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POLICY PAPER

Romania's role in the current geopolitical situation in the Black Sea region

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Summary

As conflicts in recent years have developed in the Black Sea region, so has Romania's role in them. Soon to be home to NATO's largest European base, increased involvement in joint ventures and major advancements in their military technology prove that Romania is rising to be a crucial actor in the security of the region, as well the diplomacy and other projects that occur there.

Key points

- Romania has solidified itself as a leader in Black Sea geopolitics, both independently and as a member of various alliances and organizations.
- Their presence of NATO's soon-to-be largest base in Europe, bringing threats from Russia, and attacks on ships in their EEZ of the Black Sea indicate a responsibility to help resolve the Russo-Ukrainian War as quickly and with as little escalation as possible.
- Romania is set to be one of Europe's leading energy producers, leading and joining in on many projects dedicated to green energy and energy independence, along with several research and education initiatives.

Introduction

The Black Sea is a crucial intersection of Europe and Asia. Romania is one of only six countries that border the Black Sea, the other five being Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey and Bulgaria. Russia has long laid claim to the sea, but recent conflict and other developments in Eastern Europe have begun to chip away at this claim.

Romania is a critical country for the west's endeavors in the Black Sea. Being a member of both the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization, it not only gives both organizations access, but they, in turn, are able to supply Romania with assets that allow it to maintain this crucial position. Right now, Romania is the EU and NATO's most reliable ally in the region. Despite Turkey's NATO membership and control over straits connecting to the Black Sea, it is not the most trusted ally of the organization, especially in light of the recent development of a possible BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) admission. It is also important to note that along with Georgia, Turkey is also a candidate for EU membership, but has not officially joined despite several agreements and a history of collaboration with the EU.

There is widespread support throughout the country for "align[ing] as closely as possible with the EU and NATO" (Popescu-Zamfir, 2024). The following discussions are demonstrative of how Romania has acted on this strategy, especially throughout the ongoing war in Ukraine.

NATO Airbase Expansion

One of, if not the most, notable examples of Romania's role is the expansion of the Mihai Kogalniceanu airbase, located less than 30 kilometers away from the coast where Romania meets the Black Sea. In 2019, it was announced that Romania's Mihai Kogălniceanu airbase (henceforth referred to as MKAB) was going to undergo €2.5 billion worth of upgrades. This includes new military infrastructure and technology, such as fuel depots and runway expansion, to be able to accommodate 10,000 NATO troops and base more advanced drones and fighter jets. In addition to the more tangible upgrades, some of the long-term goals of expansion are consolidating the eastern flank of NATO and being able to respond to threats in the Middle East if needed. The work is officially underway and the base is being put to use, with the United States Air Force flying two long-range B-52 fighter jets to MKAB earlier this year. Also important to recognize is the fact that the project is being funded by the Romanian government, in stages via the national budget, beginning in 2022 and slated to end in 2030. This year the country had its largest-ever defense budget of €19 billion. NATO's guideline for defense spending is two percent of a country's Gross Domestic Product, which Romania achieved for the first time in 2020 and has not reached again until now. At least twenty percent of that budget is going to be spent on modernized military equipment.

The expansion of the MKAB indicates a shift in NATO action specifically: recognizing that Eastern Europe needs to be on their priority list. Since Russia took over Crimea in 2014, Romania has been a very outspoken in advocating the importance of maintaining a presence in the Black Sea, specifically with regard to NATO. Romania is the West's strongest ally of the littoral countries, so collaboration and cooperation with Romania is crucial if organizations like NATO and the EU want involvement in and control over the Black Sea region. The Kremlin's recognition of what the base currently is and will be capable of indicated that it is not something that can be ignored. It is a blatant display of power, especially with new equipment being delivered and utilized daily. Right now, like all NATO members, Romania is a deterrent actor for further Russian conflict and invasion, but should there be further involvement (for instance, if Ukraine was authorized to use NATO members' long-range weaponry) MKAB will almost certainly be one of the first lines of defense. It could also serve as support for the admission of additional NATO and EU members, such as Ukraine and Moldova, given that "the alliance

is more likely to accept a member that it's confident of being able to defend, experts say" (Besliu, 2024). For countries such as those, "Romania serves as a key ally, offering comprehensive support" (Besliu, 2024).

Russo-Ukrainian War and transport safety

Romania has played a key role in the war between Russia and Ukraine. Ukraine is not a member of NATO nor the European Union, despite expedited admission efforts. That being said, both organizations have maintained strong support for the country throughout the war. Ukraine has managed to destroy a significant portion of Russia's naval fleet in the Black Sea, but that does not mean that the area is no longer of any concern. For instance, despite MKAB'S expansion plans being announced well before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, earlier this year, Russian Senator Andrey Klimov said that "the project represents a 'threat for Bucharest'" and "the larger the 'anti-Russian' military base and the 'closer it is to Russia's borders, the more likely it is to be among the first targets for retaliatory strikes'" (Ernst, 2024). This puts the country much more at risk of a Russian response, so Romania has both a responsibility and personal incentive to try to assist with the resolution of the conflict as quickly and with as little escalation as possible.

