the most important achievements of the CIS are the maintenance of open borders and the free movement of citizens within the community, the maintenance of a common economic space and the coordination of the transport and communications system. However, the CIS's greatest success remains the fact that the Member States have not entered into violent conflicts with each other, except for the conflicts in which Russia has been involved. Although Yeltsin sought to transform the CIS into a Collective Security Alliance that would balance NATO's power, community member states preferred to remain in trade cooperation rather than a collective defense.

With these major changes that have taken place in the region, the space of Eastern Europe has also been redefined. During the Cold War, Europe was divided into two parts, separated by the Iron Curtain. In the West were the NATO Allies, in the East the member countries of the Warsaw Pact. With the enlargement of NATO and the EU to the East, countries such as the Baltic states, Poland, Romania or Bulgaria began to be considered as part of Central Europe. After the Eastern Partnership was created, the countries covered by this project – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine – began to be considered as Eastern neighbors, with the term New Eastern Europe referring to the six former Soviet republics.

Following their independence, the states of the New Eastern Europe faced the dilemma of ensuring their security and territorial integrity. They fell into three categories: those who chose the Euro-Atlantic direction, those who opted for neutrality and those who remained close to Russia. In the former Soviet space, Russia triggered several conflicts on the territory of its neighbors, where it later stationed military troops. This was a way to ensure that it prevents them from joining the Euro-Atlantic structures, remaining for many years at the level of NATO partners and beneficiaries of the Eastern Partnership, having as an alternative option to join the Eurasian Economic Union. To keep these countries in Russia's sphere of influence, hoping to one day rebuild a new Union, Putin came up with two major country projects as an alternative to what the European Union means: the Customs Union and the Eurasian

Economic Union. After the CIS was not very successful in becoming a military alliance, these unions also failed to be attractive enough to states such as Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova or Azerbaijan. Out of the countries in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, only Belarus and Armenia have joined. Georgia is heavily involved in the implementation of the reforms needed to join NATO and the EU. The Republic of Moldova is facing a continuing domestic political instability, oscillating between the benefits of the Eastern Partnership and Russia's promises, depending on the politicians in power. Ukraine is the most economically, strategically and militarily affected, and Azerbaijan has a different situation than the others, negotiating its interests from a much stronger position, due to its energy resources.

The European Union's alternative for the states of the New Eastern Europe was the Eastern Partnership, whose mission is to deepen EU relations with the six states, through supporting democratic reforms and economic progress. The EU has reached the most advanced level of cooperation with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, concluding Association Agreements and Free Trade Agreements with each other. The three states also benefit from the liberalized visa regime with the EU. NATO has likewise come up with some solutions for this space. In order to maintain security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area, it has initiated dialogue and cooperation with non-member countries in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia through partnerships. Within the Partnership for Peace (PfP), out of the 20 countries in the program, six are beneficiaries of the Eastern Partnership, with which NATO has entered into individual collaborative partnerships.

## **Chapter II: The evolution of NATO-Russia relations between cooperation and conflict**

For Russia, the relationship with NATO was of particular importance, given the aspirations to become a great global power again. This relationship began with the inauguration of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991, but the foundations of the bilateral relationship were laid only on May 27, 1997, with the signing of the Founding Act of NATO-Russia relations. Through their commitments, they seemed to have completely overcome previous tensions and were ready to become partners and build a solid, stable and lasting cooperative relationship, based on mutual trust and common goals, for a sustainable peace in Europe and in the world, and to avoid a new international conflict like the Cold War. This Act was a recognition for Russia of the importance and role it plays in ensuring and maintaining international security. For better communication and cooperation on various issues, Russia and NATO created a consultation mechanism – the NATO-Russia Joint Permanent Council. Both powers had pledged not to resort to violence and to pursue political and military consultations through this Council to resolve misunderstandings. At the same time, the two sides agreed that it is necessary to maintain a

balance of forces between the West and the East, and to establish an arms control regime, but without affecting the defense capacity of the states.

Although a decade had passed since the end of the Cold War, the development gap between West and East was still quite large. The risk of a new division of Europe was high, thus solutions were needed to the economic, political and security problems facing the states in the Eastern half of the continent. Their integration into NATO and the EU could help them achieve significant progress. The Washington Summit in April 1999 brought three new states to the Alliance: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, while noting that the three states will not be the last to join, with significant progress being made in Romania, Slovenia, Bulgaria or the Baltic States. An important moment in ensuring regional and international security, but also a first enlargement of NATO to the East. The decision to implement the Accession Action Plan was also taken in Washington, which provided all the necessary mechanisms to support partners in their NATO accession process.

