

## REPORT

# Russian Policy in the Black Sea Region

continuity, change and direct and indirect military and political implications of the Russian war against Ukraine



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Cover photo: A line ahead of modern Russian military naval battleships warships in the row, northern fleet and Baltic Sea fleet, summer sunny day.

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Black Sea and Sea of Azov region political map with capitals and borders. Body of water between Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Illustration. Gray illustration. Vector.

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# Russian Policy in the Black Sea Region – continuity, change and direct and indirect military and political implications of the Russian war against Ukraine

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## Russia's Strategy in the Black Sea: A historical perspective

In a display of its imperial ambitions, Russia's arrival at the shores of the Black Sea took place during the reign of Catherine the Great, championing the so called "Greek Project" – aiming to establish another form of the Byzantine Empire under its control, thus gaining access to the Mediterranean Sea and opening the way towards Russian domination in Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Prince Gregory Potemkin was the architect of Russia's first annexation of Crimea and the first governor-general of "New Russia" (Novorossiia) - regions that now make up southeastern Ukraine. He promoted – and persuaded Empress Catherine II – that Russia's fate lay to the south and advocated accordingly an expansion into the Balkans, Caucasus, and northern Middle East.<sup>2</sup> Russia's expansionist ambitions were solidified through the conquest of Crimea and *Novorossiia*, defining Russia's policy towards southern expansion for more than two centuries. The interest of obtaining control over the Black Sea region overlapped with Russia's ambition of championing Eastern Christianity in the shape of a "Third Rome".<sup>3</sup>

The rise of Russian influence in the Black Sea has been a long, drawn-out process, characterised by numerous wars between Russia and Turkey. Russia has slowly but steadily gained ground in the region against the Ottoman Empire: in 1774, by the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the Ottoman Empire had to accept the right for Russian-flagged merchant ships to sail without impediment in the Black Sea<sup>4</sup> – marking the beginning of Russian naval presence in the Black Sea. Passage through the Straits was obtained by Imperial Russia in the next century, by securing the treaties of Adrianople (1829) and Hünkâr İskelesi (1833). This treaty introduced a secret clause providing for the closure

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Ragsdale, „Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project”, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jan. 1988), pp. 91-117.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolas Gvosdev, „Russia's strategy in the Black Sea Basin”, *War on the Rocks*, August 2, 2018 <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/russias-strategy-in-the-black-sea-basin/>

<sup>3</sup> Tatiana Cojocari, "Russian Federation", in "The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia", p. 228-233, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. September 1, 2020. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-5703-1>

<sup>4</sup> Charles King, "The Black Sea: A History", *Oxford University Press*. March 18 2004. p. 140-141. <https://academic.oup.com/book/3351?login=false>

of the Dardanelle Straits at Russia's request by Turkey, a deal which was viewed negatively by the UK, whose strategic interests were affected by this deal between Russia and Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

For a while, Russia's imperial ambitions were thwarted by the Crimean War (1853-1856), which is regarded by historians as the only modern war on and for the Black Sea. In a period when Russia was successfully engaged in territorial expansion mainly at the expense of the Ottoman Empire, European powers led by Britain and France decided to intervene on the Turkish side in order to prevent the collapse of the regional balance of power.<sup>6</sup> The Ottomans and their allies inflicted a serious defeat on the Russian army, forcing Tsar Alexander II to sign the humiliating provisions of the Treaty of Paris in 1856. Besides losing access to the Mouths of the Danube, Russia was denied a naval force in the Black Sea. For a short period of time the Black Sea was demilitarized, and an International Commission safeguarded the freedom of navigation for all international shipping. These harsh conditions were nullified only in 1871, through the signing of the London Convention, a diplomatic move that enabled Russia to restore its Black Sea fleet.<sup>7</sup> After defeating the Ottomans in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Russian Empire continued to build up its economic and military strength and regained confidence as a major naval power, but suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese navy in the battle of Tsushima in 1905.<sup>8</sup>

The balance of power around the Black Sea was restructured in the aftermath of World War I, as the dissolution of the Russian and Ottoman Empires resulted in the emergence of many independent states, thus changing the geopolitical setup of the region.<sup>9</sup>

The situation of the Black Sea was redefined by two international agreements: the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and the Montreux Convention (1936). While the Treaty of Lausanne acknowledged the results of the Turkish War of Independence and integrated the newly

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Edgar Bailey, "British Policy and the Turkish Reform Movement", *Harvard University Press*, July 1, 1943. p. 49-50

[https://books.google.ro/books/about/British\\_Policy\\_and\\_the\\_Turkish\\_Reform\\_Mo.html?id=SMYIAQAAMAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.ro/books/about/British_Policy_and_the_Turkish_Reform_Mo.html?id=SMYIAQAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y)

<sup>6</sup> Paul Kerr, "The Crimean War", *Pan Macmillan*, October 6, 2000, p. 17.

<https://www.amazon.com/Crimean-War-Channel-History/dp/0752272489>

<sup>7</sup> Tatiana Cojocari, "Russian Federation", in "The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia", p. 228-233, *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*. September 1, 2020. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-5703-1>

<sup>8</sup> Jakub M. Godzimirski, Ina Holst Pedersen Kvam, Leonardo Dinu, George Scutaru, "Russian Military Reset in the High North and the Black Sea Region: Similarities and Differences". *Norwegian Institute of International Affaris; New Strategy Center*. May 2022. <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL-FLANKS-1-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Sergiu Celac, "Why the Black Sea matters", *New Strategy Center and Hudson Institute, Center for American Seapower*. June 2016. <http://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Policy-Paper-NSC-and-Center-for-American-Sea-Power.pdf>



established Turkish Republic in the international arena, it denied Ankara control over the straits.<sup>10</sup>

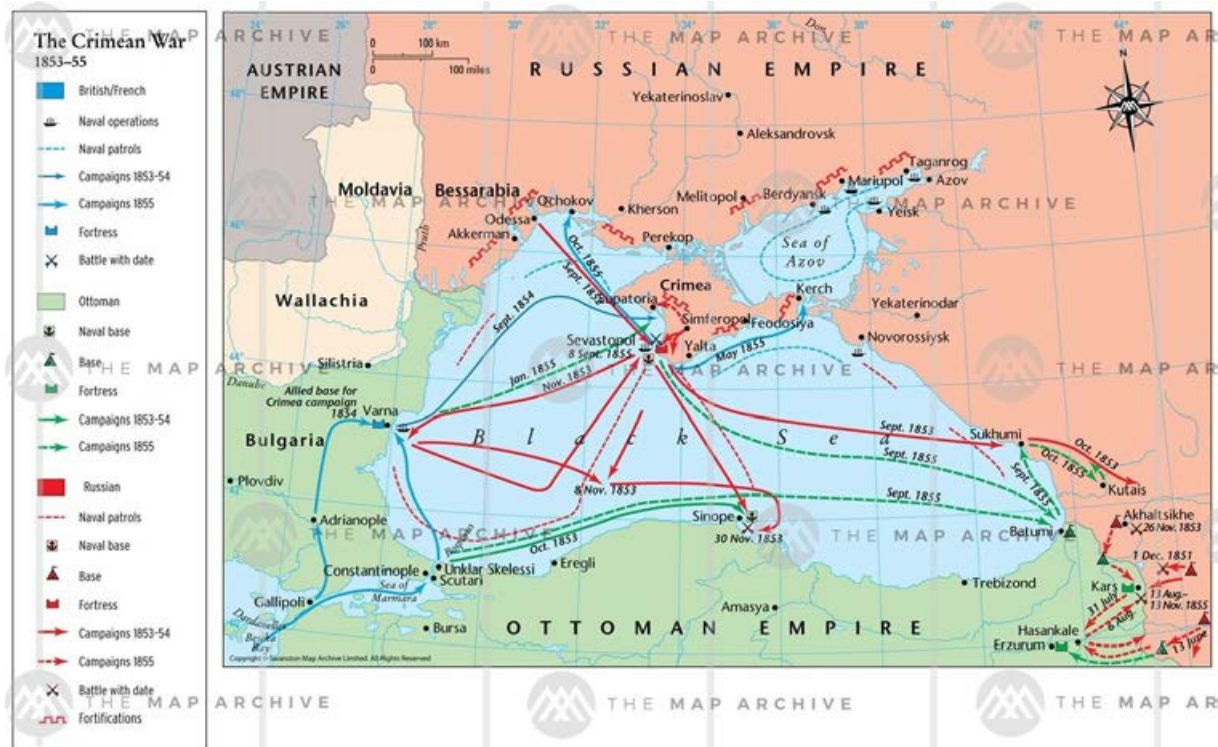


Fig. 1. Map of the Crimean War (1853-1855). Source: [The Map Archive](https://www.themaparchive.com/).

