



Building a bridge over troubled waters: Securing the EU's Black Sea coast

European View
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journals.sagepub.com/home/euv**Salome Samadashvili**¹ 

Abstract

The Russo-Ukrainian war, the potential expansion of the EU's border on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, the ongoing pressing need for the diversification of the EU's energy resources, the strategic interest in gaining access to the vast reserves of critically important minerals in Central Asia and, finally, the recent outbreak of a new violent conflict in Iran, have all turned the Black Sea region into an important strategic hotspot for the EU. As the 'buffer zone' between the EU and Russia, which is likely to remain a security challenge for Europe for some time to come, becomes thinner, the EU needs to seriously upgrade its policy on the Black Sea region. This article reviews the EU's approach. It argues that while the EU's new strategy for the region offers promise, its implementation will require the EU to live up to its potential as a geopolitical actor in this volatile space.

Keywords

Black Sea, Russia, Türkiye, EU enlargement, Security, Connectivity, Critical infrastructure

Introduction

The ancient Greeks initially named the body of water on the Eurasian continent which today is known as the Black Sea, *Pontus Axeinos*—the inhospitable sea. The Greeks' later successful navigation of it and colonisation of various locations along the Black Sea coast, prompted them to change the name to *Pontos Euxeinos*—the friendly sea. From a

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geopolitical point of view, in the twenty-first century, the western shores of the Black Sea can be described as friendly to Europe, while those on the east largely remain unfriendly. This is what makes it one of today's geopolitical hotspots, where the rivalry over the future of the Eurasian continent is currently unfolding. As the most brutal conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War begins its fifth year on the Ukrainian shores of the Black Sea, it is timely to assess what the main dimensions of this challenge are for the EU. The Black Sea region is one of the grand stages of modern geopolitics and hence deserves a closer look. In this article, the author argues that it is in the Black Sea region that the EU's new identity as a geopolitical player will be moulded. Hence, security through connectivity across this space and enhancing the EU's presence in the 'unfriendly' section of the Black Sea region should be placed at the top of the EU's foreign policy priority list. The author endorses the new EU Black Sea Strategy as a positive step forward but argues that progressing the EU's enlargement process in the region is the only reliable way to make the Black Sea truly a *Pontos Euxeinus* for Europe.

A descent into regional conflicts: the deeper shade of the Black Sea

The Cold War between Russia and the Western democracies did not end with a peace treaty or armistice to define the terms of its conclusion. It also did not usher in 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1992). What history has taught us repeatedly is that a conflict resolved on uncertain terms will eventually lead to a new confrontation. If there is one area where this historical lesson has proven to be right, it is the Black Sea region. In the last 35 years as many as 10 different regional conflicts have broken out in the greater Black Sea region, culminating in 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some of these conflicts, such as the wars in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, happened as early as the 1990s, shortly after the collapse of the USSR. However, more widely, the early 1990s held the promise of a more hopeful era of cooperation across the littoral states of the Black Sea. Various international cooperation frameworks were set up between the Cold War-era rivals, including the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation; trade, investment and arms control treaties; and other frameworks which signalled hope for a peaceful future in the region. But when geopolitical rivalries returned with the consolidation of power in Putin's hands in Russia, neither the region, nor the EU was ready to face the new reality.

Appealing to the West to act with greater effectiveness in the Black Sea region, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan noted some years ago the ambition of Putin to turn the Black Sea into 'a Russian lake' (Kucera 2016). Even at the outset of his ascent to power in Russia, Putin made it clear that he would pursue a revisionist policy both in Russia's relations with the former Warsaw Pact member states and the countries which had once constituted the USSR, and with the West (NATO and the EU). Putting an end to the expansion of NATO and the EU in the Black Sea region became one of Putin's key foreign, military and security objectives. Advancing from the tactic of war by proxy to direct involvement in open military confrontation, Russia has engaged in three interstate wars with Black Sea countries—starting in 2008 with the Russian invasion of Georgia,

continuing with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and ending with the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. The EU was not ready for such a confrontation, even after the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia.

Russia will not change its policy in any feasible future, unless its military and economic capabilities are diminished to the point at which pursuing a zero-sum game vis-à-vis the West in the region is no longer an option. It will continue to pursue its policy of preventing Black Sea countries such as Georgia and Ukraine from becoming part of Western alliances, and will attempt to use the Russian Black Sea Fleet to project power into the Mediterranean and the Middle East and to control regional cooperation in the Black Sea region (Sabandze and Dalay 2025, 4–6). If anything, Russian opposition to the expansion of the EU in the Black Sea region is likely to become stronger. Russian officials recently used threatening language against Armenia when it declared its desire to become an EU member. According to Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, the EU is becoming ‘an aggressive political–military bloc’ and any attempt to join the EU is a cause of concern for Russia (Barseghyan 2026). Meanwhile strategic rivalries in the region are ramping up, with involvement not only from Russia, but also from China, which is pursuing its own interest in developing alternative transit routes. Iran also has long-standing interests in the region. Thus, this security challenge in the Black Sea region should remain a top priority for the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy in the coming years. This requires both an objective assessment of the realities facing the EU as well as the formulation of realistic policy options to counter the security challenges.