Subsequently, in 2002, the Rome Summit took place, where it was decided to replace the Joint Permanent Council with a new format of collaboration, namely the NATO-Russia Council. The latter was based on the principles enshrined in the Founding Act and aimed to create a functional mechanism for consultation and cooperation between the two powers to resolve security issues and to become the main structure for managing the bilateral relationship. This Council proved its effectiveness until the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008, when NATO decided to suspend the Council's work. The two partners had held important consultations on issues such as the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East. In 2009, cooperation was resumed under the auspices of the NATO-Russia Council, and only five years later, following Russia's aggressive actions in eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO suspended all cooperation with Russia in both the Council and the Partnership for Peace.

NATO enlargement to the East did not stop at that first stage in 1999, when the Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic) joined NATO. A second stage followed in 2004, being the largest and perhaps even the most important NATO enlargement, which caused serious concern to Russia when NATO welcomed the Vilnius Group (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). These important moments have radically changed the course of NATO-Russia relations. Moscow has repeatedly accused Western powers of failing to live up to their promise not to expand eastward. The two rounds of enlargement reconfigured NATO's and Russia's areas of influence in Europe. It turned out that their accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures did bring them military protection and discourage Russia's threats. They did not face conflicts on their own territory, although they felt threatened, as did other former Soviet states that failed to join NATO, such as Georgia or

Ukraine. In parallel with these events, Russia committed to withdraw its military troops from Transnistria by the end of 2003, which did not happen, despite some progress in resolving the conflict. The accession of the Baltic states to NATO and the EU created a direct border between Russia and the two Euro-Atlantic structures. Putin was losing an important part of his influence in the neighborhood of his country.

The North Atlantic Alliance seemed ready to go even further. At the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, Ukraine and Georgia appeared to be on the verge of joining, when the Allies said the two countries would become members of NATO as a result of the implementation of democratic reforms. The echoes of that statement have created waves of concern in Moscow. The risk of Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO led Russia to resort to military aggression in its western neighborhood, intervening in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. Following these events, NATO preferred to strengthen its presence among the Balkan countries, welcoming four new states within the Alliance in recent years: Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and Northern Macedonia in 2020.

Solutions were being sought in Moscow to stop NATO's influence or at least diminish it. After his accession at the helm of Russia in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev came up with a proposal for a new treaty between Euro-Atlantic organizations and Russia - the Pan-European Security Pact. The novelty was the integration of Russia as a relevant player in an extended format, following which the new Euro-Atlantic space would stretch from Vancouver to Vladivostok. In this way he also included the former Soviet states in a common space of defense. This proposal was somewhat bizarre, given that it came a few months before the Russo-Georgian war. It was not taken too seriously by Western leaders, nor did it result in any concrete results. It was not clear whether they were trying to create a new security institution or just looking for ways to oppose NATO's eastward expansion, while diminishing NATO's role and influence in the region, under the pretext of providing a common and equal security in exchange. After the war in Georgia, the whole West was accused by Russian officials of not being able to ensure the security of the Eastern states and that this would only be possible with Russia.

Russia was unwilling to relinquish its influence in the former Soviet Union in favor of NATO. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration was contrary to Moscow's interests in the region. Thus, the intervention in Georgia had on the one hand the role of depriving it of control over the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and on the other hand of causing serious damage to its military capabilities and creating a conflict on its territory in order to undermine its chances of joining NATO or even reduce them to zero. At the same time, NATO and the European Union were warned about the danger of their enlargement to the East and the consequences that would arise if Moscow's interests in the region were threatened. At the same time, the West was receiving a response from Russia in recognition of Kosovo's

Unilateral Declaration of Independence. And, of course, the other ex-Soviet states with aspirations for EU and NATO integration, especially Ukraine and Azerbaijan, were also indirectly warned. On August 26, 2008, the Russian Federation recognized the independence of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with only Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria supporting the independence of the two regions. Those territories remained with an ambiguous international status, but controlled by Russia.

Six years have passed since the Georgian intervention to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, the international community was taken by surprise by Russia's actions, seeking answers to the question behind these actions and whether the events of 2014 could somehow be prevented. Aggressive actions or conflicts caused by a state are usually closely linked with the vision of the leader, the interests he pursues, the actions and the type of behavior previously manifested, as well as the political and economic situation in which the state is at that time. Most of the time, the actions taken by Russia in the ex-Soviet space had similar motivations and pretexts, such as: the historical, linguistic and cultural context, the Russian minorities, or the need to maintain security in the region. Russia's plan to become a major global power has always been at the forefront of the Kremlin's priorities, and NATO and EU enlargement to central and eastern Europe directly threatened its regional position and influence. Putin has taken most of its international actions in Russia's vicinity, which could be linked to a number of other international events that would have created the necessary context to justify their need. The intervention in Georgia was preceded by two other extremely important events: the declaration of Kosovo's independence and its international recognition, as well as the NATO Summit in Bucharest, where Georgia and Ukraine were promised future accession. The intervention in Georgia was a move that propelled him internally and strengthened his position externally.

