



# POLICY BRIEF NO: 1

## **Rethinking EU's Black Sea Policy: Linking Security and Connectivity**

*Stefan Meister, DGAP*

19.06.2025

*This policy brief is produced for the "Security Challenges in the Black Sea Region: Conflict Lines, Spoilers, and Prospects for Cooperation" webinar on May 16th, 2025 as part of the "SecureBlackSea" project, supported by the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme.*

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# RETHINKING EU'S BLACK SEA POLICY: LINKING SECURITY AND CONNECTIVITY

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With Russia's large-scale war against Ukraine since February 2022, the Black Sea has become a key area of competition for the new European security order. Although Russia has already created a new reality in the Black Sea with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, only the large-scale war against Ukraine has brought real attention to the central role of the Black Sea for European security, the EU neighborhood, and connectivity policy. While the Black Sea is crucial in terms of trade, particularly agricultural products for Ukraine, it is essential for the EU regarding connectivity to the South Caucasus and the Middle East. The Black Sea is a key part of the trans-Caspian corridor, which connects Europe with the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia. Maritime trade routes of global relevance, critical infrastructure, and energy reserves define its strategic importance. For the EU and its member states, access to alternative trade and transit routes to Central Asia and China, in addition to the Northern route via Russia and to resources from the Caspian region, has become more important since 2022.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Black Sea is an important location at the intersection between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, with access to the Mediterranean and Northern Africa. Other regional and external players, including China and the US, have become more active in this region. With Russia's war in Ukraine, the EU has



reopened its enlargement policy in offering membership to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, all states based on or linked to the Black Sea. Besides the EU, NATO, which is building its biggest military base in Europe in Constanța, Romania, will have to play a bigger role in regional stability and security. With the war in Ukraine, the securitization of nearly all policy areas, including trade, critical infrastructure, and energy policy, is growing. The EU's policy towards the region will focus more on a comprehensive security approach with human and energy security, trade and transport, societal and digital connectivity, environmental questions, and freedom of navigation. NATO will focus on hard security in deterring any Russian aggression against its member states, preventing further Russian military expansion in the Black Sea. The war in Ukraine and its possible membership in the EU and NATO will be major drivers for these institutions and the Black Sea region in the next decade.

# Changing Security Reality in the Black Sea

Russia's annexation of Crimea, followed by a military buildup in the Black Sea and control of the Sea of Azov, was part of a systematic approach of the Kremlin to undermine the sovereignty of Ukraine, create a new reality in European security, and was a precursor of its military campaign in Syria and power projection towards the Middle East and Northern Africa. The control of the Black Sea is crucial to control Ukrainian ports and undermining Ukraine's economic and security fundamentals, thus, and with this, its functioning as a state. Russia has broken international law several times in Ukraine and the Black Sea without consequences from NATO, the EU, and the international community, setting dangerous precedents for Europe.

Examples are naval blockades by the Russian Black Sea Fleet for international civil navigation, systematic minelaying of coastal areas of Ukraine with a threat for the whole Black Sea by floating sea mines, and attacks on Ukrainian grain silos. The war has dramatically impacted the ecosystem of the Black Sea, especially the ecologically sensitive Danube Delta. Therefore, the EU and NATO enlargement of Ukraine would play a crucial role in changing the security and power balance in the Black Sea region and create a new reality for Russia and Turkey. However, NATO membership will not come soon; therefore, EU integration will be the key element to secure a sovereign Ukrainian state and develop a framework for reconstructing Ukraine

linked to the enlargement policy and a new EU Black Sea strategy.

The securitization of energy, connectivity, trade, and human security is growing with Russian aggression. It has become clear that the Black Sea region cannot be treated in isolation but should be considered an integral part of the broader European and wider regional security complex. However, the war has also eroded the once prevalent concept of regional ownership based on a comprehensive security approach. Hard security, military engagement, protection against hybrid threats, and critical infrastructure will play a much bigger role in this region. Therefore, the interaction between hard security and elements of comprehensive security is crucial. That can only occur in coordination between the EU, NATO, and regional countries, like Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, in the demining initiative in the Black Sea. For the EU, investment in ports, railways, and road infrastructure linked to regional security has to become the central element of its neighbourhood Black Sea policy. With the next EU budget in the term 2028-2034, the EU Global Gateway initiative needs to become more relevant for infrastructure investment. This budget will also decide the relevance of a new EU Black Sea strategy, if it requires substantial additional funding.

