

**ACADEMIA ROMÂNĂ
INSTITUTUL DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE
ȘI RELAȚII INTERNAȚIONALE
„ION I. C. BRĂTIANU“**

Coordinators:

IULIAN CHIFU

NARCIZ BĂLĂȘOIU

PROSPECTIVE STUDIES OF THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

**Scenarios for its future in times
of high international turbulence**



**EDITURA
INSTITUTULUI DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE
ȘI RELAȚII INTERNAȚIONALE
„ION I. C. BRĂTIANU“**

București, 2018

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

Prospective studies of the Wider Black Sea Region : scenarios for its future in times of high international turbulence. / coord.: Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălăsoiu. - București : Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale "Ion I.C. Brătianu", 2018

ISBN 978-606-8656-62-5

I. Chifu, Iulian (coord.)

II. Bălăsoiu, Narciz (coord.)

32

Tehnoredactare computerizată:

DANIELA PAUL

LILIANA DINCĂ

Coperta:

MIHAI BÂRSAN

G | M | F

The German Marshall Fund
of the United States

STRENGTHENING TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

**This book is the result of a project supported by
the Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund.**

Opinions expressed in the written or electronic
publications do not necessarily represent those of the
Black Sea Trust, the German Marshall Fund, or its partners.

© INSTITUTUL DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE
ȘI RELAȚII INTERNAȚIONALE
„ION I. C. BRĂȚIANU“

București – 6, B-dul Iuliu Maniu, nr. 1-3, România
Telefon: 021 316 96 61/62

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Prospective studies. The Wider Black Sea Region Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălăsoiu	7
--	---

Part I. Assessments of the Wider Black Sea Region

1. Black Sea Security Puzzle Plus: Historical burdens, geopolitical givens, competing narratives? Present and future opportunities in a persistent reality of interdependence Teodor Meleșcanu	11
2. Security Challenges in the Black Sea Area Gen. Nicolae Ciucă	25

Part II. Critical indicators and scenarios

Chapter 1

Prospective scenarios for the Wider Black Sea Region: Short-mid-long term evolution Iulian Chifu	30
--	----

Chapter 2

Critical indicators. A reflection on the methodological approach and scenario building process. Iulian Chifu	41
--	----

1. Armenia - present challenges and expectations <i>Stepan Grigoryan, Radu Arghir</i>	55
2. Azerbaidjan - a strategic pivot in the Wider Black Sea Region <i>Adriana Sauliuc</i>	82
3. Bulgaria - internal current situation, main bilateral relations, significant external factors, indicators that might change the country's current path <i>Yordan Bozhilov, Irina Iacovoiu</i>	95
4. The Wider Black Sea Region and Georgia. Risk Variables <i>Teona Akubardia and Andreea Ibănescu</i>	117
5. The Republic of Moldova. Deep divisions in a completely divided society <i>Viorel Cibotaru, Iulian Chifu</i>	130
6. Romania - An internal and regional perspective <i>Narciz Bălăsoiu</i>	141
7. Russian Federation - Country assessment - <i>Diana Bărbuceanu</i>	151
8. Turkey in the Wider Black Sea Region. Scenarios in times of international turbulence <i>Ünal Çeviköz and Andreea Ibănescu</i>	162
9. Ukraine - Country assessment <i>Diana Bărbuceanu, Hanna Shelest</i>	184

Part IV. Scenarios

1. Scenarios beginning in the short term (6-12 month)...	195
2. Scenarios beginning in the medium term (3-5 years)...	245
3. Scenarios beginning in the long term (10-15 years).....	347
4. Scenarios with Black Swan events:	
- Short term	416
- Mid term	421
- Long term	459

Annex 1. Complex of indicators. Centralized general indicators.....	475
---	-----

PROSPECTIVE STUDIES. THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

Our book on "Prospective studies of the Wider Black Sea Region. Scenarios for its future in times of high international turbulence." Was a very challenging one. Despite the fact that we are working with an already proved methodology, used in several cases, the Ukrainian crisis – annexation of Crimea, Russian military aggression in the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Donbas – the turbulence and the speed with which change occurs in the current international relations are creating major problems for those trying to cope with it while at the same time trying to maintaining the focus on the methodology.