On April 10, 1936, the Turkish government sent an official note to the signatory states of the Convention of Lausanne, inviting them to participate in negotiations for a new regulation of the issue of the Straits, with the goal of ensuring the security and inviolability of the territory of the Turkish Republic and to facilitate the development of maritime trade between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The Soviet Union supported the Turkish attempt to regain control over the straits. The conference took place between 22 June and 21 July 1936 and was attended by Turkey, USSR, the United Kingdom, France, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Yugoslavia, Australia, and Japan. Notably absent was Italy, which refused to attend the summit since some participants had supported international sanctions against Rome for its aggression in Ethiopia. The convention establishes the legal framework that is still in effect today for the transit of military vessels through straits by non-riveran states, as well as the presence of such warships in the Black Sea for a period of 21 days<sup>11</sup>:

<sup>10</sup> Charles King, "The Black Sea: A History", Oxford University Press. March 18 2004. <https://academic.oup.com/book/3351?login=false>

<sup>11</sup> Jakub M. Godzimirski, Ina Holst Pedersen Kvam, Leonardo Dinu, George Scutaru, "Russian Military Reset in the High North and the Black Sea Region: Similarities and Differences". Norwegian Institute of International Affaris; New Strategy Center. May 2022. <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL-FLANKS-1-REPORT.pdf>

*“In time of peace, merchant ships shall enjoy complete freedom of passage and navigation in the Straits, day and night, whatever their flag and their cargo, without any formalities.” (Art. 2)*

*“In time of war, Turkey not being a belligerent state, merchant ships, whatever their flag and cargo, shall enjoy complete freedom of passage and navigation in the Straits” (Art. 4)*

*“In time of war, Turkey being a belligerent state, merchant ships not belonging to a country at war with Turkey shall enjoy freedom of passage and navigation in the Straits, under the condition of not helping the enemy in any way.” (Art. 5)*

*“In the case when Turkey would consider itself threatened by danger of impending war, it will maintain, however, the application of dispositions for Article 2, with the provision that ships will have to enter the Straits during the day and that the transition will have to be carried out on the path indicated, in each case, by the Turkish authorities.” (Art. 6).*

*“Overall maximum tonnage of all the foreign naval forces that may find themselves in the course of transit through the Straits shall not exceed 15,000 tons, except for the cases provided by article 11 and annex III of this Convention. However, the forces referred to in the preceding paragraph will not comprise more than nine vessels” (Art. 14).*

*„1. Global tonnage that Powers non-riparian to the Black Sea can have in this sea in time of peace, is limited as follows:*

*a) apart from the case referred to in paragraph b) below, the global tonnage of the aforementioned Powers shall not exceed 30,000 tons;*

*b) In the case when the tonnage of the most powerful fleet in the Black Sea would exceed, at any time, with at least 10,000 tons that of the most powerful fleet in that sea at the date of signing of this Convention, the global tonnage of 30,000 tons mentioned in paragraph a) will be increased in the same measure, up to a maximum of 45,000 tons.*

*c) the tonnage which any non-riparian Power will have in the Black Sea will be limited to two-thirds of the global tonnage referred to in paragraphs a) and b) above;*

*d) However, in the case when one or more non-riparian Black Sea Powers would like to send naval forces to its waters for a humanitarian purpose, these forces, whose total will not in any circumstances exceed 8,000 tons (...).*

*2. Whatever the purpose of their presence in the Black Sea, vessels of war of non-riparian Powers will not be able to remain in its waters more than twenty-one days” (Art. 18).*

*“In time of war, Turkey not being a belligerent State, warships shall enjoy complete freedom of passage and navigation through the Straits in conditions identical with those stipulated by Articles 10 to 18” (Art. 19).*

*“In time of war, Turkey being a belligerent State, the dispositions of Articles 10 to 18 shall not be applicable; the passage of vessels of war will be entirely left to the discretion of the Turkish Government” (Art. 20).*

*“In order to ensure the passage of civil aircraft between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the Turkish Government will indicate, apart from the forbidden zones of the Straits, airways intended for crossings; civil aircraft will be able to use of these paths by sending the Turkish Government a for-notice of three days for occasional over-flights, and a general fore-notice including data of passage for regular over-flight services” (Art. 23).<sup>12</sup>*



Fig. 2. Montreaux Convention (1936). Source: *Britannica*.

The Convention was seen as a partial diplomatic victory for the Soviet Union, as the treaty only limited the passage of non-riparian warships to the Black Sea. Attempts to change the treaty were met with resistance from Turkey and the Soviet Union - and

<sup>12</sup> “1936 CONVENTION REGARDING THE REGIME OF THE STRAITS”. <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/formidable/18/1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf>

later, the Russian Federation. To this day, the Convention remains the only legal instrument to regulate the status of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits.

By the late 1930s, just prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Soviet Union sought to gain strategic depth by expanding its domination westward. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, signed in August 1939, is a perfect illustration of Soviet policy towards southern expansion. As a result of this agreement, the USSR annexed the Baltic States, eastern Poland, and part of the territory of Romania at that time, i.e. northern Bessarabia, which extended Soviet Russia's Black Sea coast and offered it access to the Lower Danube.

In the aftermath of World War II, the geopolitical picture of the Black Sea region changed once again. „Stalin insisted on the renegotiation of the Convention by calling for a common defence point of Istanbul and the Straits with Turkey, but Russia's goal was not achieved, being perceived as an imperialist attempt on Turkish security”<sup>13</sup>. After the Cold War started, the Black Sea served as a delineation between ideological adversaries, separating Turkey (a NATO member) from the rest of the countries, as all political entities surrounding the Black Sea had become either parts of the USSR or communist satellite states, with Warsaw Treaty members (Bulgaria and Romania) controlling more than two-thirds of the littoral. With the outbreak of the Cold War, the Soviet Union progressively established itself as the main military power in the Black Sea region, later expanding to include a naval presence in the Mediterranean. The Soviet Union utilized the Fifth Squadron, which was subordinate to the Black Sea Fleet, to project might across the Straits and into the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, confronting NATO in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 1964.<sup>14</sup>

The historic political shifts of the 1989-1991 period, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union, altered the situation around the Black Sea once again. Until the end of the century, the Russian Federation faced internal turmoil and economic challenges, struggling to adjust to its new condition as a regional rather than global power. In international affairs Moscow took a relatively moderate stance, taking responsible positions in the UN Security Council and making declarative overtures to the West, while occasionally complaining that its interests were not sufficiently taken into account by the Western partners, mainly the US and NATO<sup>15</sup>. After the Cold War's

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<sup>13</sup> Tatiana Cojocari, “Russian Federation”, in “The Geopolitical Black Sea Encyclopaedia”, p. 228-233, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. September 1, 2020. <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-5703-1>

<sup>14</sup> Jakub M. Godzimirski, Ina Holst Pedersen Kvam, Leonardo Dinu, George Scutaru, “Russian Military Reset in the High North and the Black Sea Region: Similarities and Differences”. *Norwegian Institute of International Affaris; New Strategy Center*. May 2022. <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL-FLANKS-1-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Sergiu Celac, Dibenedetto, A. G. & Purcăruș, A. “ Militarization of the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean theatres: A new challenge to NATO”, *New Strategy Center & Centro Studi Internazionali (NSC/CSI)*, January 2019. <https://www.cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Militarization%20of%20the%20Black%20Sea.pdf>



victorious conclusion, a sense of euphoria began to set in, creating the idea that Western values and governance systems had triumphed for good. That was not the case.

The situation began to shift gradually once President Vladimir Putin assumed control of the Kremlin's levers of power. In his first two terms, he established political and economic stability relatively rapidly by imposing state central power in an increasingly authoritarian government. His antagonistic language was then converted into actions that clearly indicated neo-imperial intentions of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of Russia's neighbors.