Even if the intervention in Ukraine in 2014 was very different from the one in Georgia, here too we can place the event in an existing internal and international context. This time Russia acted less predictably. During that period, it faced serious economic problems, and the Kremlin was less and less able to generate political and economic reforms that would bring people the stability and prosperity they needed. In 2012, Russia faced large-scale public demonstrations against the Kremlin leader's system of government. Putin's popularity had declined sharply among citizens, and in such situations, if he did not have the capacity to bring major reforms internally and improve the situation, he would take action externally to find a new narrative to improve the image of a strong and invincible leader in front of the electorate. It turned out that the intervention in Ukraine and especially the annexation of Crimea had the desired effect on Putin's popularity. Another important external event is the signing of the European Union Association Agreement with Ukraine in December 2011. Russia perceived this as a new threat to

its sphere of influence and an attempt of the West to bring Ukraine closer, by imposing European rules and providing a set of advantages. They were brought too close to the Russian people and could cause a chain change in the systems of the former Soviet states in Eastern Europe.

The constant attempt to demonize opponents can also come from Russia's dissatisfaction with its failure to become a suitable partner for the EU and the US, to impose itself as a great power at the international level and to be treated as such. The Russia-China partnership emerged out of the same desire to counterbalance the US and become a strong international competitor, to which Russia wants to give a geostrategic connotation, but for China it seems to have a rather economic importance.

### **Chapter III: Eastern Europe in the new security context after the Annexation of Crimea**

The risk of a Ukraine integrated into the EU and NATO brought Russia not only the loss of influence in the region but also of the control of the Black Sea, with the banning of the Russian Fleet in Sevastopol. Russia could not afford such a defeat to NATO, so it preferred to resort to aggression and territorial annexations in the region to strengthen its position. Following the illegal occupation of Crimea by Russian military forces, the illegally recognized local authorities declared the region's independence from Ukraine and held a local referendum on March 16, 2016, to annex the peninsula to the Russian Federation. The referendum was not only illegal and the territorial changes unconstitutional, but also took place in the presence of the Russian military, which already controlled government buildings.

A major problem facing Ukraine at the time was its irresponsible governance. This is, moreover, a common problem of the former Soviet states, that have been going through a long and difficult process of democratization for 30 years. The then Kiev government had failed to effectively manage problems in various regions of the country prone to conflict. One of these regions is the Donbas, which has been rather marginalized by the central authorities. However, separatism did not seem to be a widespread option among Ukrainian regions, but rather an idea promoted by Russia and spread in the eastern regions of Ukraine to encourage the formation of separatist movements leading to political and even territorial division in the country. A federalization of Ukraine would probably have been the best result for Russia, that could have justified its possible actions in the future in order to protect the Russian minorities in the east of the country. Another important component is the fact that half of the country's shale reserves are located in the Ukrainian region of Donetsk - Luhansk – Kharkov, which gives it a major strategic importance. Of major interest is also the energy corridor that transits Ukraine towards Europe, which as long as it is controlled by Ukraine remains a lever over Russia. Russia will most likely maintain its long-term presence in eastern Ukraine, and will increasingly strengthen its military position in the Black Sea.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the mechanisms by which Russia sought to maintain control over the former Soviet states proved to be the creation of "frozen conflicts." Nearly two decades after the independence of these former Soviet states, Russia has control of important segments in the territory of 3 of them: Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Crimea, Sevastopol), Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria). Indirectly, it also controls the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan, through the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By creating military conflicts on their territory, the chances of joining Western structures are greatly reduced. The situation in those regions is used as a weapon of negotiation with the West and at the same time as an instrument for influencing the foreign policy direction and security of those states. Rather, the Kremlin is seeking a geographical delimitation of areas of strategic interest between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian interest.

The annexation of Crimea prompted NATO to rethink its security policy and develop a concrete action plan. A comprehensive package of measures to adapt to the new international security context was needed to ensure the security of members and to discourage further aggressive action. During the three NATO Summits held in Wales (2014), Warsaw (2016) and Brussels (2018), important steps were taken to reorient NATO policy from ensuring Allied security to defending them and ensuring strategic deterrence, with measures specifically targeting the Eastern Flank, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea.

An action plan has been adopted in Wales to increase the Alliance's response so that it can respond promptly to Russia's threats. An important measure was the significant increase in the military presence in Eastern Europe by air, land and sea. Within the NATO Response Force, it has been established that a Multinational Corps with a Rapid Reaction Level will be created, as a result of which the deployment time in a certain region will be greatly shortened to respond to the challenges. At the same time, it was decided to organize military exercises to simulate possible hybrid war scenarios to which the Allies would respond quickly. A novelty was the establishment of the minimum threshold of 2% of GDP that each NATO member would allocate for defense, while 20% of the total defense spending was to be allocated for the improvement of existing military equipment and the purchase of new one. Civil and military cooperation with Russia remained suspended, the only open way being through political communication channels, through which it was invited to dialogue with the Ukrainian side to resolve the conflict situation. These measures, together with a series of economic sanctions and restrictions imposed on Russia, marked the beginning of a long process of reconfiguring the international security strategy for NATO and the whole of Eastern Europe. The measures adopted by the Welsh Declaration were reviewed and improved two years later at the NATO Summit in Warsaw.