The project lasted for 14 month and has been financed by the Black Sea Trust of the German Marshall Fund. We've previously applied the methodology for prospective studies with a double iteration on the assessments of the most important developments for the actors involved in the region – once in July 2017, at the beginning of the project, the second time in February 2018. We used this double iteration in the first study on prospective studies – using the original PLATO-Plausible Tomorrows technique, that we've transformed in a methodology by covering the theoretical gaps – when assessing the scenarios of the Russia-Ukrainian crisis in February-September 2014, with excellent results. The surprise was that the magnitude of changes proved even more important than the war in Donbas.

The book includes from two introductions and assessments of the whole Wider Black Sea Region, one made by the Minister of

Foreign Affairs, Teodor Meleșcanu, the other by the Chief of Staff of the Defense, Gen. Nicolae Ciucă. Both officials used the same methodology, with an assessment made during the conference in late June 2017 and another in February-March 2018, which we've published here.

The research process proved to be one with big surprises. We've realized, at the end of the process, that scenarios that we've rated as black swans events, huge impact with low probability – the scenarios covering the possibility that relative certainties are not fulfilled – have become over night less improbable, and we've discussed at the end even moving them to a different category, that of the discontinuity scenarios. It was the case of the rift between US and EU and the divisions between Turkey and the US/EU, even NATO. But after due reflection, we've established that the most correct way is to stay within the boundaries of the already proved and applied methodology and avoid divagation.

We've chosen to do so due to several reasons. First, in order to observe strictly the methodology, has proven itself before. And second, because in the case of EU-US it could be just a family quarrel, and the differences between Turkey and US/EU/NATO can still be mitigated. In the first case, even the statement of Mrs Merkel that Europe cannot count on the US anymore for its security and should take it in its own hands, have been offset by the statements that Chancellor Merkel and President Macron have been made in front of President Putin, that the US is still the most important partner of Europe in terms of security and defense. And in the second case, Rex Tillerson's trip to Ankara and his proposals were the ones that opened the gate for a compromise and an understanding on Syria and could ease the strategic differences, reflected in the harsh electoral statements of President Erdogan and some European leaders.

Fact is we succeed in elaborating the system of critical indicators that led us to 16 scenarios in the short term (6-12 month), with three critical indicators, one with 4 options and 2 with two options, 32 scenarios on the mid-term (3-5 years) with 5 critical indicators

each with two options (but here we've cut half of the scenarios considering that Russian invasion of a non-NATO country in the region as being one sole scenarios, regardless which country was) and 24 scenarios in the long run (10-15 years), with 4 indicators, 3 with two options and one with 3 options related to the heritage of Vladimir Putin in a post-Putin Russia – nationalist option, continuity or democratic approach, in order of the estimated probability. Further more, we've added 11 scenarios with black swan events, as follows:

Beginning with the **short term (6-12 month)**: A Greek-Turkish direct open conflict, with a military large scale intervention.

In the **mid term (3-5 years)**:

- The collapse of the idea of solidarity and a divide inside the once relatively cohesive European Union. A divisive two/three tracks EU with geographical divides East-West, Old-New Europe, transatlantic vs. euro-centric EU.
- A hard and harsh Brexit, harming British economy leading to a major reduction of its involvement in the Wider Black Sea Area Security and Defense.
- The emergence of power politics, polarization and a split, with countries associating themselves either with France, or with Germany, and a perpetual fight inside the EU, or even a real unbalanced rivalry between France and Germany on the continent, in the long run (polarization – mid term, rivalry, conflict, war-long term).
- China is beginning to act as a rival/competitor of the US on strategic projects in the Wider Black Sea Region at a strategic investment level.
- EU-US rivalry in economic, strategic and military approaches, which would lead to less EU cohesion or to a hard divisions inside the EU.
- Turkey exiting NATO, in continuous confrontation with the EU. Closer ties with Russia or condominium.
- A weak Turkey, in turmoil. A Turkey that could become subject of Russia's involvements in its internal affairs.
- A Bulgarian-Turkish open conflict, with a large scale military intervention.

Finally, in the long term:

- The US will cease to be the main actor in charge on the international arena. China takes over, becoming more active, and Russia is more present as well, with assertiveness and direct involvement in any conflict or space.
- China interferes militarily, in the long run, in the Wider Black Sea Region (together with Russia, to protect its strategic investments).

The absolute novelty of our project is the appearance **China** in the forefront **as a new actor that may intervention in regional affairs**, with some influence in part of the countries in the region. It is not yet a critical actor, but we've already found out, due to its commitments in the region, including in the long run, together with its interventions in the area, that **China is going to become more and more relevant in the region**, in the mid-term, and especially in the long run. This despite the US already being present in the area.

