

Resilience and Security of the Black Sea Region: The Role of the Non-State Actors

Draft paper

Kornely Kakachia, Georgian Institute of Politics

Introduction

In the fragile security and political environment, the Black Sea became one of the central and strategically important points for the West due to its connectivity to Europe, Central Asia and Middle East. The political instabilities in the regional states connected to the ongoing, or conflicts with protracted resolution, hybrid threats, democratic backsliding, emerging authoritarian dependencies creates an unpredictable future for not only the Black Sea regional states, but for the international actors like NATO, the EU, the OSCE and BSEC who have both economic and security interests in wider region. Since the Cold War's end, the Black Sea has experienced the highest concentration of maritime conflicts, including the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war ([Hess 2022](#)).

The Black Sea region holds profound geopolitical, economic, and strategic importance for both regional and global actors. Its geographical location at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East makes it a vital transit zone for energy, trade, and military movements. As a maritime corridor, it offers the shortest route for connecting the landlocked countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia with global markets. This connectivity enhances the Black Sea's role as a critical hub in the East-West and North-South corridors, especially for energy supplies and transport networks.

From a security perspective, the region has become a focal point in the power struggle between Russia and the West. Significance of the Black Sea for Europe as such increased particularly since Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 that shifted regional security balance due to Russia's massive military presence in the region ([Kakachia, Lebanidze & Kandelaki 2022](#)). Russia's expansion in the Black Sea region not only undermines Ukraine's territorial integrity, but also signals its ambitions toward other post-Soviet states and poses security threats to the countries of the Black Sea basin, including NATO members and the EU. Hence, the Black Sea seems to have become a new frontline on geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Simultaneously, the region holds significant economic and strategic value, offering Europe potential access to Central Asian energy resources and broader Asian markets.

Moreover, Russia's military dominance and China's expanding economic presence in the Black Sea challenge Europe's security and undermine economic and energy stability, particularly amid efforts to reduce *dependence on China* and severed ties with Russia. In general, the Black Sea has a couple of important functions in Russian maritime strategy. In particular, it is the world's second largest oil exporter, with "22% shipments coming through Black Sea loading points like the Novorossiysk Commercial Sea Port" ([Black and Kaushal 2025](#)). Apart from this, Russia also

has agriculture export interests, to facilitate export through the Black Sea, increase its own monopoly and consequently undermine Ukraine's food export ability.

Moreover, the Black Sea is a key arena where the strategic ambitions of Turkey and Russia intersect—sometimes in cooperation, often in competition. Both countries view the region not only as a sphere of influence but also as essential to their national security, economic ambitions, and geopolitical stature. Cooperation with Turkey is crucial for Russia in this process due to its monopoly on overseeing the “access to the Mediterranean through the Bosphorus straits and is a NATO country ([Meister 2025](#)). However, relationship with Turkey is not simple due to their continuous strategic contestations of both neighbours including South Caucasus ([de Waal 2025](#)).

As a result, Europe is rethinking its security architecture, one of the parts of which is the Black Sea. However, in case of fragmented and uncoordinated approaches of the EU and NATO and some other likeminded organizations, the efforts might not be effective.

Such a complicated geopolitical environment needs a new type of multidimensional approach from state and non-state actors in order to maintain some sort of sustainability in the region ([Delcour & Wolczuk 2015](#)). To reach that goal, there is a need for coordination and cooperation of more or less likeminded states and international actors to optimize their engagement in the region, which is not easy due to their different objectives and visions.

This policy brief analyzes the roles of external actors in addressing the complex security landscape of the Black Sea and provides some inputs for the enablement of long-term strategic cooperation with the relevant actors around the Black Sea region for fostering resilience.

Role of different international organizations in the Black Sea Security

Different international actors have specific role of the Black Sea region, but some of the objectives overlap. NATO's engagement in the Black Sea is derived not only from the securitization of the connectivity potential of the Black Sea, but also because of the NATO member states having access to the sea like Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria, as NATO's partner states in the Black Sea like Georgia and Ukraine ([NATO 2021](#)). As for the EU, it contributes in the Black Sea through economic and institutional resilience. However, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was forced to expand its sphere of operation from economic to security dimension. EU's security initiatives, such as the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the EU Maritime security strategy and the Global Gateway were addressed through development of the new Black Sea Synergy initiative ([EEAS 2024](#)). As for the role of the OSCE in the Black Sea region, it covers the security matters linked with the political, military, economic, environmental and human rights and has the capacity to implement crisis, confidence and peace building initiatives, however its effectivity during the crisis is heavily criticized by some of the experts after starting the Russian war in Ukraine and even before that ([Shelest 2022](#)). As it comes to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), it focuses on a multilateral political-economic environment and aims for peace, stability and prosperity in the region ([COE 2021](#)). Some of the missions of these

organizations coincide with each other, however there is a lack of joint efforts in practice that hampers the resilience building and crisis management in the region.