Russia continued to destabilize the situation in eastern Ukraine and engage in assertive military activities near the Alliance's territory. Thus, at the Warsaw Summit, NATO members decided that in order to strengthen the position of deterrence on the Eastern Flank and the collective defense of the Alliance, an advanced military presence of NATO, adapted to the region, is needed, to ensure a consolidated presence in the north-east of the eastern flank, on the Baltic Sea, and an adapted presence in the south-east of the flank, in the Black Sea region. NATO's adapted military presence in the Black Sea region consists of the South-East Multinational Brigade in Craiova, the South-East Multinational Division with its headquarters in Bucharest and the South-East Multinational Corps Command in Sibiu. In Poland it was decided to create a Multinational Corps in the North-East. Eight multinational units for the integration of NATO forces have also been established in the territory of the members of the Eastern region of the Alliance, with the role of supporting the formation of forces and receiving reinforcements when necessary. It was decided to implement infrastructure projects that would lead to greater flexibility and speed of movement of military forces on the national territory. Starting with 2017, the presence of multinational forces in the Baltic region has been increased through the four combat battalions operating in complementarity with existing national forces in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Other important decisions were taken at subsequent Summits, such as in Brussels in 2018 with the decision to prioritize measures leading to an increase in military land, sea and air mobility in Europe by 2024, or in London in 2019 regarding the fight against hybrid, cyber and information warfare threats.

#### **Chapter IV: The configuration of power in the Black Sea in the new security environment in Eastern Europe**

After the annexation of Crimea, the entire region from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea was under the threat of Russian aggression. Crimea is an important strategic point for the projection of power in the Black Sea and even in the Mediterranean. Putin continued to see Ukraine's future in the Eurasian Union. In his speech after the Crimean referendum, he made statements about the unity of the people of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus and their inseparability from Russia, and Crimea was called forever Russian. The United States and NATO lost control in the Black Sea, and the balance of power tilted in favor of Russia, including Eastern Europe. Tensions between NATO and Russia had reached alarming levels, with some comparing the period to that of the Cold War, while others claimed that the timing of the conflict in Ukraine brought East-West relations to the highest level of danger since the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Both NATO and Russia have embarked on an extensive process of modernizing and renewing their maritime, land and air forces and strengthening the military presence in Eastern Europe, respectively in the Baltic and Black Seas, in addition to repeated military exercises.

Russia gained an increased military presence in Crimea, complemented by the Black Sea Fleet, which it has consolidated, thus claiming a strong geostrategic position in the region. As early as 2014, Putin announced that he would strengthen the capacity of the Russian fleet by 2020 with 80 new ships, 206 support ships and a giant rearmament program aimed at radically changing the Russian armed forces, including the Black Sea Fleet, to be supplemented with 6 new frigates and 6 submarines. This happened subsequently, following major investments from Russia for the militarization of the peninsula and the Northeast region of the Black Sea. Russian military, naval and air forces exceed the capabilities of other Black Sea states. Indirectly, Russia also annexed the Ukrainian maritime area of the Sea of Azov, controlling the crossing point between the Black Sea and Azov through the Kerch Strait. In Crimea, Russia has established an air defense division, an aviation division, a naval base and ground troops. The Black Sea Fleet is the best tactically and operationally equipped of Russia's four major fleets. With the annexation of Crimea, Russia also took over an important part of Ukraine's military and naval potential, that lost almost all of its Black Sea fleet. Russia's military presence in Crimea in March 2015 was estimated at about 26,000-28,000 Russian troops, with other sources giving even higher numbers, between 29,000 and 40,000. Russia has also increased its nuclear capacity in Kaliningrad and Crimea, acting strategically at the same time in both regions and putting double pressure on NATO.

The analysis of Russia's military capabilities reveals another interesting element, namely the way in which it has strategically placed them in certain geographical areas. They are divided into four geographical areas, covering the area from Eastern Europe to the Asia-Pacific area. At the western border of Russia, in the area of interest that intersects with that of NATO and the EU, are located two of the military bases: the Western Military District, which targets the northern part of NATO's Eastern Flank, focusing its actions the Baltic States and Kaliningrad, which also includes the Russian Fleet on the Baltic Sea, and the Southern Military District, which covers the Black Sea region, especially Crimea and Ukraine, but can operate more extensively than that. Two other important military bases in Russia are the Central Military District, where power projections take place in the Middle East and Central Asia, and the Eastern Military District for power projections in Northeast Asia. As of January 2021, Russia's Northern Fleet has been granted Military District status, increasing their number to five. This district will have the role of defending the Russian border and the interests of the Arctic. The five military districts are somewhat connected to each other, so that, in case of major need, Russian military forces can quickly reposition and move to the location of any of them to concentrate Russian power in a particular region.