Regardless of these threats, Romania has increasingly taken on leadership roles related to the conflict. In 2023, for example, the first Black Sea Security Conference was co-hosted by Ukraine and held in Bucharest, with goals of the de-occupation of Crimea and securing the Black Sea. Part of this conference included Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova (although not an EU member state) working closely with the EU to establish the EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes, establishing trade routes on railways, roadways and more inland waterways. Issued in July of this year, the EU's Black Sea Synergy: 4th review of a regional cooperation initiative states that "their port and transport infrastructure, was instrumental in this joint endeavor." More recently, Romania committed to take part in a joint demining operation in the Black Sea with Turkey and Bulgaria. The operation officially commenced in July, with all three countries and Ukraine deploying naval assets and technology to begin demining an estimated 800-plus square kilometers of minefields. No other NATO members are currently involved, though the offer remains open. Romanian Foreign Minister Luminița Odobescu is one of several officials who have encouraged other NATO nations to get involved. With the project expected to take up to five years to be completely finished, "this enormous task requires ongoing international cooperation and support. The legal and operational complexities of such a multinational effort need careful handling" (Allison, 2024).

In addition to the previously mentioned transport safety measures, a recent missile attack that hit a Greek-operated ship in Romania's exclusive economic zone of the Black Sea has only further emphasized the need for safety in the sea itself, especially when it comes to non-combatants. While some vessels have been damaged in Ukrainian ports, this was the first time a civilian ship had been struck by a missile. Agriculture is by far the largest sector of Ukraine's economy and grain shipments have been their biggest export in the midst of the war. Attacks on grain shipments cause food prices to increase and jeopardize food security across the globe, not just around the Black Sea. Incidents such as these show that what happens in the region impacts the entire world population, not just those who live in the bordering countries. For Romania, it means that Ukrainian exports are travelling closer to their Black Sea borders to avoid mines and Russian submarines by using shallow waters to their advantage. The port of Constanta is also much busier due to the influx of ships and imports passing through. That being said, should any attack occur so close to NATO territory, Romania would be directly involved and it is likely that the conflict would escalate even further. While effective thus far, this new navigation strategy absolutely poses risks that all states in the region must be prepared for.

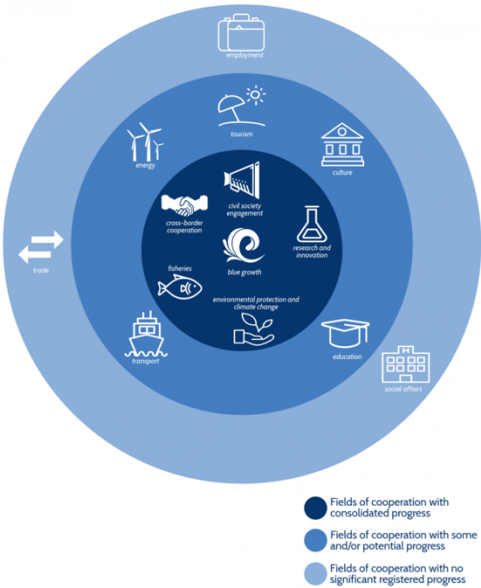**Map 1:** The new nautical export route for Ukrainian grain

Source: Council on Foreign Relations via The Economist, Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute

Black Sea Synergy initiative

While significant and currently very relevant, war and security are not the only important components of Black Sea geopolitics. The Black Sea Synergy was created in 2007 as "the EU'S regional policy framework for the Black Sea region, aiming to ensure policy coherence and further cooperation between the countries surrounding the Black Sea" (EEAS, 2024). Russia's participation is currently suspended, but the initiative has continued to help these countries make collective advancements in many different sectors, especially when it comes to the renewable energy and the environment.

Graph 1: Improvements on Black Sea Synergy initiative efforts by sector

Source: European Union External Action, Black Sea Synergy, 2024

Earlier this month, the country joined Hungary, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Green Energy Partnership to build a powerline under the Black Sea to supply the European Union with renewable energy. Support has increased for the project since its original approval in 2022 due to Europe's reliance on Russian energy, resulting in much higher prices since the onset of the war with Ukraine. Referring to recent European energy maps, Energy Minister of Romania Sebastian Burjuda said that "the project was of strategic importance for his country and the EU" (Associated Press) and that "on the eastern flank essentially we are paying a very high price recently — and that's because there is not enough diversification." Azerbaijanian Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov added that the project will "provide green energy… which is very high on the agenda of the international community." According to the EU, "all Black Sea neighbors have committed to achieving net-zero emissions by or around 2050," so these projects are a demonstration of Romania's commitment to achieving that goal as well as the resources they are willing and able to contribute to collaborate with other countries in order to achieve that goal. That being said, these are long-term and vigorous undertakings, so Romanian industries are going to have to work strategically and thoroughly to prove that they are able to fulfill these commitments.

