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## FROZEN CONFLICTS, SECURITY CHALLENGES AND GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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**Abstract:** *THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE BLACK SEA REGION HAS MADE IT AN AREA OF CONCERN FOR SOME STATE ENTITIES TO IMPOSE THEIR OWN INTERESTS AND GAIN CONTROL. AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR, THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION CONSTANTLY EXPRESSED SUCH CONCERNS, A CONTEXT IN WHICH THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NATO STOOD OUT BY COUNTERACTING THEM. THE EMERGENCE OF NEW INDEPENDENT STATES AS A RESULT OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BIPOLAR POWER SYSTEM, COUPLED WITH THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S EFFORTS TO MAINTAIN ITS SPHERE OF INFLUENCE, HAS LED TO PROTRACTED CONFLICTS - WHICH CONTINUE TO THREATEN REGIONAL SECURITY AND STABILITY - KNOWN AS FROZEN CONFLICTS, SUCH AS THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT, THE FROZEN TRANSNISTRIAN CONFLICT OR THE GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN CONFLICT, AND THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT. THE INVASION OF UKRAINE BY THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, WHICH BEGAN ON FEBRUARY 24, 2022, HAS BROUGHT THE REGION BACK TO THE CENTER OF GLOBAL CONCERN, WITH THE BLACK SEA BECOMING A GEOGRAPHICALLY IMPORTANT AREA FOR REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SECURITY. REGARDLESS OF HOW THE MILITARY DISPUTE IS RESOLVED AT THE TIME OF WRITING THIS STUDY (MAY 25, 2022), WE BELIEVE THAT UKRAINE WILL BECOME AN AREA OF TENSION-GENERATING INSTABILITY BETWEEN THE WORLD'S SUPERPOWERS, WHICH COULD LEAD TO A NEW TYPE OF FROZEN CONFLICT, WITH SPECIFIC FEATURES.*

**Keywords:** *FROZEN CONFLICT, SECURITY, DIVERGENCES, DISPUTES, AGGRESSION, SECESSION.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Black Sea<sup>1</sup> area is of exceptional significance for the European continent and the Euro-Atlantic Community, by its geostrategic position in the vicinity of the enlarged Middle East, an area currently marked by a multitude of security issues from which traditional and non-traditional threats radiate to Europe, which can affect the security balance of the old continent.

On the other hand, the Black Sea region represents a fragmented space, with the many existing land and sea routes attracting the attention of foreign powers interested in gaining control over them. During the Cold War, the area benefited from stability due to the bipolar organization of international geopolitics, but there was no real progress in the region, effectively neutralizing the "crossroads function of this space" (Prevelakis, 2001, pp. 148-152). It should be noted that Westerners perceived the region as part of the "Iron Curtain", which was seen as a barrier rather than an interest in expanding European policies.

The end of the Cold War coincided with the emergence of new tensions in the region, as a result of the confrontations between the old, traditional elements and the new ones, which became the "key" of world power, confirming in this case the principle of the influence of geographical factors on political action (Winrow, 2007, pp. 217-235). In this context, it was noted the increasing involvement of external actors, such as the European Union and NATO, interested in ensuring "that no single power (the Russian Federation) should control this geopolitical space" (Winrow, 2007, pp. 217-235). Thus, the understanding of the geopolitics of this space is achieved both through the powerful state actors inside the region (mainly the Russian Federation) and through the external influences acting in the area (the European Union and NATO).

As the region also represents "an Euro-Asian energy corridor linking the Euro-Atlantic system to Caspian energy sources" (Asmus & Jackson, 2004, pp. 4-5), it becomes clear that energy security is closely linked to geopolitics, and geopolitical concerns in the region cannot be separated from the continuous attention to sources and routes of oil and gas supply (Winrow, 2007, pp. 217-235), which gives a special value to the Black Sea region.

The region's specific challenges arose with the disappearance of the global bipolar power system, marking the birth of new independent states and the onset of prolonged conflicts. The emergence of new state actors provided the context for creating a new security environment whose equation has not yet been discerned.

## 2. FROZEN CONFLICTS, SOURCES OF INSTABILITY IN THE REGION

For the wider Black Sea region, frozen conflicts are the main challenge in the process of achieving regional cooperation, as violent ethno-political conflicts over secession have led to the establishment of de facto regimes that are not recognized by the international community or the state where the secession took place. The key feature is that as the violence around secession diminishes in intensity, the conflict turns into a "frozen" one (Clancy & Nagle, 2009).

Prolonged conflicts continue to threaten security and stability in this area, where an environment has been strengthened for the development of phenomena with major security impact, such as organized crime, arms trafficking, drug trafficking and terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> The core of this region is represented by the six riparian states: Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, but the region as a whole also includes Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.



