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The Black Sea

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BLACK SEA POLICY OF UKRAINE

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For the last few years, the Black Sea region has become a top priority of the Ukrainian foreign policy. However, due to the years of ignorance and absence of a strategic vision, Ukraine has not used all opportunities, while many projects, such as BLACKSEAFOR, cannot be used anymore due to the Russian aggression. In this article, the authors look at the main elements of the Ukrainian bilateral and multilateral relations in the Black Sea region, what risks can prevent increased cooperation and guaranteeing national interests, and which countries can be potential partners.

Strategic Appraisal

The Black Sea region has become one of the top priorities of the Ukrainian foreign policy in recent years, considering both guaranteeing national interests and national security. To analyse Ukraine's foreign policy in this domain, it is important to focus on relations with seven countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Romania, and Turkey), as well as some regional initiatives and projects. While the Russian factor is of an extreme importance for the Black Sea developments, it is however not the main driving force behind the development of the Ukrainian Black Sea policy. Considering the current state of the Russian-Ukrainian relations, despite the Black Sea littoral status of the Russian Federation, this dimension is separated into a distinct track that should be considered beyond the Black Sea region.

From Ukraine's foreign policy point of view, the Black Sea and the Azov Sea basins are impartible. While 10 years ago

we were speaking about the Black Sea-Caspian region, with the current trends this approach makes sense only for an analysis of some topics, such as transport of energy. The Danube River aspect belongs to both the Eastern European and the Black Sea direction of the policy, as its economic and security significance as an additional entry point to the Black Sea will be rising.

For most of the time, Ukraine's Black Sea politics have been predominantly concentrated on bilateral relations, with a limited strategic vision of the regional processes. However, now is the time to formulate a coherent vision and additional multilateral regional initiatives, which would not be limited to BSEC or GUAM formats.

Ukraine's vision of the Black Sea policy has been evolving for the past 10 years from the idea to become a regional leader to a narrow, first of all economic cooperation with the individual states. Security issues, except for the so-called "frozen conflicts" management and cooperation within

navy initiatives BLACKSEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony, had been mostly ignored. Meanwhile, the development of the “grey zones”, which are not controlled by the legitimate governments, is growing. These “grey zones” pose risks and challenges of both military and non-military character for the states where they exist and touch the interests of all regional countries.

In the past few years, Ukraine’s policy towards the Black Sea region has predominantly concentrated on the Crimean issue, on overcoming and preventing consequences of the peninsula’s illegal annexation. This limits the development potential of Ukraine’s Black Sea policy, as well as the elaboration of a strategic vision of its own role in the region, the return to the status of a sea power, and the use of the full potential of the bilateral relations.

Bilateral Relations

Azerbaijan and Armenia. Relations of Ukraine with these two Caucasus republics for the last decade had sporadic and weak character. Among the factors that influenced this situation, one can name the aggravation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, so the improvement of relations with one side could be seen as biased by the other party to the conflict; another reason is the absence of European and Euroatlantic integration among the priorities for these states, so it limits cooperation within the Eastern Partnership and security interactions. The third factor to be named is Armenia’s close alliance with the Russian Federation.

Bulgaria, which has been demonstrating for years a greater interest in the Balkans rather than in the Black Sea affairs, also was not among the top partners in the region. Multiplied by the confused position of sharing the EU stance but supporting lifting sanctions against Russia and having “more pragmatic” relations with Moscow,

the Bulgarian position is still tricky for Ukraine. Sofia itself is explaining such a position by serious Russian involvement in the Bulgarian economic and energy sphere and the losses it bears due to the Russian cancellation of the South Stream 2 project due to the European sanctions.

As a result, the agenda of the Ukrainian–Bulgarian relations is not going beyond a traditional set of issues: cooperating in economic, legal, and cultural spheres. Protection of Bulgarian minority rights in Ukraine is among top priorities of the bilateral relations, however without conflicting elements as in the relations of Ukraine with Hungary.

Georgia for a long time was considered as a junior partner. This created a foundation for unused potential in bilateral cooperation. De facto relations between Ukraine and Georgia passed stages from strategic, politically emotional ones at the end of the first decade of the 2000s to almost a decline in 2010–2014. Just for the last two years, the bilateral relations have returned to the priority level. This is mostly connected with the aspirations of both states to achieve European and NATO membership. The Declaration on Strategic Partnership signed in 2017 laid a foundation for the new level of strategic relations.

At the same time, for quite a time, Ukraine has been ignoring the possibility to present the Ukrainian and Georgian cases of the Russian aggression jointly and to synchronise activities at the international arena. Some time has been lost, and only recently some coordination in this matter can be seen.