Romania has also been an active contributor to marine research and maritime affairs, being one of seven nations (six, as Russia's participation has been suspended) involved in the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea. The strategy has "three main goals: healthy marine and coastal ecosystems; a competitive, innovative and sustainable blue economy for the Black Sea, and investment in the Black Sea blue economy" (Council of the European Union, 2024). In November of 2023, a conference for members was held in Bucharest to establish a Technical Group on sustainable aquaculture. So far "the initiative has… mobilis[ed] funding for projects, resulting in more than 90 supported actions on marine pollution, blue economy entrepreneurship, tourism and environmental protection, worth a total of about EUR 500 million in 5 years" (Council of the European Union, 2024). Romanian scientists have also taken part in the BlackSea4Fish project, which collaboration among Black Sea fisheries and "consolidated national expertise and scientific capacity to create a level playing field for fisheries across the region, enabling cross-sectoral opportunities" (Council of the European Union, 2024).

Additionally, Romania is involved in fields of cooperation five (civil society engagement, democracy and human rights) and six (education, research and innovation, culture and tourism). The Black Sea NGO Forum was organized from 2008-2022, supported by the European Commission and Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs "to increase the level of dialogue and cooperation among NGOs in the wider Black Sea region, strengthening their capacity to influence regional and national policies and to increase the number and quality of regional partnerships and projects" (Council of the European Union, 2024). It promoted partnerships and the sharing of expertise in the different sectors of field of cooperation five. Pertaining to field of cooperation six, Romania and other Black Sea countries have increasingly participated in the Erasmus+, Creative Europe and Horizon Europe programs. These all promote exchanging research, studying and formulating agreements throughout Europe in various ways, including audio-visual and scientific (climate, energy, health, etc.) fields.

Future development

Romania's heavy involvement in the region has set them on a course of leadership for the future. Furthermore, as the EU and NATO'S leading liaison in the region, they have a responsibility to communicate both what is occurring and what support they may need to both organizations, bringing the Black Sea to international attention. Romania has a lot at stake, especially due to their proximity to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia has threatened retaliatory responses should NATO allies authorize Ukraine to ramp up their military campaign, so decisions need to be made with extreme care and the

consideration of absolutely every possible outcome. It is a precarious situation, as Russian president Vladimir Putin has said that the use of western-provided long-range missiles would be considered an act of war by Russia, igniting a war against NATO as a whole. One of the concerns raised was that Russia could target a major weapons supply in Rzeszów, Poland as a response and as previously mentioned, they have already threatened retaliation towards MKAB should it be used for "anti-Russian" activities. Discussions are still ongoing, such as the meetings between British and American diplomats that occurred last week, but it is looking more likely that current regulations on weapons usage will be relaxed based on Russia's acquisition of Iranian ballistic missiles. The United States has and continues to express apprehension about the conflict being escalated further, but should those restrictions change, Romania is guaranteed to be an important actor in the response and will assume even more substantial responsibility of support and security in the region.

Conclusion

As the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea has escalated, so has Romania's response. As the West's most solid ally in the region, Romania is now serving as a base for EU and NATO activity related to the Black Sea. The billions of euros being put towards expanding the Mihai Kogălniceanu airbase will not only allow responses to potential threats in the Black Sea region now, but also in other regions (the Middle East, for example) in the future. The self-funding, collaboration and increased defense budget that have come along with this project are indicative of Romania's commitment to NATO, the EU and the security of the Black Sea. This has also been apparent in their assistance to Ukraine, through transport protection on land and in their Black Sea EEZ, as well as joining a multilateral demining operation. Should the conflict continue to intensify, Romania will be crucial in formulating and executing a response, both for the various organization it holds membership in, as well as for itself.

Militaristic developments are not the only important occurrences in the region, however. Romania has been a leader in energy initiatives in the region, working towards less reliance on energy from Russian fossil fuels and committing to renewable energy usage so that emissions are net-zero around 2050. Furthermore, at the Annual Meeting of Romanian Diplomacy in July of this year, Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu emphasized the importance of Romania's diplomatic endeavors, specifically in supporting Ukraine and advocating for the admission of Moldova to the EU. He also expressed interest in and dedication to working more with Asian states on infrastructure and energy projects and to "accelerate and diversify Romania's relations with the Middle East, and Latin American states." In regard to the Black Sea region, Ciolacu perfectly summarized Romania's goals and actions: "I welcome the efforts of Romanian diplomacy to strengthen the security of the Black Sea region and ensure the support of allies and partners for our objective, to transform the Black Sea area into an area of peace, security, and connectivity. The Black Sea must not be a war zone, but a bridge between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East" (Ciolacu, 2024).

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