The Black Sea is the region where Russia both created and maintained several frozen conflicts, from Transnistria to Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ossetia, to weaken the Republic of Moldova and Georgia and play an important role in the Caucasus, in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Black Sea region has proven most vulnerable since 2008. Here, Russia has launched its first kinetic actions, starting with the war in Georgia, followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and an invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The situation in the Black Sea took a decisive turn in 2008, when on August 8, Russian forces began the invasion of Georgia. While this conflict was over within a matter of days, its consequences are still felt to this day. Today, this event is recognized “as a landmark event in the transition from the era of post-Soviet cooperation between Russia and the West towards today’s Cold War climate”.<sup>16</sup> Since the war, Russia has increased its illegal military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali and has accelerated the process of de facto annexation, projecting strength in the wider Black Sea region. The West’s relatively muted response in 2008 created the perfect path to Russia’s actions in Ukraine later on in 2014.

### **Russian military buildup after the invasion of Crimea**

The examination of the Russian military buildup after the invasion of Crimea in 2014 will clearly demonstrate on the one hand the heavy militarization in the region since the date and the offensive Russian intentions to expand its presence and control over the Southern Ukraine, and to strengthen its strategic footprint in the Black Sea region.

Crimea annexation in March 2014 may be considered the starting point for the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, event preceded by the massive turmoil created by the Euromaidan (November 2013 - February 2014). The events, generated by the refusal of President Yanukovich to accept the Association Agreement, required for the European Union integration process, escalated and security forces were used in a large

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Dickinson. “The 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Putin’s green light”. *Atlantic Council*. August 7, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-2008-russo-georgian-war-putins-green-light/>

confrontation with the population. As a result, President Yanukovich fled the country in early 2014 and, after which he was voted out of office by the Ukrainian Parliament<sup>17</sup>.

In March 2014 the Russian troops occupied Crimea taking the entire region under its control. The justifying narrative used then is consistent with the one used eight years later, for the recent annexation referenda of the four regions Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia – the protection of the Russian population in these territories.

The following period was a period of Russian military build-up, as reported by both Ukrainian and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with troops and military equipment being positioned at the border with Ukrainian controlled territories. Persistent shelling and military harassment became common in the region.

European powers attempted to re-engage in a diplomatic dialogue with Russia, while also taking economic actions against it, but their effort was largely unsuccessful. These attempts came in the shape of the Minks Agreements, which aimed to establish a ceasefire between Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatists in Donbas, banning the use of heavy weapons in the region and returning the control of Donbas to the Ukrainian authorities. The inefficiency of the economic sanctions imposed by the European Union, together with the lack of EU efforts to reduce its energy dependence on Russia in the post-2014 geopolitical realities, only encouraged Putin to follow his expansionist plans.

Several hybrid attacks against Ukraine attributed to Russia have been executed before the invasion mainly after 2014. Thousands of cyberattacks have been executed disrupting severely the critical infrastructure. The Ukrainian electricity grid was targeted in 2015 leaving approximately 230,000 people with no power followed by an attack in Kyiv in 2016 creating a major blackout<sup>18</sup>. According to some analysts, Not Petya attack in 2017, was also attributed to Russia<sup>19</sup> targeting this time government and business companies with global effects and damages of billion dollars. Last but not the least, in 2022 prior to the invasion, Russian government performed a complex cyberattack<sup>20</sup> against most of the critical governmental institutions including MoD, MoI, banking system through a DDOS attack.

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<sup>17</sup> “Putin: Russia Helped Yanukovich to Flee Ukraine,” *BBC News*. October 24, 2014, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29761799>; NPR. “Ukrainian President Voted Out; Opposition Leader Freed”. February 22, 2014. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/02/22/281083380/ukrainian-protesters-uneasy-president-reportedly-leaves-kiev>

<sup>18</sup>“Ukraine Investigates Suspected Cyber Attack on Kiev Power Grid,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2016, sec. Commodities, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-cyber-attacks-idUSKBN1491ZF>

<sup>19</sup>Ellen Nakashima, “Russian Military Was behind ‘NotPetya’ Cyberattack in Ukraine, CIA Concludes,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-military-was-behind-notpetya-cyberattack-in-ukraine-cia-concludes/2018/01/12/048d8506-f7ca-11e7-b34a-b85626af34ef\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-military-was-behind-notpetya-cyberattack-in-ukraine-cia-concludes/2018/01/12/048d8506-f7ca-11e7-b34a-b85626af34ef_story.html).

<sup>20</sup>Polityuk Pavel, “Ukraine Investigates Suspected Cyber Attack on Kiev Power Grid,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-cyber-attacks-idUSKBN1491ZF>.

All the above-mentioned succession of events demonstrates the deliberate and meticulous long time Russian planning of the attack in Feb 2022 against Ukraine. We can assume at this point that the Crimea occupation was only the first step from an elaborated long-term plan against Ukraine. Most likely, the separation of the steps gave Putin time to observe NATO and EU reaction to Crimean occupation so he could calibrate further the means and ways to accomplish his goals. Unfortunately, the Western reaction was inadequate largely underestimating the mid-long-term effects, the sanctions imposed against Russia being noneffective.

The militarization of Crimea by the Russians aimed to consolidate control over the Black Sea and bolster the force projection and the strategic interests of Russia towards the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa and the Middle East. Russian intentions are to project and change the balance of power in Europe and Mediterranean through a consolidated control in the Black Sea. The Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol were included into the Southern Military District. All the essential civil services had been subsumed to this military effort aiming to support the development of the lodgment area.<sup>21</sup>

The important growth of the Russian military capabilities since 2014 and defensive consolidation at the border of Ukraine was followed by the creation of the two new Combined Armies. The 20<sup>th</sup> Combined Army<sup>22</sup> having the HQ in Voronezh is a part of the Western District and it has a C2 role for the units operating at the border. The 8<sup>th</sup> Combined Army<sup>23</sup> with its HQ in Rostov on Don and Novocherkassk, beside the C2 missions is to coordinate the separatist units in Donetsk and Luhansk controlled territories.<sup>2425</sup>

BAL coastal defense system as well as Bastion P were presented on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at the Victory Day during the military parade. Moreover, the Soviet-era coastal defense system was restored in Sevastopol. The S-400, in Feodosia, as well as the first Iskander M are reported to have been deployed in 2014.<sup>26</sup>

From the naval perspective, the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) has been dramatically boosted in the past decade, as it benefited from a State Armaments Procurement Program for 2011-

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<sup>21</sup> TASS. “Крым и Севастополь вошли в состав Южного военного округа России”. April 2, 2014. <https://tass.ru/politika/1093327>

<sup>22</sup> Konrad Muzyka, “Russian Forces in the Western Military District”, *Center for Naval Analyses*, June 2021 p.22 [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/Russian-Forces-in-the-Western-Military-District.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/Russian-Forces-in-the-Western-Military-District.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Konrad Muzyka, “Russian Forces in the Southern Military District”, *Center for Naval Analyses*, August 2021, p. 6, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/Russian-Forces-in-the-Southern-Military-District.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/Russian-Forces-in-the-Southern-Military-District.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Russian Military Buildup along the Ukrainian Border”. February 7, 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11806>

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.; Andrii Klymenko, Tetyana Guchakova. “The Militarization of Crimea as a Pan-European Threat and NATO Response. Third Edition”. August 21, 2021. <https://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/179147>

2020 (SAP-2020), which, among other things, also had in view the modernization of Russia's main naval instrument of power in the region. The SAP-2020's total budget amounts to 19 trillion rubles.<sup>27</sup> Naval power was, in fact, one of the main priorities of Russian post-2008 modernization efforts, as it received as much as 25% of the SAP-2020 budget.<sup>28</sup> Back in 2014, the BSF consisted of one guided missile cruiser, the Moskva (recently sunk by the Ukrainians), one missile cruiser, Kerch (scrapped in 2020)<sup>29</sup>, 8 frigates, one submarine, one destroyer, 10 corvettes, 9 minesweepers and other support ships. Almost all of these ships were Soviet-era vessels.<sup>30</sup> As a result of the modernization process, the fleet currently consists of 5 guided missile frigates, 11 missile corvettes, 7 diesel submarines, 6 anti-submarine corvettes, 3 large patrol ships, 14 minesweepers, 6 intelligence collection ships, together with landing, military cargo and other support ships, dispersed among the naval bases of Sevastopol, Novorossiysk, Feodosia and Temryuk.<sup>31</sup> The BSF will receive up to 14 corvettes in the years to come, out of which two Project 22160 patrol ships are expected to be commissioned until 2023. The BSF will also receive at least two frigates.<sup>32</sup> It is very likely that these modernization programs will be delayed due to the Western sanctions, as has happened in 2014.