Engagement of the NATO in the Black Sea region

NATO's security strategy scale expanded in 2022 as a result of the Russo-Ukraine war and the NATO Strategic Concept 2022 stresses on the importance of the Black Sea beyond the Baltic Sea and Western Balkans. Even before that, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, naval (BSRF – Black Sea Rotational Force) forces were created and the air defence of the eastern “frontline countries” was strengthened for collective defence via shared security duties, tasks and threat management ([Szenes 2023](#)). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulting into blockades of the Black Sea ports, disturbance to commercial navigation, attacks from the sea, militarisation of Russian occupied Crimea and also Abkhazia created the necessity of more adequate presence of the NATO in the Black Sea region (Kakachia, Lebanidze & Kandelaki 2022). However, there is still no separate comprehensive strategy of NATO towards this region ([Szenes 2023](#)), in spite of the fact that at the NATO Summit 2024, one of the key issues on the agenda was addressing the emanating threats from the Black Sea region ([Joja 2024](#)).

NATO Allied presence in the Black Sea Region (BSR) through naval patrols, air policing missions and military exercises has grown more over the past few years ([NATO-EU InfoCenter 2025](#)). Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey have jointly launched a NATO regional de-mining operation in the Black Sea and they also contributed in aiding grain export of Ukraine (*ibid*). “Moreover, in 2022, Allies established multinational battlegroups for Bulgaria (led by Italy) and Romania (led by France), increased BSR air policing, and pledged new defense plans that include an increase of high-readiness NATO troops from 40,000 to 300,000” (*ibid*). NATO's cooperation with the partner states like Ukraine and Georgia included joint military trainings, their engagement in some of the missions and NATO has Comprehensive Assistance Package for Ukraine and Substantial Package for Georgia which should be boosted with more complex and comprehensive military educational cooperation. Moreover, specific assistance package should also be developed for Moldova whose vulnerability increases (*ibid*). NATO also developed the new tools in response to hybrid and cyber threats (NATO 2023) as well as a new concept providing overarching guidance for fighting information threats within the Alliance and also in the partner states ([NATO 2024](#)).

EU's engagement in the Black Sea Region

It is essential to integrate the EU and NATO Black Sea policies into a strategically coherent and closely coordinated manner which is not yet in place ([Saari 2024](#)). EU's approach towards the Black Sea is well described in the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) initiative launched in 2007 aiming at development, identifying and supporting the needs, priorities and aims of partners in the region ([EEAS 2024](#)). Despite the war in Ukraine, according to the 2024 BSS annual report, activities under the Black Sea Synergy have been successfully implemented in all its fields, namely:

integrated maritime policy and sustainable blue economy; fisheries and aquaculture; environmental protection and climate change; cross-border cooperation - Black Sea basin programme 2014-2020, (Interreg VI - B) NEXT Black Sea basin programme; civil society engagement, democracy and human rights; education, research and innovation (beyond the marine sector), culture and tourism; and energy and transport ([ibid](#)). EU's monitoring missions as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy, as well as, cooperation in the EaP for strengthening democratic institutions, rule of law and economic reforms is also notable in the BSR states. EU's economic and diplomatic sanctions over Russia is also a tangible step in support of Ukraine, EU candidate and partner states in the wider Black Sea region.

In 2025, the European Commission launched the call to support the development of a new Joint Communication, outlining the EU's strategic approach to the Black Sea prioritising enhancing security, stability and resilience in the region ([European Commission 2025](#)). Since Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and its readiness to invest in support of Ukraine via heightened defence of the Black Sea region, the EU can demonstrate commitment to countering Russian influence by planning high-level visits in the strategic maritime locations ([Simeonova 2024](#)).

Role of OSCE in the Black Sea

The OSCE security definition includes three key elements: political-military dimension, economic and environmental dimension and human dimension that includes rule of law, democratisation and elections (OSCE, 2009). All of these dimensions are applied in the Black Sea regional states where OSCE operates ([Kakachia, Malerius, and Meister 2024](#)).