Russia has allocated significant financial resources for the improvement of military forces and for the deployment of military exercises, especially in Eastern Europe, but also in the Middle East, in

order to strengthen its capacity to deal with a possible military conflict in the region. Every year, Russia carries out extensive military exercises by rotation in each of the four strategic theaters, bearing the specific name of the region in which it takes place: Zapad (in 2009, 2013 and 2017), Vostok (in 2010, 2014 and 2018), Tsentr (in 2011, 2015 and 2019) and Kavkaz (in 2012 and 2016). The 2017 Zapad exercises attracted special attention from the international community due to their size and their deployment at the NATO border. Russia justifies its actions as a response to NATO's growing presence in Eastern Europe, right on its western borders.

An important advantage of Russia and a cause for concern for NATO is the A2/AD counter-intervention systems located along NATO's Eastern Flank. Russia has such long-range land, air and sea defense systems in several regions, including Kaliningrad, Crimea, Belarus, the Arctic and Syria, creating a security cordon for Russia from the Arctic to Lattakia. A2/AD capabilities are an important pillar in Russia's defense strategy and the deterrent effect of the systems, but also of blackmailing opponents, is given by the nuclear weapons held at those points, because Russia's conventional systems are weaker than those of NATO. The most used capabilities in the construction of A2 / AD umbrella systems are ground-to-air missiles, ballistic and cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles. To these can be added for increased military performance and advanced military aircraft, surface ships and submarines, thus creating a military superiority and control over air and sea. In addition to "hard power" military capabilities, these A2/AD counter-intervention networks also include high-performance communications and surveillance systems, as well as capabilities necessary for cyber warfare. Thanks to them, Russia can act effectively against both a conventional attack and a more complex danger, such as nuclear systems.

In addition to its military capabilities in Eastern Europe, Russia also has a number of vulnerabilities that can be exploited by opponents. Among the problems it faces are those of an economic, social, ethnic or regional nature, which create internal headaches. Russia's fear of conflicts in its neighborhood could lead to escalating separatist rebellions within its borders. Also in the Baltic region, NATO may turn Kaliningrad into a vulnerability of Russia, given that it is surrounded by Alliance territory. Exploiting this point can create an advantage for NATO over Russia, turning it into a target in the event of a conflict, which would become vulnerable as supply access routes are cut. Fear of losing control of Kaliningrad may discourage Russia from using its A2/AD systems in the event of a crisis. Belarus can also be seen as a vulnerability for Russia. Lukashenko's actions are quite unpredictable. Another challenge would be the accession of new NATO members, such as Ukraine and Georgia, despite the problems in their territories. Russia would face an undermining of its superiority and dominance in the region, but the risks are too great and the Kremlin's reaction unpredictable.

Given the militarization of Crimea, security experts say that Russia will most likely continue to use force against countries in the region and have maritime territorial claims in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), which threaten Romania's legitimate interests in the Black Sea. Russia's access and extensive military presence since the annexation of Crimea offers it the possibility of projecting power both to the European continent, especially in the Balkans and Central Europe, and to the South Caucasus and the northern Middle East. According to some analyzes, Moscow would actually like to create an operational corridor for its military forces, connecting the Caspian, Azov, Black and Adriatic seas, through the annexed territories, the proxy regions, but also its allies, thus increasing the mobility of military forces between its areas of interest. The importance of the Black Sea region is growing from a geo-economic point of view, due to the trade routes that Romania, Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan plan to allow to transit through their maritime space and through which the exchange of goods between China, Central Asia and Europe will take place.

One of the reasons that most limited NATO's ability to defend itself from Russian aggression in the Black Sea, but also to strengthen its military presence in the region, is the Montreux Convention of 1936. Its provisions prohibit permanent naval presence in region of landlocked countries on the Black Sea. Among the recommendations given by defense experts are the US to send more troops and warships to Europe and even create its own NATO A2 / AD system to protect the western Black Sea, to which should be added a larger NATO naval and air presence in the region. The Danube Delta and even the Ukrainian city of Odessa can be used as strategic locations to strengthen NATO's military presence. Romania plays a central role in the Alliance's defense process on the Black Sea, but even so it needs considerable military consolidation. In addition to developing existing NATO structures, Romania needs to improve its road and rail infrastructure, which is essential for military mobility.