The increased missile capabilities presence in Crimea was an indicator of the increased importance of Crimea which may lead to the Black Sea dominance or beyond, with implications for the Middle East and South Caucasus. The control over the Black Sea may place Russia into a dominant position over the Southern flank of Europe with large implications for NATO. The Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Sea Flotilla were equipped with ships that could launch Kalibr missiles. They were launched for the first time on

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<sup>27</sup> House of Commons Library. "Russia's Rearmament Programme". January 24, 2017. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7877/>

<sup>28</sup> Ben Hodges, Steven Horrell, Ivanna Kuz, "Russia's Militarization of the Black Sea: Implications for the United States and NATO", Center for European Policy Analysis, September 22, 2022, [https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russias-militarization-of-the-black-sea-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/#footnote\\_30\\_7954](https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/russias-militarization-of-the-black-sea-implications-for-the-united-states-and-nato/#footnote_30_7954)

<sup>29</sup> H I Sutton, "Goodbye To The Kara Class Cruiser", Forbes, February 19, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/02/19/goodbye-to-the-kara-class-cruiser/?sh=2d35a75072c9>

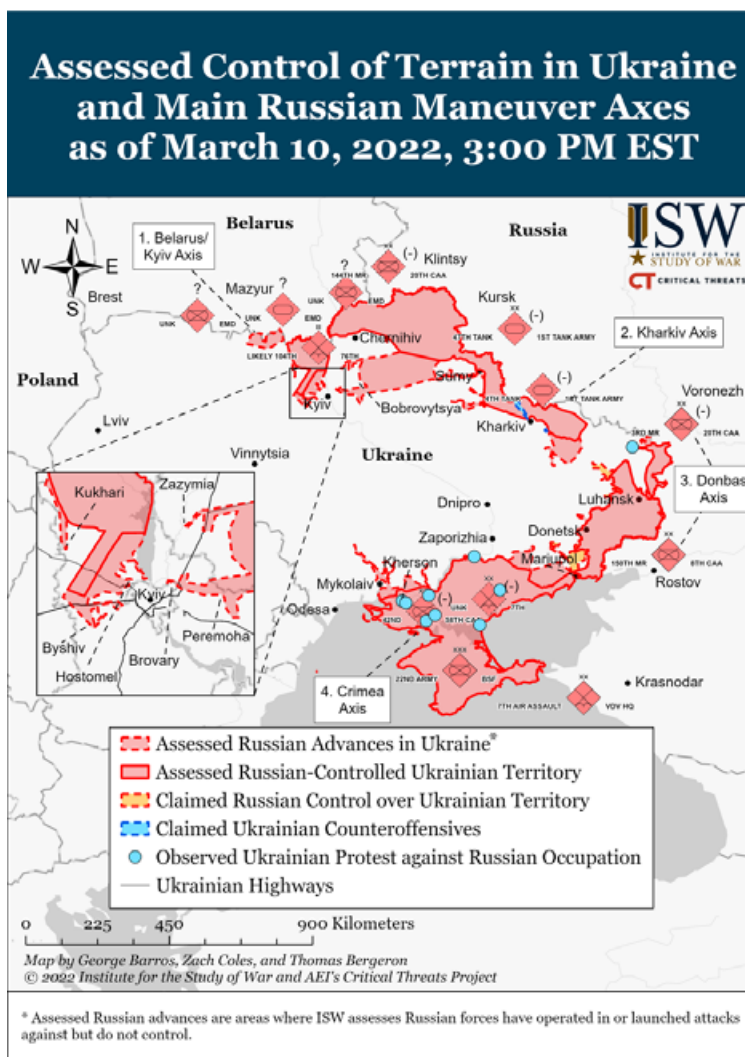
<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Bender, "Here Are The Ships In Russia's Legendary Black Sea Fleet", *Business Insider*, March 20, 2014. <https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-black-sea-fleet-2014-3>

<sup>31</sup> David Batashvili, "Russian Military Forces: Interactive Map", Rondeli Foundation, accessed October 25, 2022. <https://gfsis.org.ge/maps/russian-military-forces>

<sup>32</sup> Sidharth Kaushal, Sam Cranny-Evans, "How Russia's Black Sea Fleet Could Change the Equation in Ukraine", Royal United Services Institute, December 14, 2021. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/how-russias-black-sea-fleet-could-change-equation-ukraine>; Martin Manaranche, "Russia's Black Sea Fleet Completes the First Stage of its Modernization", *Naval News*, May 21, 2020. <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/05/russias-black-sea-fleet-completes-the-first-stage-of-its-modernization/>

various targets in Syria in 2015.<sup>33</sup> Now these ships are also used in the war against Ukraine.

### The current situation on the ground in Ukraine and the regional impact of the war



At the initial moment of the invasion, Russia had deployed under the pretext of a common exercise with Belarus around 150,000 troops next to the Ukrainian border<sup>34</sup> These troops were fully armed but surprisingly blocked in a static position for a two-week period, losing the main military advantage – the element of surprise. This could be explained by the wrong Intelligence Putin was fed with. The following factors were deemed favorable by Russian intelligence: the Taliban's surprise attack on Kabul and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, tensions between European allies and the US over NATO cost-sharing, European strategic autonomy, which Moscow believes could replace the US presence in Europe, a lack of cohesion among NATO states in the Black Sea region, Turkey's

Fig. 3. Situation of the War in Ukraine on March 10, 2022. Source: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-10>

special policy toward Russia and the discord between Turkey and the US, the incorrect assumption that a united NATO and EU decision on Russia would be impossible in the event of an attack, and last but not least the belief that the quick victory over Ukraine would make many European states unwilling to jeopardize relations with Russia. The

<sup>33</sup>Michael Kofman, "Russia's Arsenal in Syria: What do we know?", *War on the Rocks*, October 18, 2015. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/10/russias-arsenal-in-syria-what-do-we-know/>

<sup>34</sup>Jen Kirby. "Russia has 150,000 troops near Ukraine. What does that mean?". *VOX*. February 18, 2022. <https://www.vox.com/2022/2/18/22938886/russia-ukraine-crisis-troops-military-buildup>



EU was expected to be even less willing to act due to the nature of economic ties developed by different member states with Russia, the tensions in the Balkans region coming to complete this pre-invasion picture. It is reasonable to assess at this point that Russia had developed and executed a complex hybrid plan by influencing a series of European countries to achieve this goal – a potential crack in NATO cohesion and weakened transatlantic bond. Failing to achieve his objective, Putin simply had no other option but to proceed with plan B: a full-scale attack on Ukraine.

After eight month of conflict four phases of military conduct of the aggression can be discerned:

- The first includes the initial air strikes and the attack against Ukrainian Command and Control system
- The second one was the attempt to secure Kyiv and eliminate the leadership
- The third is the military effort shift to the South and culminates with the referenda and the annexation of the new territories Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts
- The last one ongoing, seems to be a change in Russian AF strategy by adopting a violent approach with air, missile and drones strikes with the intent to create fear.



Fig. 4. Situation of the war in Ukraine as of October 22, 2022. Source: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/ukraine-conflict-updates>

In the initial phase of invasion heavy air and missile attacks were conducted, with the intent to create the Russian air dominance and to destroy the Ukrainian command and control systems. It is important to mention the hesitations both by Ukrainian and by European countries in accepting the US Intelligence warning on the imminence of the attack. Although this may have

not solved all the problems, it certainly would have given more time for preparations and limit the damages, especially from the air defense perspective, but not only.

Once the attack started it was clear that the top priority was the elimination of the Kyiv regime which was viewed as a precondition for the success of the whole operation that involved also actions from the territory of Belarus. By launching not a full-scale war but a “special military operation” Putin wanted to avoid the full mobilization and international legal sanctions, more precisely from UN.

The forces used for this original mission proved to be unprepared and supported with virtually no or poor tactical actionable intelligence. Their hectic actions ended up in a shameful manner with lot of equipment and personnel being either captured or forced to retreat. However, President Zelensky and his military advisers proved to be prepared for this and moreover they put in place effective military and communicative counter-measures.