The high turbulence is creating huge difficulties for the prospective studies. It means that changes are happening quite often during the process of elaboration of such studies. This was the case with 14 months in question, from Trump taking office and the Brexit to turbulence and sudden changes in Syria, North Korea, Iran, the Middle East. But if there is the possibility to ignore those distractions and focus on the methodology and objective findings, the results will be both relevant and spectacular.

Iulian Chifu, Narciz Bălășoiu

PART I. INTRODUCTION. ASSESSMENTS OF THE WIDER BLACK SEA REGION

1. Black Sea Security Puzzle *Plus*: Historical burdens, geopolitical givens, competing narratives?

Present and future opportunities in a persistent reality of interdependence

The strategic relevance and geopolitical quandaries of the wider Black Sea region are a topic of inherent importance for Romania's foreign policy. I would argue that this has been even more the case since the end of the Cold War. Following successive enlargements of the Euro-Atlantic realm and, over the last decade, emerging elements of a global order re-design, we find ourselves at a high point of strategic imbalances, eroding security architectures, regionally conflicting trends and, outwardly at least, irreducible geopolitical competition. From a wider perspective, following an immediate post-Cold War perhaps idealistic confidence, we let ourselves carried by a misleading state of optimism. Today, after a prolonged ebb and flow in interest and focus on this region on the part of some of our Euro-Atlantic partners, we are once again faced with hard questions of what we should do together to avoid further negative influences, to reverse the trend of heightened instability and to forge some more enduring positive trends.

One could not deny that, with the exception perhaps of a short interval in the 1990s, we have never been entirely free of the spell of geopolitics in this region – in fact part of a larger zone whose historical experiences, for better or for worse, were at the origin of the science of geopolitics itself. I would therefore also

argue that we should demystify ourselves of the illusion that geopolitics has ever been the exception rather than the rule around this region – if we want to be able to project a viable secure future for us as Europeans.

As things go already, we are confident that the EU Global Strategy is moving to more openly integrate the relevance of this vital strategic neighborhood, including the wider Black Sea region, within the external-internal nexus of its outlook on European security, and with its larger vision on the future of the European project. And a very important part of this future should point to the European commonality with the Eastern Neighborhood – this being I believe the way ahead also in dealing with security dilemmas such as prolonged conflicts in the region.

For this to be possible, EU-NATO complementarity remains essential – and I do think that the recent years, with all their relative doubts at some moments, have seen us passing this test in a quite positive, convincing manner – as we have forged ahead in terms of NATO deterrence and defense on this Easternmost flank, and in maintaining the relevance of the Transatlantic compact. For us Romanians, a Transatlantic accord, a community of values and principles, is and will remain the watchword, and the United States our indispensable strategic partner.

Situated at multiple crossroads of the East and the South, the Black Sea region is once again, an area of dynamic, yet again, less than encouraging, evolutions. Unfortunately, since 2008 it has been increasingly marked by aggressive actions, open armed conflicts, as well as by a wide range of asymmetrical challenges.

We have seen the use of military force to change internationally recognized borders, once in 2008 in the case of Georgia and the second time in 2014 in Ukraine, generating an environment of renewed, hard security concerns, and bringing us closer to a “Cold War era” type of confrontation. The stability and security of the region, as well as the situation of human rights suffer the dire consequences of the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, followed by its heavy militarization, and of the deepening stalemate

in Eastern Ukraine. The worsening security situation in the Donbass, with constantly renewed waves of violence, including against civilians and civilian infrastructure, shows how far we are, at the beginning of 2018, from a political resolution of the conflict, despite all efforts invested in the Minsk process.

All this is in addition to the instability and volatility stemming from the protracted conflicts in the Republic of Moldova (Transnistria, where Russia has reinforced its military presence), in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russia has military bases) and in Nagorno-Karabakh.

There is no real progress with respect to the crisis in Ukraine or to other protracted conflicts, where negotiated solutions for lasting peace are yet to be found. The strategic security outlook continues to deteriorate in the Black Sea. Russia's building of highly technical and offensive capabilities in Crimea is unavoidably perceived as part of a larger military build-up in the Black Sea, including the modernization and enlargement of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and furthermore a platform for projecting its military force and activities, including in the Eastern Mediterranean and Syria. The purposeful development of a Russian offensive capability centered on Crimea and the Russian Black Sea Fleet alters the military balance in the region and beyond. Russian officials, mass media and research institutes speak extensively about the new capabilities already added or planned to be added to this fleet. The number of military exercises, including snap alert, has increased significantly, involving large number of Russian troops and more aggressive scenarios, thus heightening the precarious atmosphere in the region and beyond.