### ***2.1 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict***

Mountain Karabakh is a territory that, throughout history, has been disputed between ethnic Azerbaijanians and Armenians through bloody conflicts. The conflict in the mountain region of the South Caucasus, known as Nagorno-Karabakh, is the first and longest ethno-territorial dispute in the post-communist world (de Waal, 2015, pp. 125-136). The key cause of this outbreak is the idea that nationalism in both countries is incomplete without the region's membership. The actors involved in the conflict are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The conflict began in 1988 with mass demonstrations promoting the integration of the Nagorno-Karabakh region to the Soviet Republic of Armenia, although at that time this space was part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic.

After the collapse of the communist bloc, the emerging and rebel conflict to acquire the Nagorno-Karabakh region gained the valences of an armed war between the young republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan between 1992 and 1994 (Krüger, 2010, pp. 22-24.).

Since March 1992, the conflict has been mediated by the so-called Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. At the end of 1992, the Russian Federation began to support the Armenian forces, supplying them with weapons and fuel.

The shootout ended in 1994, when Armenia gained control of the entire disputed territory. At the same time, this state actor also gained full or partial control over seven Azerbaijani regions in the immediate vicinity of Mountain Karabakh. The conflict turned into a frozen conflict. The dispute continues as Azerbaijan does not relinquish its claim to an area internationally recognized as part of its territory and uses all the levers at its disposal to challenge the newly created status quo (de Waal, 2015, pp. 125-136).

The effects of this shocking conflict are evidenced by the large number of refugees and the loss of lives, making it "one of the secession wars of the post-Soviet era." (Krüger, 2010, pp. 22-24)

In the peace-building process, the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe established a tripartite co-presidency in 1997, with the three mediators, France, the Russian Federation and the United States, managing to create a common agenda on conflict management, despite the difficulties of coordination between the parties involved. At the same time, another issue of the peace process is its closed nature, as the presidents of the two states do not want to lose control over the peace process, being the main leaders of the negotiations (de Waal, 2015, pp. 125-136).

Note that the settlement of the differences between the two sides could have been achieved by a peace agreement in 2001, when the presidents of the countries involved had talks in the US state of Florida following the mediation of the Minsk Group. However, the major obstacles to resolving the conflict are represented by the "future status of the Nagorno-Karabakh region and the fate of the surrounding areas, held by ethnic Armenian forces and extending to the border of Armenia" (Five key things to know, 2020).

Among the factors that maintain tensions in the region is the increase in military attack capabilities through the acquisition of the license for the production of Israeli drones and unmanned aerial vehicles – Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles. Nor is it uninteresting that Turkey has expanded its sphere of influence in the region, counterbalancing the influence of the Russian Federation in the South Caucasus" (Five key things to know, 2020).

Resolving this frozen conflict requires a more pragmatic involvement of the European Union, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. The European Union has been a marginal actor in the peace process, and the OSCE has not coordinated its work well enough for this conflict to be resolved. In addition to the above, a political compromise on both sides is necessary to resolve the conflict.



## ***2.2 The frozen conflict in Transnistria***

The reasons behind the outbreak of this conflict are the actions carried out by the separatists in Transnistria, who took control of the former Soviet military forces and various governmental bodies located on the territory of the Republic of Moldova.<sup>2</sup> The actors involved in this conflict are: Moldova, the Russian Federation and the separatist forces in Transnistria. In November 1990, armed confrontations between separatists and Moldovan government forces began, with Russian forces contributing to the arming of Transnistrian separatists, a matter brought by Moldova to the attention of the United Nations Security Council (Grant, 2017, p. 378). The fighting in late 1991 and early 1992 was particularly intense and resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives. Until the first half of 1992, some of the Russian Federation's military forces were ordered in Transnistria to fight alongside the Transnistrian separatists against Moldovan forces, although Kremlin authorities denied involvement in the conflict and said they remained neutral. Until March 1992, the Moldovan army was in a position of inferiority that has been keeping it from regaining control of Transnistria (Grant, 2017, p. 378). Through the support of the separatists, the Russian Federation aimed to maintain its influence on the Republic of Moldova, interested in ensuring territorial integrity and defending the institutions of the rule of law. On March 23, 1992, the foreign ministers of Moldova, the Russian Federation, Romania and Ukraine met in Helsinki and set up a quadripartite commission and a group of military observers to oversee the observance of a possible ceasefire in Transnistria, adopting the principles for a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. Subsequently, on July 21, 1992, Moldova and the Russian Federation adopted an agreement on the principles for the amicable settlement of the armed conflict in the Transnistrian region. At the same time, the Memorandum of May 8, 1997 – whose parties were the central government of Moldova and the authorities of Transnistria – established the basis for “normalizing the situation” and agreed to refrain from using or threatening the use of force in their mutual relations. It is worth mentioning that the Russian federation and Ukraine have signed as guarantor states (Grant, 2017, p. 379).