An important innovative intelligence support came from the US and the UK through an aggressive and effective open source based STRATCOM. This approach meant that the usually classified information regarding Russian actions or intentions would be made public. This move has exposed Putin at large and has created a serious strategic dilemma to the Russian AF. For instance, the US decision to expose the Russian intention to launch a full-scale invasion on Ukraine days before the invasion, which might have altered the Russian calendar of the invasion. The regular intelligence updates published by the British MOD have also offered strategic details about the war in the air to the large public. The fact that the United States and the United Kingdom released classified information about Russia's actions helped the public better understand the danger of war, so that when the aggression broke out, it was easier to build up sympathy for Ukraine, as the public was already somewhat familiar with the subject. The policy of supporting Ukraine was much easier to implement with massive popular support, and building this support was also done with the help of this blame and shame policy.

The Info-Campaign war, some other times considered Putin's advantage, is so far won by Ukraine at large. Kyiv's leadership ability to anticipate, expose in real time and exploit Russian actions with negative effect is remarkable. Moreover, the dissemination of the information is based on modern means, primarily via social networks which creates a worldwide coverage almost in real time.

If initially the attempt of Kyiv's leadership annihilation was executed by small groups operating rather clandestine, the second part of this phase consisted of Russian regular troops advancement from East and North. The Russian military maneuver is simply hard to be understood by any military personnel. The slowness of armored convoys and their formations made them easy targets for Ukrainian forces. Beside the morale effects the strikes executed by Ukrainian AF by different means, including drones, simply blocked

the Russian convoys advancement and eventually forced them to withdraw or divert their courses of action. This was the first sign of the difference in training and doctrinal approach between the two opponents. Russian AF have displayed a severe incapacity to adapt to the reality of the new war being stocked technologically and doctrinal in a Soviet-era format. On the other hand, Ukrainian AF, trained in the last years under NATO standards and procedures have employed innovative solutions on the ground both from technical as well as procedural perspectives, low level commanders assuming responsibilities based on the situation on the ground. Equipment was effectively purchased, very often from commercial sources, providing a superior situational awareness and an adequate response in the absence of adequate Russian countermeasures. Nevertheless, the supply from the West with MANPADs, HIMARS, short range artillery and air drones played a key part in helping the Ukrainian AF deal with the challenges in this phase of the war.

Once Putin realized that attack on Kyiv was about to become a major strategic error that could bring a potential end to his career and reputation, he decided to change the plans and focus on the South, more precisely on the territories later occupied and annexed to Russia by illegal referenda. The Ukrainian counterattacks recovering important territories from Russian AF are of a tremendous importance for the morale of the troops but also a very strong message sent to the free world.

To understand the current developments, we need more elements in place. The partial mobilization ordered by Putin<sup>35</sup> is a clear sign of weakness and has the potential to severely undermine his authority in Kremlin, mostly by the civilian population while a total mobilization is likely to produce the collapse of the regime in Kremlin. We assess this is the reason for maintaining the “Special Operation” status of the military activities at this point. The new reservists will most likely serve for defending the new occupied territories as their combat experience is extremely limited. The regular forces will allegedly try to maintain the regular front line of the present alignment. In addition to this operational picture, nuclear capabilities both tactical and strategic need to be remembered. The reports highlight the provision of nuclear warheads in Crimea, and this is likely to be replicated in the new occupied territories. This demonstrates a Russian consolidation on this sea inland region with a heavy nuclear deterrence component. The latest attacks on Kerch bridge and Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant should be seen in this context.

The latest Russian strikes are likely to be part of a shift in the Russian military strategy. The new AF commander, general Surovikin is well known from Syria for his violent methods and application of overwhelming fire power to achieve his military objectives.

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<sup>35</sup> NPR. “Putin is mobilizing hundreds of thousands of Russian reservists to fight in Ukraine”. September 21, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/21/1124215514/putin-announces-a-partial-military-mobilization-for-russian-citizens>

The present waves of air, missile and drone strikes targeting Ukrainian critical infrastructure, including the energy grid and civilian infrastructure and population are likely to be a sign of military incapacity to deliver results on the ground. But it may also buy more time to consolidate the new occupied territories and regroup and resupply the Russian AF. Some analysts talk about a new offensive in Feb-Mar next year, but it will largely be dependent on the Ukrainian Forces reaction and resilience. Nevertheless, the Western support to Ukraine during the wintertime may be crucial for the outcome of this war. The European resilience will be likely tested by Moscow as the energy prices may trigger European populations' violent reactions. Russia also can use various hybrid means to undermine Western governments and influence their decisions on a return to the European energy cooperation with Russia. This could weaken NATO-EU cohesion and solidarity and subsequently their support to Ukraine.

The ongoing war and its evolution have highlighted the importance of the Black Sea inland. Romania has called for a particular attention in this area, but this was difficult due to the lack of cohesion between the NATO Black Sea states. Turkey has a cordial attitude towards Russia, and Bulgaria was reluctant to undertake initiatives that would disturb Moscow - unlike Poland and the Baltic states, which together advocate for the strategic importance of the Baltic Sea region. In the Black Sea region, Romania had to act many times alone by relying mostly on the support of the USA. From these considerations, the strategic partnership is vital for Romania from a security perspective. The present picture places Russia in a dominant position in the Black Sea area with the possibility of affecting the security of other countries, not only Ukraine, such as the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, if Russia wins the war in Ukraine. There is therefore a need for a greater involvement of the USA and a predictable policy on multiple military, political and economic levels to increase the resilience of the states in the region in the face of Russia's hybrid actions. That is precisely why the initiative of the US Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D) and Mitt Romney (R) who submitted a project for a Black Sea strategy and its adoption in the US Senate calling for development by the State Department and the Pentagon, of a long-term US strategy for the Black Sea, is so important.<sup>36</sup>

Russia is expected to seek countering these efforts of NATO/US by using hybrid tactics, the variables being the NATO level of ambitions for Black Sea, the US will for a permanent deployment in the area to clear and secure Ukrainian coastal waters from the Romanian border to Odessa at a minimum. On the other hand, Russia is likely to try to consolidate the new occupied territories in the South of Ukraine, simultaneously

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<sup>36</sup>“Shaheen, Romney Unveil New Bipartisan Bill to Establish U.S. Strategy Toward Black Sea Region | U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire”. July 12, 2022. <https://www.shaheen.senate.gov/news/press/shaheen-romney-unveil-new-bipartisan-bill-to-establish-us-strategy-toward-black-sea-region>.

with the air strikes targeting critical infrastructure with the intent to disrupt the strong Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Putin is likely to be internally affected by the recent partial mobilization. Russia's record-low unemployment rate means that there is little workforce in reserve to substitute the recruited men. The 300,000 conscripts account for approximately 1% of Russia's active workforce.<sup>37</sup> A full mobilization could be fatal for Putin's regime, because an ensuing economic downturn could have catastrophic effects on Russia's population. The efficiency of the drafting process is also questionable. As many as four unsuccessful attempts for mobilization, known as BARS volunteers, have been conducted last year, exposing systemic problems in the military hierarchy, especially in the Russian MOD.<sup>38</sup>

The Info Campaign war seems to be won by Kyiv at large. Ukrainian ability to understand the importance of social media as a fastest vector of narrative propagation was key. Information about crucial developments on the ground was disseminated almost instantly in every corner of the world by these means which have undermined the credibility of Putin's propaganda. This ability to win the information war may be an important factor in winning the kinetic war as well.

Overall Russian AF have demonstrated the inability to fight the new war, remaining trapped in the old Soviet-era tactics and equipment. On the other hand, Ukrainian AF have displayed innovative solutions on the battlefield, adapted tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) in response to the real conditions, showing high level of resilience and strong motivation.

The importance of the Ukrainian recent attack on the Kerch bridge should be seen in the light of its strategic relevance for deploying equipment far more quickly than on ferries through Kerch Straits. This route was extensively used during the military escalation in South and East of Ukraine. The control over Black Sea and Azov Sea has placed Russia into a dominant naval position with a possibility to control/obstruct the merchant ships movements.