At the same time, the region continues to be affected by emerging threats, many of them pertaining to *soft security*. The array of instruments used by revisionist forces to change the established *status quo* or alter free choices of leaders and societies in the region is a large one, including pressures of economic and political nature, putting into question cultural and identity elements of national states, cyber-attacks, use of propaganda and fake news to influence and distort the public perceptions. The use of

hybrid operations covers various levels of involvement and achieving new strategic goals. Propaganda warfare has reached record magnitude, both externally and internally, and continues to be extensively used, with a view to distorting reality, creating confusion and divisions. Hybrid warfare tactics also almost automatically result in an increase of divisive movements inside sovereign states. Mass media and especially social media, NGOs, persons belonging to different groups of minorities are used as vectors of disinformation inside national societies.

The overall picture around the Black Sea is thus one of amplified and diversified security concerns. Aggression and hybrid tactics, the situation in the Caucasus and developments in the Levant create a dynamic that leads to increased transnational threats in the form of criminality, trafficking in persons, smuggling in drugs and even potential terrorist risks. Protracted conflicts generate “grey zones” that undermine regional security and economic development.

Thus, when speaking about security challenges in the Black Sea today we cannot pin-point one single menace that is threatening regional security. Overall, the regional narrative is nowadays much more about security and military capabilities in the area, than it used to be 10 years ago, when the focus was still on cooperation and economic opportunities.

Events that have intervened during this last decade at the Eastern borders of NATO and the EU mark a paradigm change in the security of the region, of Europe, and in their relation with the overall global system. Given its strategic positioning at the crossroads of different corridors, cultures and values, strategic stakes, but also given the profound interconnections with Euro-Atlantic security, the Black Sea areal has been gradually recovering in importance for European and American strategic thinking.

These last years’ events have significantly undermined the venues for cooperation in the region, changing the larger balance of power between major actors and dramatically prompting the Black Sea to the forefront of EU’s and NATO’s security concerns.

The unpredictability of strategic developments in the Black Sea having been amplified, the Euro-Atlantic allies have now embarked upon the sound path of renewing and consolidating their commitment. We thus acknowledge that the deepening of crises over the last years pushes us to stay focused on our shared strategic interests, while continually and purposefully monitoring the whole spectrum of risks and threats. This has already been, to a significant extent, translated in day-to-day decision making, yet more needs to be done. What has been achieved needs to be more durably strengthened. The Black Sea has become the “next frontier” in terms of hybrid warfare, open armed conflicts on European soil, energy insecurity, economic fragility. The Black Sea could also be portrayed as the theater where two conflicting narratives of the international order are simultaneously interpreted to a (too often!) unaware or disoriented public.

The changing nature of the threats is something yet to be fully internalized in grasping the overall security context in the Black Sea. Besides the concrete use of military force, states and societies in this region have been the testing ground for different kinds of “new threats”, from hybrid warfare, to massive military exercises, cyber-attacks, but also propaganda campaigns, fake news and manipulation of social movements. All these – coupled with the provocative and threatening military activities in the periphery of the NATO territory – contribute to a spiral of regional instability.

We must continue pursuing the long-term vision of transforming the Black Sea from a confrontation area into a stability and creative connectivity nexus with other neighboring regions like Central Asia or the Middle East. This region should be an area where cooperation prevails, predictability is the only game in town, economic perspectives are improving and different peoples and cultures find peaceful ways to interact and coexist. Even if such prospects seem at times farther than ever, our joint work is meant for the long run. It is anchored in the belief in a different future, shaped by ourselves in the region.

Such a complex regional security situation requires strong determination, appropriate resources and a close coordination

among all relevant actors, at all levels – within NATO, the EU and between these two organizations, as well as in regional cooperation formats.

Against this background, transatlantic cooperation and NATO solidarity are more valuable and meaningful than ever. A solid transatlantic partnership remains the cornerstone of the Euro-Atlantic security and Romania continues to be a strong advocate of Europe and North America working together in projecting stability near our borders and beyond, thereby safeguarding important benchmarks of the international order as we know it.

Allied unity and solidarity, based on common values and principles, are our stronger assets, and we are continuously preserving and consolidating them. It is for this reason that in reaction to the illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO decided to strengthen its posture on the Eastern flank. All these measures are defensive in nature, proportionate and fully in line with international commitments. They are legitimate responses by NATO to a deteriorating security situation and to an aggressive behavior and posturing by the Russian Federation. The respective measures are an essential dimension of the Alliance's role in dealing with current challenges and threats and ensuring the collective defense of its member states. Security developments in this area require us to further consolidate deterrence and defense on the entire Eastern flank, including in the Black Sea region, and also to continue to actively support its partners.

