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BLACK SEA  
and BALKAN PERSPECTIVES  
A Strategic Region

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*Background Policy Paper*

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Almost thirty years after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the wars in the Balkans and the collapse of the Albanian communist regime, followed by years of a complex multifaceted recovery, the Balkan region remains deeply divided and only partially integrated in the Western political, economic and security structures.

The integration into NATO is more of a success story than the EU integration. Currently, Slovenia, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and the Republic of North Macedonia are part of the Alliance, while the biggest military power in the area, Serbia, upholds its policy of neutrality and is not seeking NATO membership. This is at the same time a major factor of stabilisation but also a cause for tensions, when Serbian interests are involved directly or indirectly, as shown by the turmoil in North Macedonia (then FYROM) and Montenegro before their accession. Bosnia and Herzegovina's membership remains stuck due to the anti-NATO hostility of the Bosnian Serb leadership.

Today, 19 years after Balkan countries were offered a so-called "European perspective" at the Thessaloniki Summit, only two of them managed to become full members of the EU: Slovenia and Croatia. The remaining six are currently faced with the enlargement fatigue domestically and among EU members. The process of integration of Serbia and Montenegro is stalled, also due to a lack of reforms and a deterioration of the democratic institutions. Albania and North Macedonia are still waiting for the opening of accession talks, a reason for an increased disillusion of the local population with regards to the European perspective.

In this scenario, already existing fractures were exacerbated in the past years and in particular during the pandemic, threatening the stabilizing role of the EU, the first trade and political partner of the region. Russia, as an energy superpower, and especially China, reinforced their impact in the region, in particular in Serbia, also by supplying vaccines, trying to increase an influence that was already strengthened in the last decade by supplying credits for infrastructures and energy, a strategy widely used in the area also by Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the region remains an area of confrontation between regional and global actors, a limbo where many external actors seek influence also by nourishing ethno-nationalist sentiments.

Risks are exacerbated first of all by the economic crisis provoked by the pandemic, latching upon pre-existing fragility factors among which: the brain drain and the demographic collapse, the rise of semi-authoritarian leaders with an attendant democratic backsliding, the flourishing of organized crime and corruption and a returning nationalism.

The Kosovo issue remains unsolved, despite the renewed engagement of the EU and of the USA. Speculations about the redefinition of borders, circulated this year, confirm the existence of potentially disruptive solutions to the lack of European integration of the countries of the Western Balkans.

That said and for obvious political imperatives, regional leaders have shown some willingness to cooperate more intensively, also through common initiatives such as the so-called 'Mini-Schengen' in the 'Balkan six' and the creation of a common economic market. Nevertheless, the only long-lasting solution for the stability of the region remains the inclusion of the entire Western Balkans in the EU.

For too long perceived as utterly separated from the Balkan Six, the Black Sea is part of the historical Balkan region. It hosts vital critical infrastructure including both energy and cyber links of paramount importance for all countries in the region as well as for Europe.

That area, now considered by Moscow as a "Russian lake" after a decade of waning influence, is also affected by NATO Russia tension, further increased by the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Since then, Russian combat aircraft have periodically intercepted US reconnaissance flights, including close flight manoeuvres deemed unsafe by US officials. Although NATO has intensified its presence in the Black Sea, its initiatives are more symbolic than concrete, more political than military.

The Black Sea has witnessed frequent and close confrontation between Russian and Western military forces in recent weeks. In a major incident in late June 2021, Russia declared that a border patrol ship fired warning shots while a Su-24 bomber dropped four bombs on the path of the UK destroyer Defender, apparently to induce the ship to sail out of Russian territorial waters near illegally annexed Crimea. London denied these waters were territorial and that the ship came under warning fire.

It is evidently a way to assert sovereignty over Crimea also vis-à-vis powers who do not recognise it. Secondly, Russia does not want to have any NATO military presence in the Black Sea and is aggressively harassing any Western ship also in international waters. When Russians captured Crimea, they also captured a lot of oil rigs and gas drilling installations in the Black Sea, which reach up to the Romanian shore, and they are very aggressively policing them.

Given the strategic importance of Ukraine's remaining Black Sea ports, there is a significant risk that Russia may decide to block maritime traffic in order to bring the Ukrainian economy to its knees. This is thought to be militarily feasible. Indeed, Russia already has sufficient warships in the Black Sea to attempt

such an operation. Such a Russian escalation would inevitably elicit significant international condemnation. If this would entail a concrete Western blockade breaking action, remains, upon previous experience, an open issue.

The times where the Black Sea could be considered controlled mainly by the Turkish NATO ally and thus a peripheral space are clearly passed, not only for Russia's aggressive stance, but also due to the effects of Chinese investments linked to the great Belt and Road Initiative. China is promoting trade and investments to achieve significant diplomatic and political leverage in the region, besides acquiring footholds for trade, investments or scientific cooperation.

In this scenario, Turkey remains determined to be the region's pivotal power. The discovery of a 320 billion cubic meter natural gas field in the Black Sea by Ankara, as well as the construction of energy infrastructures and the creation of new Exclusive Economic Zones, are part of a strategy to become an energy hub for the Old Continent.

NATO and the European Union need to reconsider their strategic assumptions in order to guarantee their main objectives of peace, stability and prosperity in the region.



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