Although the impact of recent annexation of the new territories, Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia oblasts is too early to be fully analyzed, it is reasonable to assess the same scenario as in Crimea. Russia is likely to strengthen the military presence and consolidate its posture in the same manner. The maritime control permits regular reinforcements of the regions from the sea while the defense exposure is limited to the land only, while Russia controls Black Sea waters at this moment, with a limited exception – the S-E part of Ukraine. The Odesa region becomes critical under these

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<sup>37</sup> "Putin's Mobilization Hits Russia's Economy in Its Weak Spots", *Bloomberg News*, September 27, 2022. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-27/putin-s-mobilization-hits-russia-s-economy-in-its-weak-spots>

<sup>38</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Russian Military Buildup along the Ukrainian Border". February 7, 2022. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11806>



circumstances providing the only maritime access for shipment, including the economical one. The exports of Ukrainian goods have already been affected by the Russian maritime blockage and they operate with a limited capacity. However, in case of a successful Russian advancement to Odesa, the entire Ukrainian access to Black Sea will be denied, suffocating the entire economy. But there are also military effects foreseen in this case, the Russian access to the Danube gates placing NATO in contact with Russia. Their permanent presence will also affect the extraction of hydrocarbons in the adjacent areas, including Romania. This will deprive several countries of supplies from this source and consequently increase their dependence on Russian sources.

If Russia were to secure and consolidate the presence in these regions, this would mean a shift from a legal global problem into a security one, as Russia would be tempted to use this region to project military power with major ramifications, including NATO. In these conditions it would be completely realistic to think about Russia taking steps against Georgia and Moldova, using the occupied Ukrainian territories as a launching base.

The NATO presence in Black Sea is the only solution to offer a credible deterrence against Russian forces. The strong naval NATO nations should create a permanent credible naval force presence in the region completing the latest efforts on securing the Eastern Flank. The initiative may be the key here, a NATO naval presence in the undisputed waters having the potential to prevent further Russian advancements. The naval force should be heavy intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance (ISR) force equipped with a large monitoring capacity. This force should be supported from shore by coastal radars and antiship missiles under a robust C2 architecture. Until a permanent solution is found, rotational forces can initiate the process. However, the key question is who is to take the initiative. The effects will most likely be seen in mid-long term perspective and a later change in intention will be extremely difficult. Bulgaria and Turkey need to be involved in this effort, as such naval initiatives are impossible to be implemented alone. It will be a long and difficult process and for it to be successful the United States must be involved first. NATO must have a long-term credible and predictable approach to these questions and not only act in times of crisis.

### **Possible scenarios**

For Vladimir Putin, the political goal of destroying Ukraine remains in place, which cannot be done without occupying the entire Black Sea coast of Ukraine. That is why we believe that the most important military objective in the coming period will be to hold Kherson, prevent Ukraine from liberating the land corridor between Donbass and Crimea and resume the offensive towards Mykolaiv and Odessa.

The loss of the land corridor will bring back to the table the old problems Russia faced before the outbreak of aggression on 24 February 2022:

1. Lack of direct access to Crimea, which becomes vital, as it has been proven that the bridge over the Kerch Strait can be hit;
2. Ensuring a steady flow of a significant amount of water from the Dnieper to Crimea. Maintaining control over Nova Kakhovka and the water supply channel to Crimea is particularly important for Russia. Before the occupation of Crimea, 140.000 hectares were irrigated, and after the occupation of Crimea, and following the cut off of water supply by Ukraine, only 13.400 hectares remained irrigated.<sup>39</sup>

Strategically, Kherson is important because it is the only Ukrainian port on the Black Sea controlled by Russia at the moment, and it also ensures control of the Dnieper.

Beyond these issues, the Kremlin now has a political one to contend with. From Russia's point of view, the regions illegally annexed from Ukraine (Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson) have become an integral part of the Russian state. It will be difficult for Putin to explain to his own citizens how Russia is losing recently "liberated" territories as a result of a war that has isolated Russia and is generating a long series of economic and social difficulties. Add to that the human toll, which is rendered unnecessary as long as the conquests are threatened by the Ukrainian offensive.

Given that political objectives have always prevailed over all other considerations, including human losses, both during the Tsarist and Soviet periods, it should be noted that Vladimir Putin will attempt not only to halt the Ukrainian offensive, but also to launch an attack to conquer the Ukrainian Black Sea coast. If the Ukrainian offensive is halted, Russia could undertake an offensive aiming at seizing Mykolaiv and Odessa in January-March, depending on the accumulation of fresh reservists and war equipment brought in from other areas of the nation. A Russian victory would pave the way for a land corridor to Transnistria as well as a continuation of the direction of attack towards the Danube mouths.

For Romania, the greatest geostrategic nightmare would be for Russia to reach the mouths of the Danube again after two centuries. Such a hypothesis opens several other scenarios for the Republic of Moldova. In our opinion, there are three possible scenarios:

- Russia's annexation of Transnistria. The pretext would be activating the referendum held in Transnistria in 2006 (at the time 98% of voters voted for

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<sup>39</sup> Alla Hurska, "Water Crises and the Looming Ecological Catastrophe in Occupied Crimea and Devastated Donbas". *Jamestown Foundation*, January 21, 2022. [https://jamestown.org/program/water-crises-and-the-looming-ecological-catastrophe-in-occupied-crimea-and-devastated-donbas/#\\_ftn14](https://jamestown.org/program/water-crises-and-the-looming-ecological-catastrophe-in-occupied-crimea-and-devastated-donbas/#_ftn14); Sonia Lukashova, Kateryna Reshchuk. "Що відбувається з окупованим Кримом без дніпровської води. 13 фактів". *Pravda*. February 19, 2020. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2020/02/19/7240920/>

Transnistria's independence and possible integration into the Russian Federation);<sup>40</sup>

- Russia has the possibility to generate a secessionist movement in the south of the Republic of Moldova, in Găgăuzia<sup>41</sup>, demanding a union with Russia.

Both options can be accompanied by political, military and economic pressure to install a Russian puppet government in Chişinău.

- The full occupation of the Republic of Moldova by Russia.

Moldova could be accused of not respecting the rights of Russian-speaking minorities, Russia can orchestrate social unrest, and create incidents on the line of contact with the breakaway region of Transnistria to justify its intervention.

Russia, moreover, has issued various warnings and accusations against the pro-Western government in Chişinău, building pretexts that can be used in the future. Some examples are:

- In April 2022, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova called Moldova's decision to ban the St. George ribbon a betrayal. "I understand that Moldova is under pressure, but there are things that cannot be betrayed," she stated.<sup>42</sup>
- On April 22, two months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a Russian military commander suggested that Moscow hopes to establish a corridor through southern Ukraine to Transnistria. Rustam Minnekaev, acting commander of Russia's Central Military District, stated: "Control over the south of Ukraine is another way out to Transnistria, where there are also facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population".<sup>43</sup>
- Since the end of summer and into October protests took place against Maia Sandu's government. Against the growing concerns regarding energy prices, and given Moldova's reliance on Russian gas, protesters have accused Sandu of failing to negotiate a more reasonable gas price with Moscow. Many people set up a tent camp outside the government headquarters, vowing to stay until Sandu resigns

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<sup>40</sup> Beat Müller, "Transnistrische Moldawische Republik (Moldawien) - Unabhängigkeitskurs Und Beitritt Zu Russland". September 17, 2016. *Direct Democracy*. <https://www.sudd.ch/event.php?lang=en&id=mdo12006>

<sup>41</sup> Găgăuzia is an autonomous territorial unit of Moldova, established in 1995. Its autonomy is ethnically motivated by the Gagauz people's preponderance in the region, who are largely Orthodox Turkic-speaking people.