The NATO Summit Declarations adopted in Wales (2014) and Warsaw (2016) underline the importance of the Black Sea as a component of Euro-Atlantic security. In Warsaw, Allies decided to establish a more regular, multinational Allied presence in the Black Sea. The strengthening of NATO's forward presence at the Eastern borders sends a clear message that all member states stand united, determined to defend Allied territory and to deter any possible aggression. Therefore, our Allies from Europe and North America have deployed troops and equipment to the Eastern flank, to serve alongside local forces. At the initiative of Romania and Poland, nine member states on NATO's Eastern flank are meeting

in the Bucharest 9 (B9) format, in order to coordinate closely and find the most appropriate measures necessary to adjust the Alliance for the current security challenges and threats.

The actions and policies of the Alliance must remain based on facts. We would like nothing better than to be able to focus on economic opportunities and regional cooperation and restore relations with all littoral states, but unless Russia's comes back to the respect of international law, such an approach is not possible. We need to stay alert, to adapt our response constantly and to work very closely together and with the partners in the region.

NATO does not seek confrontation. In the past, the Alliance invested a lot in building a functional relationship with Russia. So did Romania, by creating and participating to regional cooperation mechanisms and organisations. Unfortunately, nowadays these mechanisms can no longer function, since the basic principles, which they were built upon, have been bluntly violated by the Russian leadership.

The situation in the Black Sea region is very complex, and solutions cannot be simple either. The Alliance has unanimously decided to follow a two-track approach towards Russia, based on one hand on a strong deterrence and defense and, on the other, on openness towards a meaningful and reciprocal dialogue. It means that NATO not only strengthens its deterrence and defense capacity, but it is making significant efforts to reduce tensions and the risk of military incidents, and Romania fully shares and supports this approach.

The Black Sea region is not only a place of turmoil in terms of security challenges which need to be addressed by means of consolidated defense and deterrence. There is also the undeniable perspective of the Black Sea Region as an area of high potential, a platform for increased cooperation and dialogue with those like-minded states that are willing to work together for ensuring security, stability, enhancing interconnectivity and jointly look for better regional economic opportunities.

The EU's support for the region and constructive role in it is worth overstating. We need to focus on making progress in connecting the Black Sea states with the EU and among themselves. The strengthening of regional cooperation in all areas where it can make progress remains the only way of transforming the Black Sea from a confrontation area into a bridge between different nations and cultures.

In light of all the above, we should essentially endeavor to strengthen our strategic relations with the states at the Black Sea. It is important to continue to provide an active support to partners like R. Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, with a focus on developing their national defense capacities, increasing their resilience, reforming institutions and legislation to facilitate economic growth and building democratic societies. We need to help these countries to become better prepared for dealing with increasing internal and external challenges, thus preventing the emergence of new crises at our doorstep. We must invest in the state and societal resilience of our partners at all levels, as an investment also in our own Euro-Atlantic state and societal resilience. The focus should be on strong, democratic and efficient institutions, solid economic fundamentals, well informed and adaptive entrepreneurs and communities, educated and active citizens – all capable to react promptly to negative developments. Cooperation on stratcom activities, among partners and within the transatlantic community, has to become a fully assumed priority.

NATO has increasingly engaged with partner countries in the Black Sea region, within the full spectrum of instruments available in the partnership domain. Also, given the multidimensional threats in the region, maintaining an intensive dialogue in order to ensure better strategic awareness and a deeper understanding of the challenges that we are facing is a key objective.

The European Union will have to do more to act as a factor of stability in the region, by assuming an increased role. The EU should strengthen its focus on its partners, responding to their concrete needs, increasing their resilience and better communicating

about the EU's role and support. The implementation of the EU's Global Strategy and better weighting politically and practically the transformative means of the EU's foreign policy instruments in its neighborhood, including the Eastern Partnership, represent the best opportunity in this regard. We expect that, drawing upon the strategic priority of building the capacities of partners, the EU will offer expertise and assistance to strengthen its partners' resilience and counter hybrid threats.

To be frank: cooperation the early '90s way has failed and is out of date. Other attempts have not born too many fruits in terms of a substantially improved regional environment. Unfortunately, regional cooperation frameworks and confidence building mechanisms in the Black Sea are suspended and cannot work until full respect for international law is restored. Nevertheless, Romania strongly believes that regional cooperation cannot be abandoned.