Despite that, the conflict has not been resolved, and it has turned into a frozen conflict. In order to resolve this conflict, a number of factors need to co-exist, including: the existence of a transparent dialog between the parties to the conflict, building a relationship of trust between the negotiating parties and highlighting the economic benefits that can be achieved due to political stability and the successful resolution of the conflict (Belitser, 2015)

In the context of the recent conflict in Ukraine (Mărcău, Peptan et. al., 2022), prompted by the military aggressions of the Russian Federation, “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” claims that “there are growing concerns about the possibility [...] of reactivation and the conflict in Transnistria, frozen for three decades. The pro-Western Government of the Republic of Moldova and the Russian-oriented Tiraspol authorities are pursuing a policy of neutrality, which they maintain even after the recent incidents. On the other hand, the publication Der Spiegel claims that “an extension of the war toward the Republic of Moldova is risky even for Moscow”, despite some challenges that could be used as a pretext to intervene militarily in Transnistria (Draghicescu, 2022).

## ***2.3 Georgian-Ossetian conflict and Georgian-Abkhazian conflict***

The South Ossetia constituted an autonomous entity within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic of the former USSR. Tensions between the nationalist government of Georgia and Ossetia continued to rise in the months before the collapse of the communist bloc, but the key cause of the

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<sup>2</sup> Moldova declared independence from the former USSR on June 23, 1990, and Transnistria declared itself a separate territorial unit on September 2, 1990.



conflict was the action of the nationalist government in Georgia to oppose the South Ossetia autonomy (Grant, 2017, pp. 383-384).

In the context in which, on April 9, 1991, Georgia proclaimed its independence from the USSR, and the people of South Ossetia wanted to join the Russian Federation, the referendum of January 19, 1992 highlighted the desire for separation from Georgia and integration into the Russian Federation, thus creating the conditions favorable to the declaration of independence of South Ossetia on 29 May 1992, although the Russian Federation did not recognize independence for a considerable period of time after that (Grant, 2017, pp. 383-384). On 24 June 1992, the Russian Federation and Georgia adopted the Sochi Agreement, which established the principles underlying the settlement of the Georgian-Osetian conflict. Two years later, on October 31, 1994, Georgia, South Ossetia, Russia and North Ossetia adopted the Georgian-Ossetian Agreement. The two agreements have not achieved major results in promoting a transparent dialog between the warring parties and the peace reconstruction process is far from being completed. So far, the conflict has not been resolved and no solution has been found that is agreed upon by both sides. As a result of this conflict, tens of thousands of refugees were killed and more than 1000 people were killed in the battle. Abkhazia, like South Ossetia, was an autonomous unit within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, which was under the strict influence of the USSR. The Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia presented on August 24, 1990, a declaration calling for respect for the state sovereignty of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. The nationalist government in Georgia perceived the declaration as a threat to the country's territorial integrity. The two sides had very high tensions, which later turned into a violent conflict with the entry of Georgian troops into Abkhazia on August 14, 1992 (Grant, 2017, p. 386).

It should be noted that the Abkhazian separatists aimed at strengthening a sovereign state and invoked throughout the conflict the right of peoples to self-determination, while the central government of Georgia claimed that the Abkhazia region was an integral part of its territory, this issue being established by the referendum of 13 March 1991. On 3 September 1992, Georgia, the Russian Federation and the Abkhazia separatists adopted the Moscow Agreement, which ensured Georgia's territorial integrity and provided for a ceasefire from 5 September 1992. The signatory parties requested assistance from the UN and the OSCE in the peace-building process. The agreement was violated shortly after its signing, when Abkhazian separatist forces took control of the Western part of the territory and established a consolidated territory in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Federation (Grant, 2017, pp. 386-387).

The above issues have generated a more pragmatic UN involvement in the conflict, with the UN Secretary-General appointing a special envoy to Georgia in May 1993 for the purpose of implementing an armistice in Abkhazia. Thus, it was possible to adopt a new ceasefire agreement on 27 July 1993, which prohibited the introduction of additional forces into the area and provided for the establishment of a Joint Commission for the settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia, composed of representatives and observers of the UN and OSCE. UN Security Council Resolution 858 of 24 August 1993 welcomed the Agreement of 27 July 1993 and set up a UN observation mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) to verify compliance with the provisions of this Agreement (Grant, 2017, pp. 387-388).