<sup>42</sup> "Zakharova called the ban on the St. George ribbon in Moldova a betrayal", *Teller Report*, April 20, 2022. <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2022-04-20-zakharova-called-the-ban-on-the-st-george-ribbon-in-moldova-a-betrayal.SiejnopE5.html>

<sup>43</sup> Claire Parker. "What is Transnistria, and will Russia advance toward Moldova?". *The Washington Post*. April 22, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/22/ukraine-moldova-transnistria-russia/>; Interfax. Военные РФ заявили о планах обеспечить сухопутный коридор в Крым и выход к Приднестровью. April 22, 2022. <https://www.interfax.ru/world/837353>

and calls early elections.<sup>44</sup> In Găgăuzia protesters demanded that Chișinău should resume negotiations with Moscow, and also echoed conspirationist theories propagated by Russia claiming that Romania is attempting to “occupy” the Republic of Moldova.<sup>45</sup>

- From Putin's perspective, the occupation of the entire territory of the Republic of Moldova may have a historical justification, taking into account that between 1812-1918, the Tsarist Empire had Moldova within its borders, in the form of the Bessarabia Governorate. This recourse to history has become part of official policy and was very clearly explained by Putin in his speech in St Petersburg.<sup>46</sup>
- The occupation of the Republic of Moldova poses no military problems for Russia. Moldova's army numbers just 6,000 soldiers, according to Moldovan Defence Minister Anatoly Nosaty.<sup>47</sup>, and while the military spending has been increased these past years, reaching around 914 million Moldovan lei in 2022, these numbers are only around 0.4-0.5% of GDP.<sup>48</sup> For context, Moldova's GDP in 2021 was 11,9 billion dollars.<sup>49</sup>
- Moldova is a small country, it does not have enough territory so that the Russian offensive can be stopped by various natural obstacles. Such a hypothesis will generate a massive flow of refugees to Romania, given the common language and the special bond between Romania and Moldova. The situation could also cause serious problems for Romania internally, as many Romanians may consider it cowardly that Romania would not help the Republic of Moldova, and a parallel could easily be drawn with June 1940, when the Romanian Army and Administration had to withdraw within 48 hours from Bessarabia (now the Republic of Moldova) following the Soviet ultimatum.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Alexander Tanas, “Thousands take part in anti-government protest in Moldova”. September 19, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/thousands-take-part-anti-government-protest-moldova-2022-09-18/>

<sup>45</sup> G4Media. “Discurs inflamator în regiunea autonomă Găgăuzia: mai mulți lideri cer protecție Rusiei și Turciei împotriva României”. Aug 23, 2022. <https://www.g4media.ro/discurs-inflamatoriu-in-regiunea-autonoma-gagauzia-mai-multi-lideri-cer-protectie-rusiei-si-turciei-impotriva-romaniei.html>

<sup>46</sup> BBC. “Путин сравнил себя с Петром I и назвал своей задачей возвращение территорий”. Jun 9, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-61749842>

<sup>47</sup> Anatol Cibotari. „Ministrul Apărării: „Armata Națională este pregătită pentru a răspunde provocărilor militare”. Câți militari are Republica Moldova”. *Republica Media*. October 10, 2022. <https://replicamedia.md/ro/article/qew95Ax29/ministrul-apararii-armata-nationala-este-pregatita-pentru-a-raspunde-provocarilor-militare-cati-militari-are-republica-moldova.html>

<sup>48</sup> Jurnal Moldova. “Cheltuielile pentru apărare ale Republicii Moldova vor crește cu peste jumătate de miliard de lei”. October 19, 2022. <https://www.jurnal.md/ro/news/e092ae6d9b594877/cheltuielile-pentru-aparare-ale-republicii-moldova-vor-creste-cu-peste-jumatate-de-miliard-de-lei.html>

<sup>49</sup> The World Bank. “Moldova prezentare generală”. <https://www.worldbank.org/ro/country/moldova/overview#1>

<sup>50</sup> On 23 August 1939, Germany and Russia concluded the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which provided for the USSR to occupy the Baltic States, eastern Poland, Bukovina, part of Romania: northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, i.e. the territory between the Prut and the Dniester. On June 26, 1940, a Soviet ultimatum was issued, when a note was sent to the Romanian government demanding the evacuation of the Romanian military and civil administration from Bessarabia and the northern part of Bukovina. On June 28, 1940,

If it comes to that, international protests or new sanctions will not matter to Putin, and the possibility of annexing new territories to Russia will be more tempting. What matters to Putin is his place in Russia's history, and he wants to be placed alongside great tsars like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, who brought Russia significant territorial gains.

- A Ukrainian pre-emptive attack on Transnistria

Beyond these three scenarios, there may be another, with Ukraine reacting to a Russian offensive on Mykolaiv and Odessa by launching a pre-emptive strike Russian troops deployed in Transnistria. Transnistria is a separatist territory that is internationally recognised as a part of Moldova under military occupation by Russia<sup>51</sup>, and it marks Russia's first frozen conflict in the former Soviet space. Political differences between Tiraspol and Chişinău erupted into open violence in 1992, prompting the Russian 14th Army, which had been stationed in Transnistria since the 1950s, to intervene. This action resulted in a stalemate, which led to the current frozen conflict. In the decades since, Russia has ensured that the conflict will not be resolved.<sup>52</sup> The official position of the government in Tiraspol also maintains that Transnistria is Russian, and will be formally recognized as such one day.<sup>53</sup>

Transnistria has an army of around 5,000 soldiers<sup>54</sup>, while Russia has a military contingent of around 1,500-1,600 military personnel stationed in Transnistria, which has, over time, strengthened the Kremlin's position. The troops comprise two components, namely a peacekeeping contingent, that has been stationed since the

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the Romanian government agreed to submit to Soviet demands on the advice of both Germany and Italy. For more information regarding this event: Eric Victor. "The Soviet Occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina". *Historia*. <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/the-soviet-occupation-of-bessarabia-and-northern-578853.html>; George Ciorănescu, "40th Anniversary of Annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina", *Radio Free Europe Research*, July 23, 1980. [http://storage.osaarchivum.org/low/bf/9d/bf9d5971-150f-4be8-86a5-f7a9cb50f999\\_1.pdf](http://storage.osaarchivum.org/low/bf/9d/bf9d5971-150f-4be8-86a5-f7a9cb50f999_1.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Madalin Necsutu. "Council of Europe Designates Transnistria 'Russian Occupied Territory'". *Balkan Insight*. March 16, 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/16/council-of-europe-designates-transnistria-russian-occupied-territory/>

<sup>52</sup> William Zadeskey. "Transnistria: The History Behind the Russian-backed Region". July 2022. [https://origins.osu.edu/read/transnistria-history-behind-russian-backed-region?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://origins.osu.edu/read/transnistria-history-behind-russian-backed-region?language_content_entity=en)

<sup>53</sup> Vladimir Solovyov. "Ukraine War Risks Repercussions for Transnistria". *Carnegie Politika*. September 23, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87986>

<sup>54</sup> Mădălin Necşuţu. „ANALIZĂ Ce trupe și armament există în Transnistria. Forțele interne numără circa 5.000 de militari, iar Rusia are peste 1.600 de trupe staționate ilegal pentru a păzi uriașele depozite de muniții din perioada sovietică”. *G4Media*. April 27, 2022. <https://www.g4media.ro/analiza-ce-trupe-si-armament-exista-in-transnistria-fortele-interne-numara-circa-5-000-de-militari-iar-rusia-are-peste-1-600-de-trupe-stationate-ilegal-pentru-a-pazi-urias-urile-depoziite-de-munitii-din.html>



1990s, and Russian troops left to guard the Soviet-era ammunition depot in Cobasna, a Transnistrian village close to the Ukrainian border.<sup>55</sup>

There is no official information regarding the current ammunition stationed at the depot in Cobasna, but given its position close to the border, it is very possible that Ukraine would count it in its war with Russia. Back in 2007, according to OSCE data, around 20.000 tons of arms and munitions were stocked in Cobasna.<sup>56</sup> The amount of ammunition stocked there has long served as a cause of concern. According to a 2015 study by the Academy of Sciences of Moldova, a possible explosion of the Cobasna military depot could be compared to the detonation of a 10-kiloton nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.<sup>57</sup> Following a series of attacks in Transnistria in 2022, concerns have risen regarding the stability of the breakaway region and a possible spillover of the conflict.

