

“Grey Zones” and Problem of New Common Identity in the Black Sea Region

Abstract

Globalization and integration are characterized not only with forming of homogeneous structures and systems or certain orders, but accompanied with fragmentation and localization as well. Spaces, being left out of the synthesis of certain system, create uncertainty and infinite zones, which can be described as “Gray Zones”, where actually collapsed before existed order and the new one had not emerged yet. Moreover, actors (states) of such zones do not belong to the specific Defense, Security or Economic structures and region has huge gap regarding to the common regional identity. In the recent world politics one of such zone can be described as Black Sea Basin and its adjacent area.

Article presents problem of common regional identity and geopolitical rivals in the Black Sea region.

Key Words: Black Sea, Geopolitics, New Identity, Gray Zone.

Methodology (in brief)

In order to complete main research goals there was used basic approaches empirical methods. There was collected and studied various official materials, doctrines and strategies, official and public statements of military and political figures. All these materials was giving possibility to portray objective geopolitical reality one of the contested region of world and gives opportunity to make analyze correctly. During analyzing these materials there were used method of comparative, interdisciplinary and content analyze as well.

Geopolitical architecture of Black Sea (BS) basin, its straits (Bosporus and Dardanelles) and its adjacent mainly Southern Caucasus (SC) Region presents itself geopolitical environment complex and one of the cornerstones of the world politics, as well as one of the contested region and the subject of intense debates between great powers. These three geographical Components are linked to each other and create geopolitically important space, essential for those who are fighting to take control over the Broaden Black Sea, Middle East and Central Asia. Historically, BC and SC region has unlimited capacity to connect Central Asia to Europe and Vice-versa (East-West) and it is also a land bridge for Russia to Middle East (North-South). Besides of Geo-strategic option Caucasus and its Caspian part are rich with energy Sources. Caucasus presents crossroad of Christian and Muslim Civilization, European and Asian Cultures, here is interrelated local Caucasian, Turkish, Persian and Slavic cultures. On the other side Geopolitical significance of region, their colorful ethno-linguistic and cultural structures were the reason of conflicts and intervention from outside.

During the Centuries Black Sea were area of Clashes and mutual deterrence of Great Powers. But After the collapse of Soviet Union and sovereignization of new states region became diverse. Black Sea and its transit capacity became essential for security, economic development and communications for newly emerged states. Moreover, geopolitical importance of the region also attracted interests of Western and Eastern powers. In 2004, western littoral states (former communist countries – Bulgaria and Romania) of Black Sea became NATO members and in 2007 EU members as well, another former soviet countries Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova expressed its willingness to join Euro-Atlantic

Organizations and built strong ties with western allies. Changing political and military circumstances since 1991 Black Sea Basin became most disputed between East and West. One of the problematic issues are Freedom of Navigation and new military balance in the Black Sea basin which is directly connected with Regime of Monteuix (1936). Nowadays, Black Sea Basin presented itself one of the explosive area of World Politics where level of intense militarization is increasing. But neither West (NATO/EU/US) nor Russia and Turkey has clear long term strategy regarding to the future status (and order) of Black Sea. Given circumstance might be described as “Predictable Unpredictability”

Moreover, it can be proved that besides the fact that Black Sea was one of the important and active zone of interrelations however, during the history Black Sea presented itself as divisor of adjacent geographic areas and civilizations and rather than nexus. Therefore, still there is lack of regional identity and understanding of importance of high level regional cooperation in the economic and security area which is one of the important reason of regional fragmentation and confrontation.

Differences, Lack of Common Regional Identity and Rivals in the Black Sea Region

Problem of non-existence of common regional identity mostly reviled itself after dismantle of Soviet Union when before existed order in the strategically important Black Sea region was collapsed. “Old Hegemons” lost their exclusive positions, newly emerged states define their independent foreign policy strategy and alternative transit capacity development policy with non-regional powerful actors. All the

Russia

Since 18th century Black Sea has been an important area for Russian security, commerce, and other interests. Moreover, Trans-Caucasia presents a Gateway for “Soft Penetration” in the above mentioned “Strategic Ellipse between 5 Seas” from the North. Through South Caucasus region Russia tries to establish its influence over the Middle East and become key actor in the Energy trading and transit capacity. What the Black Sea offers *geopolitically* is traditionally are Russia’s closest access point to the Balkans, the Mediterranean Sea, the Middle East (mainly coastline trough straits), and the world oceans at large. These are all areas of strategic importance to Russia where it seeks to expand its presence and activity, or to build upon current security and energy partnerships. In 2014 The U.S. Department of Energy has highlighted the importance of Russia’s energy exports. Russian port Novorossiysk is Russia’s main oil terminal on the Black Sea coast. Its load capacity is more than 1 million barrels per day (b/d). ... Oil and natural gas revenues accounted for 50% of Russia’s federal budget revenues and 68% of total exports in 2013. Port also administrated 117 million tons of cargo, which is twice the amount of traffic received by the St. Petersburg or even Primorsk ports located in the north of Russia on the Baltic Sea.¹

