
CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE ROLE OF ROMANIA AS A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR IN THE BLACK SEA

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Abstract: *THE STUDY AIMS TO PRESENT THE ACTIONS CARRIED OUT BY ROMANIA, AS A STATE ACTOR IN THE BLACK SEA REGION, FROM THE MOMENT OF ACCESSION WITHIN THE EURO-ATLANTIC STRUCTURES AND UNTIL NOW, REVEALING, AT THE SAME TIME, THE EFFECTS RESULTING FROM THE ACCESSION.*

THE IMPORTANT OPERATIONS AND EXERCISES IN WHICH THE ROMANIAN MILITARY FORCES PARTICIPATED, THE DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT, THE ROLE OF ROMANIA AND THE EFFECTS OF ITS PRESENCE IN THE MENTIONED PARTNERSHIP ACTIONS ARE HIGHLIGHTED.

ON THE OTHER HAND, SOME OF THE DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION INITIATIVES IN THE BLACK SEA REGION ARE PRESENTED, WHICH DEMONSTRATE ROMANIA'S OPENNESS TO THE VALUES OF THE WESTERN WORLD, THE IMPORTANCE IN THE REGIONAL SECURITY EQUATION AND THE DEGREE OF TRUST IT ENJOYS FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERS.

Keywords: *SECURITY, COOPERATION, PARTNERSHIP, INITIATIVES, OPERATIONS.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the communist bloc and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Romania sought to integrate into a new political-economic-military system and, in this sense, made the necessary change to embrace the values of democracy. Thus, it became a member of NATO in 2004 and of the European Union in 2007, later participating in various partnership operations and developing some regional initiatives. Romania has thus become an important promoter of EU and NATO policies

and initiatives on the Black Sea region, actively supporting cooperation between the states in the Pontic basin.

Given its geographical position, Romania has an important geostrategic role in the region, a role enhanced by the economic importance of the port of Constanta and belonging to an exclusive economic zone rich in hydrocarbons, whose exploitation could contribute to national economic development and energy security in Europe, in the context of the current continental energy crisis (Rechea, 2021). Last but not least, the promotion of projects aimed at strengthening maritime security and the right to free movement, highlights the potential for regional leadership and gives additional value to actions to promote interests in the region.

Prior to 1989, Romania was under the influence of the Communist Party, being one of the most active and vocal members of the Warsaw Pact. Since the end of the Cold War, Romania has developed close relations with all its neighbors, and with the acquisition of the status of active member of NATO has supported the development of relations between the alliance and the states of the Black Sea region. It is eloquent that since 1997, when Romania signed a strategic partnership with the USA, becoming a strategic partner, which has made the relations between the two states even closer in recent years (Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018, pp. 2-3).

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 was an event that highlighted the interests of regional and international actors in this space. Romania expressed concern about Russia's actions in the Black Sea area, stressing that they threaten the stability and security of the region. No other security threats radiating from the Middle East, in the vicinity of the Black Sea region (Peptan, 2020 a, pp. 9-12), should be neglected. Experts in security studies say that „Romania has been vocal in what it considers to be the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine and the threat that Russia poses to other European states” (Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018, p.3). Due to this issue, relations between these states have deteriorated.

The recent deployment of Russian military forces on the border with Ukraine is likely to amplify regional instability and has been the subject of further criticism from senior Kremlin decision-makers over the deployment of NATO military capabilities in Romania (Rotaru, 2021).

In conclusion, it can be said that after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, our country was forced to integrate into a new system to ensure its internal security and stability. Thus, the accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures of Romania, demonstrated a reliable partnership with the members of the Alliance, through the significant participation in all the activities carried out by the organization.

2. MAJOR OPERATIONS AND EXERCISES WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF THE ROMANIAN MILITARY FORCES

After obtaining NATO membership, Romania has hosted or participated regularly in exercises with NATO partners, the size and frequency of these exercises increasing in recent years, which highlights both Romania's openness to Western world values and the degree of confidence which is enjoyed by strategic partners. It should be noted that the military exercise Saber Guardian, led by the USA, is organized since 2013, in the Black Sea region and those of 2017 (Cozmei, 2017), jointly hosted by Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania, and 2021 (Lupitu, 2021), as a module of the military exercise Defender Europe 2021, they have been the largest so far.