NATO's power to combat aggression, real or potential, is composed of the ground, naval and air military capabilities of all its members, but also of partners in Europe, the Middle East or the Pacific. NATO has a significant military advantage over Russia, and in the event of a confrontation with it, some experts say, it could address the tactic of "horizontal escalation", which means simultaneous intervention in several points of interest or Russian military bases, such as it would be in the Arctic, the Caucasus, Syria or the Baltic near the Suwalki Corridor. Military attacks combined with cyberattacks would greatly weaken Russia's reaction. In addition to the military superiority held by NATO in general, but also in the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea or the Atlantic Ocean in particular, the Alliance also has control over important points in Europe, such as the Aegean Sea, Gibraltar or the Turkish and Danish straits. Romania hosts an American missile defense system, the Deveselu shield. In addition, the US Navy has increased

its presence in the Black Sea, participating in several joint military exercises with Romania. NATO has also approved a support package for its Black Sea partners, Ukraine and Georgia. The American military presence in Romania includes both combat aircraft and ground forces deployed at Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base (approximately 1000 soldiers and tanks) and a naval presence at the Black Sea. Among the measures already taken is the development of the multinational brigade in Craiova, which is the ground component of NATO's advanced presence in the region. To ensure aviation security, Romania and Bulgaria receive assistance from Canada and Italy. A NATO Black Sea Center has also been set up within the NATO Maritime Command, with a special focus on security and specific issues in the region.

NATO's Eastern Flank is the Alliance's most exposed and vulnerable side to threats from Russia. Along the flank there are three central points of strategic importance where NATO must properly assess its vulnerabilities and come up with sound policies and a coherent plan to defend and deter external aggression: to the north (Baltic Sea region), to the center (Suwałki Corridor and Poland) and to the south (Black Sea region). Russia's A2 / AD systems in both Kaliningrad and Crimea appear to be the biggest headaches for NATO. Moscow's militarization of the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia, respectively Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, also creates vulnerabilities in maintaining those countries on their path to Euro-Atlantic integration. In recent years, NATO has even seen its airspace threatened by Russian military aircraft, and Russia has gone even further, conducting military exercises with nuclear missiles that simulate an attack on the Alliance. Among the major vulnerabilities of the Alliance is the energy dependence on Russia, which is still quite high. Russia's gas pipelines can be used as political weapons against the Alliance. Moscow can use the pretext of protecting its energy infrastructure to increase control in the region. Increased energy dependence on Russia limits Europe's freedom to sanction slips for fear of a retaliation through a reduction or even a cut in Russian gas supplies.

Following the NATO decision in Warsaw to establish an adapted military presence in the Black Sea Area, including measures to increase the defensive character of the Alliance on land, sea and air, Romania's role in the region has increased. It hosts on its territory a Multinational Brigade under the command of the Multinational Command of the South-East Division. A cyber defense command was also established in Romania. NATO's naval presence has also been consolidated and naval and air military exercises have been increased. However, due to the Montreux Convention, NATO is unable to mobilize Allied naval forces in the Black Sea area, with access to military vessels belonging to non-riparian states being limited. Thus, the only NATO member countries that can ensure security in the region remain Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria. In 2016, the Romanian authorities came up with the idea of setting up a NATO naval force to be permanently stationed at the Black Sea, under the name of the

Allied Flotilla in the Black Sea, a project that did not materialize. Romania has started in recent years to improve its naval capabilities, following the allocation of 2% of GDP on defense, of which more than 30% are intended for the modernization of military equipment and capabilities and the acquisition of new ones. Romania's growing importance in the region is also represented by the strengthening of relations with NATO through Romania's participation with ships in the multinational exercises "Sea Breeze" or "Defender-Europe 21".

The Black Sea deposits also play an important role for riparian states. Considerable amounts of energy resources are stored in Romania's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), but after the annexation of Crimea it is quite vulnerable to threats from Russia, which could try to prevent the exploitation of these reserves. Bulgaria has the least developed naval capabilities in the Black Sea, unlike Turkey which is at the opposite pole, remaining the main NATO Ally in the region and holding the second largest military possession among Alliance members. It also has the largest and most modern navy of the Black Sea states. The Danube River is the second longest in Europe, crossing the territory of 10 countries, and an important access road to the Black Sea. NATO could further exploit the military potential of the river, especially the Danube Delta region, by creating defense or even power projection areas.

As a NATO member, Romania has acted to strengthen national and collective defense measures, so as to contribute to the measures taken by NATO in response to the massive increase in the Russian military presence in Crimea. The aim is to ensure the security of allied states in the area and to provide assistance to partners in the region to reform their defense. Romania attaches great importance to the Black Sea in its security agenda. If in the Country Strategy for National Defense in 2015 there are quite general and ambiguous formulations, probably due to the recent events in the Black Sea, in the subsequent Country Strategy for National Defense for the period 2020-2024 comes with much clearer details regarding the directions of action for strengthening the country's deterrent and military defense posture. Romania has the ambition to become a pole of stability and security in the region, so it assumes the role of regional actor that will create links between NATO, the EU and its eastern neighbors and will contribute to supporting the processes of democratization, institutional transformation and integration of the Eastern Neighborhood states into the European economic circuits. Particular importance is given to supporting the European path of the Republic of Moldova, for which Romania has assumed the role of "mentor" in order to strengthen democratic institutions in the neighboring state, highlighting the existing security risks, through attempts to influence Moldova to choose the Eurasian direction to the detriment of pursuing the European road. Russia is also presented as a threat to Romania's security, which leads it to strengthen its military capabilities to deter and defend, but also to counteract hybrid threats.