More than a decade has passed since President Putin made a pair of declarations within a single two-day span. The first was that “the Azov-Black Sea region is a Russian strategic interest zone.” The second was that adjacent Krasnodar—“Russia’s southern outpost”—is “our most important region, a strategic interest zone, where we have our only warm water sea lines of communication with our main European partners. The Black Sea gives Russia direct access to the most important global transportation routes, including for energy.” Both are reflected in the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation published in December 2014.²

Since 2007 Russia under the V. Putins’s leadership became one of the revisionist force of post-bipolar global order. Putin blamed US in attempts to establish Unipolar world order and forecast establishment of multipolar world not only in the global politics but in the global economic relations as well. Also Putin blamed West, especially NATO about violation of Treaty on Restriction of Conventional Armed forces in Europe (1999) and deploying antimissile systems in Central Europe. Moreover, as Putin stated NATO deployed additional armed forces in Bulgaria and Romania. All these facts was perceived as national threat for Russia and once again condemn that NATO’s enlargement in the West and its defense strategy does not had any relations with the modernizations of the Alliance

itself or with ensuring security in Europe.³ Consequently, Russia started to respond in cold war manner to defending its national interest became and sphere of influence especially in the “near abroad” covering Black Sea as well. Few month after Munich speech Russian Air Force decided to resume long-distance flights by its strategic bombers covering also the Black Sea space. In the fall of 2008, the Russian Admiralty announced ambitious plans for the expansion of the Black Sea Fleet, including its ability to “show the flag” in the Mediterranean. It was also decided to accelerate the development of the military port of Novorossiysk.⁴ Besides of enforcement its conventional forces in the region Russia successfully activated its traditional hard power tools and via heating so called “frozen” conflicts invaded in Georgia (August War), annexed Crimea (2014) and provoke separatist conflict in the Eastern regions of Ukraine.

In order to strengthen Russia’s position in the “Near Abroad” and in the Black Sea region as well **Russia successfully move its illegal activities from shores to offshore**s and seized Ukrainian Maritime assets (Kerch strait incident). Nowadays particularly Russia illegally controlling seaways in the North of Black Sea and Sea of Azov, challenging security of Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Seaways and creates so called “**Anaconda Circle**” (a maritime strategy for victory based on coastal blockades) around them. It means that simultaneously with land-based conflicts gradually appearing sea-based conflicts which changing nature of rivalries between acting powers of region. Moreover, in the future Russia would support separatist regimes (DPR and Abkhazia) to building its own maritime capabilities armed with large caliber weapons and antitank cruise missiles. A report by a pro-Russian newspaper in May 2015 claimed that an “Azov Flotilla”, with a maritime Special Forces element, had been set up in the Donetsk People’s Republic. These forces would have ability to conduct raids or sabotage missions is clearly a serious threat to maritime security in the Black Sea. Consequently, Georgia’s and Ukraine’s coastline would be under increased risks and resulted with diminish their economic and transit capacity. Thus, by exercising hybrid, grey zone or threshold approaches to activities short of conflict, Russia has seized the initiative on land, and is doing so at sea.⁵ In the words of the Warsaw Summit communiqué, “*Russia’s recent activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment.*”⁶ The most principal strategic objectives of Russia in the region is to returning and keep countries of so called “near abroad” under the Traditional (mean 19th century stile) Russian Sphere of Influence.