Nagorno Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan was managed by the OSCE Minsk Group and OSCE Monitoring Mission was established in the Ukrainian counterparts to form Normandy Group for finding peaceful resolution in Ukraine after Russia annexed Crimea that produced the Minsk protocol in 2014 and in both cases the OSCE involvement is not assessed as successful contribution ([OSCE 2023](#)). OSCE missions are mostly involved in election monitoring through OSCE ODIHR mechanism, in confidence building and conflict prevention initiatives even in the Transnistria disputed region of Moldova.

Presence of the BSEC format in the region

BSEC mostly promotes the economic cooperation of the regional states and facilitation of the involvement of the strategic external actors in the regional economic development in the energy security, trading, environmental protection, science and technology, as well as fighting against the crime ([BSEC 2021](#)). Apart from this, BSEC is largely developing sectoral cooperation between the 13 member states including the emergency response and building resilience against non-conventional threats ([Tzounis, 2020](#)). Topic-wise this initiative could have a possible synergy with the NATO's and EU's approaches regarding the elimination and prevention of the foreign

information manipulations and cyber threats which synergy is not in place because of the tensions between the member states, especially due to the involvements of Russia in this format ([Kakachia and Lebanidze 2020](#)). Therefore, its role in the time of the wars and conflicts is not that effective which was well reflected in the responses of the expert surveys in Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan BSEC alongside OSCE were seen as having the least positive role in strengthening the Black Sea security ([Kakachia, Valiyev, Shelest \[...\] 2022](#)).

Prospects of cooperation in fostering resilience and crisis management

[.....]

Conclusion

The security and resilience of the Black Sea region are indispensable components of European and Euro-Atlantic stability. As geopolitical competition intensifies—marked by Russia’s aggression, China’s economic assertiveness, and internal fragmentation among regional actors—the need for coordinated, strategic, and multidimensional engagement has become more urgent than ever. NATO, the EU, the OSCE, and other stakeholders must move beyond fragmented initiatives and work toward a comprehensive and coherent approach that addresses both traditional and non-traditional security threats.

Revitalizing multilateral frameworks, particularly the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), is essential in fostering long-term regional stability and enabling economic cooperation. At the same time, greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening hybrid and cyber threat responses, enhancing resilience, and supporting vulnerable partner states like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Repairing and recalibrating relations with Türkiye—given its pivotal role as both a NATO member and a gatekeeper of maritime access—is equally crucial. Deepening cooperation between the EU, NATO, and the United States with Türkiye could serve as a cornerstone for a more effective Black Sea strategy. The European Union, in particular, must recognize the Black Sea not as a peripheral space, but as a core element of its security architecture. A renewed vision for partnership—both with member states and associated countries in the region—is imperative.

Ultimately, addressing the complex and interconnected challenges of the Black Sea requires more than isolated national responses. A comprehensive, collaborative, and forward-looking vision is essential—one that prioritizes resilience, inclusive governance, sustainable development, and a renewed commitment to regional peace and security.

References

Black, E., & Kaushal, S. (2025, April 14). Black Sea significance to European security. Royal United Services Institute. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/black-sea-significance-european-security>

Shelest, H. (2022). From soft security to hard security in the Black Sea region – Does the OSCE fit? *Security and Human Rights*, 33(1–4), 106–120. <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2022/03/18750230-Security-and-Human-Rights-From-Soft-Security-to-Hard-Security-in-the-Black-Sea-Region-%E2%80%93-Does-the-osce-Fit.pdf>

European External Action Service. (n.d.). Black Sea Synergy. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/black-sea-synergy_en

Meister, S. (2025, March). Russia's policy towards Georgia: Exploring security and connectivity vulnerabilities. Transatlantic Leadership Network. <https://www.transatlantic.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/TLN-RSI-Georgia-Policy-Paper-Meister.pdf>

De Waal, T. (2025, March). Russia, the South Caucasus and the Black Sea. Transatlantic Leadership Network. <https://www.transatlantic.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/TLN-RSI-Caucasus-Policy-Paper-De-Waal.pdf>

Council of Europe. (2021). Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) – Cultural Routes. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/bsec>

Tzounis, D. (2020). The Black Sea Economic Cooperation: 25 years of regional cooperation. BSEC Coordination Centre for the Exchange of Statistical Data and Economic Information.

Delcour, L., & Wolczuk, K. (2015). The EU's unexpected 'ideal neighbour'? The perplexing case of Armenia's Europeanisation. *Journal of European Integration*, 37(4), 491–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2015.1004631>