The Noble Jump exercise has become of paramount importance to NATO, as it „provides a great opportunity for NATO's response force to demonstrate its ability to deploy quickly in crisis areas”



(Exercise Noble Jump 2021 begins in Romania, 2021). It is worth mentioning that Noble Jump 2017 was carried out in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, representing the first action in which the participating armed forces tested their capabilities to provide logistical support to other NATO forces on a large scale, which highlights the responsiveness in crisis situations (Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018, pp. 8-9).

Since 2015, Bulgaria has hosted the annual Thracian Star air exercise, the purpose of the exercise being to improve the joint air operations of some NATO countries. Starting with 2016,

Romania participates with fighter jets, along with other NATO members. At the 2021 edition, the Romanian Air Force was present with F-16 Fighting Falcon aircraft, belonging to the 86th Air Base „Lieutenant Aviator Gheorghe Mociorniță” (Costea, 2021).

The capabilities of the Romanian maritime military forces have participated in recent years in several regional or international exercises, with the role of increasing the level of interoperability between the participating forces. Eloquent is the participation in the naval exercise "Breeze" in the Black Sea, conducted since 1997. The naval exercise „Breeze” in 2021 involved military capabilities in 32 countries, including Romania, which determined Moscow authorities to call for such operations to be dropped, saying it was „a challenge because it takes place too close to its territory” („Sea Breeze”: Large-scale military exercise in the Black Sea, 2021).

Romania is also a constant presence at the multinational, multi-annual, Platinum Lion exercises hosted by Bulgaria, designed to help strengthen relations between the military and increase interoperability with allied or partner forces. The exercise of 2019 enjoyed the presence of the armed forces of the USA, Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Serbia (Bigley, 2019).

Participation in such „security cooperation” activities (training courses, operations and military exercises) with NATO partners is very important for the countries of the Black Sea region.

In the context of international concerns for maintaining peace and stability in the Black Sea region, it should be noted that in 2016, NATO developed the Forward Presence initiative, which aimed to strengthen the Alliance's deterrence policy against the Russian Federation, with two main components: the consolidated advanced presence (focused on Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland) and the adapted presence (focused on Bulgaria and Romania). In October 2017, the Southeast Multinational Brigade was established as part of the Forward Presence initiative, led by Romania and supported by troops from nine other NATO member states (Wezeman & Kuimova, 2018, pp. 7-9).

In conclusion, we can say that NATO partners are constantly evolving and working closely together on the Black Sea coast, and the United States is actively participating in Allied-hosted exercises in this region.

3. BLACK SEA DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION INITIATIVES

3.1 Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership

In 2005, less than a year after joining NATO, the project of the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership was announced, being the first subregional initiative of Romania in the Black Sea area, as a “process of reflection on the future and identity of the region, to increase mutual trust, to facilitate the identification of pragmatic projects capable of meeting the real needs of regional development” (Lungu, 2006). The initiative was perceived by the Russian Federation as an attempt to revise the Montreux Convention and change the status quo in the Black Sea region (Dungaciu & Dumitrescu, 2019).



From the perspective of Turkey, the initiative was a competition between Romania and Turkey for the status of the most important NATO member state in the Black Sea area, being seen as a project that competed with the initiative launched in 1992 by 12 riparian states or in the vicinity of the Black Sea, and namely the Organization for Economic Cooperation on the Black Sea.

Through the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership, Romania has supported NATO's strategy on the Black Sea, which aims to strengthen its presence in this space and to eliminate the dysfunctions in the functioning of existing regional organizations or initiatives.

In 2006, without the official participation of the Russian Federation, the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership Summit was held, which aimed to pave the way for a process of „building confidence and exploring new opportunities for cooperation and dialogue in the extended Black Sea region”, for the optimal management of the risks that this region was facing at that time and the highlighting of a common vision on the Black Sea region. The novelty in this case was the involvement of civil society in discussing the various issues facing the riparian states (Dungaciu & Dumitrescu, 2019). In this project, the common vision for the Black Sea region would have been developed not by the authorities in the riparian states, but by the civil society, a matter highlighted by the substantiation note of the meeting. (Substantiation note– HG no. 396/29.03.2006, n.d.).

In the absence of substantial funding and real support from NATO and the European Union, the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership has not been as successful.

3.2. Geostrategic capabilities

As mentioned earlier, Romania has expressed concern about Russia's actions in the Wider Black Sea Region and has highlighted the issue that they threaten the security and stability of this area.