Moldova. One of the main issues of the Ukrainian–Moldovan relations remains the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict based on the principle of territorial integrity of Moldova, demilitarisation of

the Transnistrian region, and guaranteeing of human rights. Ukraine continues to participate as an official mediator in the “5+2” talks, where it has the status of a guarantor of peace. However, for the past few years, one can see a decrease in Ukrainian activities and attention in this question.

Ukraine continues to cooperate with Moldova in questions of sustainable use and protection of the Dniester River, transborder cooperation, as well as within EU technical programmes. At the same time, the bilateral relations have been under the influence of two factors: accumulated mutual distrust and internal political situation in Moldova.

Creation of the “Ukraine–Georgia–Moldova” Interparliamentary Assembly can give a new impetus to the political dialogue among the three states and facilitate coordination of joint cases within international organisations. However, with the political changes in all three countries, this instrument of cooperation is currently on pause.

Romania. Questions of security and intensification of military cooperation remain among the top priorities of Ukrainian–Romanian relations. Among the three Black Sea states–NATO members, Romania is the most consistent supporter of the idea to increase NATO presence in the region. Romania was the first EU country to ratify Ukraine’s Association Agreement and was the leading nation in the NATO Trust Fund on cyber security for Ukraine. For the last two years, one can see intensification of the bilateral relations, including in the security sphere and joint military exercises. After years of distrust, it is a big step forward. Definitely, Ukrainian Law on Education that concerned many neighbouring countries is a difficult point in relations; however, this issue is in the working process of resolution. Competition between Ukrainian and Romanian ship owners in the market

of Danube transportation is also among the difficulties of bilateral relations.

Turkey holds a special place in Ukraine’s foreign policy. Since 2011, it has been defined as a strategic partner, and during the years of the Russian aggression has played a key role in the sphere of regional security. Comparing to the previous periods when relations between Ukraine and Turkey had been less profound and, thus, mostly focused on economic cooperation, since 2014 Kyiv’s dialogue with Ankara has intensified in political and defence spheres, paving the way to diversification of the bilateral agenda. On the other hand, Turkey’s fast rapprochement with Russia, including cooperation on Syria, procurement of Russian S-400 missile systems, building a nuclear power plant Akkuyu, and TurkStream pipeline bypassing Ukraine, has had considerable negative impact on bilateral Ukrainian–Turkish relations.

Turkey has not recognised the illegal annexation of Crimea and has consistently supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Defending the rights of the Crimean Tatars has been another important track, resulting in adoption of several UN resolutions on the situation with human rights on the occupied peninsula, co-sponsored by Ukraine and Turkey. At the same time, Ankara has not joined Crimea-related economic sanctions against Russia and has supported the return of the Russian delegation to PACE, which was very negatively perceived in the Ukrainian society.

International organisations – GUAM and BSEC. Ukraine is a member of all regional organisations in the Black Sea region. However, its diplomatic efforts have been concentrated mostly on the institutional participation, especially regarding BSEC. Since December 2019, a more active stance was seen concerning revitalisation of GUAM. Ukraine has been lacking both economic and

political resources to use these organisations for promotion of own ambitions as a regional leader. The idea to transform GUAM into the community of democracies back in 2004 did not receive any development.

Russian membership in BSEC and a number of unresolved conflicts between the member states are de facto blocking BSEC and make it ineffective for realisation of the Ukrainian foreign policy tasks at the current stage. The neutral position of BSEC regarding the Russian–Ukrainian conflict and the Russian attempt to influence financially the future development of the organisation, accompanied by the limited possibilities for influence, makes this organisation secondary for realisation of the Ukrainian policy in the Black Sea region.

NATO and Navy initiatives. Despite the fact that three Black Sea states are NATO member states and two are aspirants, NATO still does not have a clear strategy towards the Black Sea region. Only recently, despite restrained positions of Turkey and Bulgaria, the Alliance has made practical steps to increase its presence in the region. This topic became one of the priorities at the end of 2019 for Ukraine–NATO cooperation, including planning the first joint exercises on protecting critical infrastructure in the Black Sea region, Coherent Resilience 2020, which will be held in Odessa in October 2020.

For a long time, Turkey took on the role of the communicator on the Black Sea security in Brussels, which led to the lack of understanding of the challenges, threats, and needs of the region. Gradual increase in the number of the NATO member states' ships in the Black Sea region speaks about readiness to take greater responsibility – exactly what Ukraine is calling NATO to do, considering the difficulties with navigation caused by the Russian actions and possibilities of annexation of considerable sea zones.