Moreover, Russia has increased its capabilities and operations of air, sea, and land forces in the region. The Black Sea Fleet currently consists of 47 warships and 5 submarines stationed primarily out of Sevastopol, located on the west side of the Crimea, and Novorossiysk, located on the west bank of Russia proper. The fleet’s warships constitute 22 percent of total Russian naval warships in service from all fleets, and seven percent of the total submarine force⁷. In 2015-2016, the Black Sea Fleet took delivery of the first of six planned improved KILo-class submarines and the first of six planned Admiral Grigorovich class frigates systems. Russia’s 2020 State Armament Program prioritized the Black Sea Fleet for significant capability upgrades. Also deployed Intermediate-range (1500 km.) missiles, Surface-to-Air (S-400 Triumph) missiles, mobile short-range (500 km) ballistic missile system Iskander, anti-ship cruise missiles and etc. Continues large military infrastructure build-up in Crimea, Enhanced air defense, communications and surveillance systems, as well as cyber war. Consequently in the Black Sea Russia created so called **Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) Systems**⁸ which is most essential features of reshaping not only Black Sea regions but Security of Europe in general (Surface to Air Missile Systems S-300 presents threats to the Air-corridor from Eastern Europe to Afghanistan. These system could interrupt NATO and US flight from Europe to Afghanistan). In fact, Russia seems to have acquired a strategic place d’armes for further incursions in its ‘near abroad’, seen this time in a broader sense to include the Balkans, Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. Available evidence suggests, in addition to threatening the sovereignty of Ukraine, Georgia and Republic of Moldova, an intent to control navigation in the Black Sea maritime space, to protect Russia’s communication lines and energy transportation routes, to intimidate NATO members Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, and to interdict the access of NATO forces to the Black Sea.⁹

Thus, reinforcement of positions on Black Sea gives opportunity to Moscow to build a platform for denying NATO access to that region mainly in Ukraine and the South Caucasus and to serve as a platform for power projection into the Mediterranean and Middle East as well as.¹⁰ Argument for these can be served Russia's military move to Syria and enforcement of its presence on the Eastern coast of Mediterranean. Moreover, Russian long term strategy goes beyond of Black Sea and Mediterranean and mainly focuses on Atlantic Ocean as it was during the Cold War."¹¹ The Atlantic Ocean is a main focus of the new maritime doctrine, underlying which is the suggestion that it is the most likely venue for a maritime conflict between Russia and NATO in the next five years. One significant change is that the Black and the Mediterranean Seas are now contextually (and doctrinally) part of the Atlantic Geostrategic Theatre which are linked with plans for the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.¹² With the *return* (Russians calling annexation of Crimea as "return of lost Russian Lands") of Crimea and Sevastopol, Russia must take all necessary measures to ensure their rapid integration into the national economy. "Furthermore, Russia should strengthen its naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea, which is part of the Atlantic region."¹³

But, it should be clearly delivered that Black Sea is not only exclusive zone of Russia, part of Sea and its international seaways equally belongs to the other littoral states. But Russia actually did not recognize their right and their sovereignty, their independent foreign policy and freedom of choice (these attitude visible in a statements of Russian top officials and experts). All external links of former Soviet States with Western organizations Moscow perceiving as national threat and tries to deter it using aggressive methods. Russia regards the increased U.S. and NATO naval activity in the Black Sea as a threat to Russian interests in the region, and an example of NATO expansion and interference in its immediate sphere of influence. Russian policy makers and experts asserting that if Georgia and Ukraine become NATO member states Black Sea would be a "Lake of NATO"¹⁴ and in the region there would be only two powerful and rival force. Explaining existed situation in the Black Sea and South Caucasus region is better to recall story about Pirate and Emperor quoted by Saint Augustine in his book "The City of God". A captured pirate was brought before Alexander the Great. "How dare you molest the sea?" asked Alexander. "How dare you molest the whole world?" the pirate replied boldly, and continued: "Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy and are called an emperor."¹⁵ The same can be said about the case of the Black Sea and Southern Caucasus region, where the force gives absolutely different status to the interests and actions of Russia and Small Countries. As long as there is the different interpretation of existed problems (liberal or 19th century order of sphere of influence), there will be permanent base of confrontation as well, which will keep the new geopolitical horizons under the increasing risks and will be a sense of contested area in general.¹⁶

Turkey "has No Allies in the Black Sea, Only Interests". Ankara's main task to preserve the 1936 Montreux Convention that grants it exclusive control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, Turkey always implemented its clauses in a strictly impartial way, avoiding potential disputes over Russian ships classification and denying NATO vessels any favorable treatment. Turkey is constantly struggling to find a balance between its national security interests and its commitments as a NATO ally. Aware of both Russia's military superiority and sensitivity, Turkey tries not to compete with Russia in the Black Sea. After the brief Russian-Georgian conflict in 2008, Turkey adopted a neutral stance and consulted with Russia before reaching out to NATO. In 2014, though a vocal supporter of Ukraine's territorial integrity, Turkey did not sanction Russia for Crimea's annexation, limiting its role to negotiating for the freedom of jailed Crimean Tatar leaders. Eventually, it took an overt violation of its airspace at its southern border in November 2015 for Turkey to react, which it did with alarm by shooting down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft.¹⁷ But in long-term interests and policies of both countries cannot be correlates to each other long time. Russia absolutely different interests and goals which cannot be relevant to Ankara. According to the "Strategy of Warm Seas" Russia's main goal remains to enhance its influence over Black Sea, its straits and increase its presence in the Mediterranean which automatically means encirclement of Turkey.