Such a scenario could be possible if the Russians attack Odessa and the Ukrainians decide to launch a preemptive strike. Legally, Transnistria is part of Moldova, and to do so, Ukraine would at least have to inform the authorities in Chişinău beforehand. In April 2022, Oleksii Arestovich, advisor to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, made a controversial statement: "The Republic of Moldova is our close neighbor, and it is not indifferent to us. We have always been close. We can only intervene after an official request because Transnistria is, after all, a territory of Moldova. We can solve the Transnistrian problem at the snap of a finger, if need be [...] The Republic of Moldova could be in big trouble if they are the ones to attack. The best thing Chişinău can do at this point is to ask Ukraine and Romania for help." This statement raised the Kremlin's dissatisfaction, being described as "quite provoking".<sup>58</sup>

Russia's seizure of the Ukrainian coastline and reaching the Danube mouths would give Russia the opportunity to economically suffocate Ukraine, depriving it of any ports on the Black Sea or Danube. Immediately after the attack was launched in February 2022, Russia instituted a naval blockade that caused significant losses to Ukraine's economy. Every day, Ukraine lost \$170 million and significantly reduced its exports of goods<sup>59</sup>. This

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<sup>55</sup> Ibidem.; Vitalie Călugăreanu. "Împuşcături în preajma celui mai mare depozit de armament din Europa de Est". *Deutsche Welle*. April 27, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/ro/%C3%AEmpu%C8%99c%C4%83turi-%C3%AEn-preajma-celui-mai-mare-depozi-t-de-armament-din-europa-de-est/a-6161187>

<sup>56</sup> Interlic. "OSCE: Depozitul de la Cobasna - un dezastru ecologic și uman". May 24, 2007. <http://www.interlic.md/2007-05-24/869-869.html>

<sup>57</sup> Vitalie Călugăreanu. "Împuşcături în preajma celui mai mare depozit de armament din Europa de Est". *Deutsche Welle*. April 27, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/ro/%C3%AEmpu%C8%99c%C4%83turi-%C3%AEn-preajma-celui-mai-mare-depozi-t-de-armament-din-europa-de-est/a-6161187>

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> Landlord. У морських портах України заблоковано майже 70 суден, ми втрачаємо по \$170 млн щодня. May 10, 2022. <https://landlord.ua/news/u-morskykh-portakh-ukrainy-zablokovano-maizhe-70-suden-my-vtrachaiemo-po-170-mln-shchodnia/>

blockade continued until the liberation of Snake Island on June 30, 2022 and the signing of the UN grain corridor agreement in Istanbul, Turkey, on July 23, 2022.<sup>60</sup>

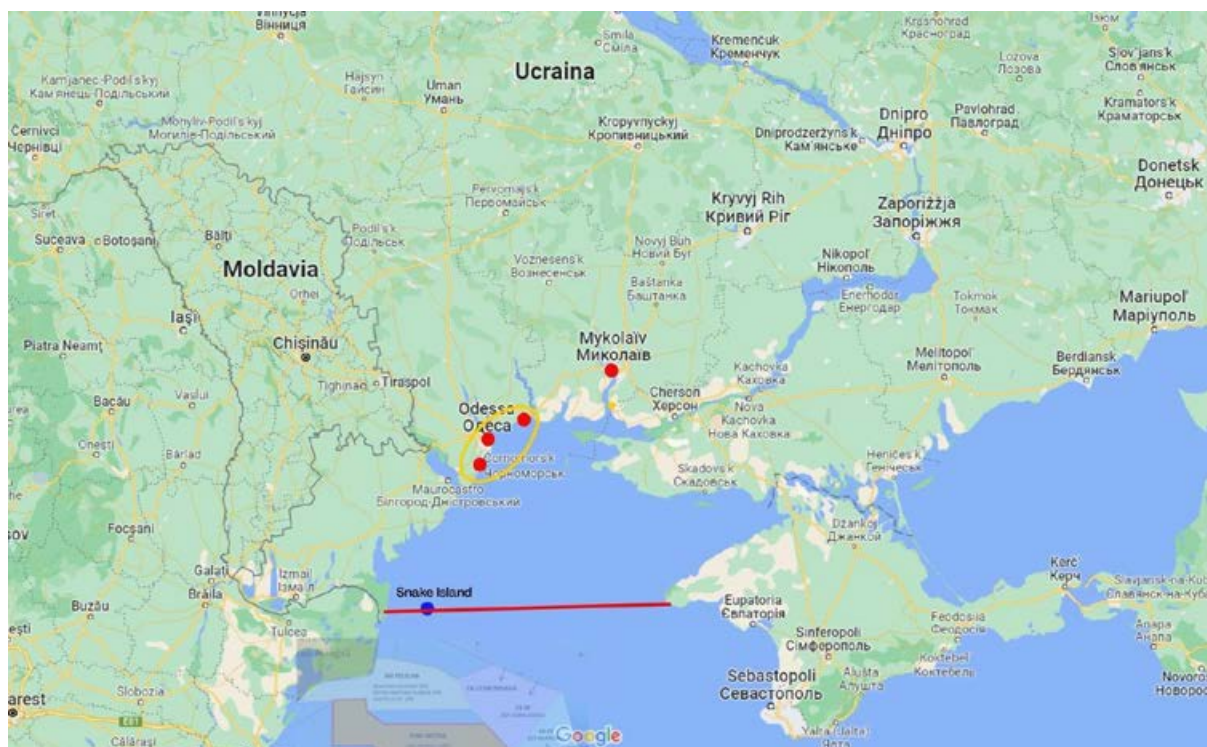


Fig. 5. Russia's use of Snake Island. Source: Google Maps; New Strategy Center.

In this context, we underline the strategic importance of Snake Island. Although it is only 17 hectares, the island is located in front of the Danube mouths, only 37 km from the Romanian port of Sulina. The island is also close to the shipping lane between Odessa and Istanbul and not far from important perimeters of Romania's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), where the country has discovered significant natural gas deposits. The Snake Island is also only 167 km from the Mihail Kogălniceanu base in Romania, where most of the US troops are stationed.

Russia's reoccupation of Snake Island, even if not supplemented by the occupation of the entire Ukrainian Black Sea coastline, would give Russia the opportunity to harass ships coming or wanting to enter the Danube and disrupt the flow of ships between Odessa and the Bosphorus. At the same time, Russia can undertake various actions of intimidation in Romania's EEZ. Natural gas reserves in Romania's EEZ are estimated at around 200 billion cubic meters<sup>61</sup>, which would enable Romania to become a major

<sup>60</sup> Rob Picheta, Jomana Karadsheh, Radina Gigova and Tim Lister, "Kyiv and Moscow agree deal to resume Ukraine grain exports from Black Sea ports", *CNN*, July 23, 2022.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/22/europe/ukraine-russia-grain-deal-turkey-intl/index.html>

<sup>61</sup> Antonia Colibășanu, G. Alexander Crowther, Joel Hickman, George Scutaru, "The Strategic Importance of Snake Island," *Center for European Policy Analysis, New Strategy Center*, September 27, 2022. <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-Strategic-Importance-of-Snake-Island-NSC-CEPA-STUDY.pdf>

player in the region, make it possible to export gas as far as to central Europe and stop Russia's malign influence in countries such as Bulgaria and the Republic of Moldova.

In 2026, with the start of gas exploitation from the Neptun Deep perimeter, Romania will become the largest producer of natural gas in the European Union and the third in Europe, after Norway and Great Britain.

Romania has an important role in ensuring the grain exports from Ukraine. By mid-October 2022, through Romanian ports on the Danube and the Black Sea, Ukraine will be able to export 5,2 million tons of grain.<sup>62</sup> This was made possible even though Russia bombed the Zatoka bridge on the Dniester estuary several times, a bridge that connects the port of Odessa on the Black Sea with the Ukrainian ports of Ismail and Reni on the Danube.



Fig 6. Position of the Zatoka/Pidyomnyy bridge. Source: New Strategy Center

All these developments are possible if Russia manages to overcome the current stalemate and generate the necessary force to continue the offensive. The effects of the

<sup>62</sup> "România a facilitat tranzitul a peste 5,2 milioane de tone de cereale din Ucraina. Precizările ministrului Afacerilor Externe", *Romania24*, October 16, 2022. <https://romania24.ro/romania-a-facilitat-tranzitul-a-pestre-52-milioane-de-tone-de-cereale-din-ucraina-precizarile-ministrului-afacerilor-externe-431730.html>

occupation of the Ukrainian coastline on the Black Sea and the possibility of Russia reaching the mouths of the Danube would create huge problems not only for Ukraine, but also for the EU and NATO. That is precisely why military and economic support for Ukraine must continue, so that Russia is prevented from taking further offensive actions. It is very important that Ukraine continues to be assisted with anti-ship missiles and air systems to prevent a Russian naval presence in the western Black Sea basin and a reoccupation of Snake Island. Also, NATO must strengthen its presence in Romania and bring deterrent equipment, such as anti-ship missiles to protect Romania's EEZ where energy resources important not only for Romania but also for other actors in Europe are located.

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