However, it should be, at least partly, reinvented in new forms and avenues, focusing on deliverables, in a sustainable virtuous circle. We have identified a lot of potential in the maritime agenda, small and medium size enterprises with activities related to the actual sea basin, environment protection, institutional best practices, research and innovation, education. The EU has a crucial role to play in at least three ways: providing the funds, providing an inspiring example from other sea-basin cooperation and positively incentivizing regional projects. Romania has a strong Black Sea agenda within NATO, as well as a consistent Black Sea agenda for the EU. We will therefore aim at specific results during our EU Council Presidency, also capitalizing on the actions of the Bulgarian Presidency. This process will be complementary to the focus on EaP during our Presidency, particularly on aspects related to fully harnessing the benefits of DCFTAs by our Eastern Partners' economies and citizens.

Enhancing economic cooperation and intensifying investment flows to the region, with a focus on the energy sector, is yet another tool in strengthening regional security. Significant investments by Exxon in the Black Sea offshore open up extraordinary opportunities for the business environment that have a multiplying effect on the

wellbeing of Romania. Economic growth consolidates Romania's posture as a stability pillar in the region and as a close ally of the US.

For Romania, all of these steps, in terms of deterrence and defense on one hand, and of projecting stability on the other, are of vital importance. This is only natural, as we are a littoral Black Sea country and a frontier state in both NATO and the EU. Promoting the stability and development of the Black Sea region, mainly by increasing and diversifying its connections with the EU and the Euro-Atlantic world, have been a recurrent theme on our country's foreign policy agenda for more than two decades. Since our accession to NATO and the EU, we have constantly worked to raise awareness in both organizations about the opportunities, as well as the challenges in the region, based on the arguments and facts already mentioned.

I have gladly taken the invitation by the coordinator(s) of this publication to add some personal insights to a discussion about the Black Sea as an opportunity to reflect afresh upon the role of the region in our foreign policy, in a new strategic context of profound challenges and transformations.

I have at the outset of my mandate as Minister of Foreign Affairs singled out regional policy as a centerpiece of my vision for Romania's foreign policy. In essence, at the time, I portrayed regional relations as a system of "concentric circles", encompassing all neighboring regions, along multiple geographical axes and sustained by effective regional partnerships. It is in this type of representation that I think we should view the Black Sea as one indispensable piece in the puzzle of regional affairs.

This certainly implies a holistic approach to our neighborhood, essentially taking note of existing interdependencies, as regions are by default interconnected through historical and geographical common heritage, on one hand, as well as through existing trans-regional exchanges and trends developed in the more recent past. As a tool of analysis and a system of projection, such an approach should aim to empower a more strategic, nuanced and integrated way of action, capitalizing the opportunities offered by realities on

the ground, while efficiently countering vulnerabilities and risks that come with those realities. This is especially true in a neighborhood as rich in positive as it is in negative historical baggage.

It is thus, I believe, not simply a personal preference, but what increasingly appears as a sensible choice, given the high degree of interdependencies implied in and generated by the previous decades' advance of globalization. We live in a world where, more than ever, projecting a foreign policy in relative isolation, based on outdated identity politics or even in autarchy, are no longer viable options – be it in terms of a bilateral relation, a region, or a specific field of action.

However, while I indicate regional policy as the main focus, this does not intend to diminish the relevance of multilateral formats or bilateral relations. On the contrary, each of these components is a building block on which all other rest, within an overarching construction. The focus on regional policy is the foundation on which we can substantiate bilateral relations and dialogues (i.e., with countries in the region as well as from outside the region) and more properly and clearly define our profile within multilateral formats.

Thus, prosperity and stability in the entire Eastern Neighborhood represents a priority for consistent involvement with our strategic partners, as well as an agenda to be pursued together in multilateral formats. This is a responsible, European manner to substantiate our profile in the region, and to bring added value in international formats where we belong – NATO, the EU – by taking direct and active part in shaping their involvement in our region.

This is of course not an entirely new proposal. The strategic value of the Black Sea has been a mantra in Romania's public discourse for the last almost three decades, highlighting the region as a crossroads between Europe and Central Asia, leading to Middle East and, via the Turkish Straits, to the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Notwithstanding the fact that most seas are crossroads in their own regions, the Black Sea is a special juncture of several big powers traditionally disputing supremacy and competing narratives of national development, inter-state relations and overall world order.