What is at stake for the EU?

The Black Sea region is an integral part of the EU’s security, both conventionally, as well as in terms of economic, food and energy security. The spillover effects from instability in the region, ranging from disruption of the energy and food supply chains to migration, illegal arms trading and the export of crime, among others, could potentially be substantial. This is particularly true as the EU is facing a pressing need to diversify its energy sources, as well as its trade routes with the countries in Asia. Once the war in Ukraine has ended, how Europe defines its relations with the emerging or declining powers in the Black Sea region, namely Ukraine, Russia and Türkiye, will play out in this space (Kakachia et al. 2024, 2). The importance of the region over the past 30 years has increased significantly for the EU, and it continues to increase—30% of Europe’s consumed energy passes through the region. The Black Sea also connects the EU to the resources of Central Asia, which is a potential source of both energy and rare earth minerals for the EU.

Through the Black Sea Synergy, the Eastern Partnership Initiative and the new Black Sea Strategy (European Commission 2025), the EU has developed a framework for its policy towards the region. However, the policy pursued by the EU in the region over the course of recent decades has been fragmented. Continuing disagreements, both between the EU member states as well as with the countries of the Black Sea region, about how

far and deep the regional formats of engagement should go have undermined the success of EU policies.

Now, seizing the opportunity that every crisis provides, the EU has a chance to overcome some of those obstacles. The latest EU Black Sea Strategy is promising and duly recognises the importance of the region. It notes that

[a]s a critical connector between Europe, the Southern Caucasus, Central Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea region plays a strategic role for European and overall global security, international trade, energy and food security (notably grain). With its population of almost 174 million people the States surrounding the Black Sea (excluding Russia) generate a GDP of approximately EUR 2 trillion. The EU is the largest trade partner for most of the countries in the Black Sea region with the overall trade volume of EUR 310 billion and the second largest trading partner for Central Asia. Strengthening our cooperation and fostering enhanced economic links will contribute to the competitiveness of the region and of the EU itself. (European Commission 2025, 1)

Implementing this new strategy, focused on security through connectivity, which is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the EU's other priorities, should be at the top of the EU's agenda in the immediate future. While the EU is facing new security challenges, notably in the Arctic, the Black Sea region cannot be allowed to slip down the list of priorities. The new US National Security Strategy has made it clear that US involvement in strengthening the security of the Black Sea region is unlikely to increase. This leaves the EU with the task of finding ways to implement policies which, in coordination with NATO, will shore up security on the EU's eastern sea border. If it fails to do so, the EU will lose the geopolitical game in its neighbourhood, undermining its own long-term security.

The Black Sea region: the EU's security through connectivity

The new EU Black Sea Strategy rightly outlines the security of the Black Sea region as the key priority and proposes the establishment of a Black Sea Maritime Security Hub. Contributions from the member states and the EU to this hub would 'strengthen maritime security and safety, [and] protect the critical maritime infrastructure and the marine environment' in the region (European Commission 2025, 5). To counter hybrid threats and prepare for a potential peace, the strategy proposes the support and coordination of efforts 'to build up maritime capacities and enablers regarding sea monitoring, including for observation of a possible maritime ceasefire, mine cleaning efforts, protection of critical infrastructure, [and] patrolling of commercial sea lines' (European Commission 2025, 5).

EU support, via the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 framework, will also be provided to Black Sea countries that wish to bolster their defence. Furthermore, the strategy notes, '[t]he integration of the Ukrainian defence industry into the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) and . . . investing more into new

technologies will contribute to the strengthening of maritime capabilities in the Black Sea’ (European Commission 2025, 5). The use of other EU frameworks, such as EU Common Security and Defence Policy missions and the European Peace Facility, are also proposed as ways to improve the security of the Black Sea littoral states.

Security could also be enhanced, the strategy notes, through the adoption of the Revised EU Maritime Security Strategy. It is also acknowledged that ‘[t]he EU’s strategic partnership with NATO and the established staff-level formats and areas of cooperation can be further leveraged’ (European Commission 2025, 6).

Thus, the key focus of the strategy is to enhance security through connectivity, with the goal of creating a dual-use transport infrastructure. In this context, the strategy notes a ‘need to urgently upgrade the dual use transport infrastructure along the existing military mobility network—comprising multi-modal transport routes connected by logistical hubs—so that it is capable of handling potentially heavy and large-scale military transport’ (European Commission 2025, 7). The goal is to improve military mobility by having EU ports in the Black Sea and on the Danube with the technical capacity to embark and disembark military vehicles, as well as improved rail and road infrastructure. The strategy outlines key actions to take for the fulfilment of these goals:

- Upgrading transport infrastructure to enable its preparedness for dual use.
- Equipping a sufficient number of sea and river ports and airports in the region, particularly on the military mobility corridors, with the specialised infrastructure necessary to onload/offload oversized and overweight military equipment and materiel and providing for sufficient storage space to allow smooth inland forwarding of shipments.
- Protection of the critical infrastructure, including military mobility corridors and economic and energy platforms.
- Working with partners on mechanisms to ensure that the ownership and management of ports and critical maritime infrastructure is transparent reliable, including through the implementation of the Foreign Direct Investment screening mechanism in the EU. (quoted from European Commission 2025, 7; bold type in the original has been omitted)

Can the EU strategy deliver?