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the issue of naval power in the Black Sea is once again becoming relevant, generating new initiatives in the region. Thus, in January 2016, the Romanian government authorities launched the initiative to create a naval group in the Black Sea – „Black Sea Flotilla”, as a priority objective for national defense policy. It is worth mentioning that NATO and the US have supported this regional project, in the context in which the US naval presence in the Black Sea is limited by the provisions of the Treaty of Montreux. The possibility of creating such a fleet was discussed at the NATO summit in Warsaw in July 2016. This initiative received strong support from President Klaus Iohannis, following talks with Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, who stated that the presence of NATO members in the Black Sea „is part of the deterrent measures that the Alliance has decided to adopt against Russia, following its aggressive military actions, which led to the annexation of Crimea” (Popescu, 2016).

Although the Bulgarian foreign minister at the time has said that his country was exploring options to join a NATO joint group in the Black Sea and that Bulgaria was doing everything possible to increase its guarantees and defensive capabilities in the Black Sea (Sebe, 2018, pp. 16-19), surprisingly, gave a negative answer to the President of Romania regarding this initiative, the Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boiko Borisov, for domestic policy reasons, stated that he does not want the Black Sea to become an area of military conflict. Thus, under the given conditions, the project was reduced to simple joint exercises carried out by the naval forces of the three Allied countries, Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey (Teja, 2016).

The failure of this initiative was also due to deficiencies in promoting it, without an active diplomatic promotion campaign and without the support of all actors involved (Sebe, 2018, pp. 16-



19), Romania having to apply the Polish or Baltic model, which promotes its interests in a vocal manner.

3.3. Bucharest Initiative 9 (B9)

Similar to the Three Seas Initiative that brings together the member states of the European Union is worth mentioning the initiative „Bucharest 9”, which was launched by Romania, in partnership with Poland, in 2014, designed as a platform to strengthen dialogue and consultation between nine NATO Member States: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary.

The most recent meeting took place on November 25-26, when Romania co-chaired with Poland the third meeting of defense ministers in Format B9. The sessions were dedicated to „the results of the NATO summit in Brussels in June, the process of developing the new Strategic Concept of the Alliance and the implementation of the NATO 2030 agenda”, as well as „cooperation between NATO and the European Union, Strategic Compass, resilience and military mobility” (B9 meeting in the format of defense ministers, 2021).

The meeting of defense ministers discussed the configuration of the security equation on NATO's eastern flank and the concrete ways of formulating tailored responses within the Alliance. The above issues were very important for strengthening NATO's policy of deterrence and collective defense, especially in the context of the inflammation of the security equation on the border between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The Black Sea area was at the forefront of the discussions, analyzing and mentioning some of the options for strengthening cooperation actions between allied states, including through complementarity with the European Defense Initiative or the Three Seas Initiative.

In conclusion, unlike the „Black Sea Fleet”, the B9 Initiative has proved to be a success and is proving effective by strengthening the positions of the nine Member States on NATO's eastern flank, providing the necessary framework for harmonizing the positions of the nine Member States within the eastern flank of the Alliance. It is also the first initiative developed by Romania that is successful and that proves its efficiency, in the context in which it is in a vulnerable position towards the Russian Federation given the geographical proximity.

CONCLUSIONS

Romania's accession to NATO has created a favorable framework for hosting or participating regularly in partnership exercises, which highlights both Romania's openness to the values of the Western world - in a global world characterized by unpredictability and multiple security threats (Peptan, 2020 b, pp. 319-332) -, the importance in the regional security equation and the degree of trust it enjoys from strategic partners.

By developing and participating in certain regional initiatives, such as the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership, the Black Sea Fleet and the Bucharest Initiative 9, Romania has sought to strengthen its position within the two organizations (NATO, EU) and assert itself as a relevant power in the Black Sea region.

Despite the good intentions and efforts made, the only initiative that was successful was the Bucharest Initiative 9, which has the capacity to be organized annually due to its format.

The Bucharest 9 initiative offers the possibility for NATO member states participating in this platform to harmonize their military positions within the Eastern flank of the Alliance. It is a plausible



reason for the other NATO member states to contribute directly or indirectly to ensuring the success and effectiveness of this initiative.

Although Romania has actively participated in NATO operations and developed some regional initiatives, they have so far failed to assert themselves as a true regional power, due to internal socio-economic causality, which it has faced in the last three decades.

It is necessary to harmonize national policies and strategies with those of other countries in the region, in order to identify and implement joint initiatives, able to enhance the role and importance of these countries in the regional security equation and give them the status of relevant powers in the region Black Sea.



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