

## **Romania's Neighbourhoods: East and South An Integrated Approach**

*Joint policy paper produced by the New Strategy Center Bucharest, the I.C.Bratianu Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Romanian Academy, Aspen Institute Romania, and the Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund of the US Bucharest.*

### 1. A new geopolitical paradigm in the region of the Black Sea and Western Balkans

Romania lies at the intersection of two regions where the developments in the past few years followed a trend toward instability and regression in political, economic and security terms. Both the Black Sea region and the Western Balkans are now vulnerable to open or latent conflicts (already present in the Black Sea area), likely emergence of failing or failed states and their diversion to a non-Euro-Atlantic course. Growing Russian assertiveness both through direct action and more insidious methods combines with the absence of a coherent understanding in the West of the strategic connection between the two regions to produce a new geopolitical reality that requires adequate responses at political and societal levels. The migration crisis and the current surge in terrorist activities have come on top of the accumulated regional tensions while also affecting the ability of EU and NATO to concentrate on the real security priorities. All this has led to the emergence of sharper vulnerabilities in Romania's immediate and wider vicinity.

The changing regional environment calls for a careful reconsideration of the existing theoretical premises and analytical evaluations in order to align them with the newly emerging reality, to generate viable solutions to the present risks and threats, and to seize the opportunities that may arise. The purpose of this paper is to provide additional factual and analytical elements on the regional security outlook for further consultations with partner think tanks without prejudice to the conceptual framework agreed at official level or to Romania's strategic commitments.

The National Defence Strategy of Romania for 2015-2019 makes it clear that “destabilising actions in the Eastern neighbourhood pose major challenges to the security of the Euro-Atlantic space by causing regional instability and possible negative developments such as migration or organized crime, and by affecting potential economic development”, while “the continued existence of frozen conflicts in the Black Sea region and unstable conditions in the Western Balkans engender additional pressures on Romania. Inter-ethnic tensions and regional imbalances in neighbouring countries may lead to outbreaks of regional conflicts”.

A new perspective on Romania’s neighbourhood logically emerges from the guidelines of the National Defence Strategy and suggests a comprehensive approach responding to the requirements of the regional security situation. The Strategy notes that Romania’s neighbourhood has entered “a new phase of restructuring”, which makes it imperative “to contribute toward strengthening the process of Europeanisation through gradual expansion of the space of freedom, prosperity, security and justice”.

Regional instability caused by the Russian Federation and its actions aimed at blocking the European choice of Ukraine, Republic of Moldova and Georgia, the promotion of energy projects in competition with those supported by the EU and Romania ultimately jeopardising the development of regional energy resources, the perpetuation of instability in the Western Balkans, the constant assault against the system of liberal values, the sharpening of the nationalist and populist discourse – all these are incentives to anticipate what comes next and to glimpse the opportunities that inevitably accompany a process of change.

## 2. Merger of the two security axes

The security outlook that has been officially assumed by NATO is based on the hypothesis that the main challenges in Europe are coming from two directions. One is the Eastern Flank (East Axis) stretching from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, including the frozen conflicts, annexation of Crimea and continued hybrid-type confrontations in Eastern Ukraine. The other is the Southern Flank (South Axis) including massive illegal migration, failing states, military insurrections with an ethnic, identity or religious background, and terrorist actions. A neat distinction between the two axes tends, however, to lose sight of several recent developments:

- Russia's active military presence in Syria places it in a position where the former perception of potential threat only from the Eastern Flank has been superseded by the realities on the ground;
- The implicit linkage, tending to become explicit, that Moscow (and other actors) appears to be making between 'the Syrian file' and 'the Ukrainian file' has become obvious and can no longer be ignored;
- The principal regional powers, Russia and Turkey, have traditional historical interests (some convergent, others divergent) and are massively involved both in the Black Sea region (e.g. the Caucasus) and in the Balkan space and the Middle East in a fragile balancing act with high volatile potential;
- In terms of energy security most of the countries in the wider region are heavily dependent on Russia, while the diversification of sources and regional interconnections are still on the drawing board;
- With reference to the frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space Russia often invokes 'precedent-setting' examples in the Balkan area, in particular the Kosovo case.

### 3. Perils of confined approaches and the need for a paradigm change

In the Black Sea region, the attempts in the past 24 years to build the structures of a regional cooperative framework mainly in the economic sphere have, for all practical purposes, stagnated. The overriding concerns have moved to the geostrategic domain as a result of a drastic alteration of the military balance, especial naval and air forces, and the foreseeable legal and territorial consequences of the annexation of Crimea, including the maritime space. Beyond the inertial soothing rhetoric, the existing commitments, from the flank limitation of conventional forces (CFE) to the operational ability of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the EU-sponsored Black Sea Synergy and even the Eastern Partnership are being increasingly questioned. At the same time, the 'Novorossia' project remains a stated strategic objective, which the Russian Federation does not seem to have renounced, as demonstrated by its complex political manoeuvres in the Republic of Moldova and the southern areas of Ukraine.