European Union

EU strategic interests directly are corresponded with Black Sea and South Caucasus region. In 2005 since Central and Eastern European countries became members of European Union EU obtained the status of neighbor. But after integration of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 EU became active regional player. Black Sea and South Caucasus have significant energy transit capacity. It is most important for EU because of Middle East and Central Asian suppliers are potential alternatives of Russian energy market. That is why Security and stability (containing conflicts, illegal migration, trafficking etc.) transit region is most important component. Thus, European Union is becoming one of the key geopolitical player of region. EU Black Sea policy as implemented through its three instruments—ENP, BSS, and EaP— but often lacks an overall strategy. EU is a normative power and its politics absolutely different from US, NATO and especially from Russia.

Georgia and Ukraine has similar interests:

1. Deter Russia's aggression – Secure Security and Stability;
2. Freedom of choice and foreign policy action - EU/NATO membership;
3. Mare Liberum and Free of Navigation;
4. Development of Alternative Transit Capacity. Recently, Georgia's ambitious plan to construct deep-water port in Anaklia significantly will increase region's transit capacity, but would threatened Russia's positions in the region. For near future Anaklia Port would have several significance for Georgia and for Western powers trying to balance Russia's increased military activities in the region:
 - Port will increase Georgia's Transit capacity and become one of the huge hub for energy and cargo transit;
 - Anaklia Port will automatically remove from agenda restoration of an Abkhazia railway line (supporting also part of Georgian political elites) and will grant Georgia full transit independence;
 - Will maintain Economic growth and Security;
 - Will play significant role in rapprochement with Euro-Atlantic Partners.

The US Vise President Mike Pence: "The Anaklia deep-sea port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside their Georgian counterparts in this multi-billion-dollar project. As we look toward the future, our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity."¹⁸

Elizabeth Rood, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Georgia: "The Anaklia Deep Sea Port project and special development zones are vital and demonstrate the great potential not only for the development of Georgia but also of the whole region. We are proud that two large American companies are involved in this project – SSA Marine and "Conti Group, Rood said. The broader involvement of the American government agencies in the project shows the importance of this project for the US."¹⁹

The Commander of NATO's Allied Maritime Command, Sir Clive CC Johnstone: "In general, constructing a deep-sea port is important for any country and it is brilliant that Georgia is investing in this project... "I think this is a brilliant, ambitious vision. And if you have strong economy and stability, it will build the security of the country and anything that contributes to the strengthening country's security is a good thing," he added."²⁰

Retired US 3 star General Ben Hodges: "Anaklia has high potential to become a European and Eurasian regional logistic centre. I believe that after the launch of the port the United States and other member countries of NATO will become more interested to ensure the safety of the country, as Georgia's role in the economic field will be seriously grown... ...before Georgia becomes a NATO member it should be closely involved in Black Sea security"²¹

Former deputy assistant secretary of defense Micheal Carpenter: “The U.S. has a strong strategic interest in completing the Anaklia deep-water port facility. I think Russia would prefer not to see this investment happen.”²²

Director-General for Mobility and Transport of European Commission Henrik Hololei: “One of the important projects is the Anaklia port. Georgia needs deep sea port in the Black Sea. Today Georgia’s ports are not able to receive about 75% of the ships, because there is no deep sea port in the country. Anaklia is not only about port, it is about ecosystem. And it is a very ambitious project and we are very keen to see this project also take shape. It is among the priority projects between Georgia and European Union and of course, we would like to see this project going forward.”²³

Conclusion

Thus, if we consider that the concept that power gives absolutely different status to the interests and the activities of regional powers in the Black Sea, it is hard to imagine whether the all of them can agree on common positions or not regarding to the regional order and cooperation. Until existing various interpretations of the problems, approaches and views, it will be existed a base of confrontation and fragmentation as well, which will involve all actors (regional and global) and will keep the region under the increasing risks. Also it can be proved that until the region has huge gap with common identity (means Black Sea Identity) it will be permanent lack of stability, basement for regional co-operation and integration as well.

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