Necessity to increase NATO presence in the region is also connected with the de facto freezing of two other navy initiatives – BLACKSEAFOR and the Black Sea Harmony. Russian participation in both does not leave a possibility for Ukraine to continue its participation as neither joint activities, nor sharing of information is possible at the current stage. That is why for Ukraine it is a necessity to search for new formats of navy cooperation, both bilateral and multilateral. Presentation of the Navy Strategy of Ukraine 2035 at the end of 2018 (first time in its history) should facilitate a more clear vision of the Ukrainian navy presence in the Black Sea region.

Black Sea Commission. Ukraine continues to participate in the Commission on the Protection of the Black Sea against Pollution (Black Sea Commission), which is an intergovernmental agency to implement the 1992 Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea against Pollution (Bucharest Convention). However, the Russian annexation of Crimea influenced this work as well, as Ukraine cannot fulfil all its obligations under this Convention regarding control over pollution in a 12-mile zone around the Crimean peninsula. Serious increase in military equipment, illegal hydrocarbon extraction offshore, which belongs to Ukraine, the Kerch bridge construction, uncontrolled use of recreational and biological resources lead to the Black Sea pollution.

EU and the EU Danube Strategy. Participation of Ukraine in the EU Danube Strategy 2011 should become an important instrument to improve Ukrainian performance in the Black Sea. As of now, Ukrainian level of participation remains low. Development of cooperation in the Danube Strategy framework will allow Ukraine to improve its transport potential and to cooperate with other countries of the Danube macroregion, so as to improve

its economic competitiveness, tourism potential, cultural development, and transborder cooperation that can result in sustainable regional development.

At the same time, there is de facto no EU Black Sea strategy, as it is based on an outdated document of 2007 – the Black Sea Synergy. The EU prefers bilateral relations or the Eastern Partnership framework. In reality, the only programme especially designed for the Black Sea region is the “Black Sea Basin Operation Programme 2014–2020” with a small operational budget of 39 million euro. As Ukraine also concentrates its attention on the work within the Association Agreement or EaP A3, there is no Black Sea focus in the EU–Ukraine cooperation.

Main Risks

To formulate pragmatic and proactive foreign policy in the Black Sea region as well as to increase cooperation with the individual states, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of risks and conflicts that can have direct or indirect influence. Among the most immediate risks that can influence Ukraine’s Black Sea policy are the following:

- Militarisation of the Black Sea region, predominantly due to the Russian military build-up in Crimea and Caucasus;
- Retaining of the sizable Russian forces in the Azov and the Black Sea that lead to the violation of the international law of the sea and restrictions to the navigation through the Kerch Strait, as well as possible blocking of the Black Sea ports and possible violation of the state sea border, possible provocations on the sea;
- Increase of pro-Russian sentiments in Turkey and Moldova, as well as controversial political situation in the Black Sea states, including financing of pro-Russian political parties and media, conducting information campaigns;

- Protracted conflicts in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh;
- Blocking of the security initiatives in the region, including resistance to a more active presence of NATO;
- Formation of new transport corridors in the Black Sea region bypassing Ukraine that will lead to the losses of the transit potential;
- Increase in illegal migration, arms and drugs trafficking, including through “grey zones”;
- Significant pollution of the Black Sea due to the illegal Russian activities in and around Crimea.

Conclusions

For a long time, Ukrainian foreign policy in the Black Sea region has been predominantly focusing on bilateral relations with limited strategic vision of the regional processes. At the same time, it is a necessity to elaborate additional targeted regional initiatives, which would not be confined to GUAM or BSEC.

Considering the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, it is necessary to concentrate on development of relations with Romania, Turkey, and Georgia for the purpose of restricting Russian influence and increasing NATO presence; as well as with Georgia and Azerbaijan considering development of the regional transit potential and realisation of the energy and transport projects. At the same time, it is necessary to increase Ukrainian information presence in all Black Sea states and to promote Ukrainian national interests in the economic sphere.

Ukraine still needs a coherent Black Sea strategy that should be developed as a separate document with a comprehensive

view on security, political, economic, environmental, humanitarian, and transborder priorities. Enhancement of cooperation with individual countries to build regional resilience, to protect critical infrastructure, to prepare for emergencies, and to increase cyber security can be new prospective topics of cooperation. New multilateral projects of cooperation can go along such configurations: Ukraine–Romania–Moldova, Ukraine–Turkey–Georgia–Azerbaijan, Ukraine–Georgia–Moldova, etc. It is also in the Ukrainian interest to promote an idea of the NATO Black Sea strategy elaboration.

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