In the Balkans, recent developments, further augmented by the migration crisis may eventually pose a direct threat to Romania's security interests. The Dayton Accords, which put an end to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, fulfilled their role but also generated some unintended consequences that may acquire an explosive potential in the current circumstances.

The prospect of eventual accession that the European Union extended to the Western Balkan nations has so far concentrated mainly on transitional aspects such as the approximation of laws and building administrative capacity, while paying less attention to the still unresolved political problems and underlying tensions. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the Western Balkans now harbour the vulnerabilities that NATO has identified for both the Eastern and the Southern flanks of the Alliance.

Against this background the theoretical foundation of political action in the Black Sea and Balkan regions is likely to suffer some adjustments in terms of emphasis and nuance. Shifting circumstances call for a re-affirmation of the EU and NATO strategic interest to keep both areas within a Euro-Atlantic orbit through concrete measures designed to strengthen their security and stability. The strategic advance of Russia can be countered by encompassing the two regions in a consolidated regional concept to be reflected in the specific policies and programmes of the European and Atlantic institutions.

#### 4. The two flanks and the principle of communicating vessels

Maintaining the dichotomy between the two political and security spaces, East and South, may have awkward consequences. The first opens the possibility of underestimating Russia's strategic moves in the Eastern security space. The lessening of the interest shown by a possible majority of the NATO and/or EU members toward that space because of more kinetic confrontations in other spaces where strategic stakes are high may lead to imbalances with far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Russia could avail itself of the South/East distinction to overshadow the strategic relevance of its actions on the Eastern flank, which runs counter to the interests of the Euro-Atlantic community.

On the other hand, such developments may suggest (while not stating it officially) an approach of the communicating vessels type: awarding compensations in one space (e.g. East) for putative concessions in another (e.g. South) – or vice versa. From this perspective the notion (currently circulated in parts of Europe) of a strategic bargain based on mutual concessions at the level of big geopolitical actors without proper consultation can be construed as detrimental to smaller actors, including Romania. Such a possibility can be gleaned from tiny early signs: a relative softening of the military engagement of Russia in the Donbas area simultaneously with its intervention in Syria, tell-tale silence in parts of Europe about the developments in Ukraine and the consequences of the annexation of Crimea, questioning the wisdom of continued sanctions for Russia's unacceptable behaviour.

## 5. A new perspective on Romania's neighbourhood

The above elements, compounded by natural concern about the European future of the Republic of Moldova, plead for an update of the strategic vision and tactical priorities of the Romanian state in relation to its immediate vicinity including both the wider Black Sea region and the Balkan countries in a single conceptual framework.

Traditionally, Romania's regional policies, as shaped by its geographic location and historical experience, concentrated on three main directions: the Central-European and farther on Western dimension (with a Danube component), the Eastern dimension (including Black Sea regionalism), and the Balkan dimension. By Joining NATO and the European Union and sharing the common positions of the European and Atlantic allies on Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, Romania has strengthened its national security posture and its links with a values system which is also its own and with abiding sources of prosperity. Having thus attained its strategic objective in the Central-European and Western dimension, Romania's constructive regional action was able to concentrate on promoting cooperation in the wider Black Sea basin and on gradual improvement of relations with the Balkan countries through bilateral and trilateral arrangements. The changed geopolitical environment now calls for an adjustment of Romanian regional policy in line with the dynamic realities of the time and a new determination to assume the resulting responsibilities.

Geographically, Romania is situated at the intersection of the two axes, East and South. The tensions prevailing in the wider Black Sea region and in the Balkans merge and have a bearing, often simultaneously, on Bucharest. From the perspective of strategic relevance (geographic location plus Euro-Atlantic consistency) and economic substance (the largest GDP in the region) Romania is in a position to realize that a rigid distinction between flanks tends to become irrelevant, at least when applied to these two regions. Instead of dichotomy we may be well advised to resort to complementarity and see the two axes in correlation.

Romania's strategic interest is to have neighbours that are strong, stable, attached to the accepted rules of international behaviour and integrated with the European and Atlantic structures.

Romania has the natural calling, historical experience and required expertise to promote constructive regional action, duly correlated with its allies and partners. Conceptual innovation is a good place to start, while drawing attention to the dangers of inaction.