Strengthening existing bilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation formats along NATO's eastern flank, such as the Bucharest Format (B9), the Three Seas Initiative or the Turkey-Romania-Poland trilateral in the field of security and defense, is supported by Romania as aspirant of the status of regional pole of stability. The Three Seas initiative, launched in 2015, has 12 EU member states, located on the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas. The aim of this platform is the progressive development of the region between the three seas and an increase in mobility and connectivity between Member States, especially in areas such as energy, infrastructure and digital interconnectivity, thus contributing to building a stable and prosperous area. Some analysts say the purpose of this geopolitical concept is to discourage a move by Russia to Western Europe, forming a demarcation line. The Bucharest 9 (B9) format brings together the heads of state on the Eastern Flank of the Alliance, being launched at the initiative of Romania and Poland, in order to deepen dialogue and cooperation between participating states for joint actions within NATO or participation in ongoing processes at the level Alliance targeting security in Central and Eastern Europe. The Romania-Turkey-Poland trilateral takes place through annual meetings between the foreign ministers of the three states where the most important security issues of the moment are discussed, covering both the countries represented by the three officials and the Black Sea region, the eastern flank of NATO, the relationship with the states of the Western Balkans, as well as the challenges of the Eastern Neighborhood.

Russia uses various soft-power tools to erode democratic institutions in Eastern European states and weaken their economies. Propagated disinformation campaigns based on various inflammatory topics such as identity, history, culture, language, create conflicts within states and undermine citizens' trust in institutions such as NATO and the EU. The spread of false news, conspiracy theories, and Russia's direct support to political parties and organizations with anti-EU and anti-NATO political agendas lead to increased Euroscepticism, the polarization and division of societies. The frozen conflicts in the Black Sea are a permanent source of threats to the regional security and internal stability of the host states.

The evolution of the situation in the Black Sea in the medium and long term is quite unpredictable. Even if some scenarios can be assumed, their outcome can only be speculated, as was the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in the autumn of 2020, when the international community was surprised by Russia's passivity in that conflict or maybe Russia itself was surprised from the beginning because of that war. However, security and defense experts bring a number of conflict scenarios to the attention of NATO members in order to be prepared with a rapid and appropriate response.

By annexing Crimea, Russia is demanding the rights to access a newly discovered area rich in energy resources, to which Romania and Ukraine still have access. The fact that Romania is starting to

exploit its resources with the help of Western partners may lead to the creation of a new potential conflict in the Black Sea region. Energy security in the Black Sea region is therefore a real challenge for NATO, as the region is also an important transit corridor for energy resources. The lack of stability in the region and the unpredictability of the evolution of the security environment make it difficult, if not impossible, to exploit the energy resources of the Black Sea. Resources that could be used to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas, a weakness that Russia uses as a control mechanism and political weapon. Although Romania is almost energy independent, it fails to establish itself as an energy supplier and become an energy hub for the countries in the region, especially for Moldova and Ukraine.

Another potential conflict that experts are warning of is the one that could be provoked by Russia in Odessa, by blocking Ukraine's main seaports in the Black Sea, including the one in Odessa. The Baltic countries are still an area extremely exposed to Russian danger. Under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians or Russian speakers in large numbers in Estonia and Latvia, Moscow can take assertive action in the region, thus testing the Alliance's reaction to an external danger to its members. Although the Baltic states have policies for the inclusion of ethnic minorities, misinformation or Russian agents can create serious problems in regions with a large Russian-speaking population, spreading the idea of separatism among them. Belarus's political destabilization could lead to further tensions in NATO's neighborhood. Alexander Lukashenko is the longest-serving head of state in Europe, having been president of Belarus since 1994. A possible conflict scenario could be whether Russia wants to replace its current president with one closer to Moscow and the Kremlin's interests, or whether Putin would force a union between Russia and Belarus for a new term as president of a new state. However, in the context of the latest developments in the situation between Russia and Belarus, the two scenarios still seem very unlikely. Putin continues to support Lukashenko, and for his re-election as president for another term he prefers to amend Russia's constitution and even secure immunity for life.