Following the establishment of this mission, the Georgian government withdrew heavy artillery from the region, with separatists launching a strong offensive against territories controlled by Georgian forces and taking full control of Abkhazia. On May 14, 1994, a third ceasefire agreement was adopted and the Security Council extended the mandate of UNOMIG. However, the conflict has not been resolved to date and after the signing of the May 14, 1994 Agreement, it has become a “frozen conflict”. Relations <sup>3</sup>between the Russian Federation and Georgia deteriorated over time, and on



August 28, 2008, an interstate conflict broke out, which was accompanied by the recognition by the Russian Federation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The two de facto separatist regions were recognized for the first time internationally (Grant, 2017, pp. 389-390).

In addition to the loss of lives, the two frozen conflicts have generated a large number of displaced persons and refugees, with the social dimension being the most eloquent from a security point of view as a result of these frozen conflicts.

#### ***2.4. From the military aggression of the Russian Federation on Ukraine to the possibility of a new frozen conflict.***

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation in 2014 was assessed as non-compliance with the provisions of the Helsinki Treaty (1975) and the Budapest Memorandum between the Russian Federation, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, the EU said it had “security insurance against threats or the use of force against Ukraine.” (Malvin, 2018, pp. 19-20).

Subsequently, Ukraine adopted a strategy that would provide it with constant support from the West in the face of an imminent aggression from the Russian Federation, in the context in which “Ukraine’s strategic objective in the Black Sea region does not extend beyond its national territory” (Joja, 2019)

Russian maritime aggression in the Black Sea Kerch Strait in 2018 and artificial feeding of conflicts between ethnic Russians and Ukrainians - especially in the Donbas region - were additional challenges for Ukraine (Joja, 2019). It should be noted that the Russian Federation – the strongest state actor in the area due to its capabilities, but also because it has control over areas of particular strategic importance – refers to the Black Sea “as its own lake, it is populated by weaker actors who cannot do much to challenge its regional hegemony.” (Joja, 2019). The Russian Federation’s efforts to regain influence in areas once controlled by the former USSR and to counterbalance USA’s hegemonic power have taken on an upward trend in recent years. On the other hand, the expansion of NATO’s strictly defensive military capabilities in Poland and Romania were perceived by the Russian Federation as a serious threat to its own security, context in which the Kremlin authorities urgently requested their relocation from the vicinity of the Russian Federation’s borders. The pro-Western path of Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltic countries represented an additional motivation of the Russian Federation to try to rebalance the regional and global security equation, by overcharging its own economic and military capabilities. Circumscribed to this state of affairs, it is worth mentioning Vladimir Putin’s statement that the breakup of the former USSR represented the greatest political catastrophe of the last century (Neagu, 2011).

In the geopolitical context mentioned, on 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation militarily invaded Ukraine under the pretext of a “special operation” to “denazify and demilitarize”, being the largest conventional military attack on a European state since the end of the Second World War. The consequences of the military aggression are practically incalculable, in addition to the material losses suffered by Ukraine and the onset of the biggest refugee crisis in Europe, with over 5,2 million Ukrainians leaving the country so far, including the onset of a regional and global security crisis, as well as an economic crisis, with the same valences, as a result of the direct and indirect effects caused by sanctions adopted <sup>4</sup>by the international community – which has strongly criticized the invasion of Ukraine – against the Russian Federation, turning it into a politically and economically isolated state entity. In the medium and long term, regardless of how the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation is resolved, it is very possible to register a new frozen conflict that will weaken the



parameters of the security equation in the East of the European continent, because the Russian Federation is still nostalgic for the “glorious past” of the former USSR (The nostalgia for the USSR, 2022).

Note the position of Colonel General Vladimir Shamanov, according to which the “demilitarization” and “denazification” of Ukraine could take between 5 and 10 years (Jucan, 2022).

In this context, the international community cannot passively witness the circumvention and violation of the norms of international law governing the existence and sovereignty of the states of the world.

### 3. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Frozen conflicts in the Black Sea region threaten the stability and security of this area, as well as regional cooperation. In order for natural resources and the potential for regional cooperation to be fully exploited, it is necessary to resolve these conflicts through joint action by all stakeholders, both those who originate in this area and other state actors or international security bodies.

In the context of the phenomenon of globalization at the global level, in order to effectively solve frozen conflicts, it is necessary to respect the importance of each state entity, including by redefining its own institutional architectures and increasing the negotiation capacity based on strategic knowledge. We point out that the military force must be replaced by the force and power of forward-looking and preventive information (Peptan, 2020a, pp. 83-88), which will give the necessary levers to manage the problematic situations that are registered in many geographical areas of the world and are at the origin of frozen conflicts.

Not a few are the voices that bring to the attention of the public the need to create a global capacity for a single governance, acting coherently and balanced to solve the many problems facing humanity, which have various causes (Peptan, 2020b, pp. 315-337). Such an approach is difficult to achieve in the context in which in many of the world’s states there is an increase in national sentiment and the challenge of globalization as a phenomenon, including international security institutions that advocate for peace and security on a global level.



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