The new EU strategy on the Black Sea is impressive: the EU has proposed several avenues for cooperation with the Black Sea countries to enhance their security, and if implemented, the strategy will upgrade the EU’s security in the region. However, its implementation will require willing partners on the eastern side of the Black Sea. In this light it is illuminating to look at one of the key setbacks facing the EU’s connectivity ambitions in the region—the Anaklia deep-sea port project in Georgia. It is a good

reference point for reminding us that the key challenge for the EU in the region remains geopolitical competition.

The Black Sea currently lacks deep-sea port capacity on its eastern shores. The creation of a deep-sea port at Anaklia in Georgia will change this and have a significant impact on both the costs as well as the volumes of transit between the Greater Central Asia region and Europe. While the main benefit of the port will be an increase in long-haul shipping capabilities, its construction will also create new opportunities within the Black Sea region, including improved connectivity between ports within the Black Sea itself. This could increase trade volumes for those EU member states with Black Sea access, in particular the ports of Constanța in Romania and Varna and Burgas in Bulgaria. Shipping capacity between Georgia and Ukraine will also be enhanced, which could contribute, post-war, to Ukraine's reconstruction and development. It should also be noted, however, that the port will be constructed as dual-use infrastructure and hence will also play a significant role in enhancing the security infrastructure of the region, as noted in the EU Black Sea Strategy. Free and open links between the Black Sea, the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea are important for both the political and economic security of the wider Black Sea region. The Anaklia project is the linchpin of the Middle Corridor.

This project was initially meant to be constructed with US and European investments. However, the Georgian government has taken a 51% ownership stake in the project and is considering giving the rest of the stake to a Chinese state-owned company. The government is still negotiating with the China Communications Construction Company to finalise the deal. As of 2026, while the project is not moving forward, Western involvement has been successfully neutralised. In a TV interview in 2019, one of the founders of the Anaklia Development Consortium, Mamuka Khazaradze, recollected the surprised query of the de facto ruler of Georgia, the Russian-made oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, in 2017: 'What business do the Americans have in the Black Sea?' (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2019). In 2019 Ivanishvili's government decided to launch a prosecution against the founders of the Consortium, ending any potential US participation in favour of that of China (Kapanadze 2024). The EU's strategy on the Black Sea region makes it clear that the EU does have business in the Black Sea, but that it also has an interest in countering both Russia and China in their attempts to control critically important infrastructure in the region. Hence, the Anaklia deep-sea port project must become part of the EU's strategy to ensure both connectivity and security in the region and should be the highest priority of the concrete infrastructural objectives that the EU seeks to accomplish there.

Competition for infrastructure is key to the security of the Black Sea region—Russia understands this well. It has thus opposed the construction of the port from the very start (Daly 2020). Meanwhile, rumours that Russia plans to use its de facto occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia region to construct a new port in Ochamchire have been swirling for a few years now (Daly 2025). While at this point it is unclear what the immediate intentions are with regard to the construction of a new port, the representatives of the Russian occupation in Abkhazia, while maintaining a formal claim to 'independent' policy, have

confirmed their readiness to welcome the Russian fleet if Moscow requests access to Ochamchire's naval capabilities (*BBC* 2023).

It is clear that if Georgia had a pro-Western government in power, the Anaklia deep-sea port project would have been completed years ago and would be fully operational now. A major infrastructural hurdle for the EU's security strategy in the Black Sea would have been resolved. The conclusion to be drawn from this is therefore obvious—the best security guarantee for the EU in the Black Sea region is having pro-European political decision-makers in power in as many of the Black Sea littoral states as possible. The success of any EU strategy for the region, even a good one, such as the one produced by the European Commission last year, will require reliable partners in the region. Hence, the most important 'security strategy' for the EU in the Black Sea region remains successful enlargement. The Black Sea has six littoral states: two are EU members—Bulgaria and Romania on the western side—and three are candidates for EU membership, on the eastern side—Georgia, Türkiye and Ukraine. The success of the EU's policy in the Black Sea region depends on whether the EU manages to bridge this east–west divide over the troubled waters of the Black Sea. If Russia is successful in undermining Georgia and Ukraine in their EU accession processes, the new and impressive EU Black Sea strategy will become irrelevant—there will be no political space for its implementation. In these circumstances Russia will have achieved its strategic objective and returned to the pre-1990s status quo of dominating the Black Sea region, sharing strategic influence in the region only with Türkiye, and thereby marginalising Europe. This is why the EU faces its greatest challenge in the Black Sea. Thus, whether the Black Sea can be considered a *Pontos Axeinos* or a *Pontos Euxeinos* for Europe might also answer the question of whether the EU is able to be an independent global geopolitical actor.


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