A new Russian aggression in Ukraine is another scenario taken into account, this time inside the city of Odessa. The importance of this city comes both from the fact that it is located on the Black Sea, being a maritime and tourist city, and from the fact that it is one of the largest cities in Ukraine, the third largest. It is also close to Transnistria, a frozen conflict zone in the Russian-controlled Republic of Moldova. In 2014, during the annexation of Crimea, the risk of a conflict in Odessa was quite high. Although there were some violent clashes that left casualties, Ukraine managed to maintain control in that region, as Russia did not have enough local support to impose itself. However, it is not excluded that Russia will try again to provoke internal demonstrations under the pretext of respecting the rights of minorities so that it can intervene later. Odessa's vulnerability is extremely high in the face of Russian

threats, and control of that territory would further extend its influence in the Black Sea, and Ukraine would be almost entirely powerless in the region. This seems to be a red-line that Russia would not touch for fear of a reaction, in this case, from NATO.

Moldova is another area of great interest to Russia and a potential source of conflict in the region, given the military presence and control of the Transnistrian separatist zone by the Kremlin leadership. A conflict in this area would directly affect Ukraine and Romania. Moscow can fully exploit the fears of the population through disinformation campaigns and actions carried out in the three countries, so as to lead to a conflict between Ukraine and Romania and to create a favorable environment to intervene in Moldova to defend the separatist areas of Transnistria or Gagauzia. Under the same pretext, in the event of a conflict, Russia can go even further and try to link Transnistria with the Black Sea through a narrow strip taken from Ukraine. Although it seems sophisticated and hard to believe that such a scenario will be applied, given Russia's recent misinformation campaigns on both banks of the Prut river and how it is trying to take advantage of the situation in each country, it is not excluded to go even further with its hybrid techniques to obtain at least advantages from the information attacks it undertakes.

Another region where Moscow can provoke conflicts in order to destabilize relations between the three states is in the South Caucasus. The generation of a new conflict in Georgia could lead to the bifurcation of the state through a military corridor, linking South Ossetia, a territory in which Russia already has control, to Armenia, which is a loyal ally of Russia. Using its influence on the same ally, Russia can rekindle the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. A sufficient reason for Moscow to justify possible military interventions to "keep the peace" between the two states. This scenario was not far from reality, given that in the autumn of 2020 the conflict in that region erupted violently, but the outcome was completely different. After six weeks of war, a ceasefire agreement was signed, in which Armenia was forced to relinquish control of three major districts in the region after Azerbaijan recaptured four others during the conflict. Surprising was the position of Russia, which chose not to intervene in the first weeks, but only towards the end as a mediator, Armenia feeling left without support, while Turkey acted on the side of Azerbaijan.

Any of the above scenarios represent probable security risks in the Black Sea area yet with an uncertain evolution at the same time. However, if the extended Black Sea region is considered, then the range of challenges that may arise in the medium term is much more complex. These may include tensions in the Western Balkans, the divergence between Turkey and some NATO members in the South plus the development of Russia's offensive military capabilities to project its power in the Mediterranean. humanitarian tragedies in Syria and Iraq, while China is trying to expand its influence in the Black Sea

and Europe through the New Silk Road. A series of unpredictable situations with many unknowns, whose evolution we will observe over time, but for which NATO should have an answer, if its members become directly affected.

However, recent analyzes by Russian experts present a different point of view in addressing the issue of Eastern European countries. According to them, Russia is going through a period of "post-post-imperial" formation, since in the last decade the idea of empire in the collective consciousness has diminished considerably, alike the influence it has on the ex-Soviet states. A period of reconfiguration in which Russia acquires a new model of behavior, more concerned with its own interests and needs, than with an ideological mission or geopolitical concerns that it had until now. It is changing its position and the way it operates in both Europe and Asia. It also no longer supports various local leaders in its neighborhood, as evidenced by the change of power in Kyrgyzstan or Armenia without Russia intervening in any way. In the same vein, the Kremlin would no longer be interested in provoking new conflicts or reopening existing ones. Their role would have been as measures taken depending on the international context existing at that time. The unresolved conflicts in Donbas, Abkhazia and Ossetia were to stop Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO and pushing the West beyond its borders. As for the unconditional support offered to Lukashenko, it would have been in order to exclude a potential intervention of Poland and Lithuania in Belarus, and Transnistria and the Russian military stationed there would have the role of preventing a possible union of Moldova with Romania. Russia has secured its borders in the rest of the region, not just in the West. In Central Asia, it has shared economic and security responsibilities with China, and in the Caucasus and the Middle East it competes directly for the design of interests with Turkey.

Relations between NATO and Russia have reached maximum levels of tensions between the two powers in recent years. Each side resorted to strengthening military capabilities and expanding the ability to project power, arguing for their need to discourage their opponents. Although in terms of traditional capabilities NATO has superiority over Russia, the latter has nuclear capabilities in Eastern Europe, including the Black Sea, which give it an advantage in the event of a direct confrontation. Both NATO and Russia are likely to continue large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of each other in the coming years, and NATO will find ways to strengthen its position on the Black Sea to counter Russia's military superiority in the region. Developments in the coming years will also depend on how the two leaders, Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, succeed in managing the misunderstandings that arise and even resume collaboration in order to maintain security in certain regions of the world.

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