# Competing Approaches for EU Black Sea Policy

With its Black Sea Synergy (BSS) launched in 2007, the EU developed a bottom-up approach for the region to foster a confidence-building approach, to regional dialogue, and improve economic cooperation, and mobility for states and citizens around the Black Sea.

The 2024 review of the BSS underlined how much this approach was rather project-driven than a real strategy.[1] We can criticize the EU BSS for its lack of ambition and its limited strategic depth since it focused mainly on prosperity and economic development, but ignored the region's growing security challenges. However, only because it was so soft and fuzzy could most of the region's countries agree on this policy during peacetime. It was the answer to the demand for a rather not-so-strategic approach, which would not challenge Russia's or Turkey's role in the region.

This has now changed with the war in Ukraine. There is a need for more EU engagement in the region with a strong focus on Ukraine, security, and connectivity, as well as a demand for a new Turkey policy and better coordination with NATO. The Black Sea is a crucial element in rethinking the EU neighborhood and connectivity policy, a significant task for the new European Commission, which released its new strategy paper on the Black Sea on 28 May 2025 taking many of the here discussed elements into

consideration with a stronger focus on regional security.[2]

Two competing approaches discussed: The first understands the Black Sea as a central element of the new European security order and, with this, as a key element for a new neighborhood policy. In this context, Ukraine is becoming fundamental to EU policy regarding the Eastern neighborhood and the Black Sea. The latter is central to connecting Europe with other regions and circumventing Russia. This approach is somewhat supported by the European External Action Service (EEAS) and it builds on concepts developed by Romania, which puts the Black Sea at the center of a new European security policy. At the same time, EU institutions are always cautious about focusing too much on security policy rather than on soft issues. In such a concept, connectivity (human, digital, trade), critical infrastructure, and energy security would play a significant role. However important these are, the Black Sea will become a core element of a revised neighborhood policy and should play a more independent role in EU foreign and neighborhood policy.

The other approach, rather preferred by the European Commission, understands the Black Sea as an element of a revised neighborhood policy connecting Europe with other regions, especially the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia.

[1] <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11900-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.

[2] [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921\\_en?filename=EU Strategic Approach Black Sea Strategy.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU%20Strategic%20Approach%20Black%20Sea%20Strategy.pdf)

Connectivity will become a core element of this policy, linking Europe to different regions and countries and developing relations in trade, digital connectivity, energy policy, mobility, and human security. In this concept, the Black Sea would be just one element of a revised neighborhood policy, but it would not have a unique characteristic. At the same time, it is also with Ukraine and Moldova, and possibly at a later point with Georgia, as part of the enlargement policy of the EU. Here, the Black Sea is the target of different overlapping EU policies without being at the center of a distinct strategy.

For the EU, the connectivity agenda will be a key element in linking different regions and policies. It is not just about connecting Europe with Central Asia via the Trans-Caspian corridor, but also connectivity as a key element of European norm-setting in areas like environmental standards, labor rights, and digital technology, with the target countries linked to governance questions. The EU is in these areas in competition with China, Russia, and Iran, and they are also norm setters in the Wider Black Sea region regarding internet control, control of civil society, and the stabilization of authoritarian regimes. The external interference in Romanian and Moldovan elections, energy blackmailing in Moldova, and the pressure on Georgian politics are elements of Russian hybrid warfare in Europe.

## The Role of Russia and Turkey

A key question for the EU is how to deal with Russia, which will stay an adversary and the primary threat to European security for a long time. Russia, under the current regime, will not end the war against Ukraine as long as it is capable of attacking the country or it controls the whole of Ukraine. Also, Donald Trump's presidency will not be able to change this situation. The limited reaction of the EU and NATO to Russia's military buildup in the Black Sea following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a crucial precursor for the invasion in 2022. The lesson learned here is that not acting and the lack of a strategic vision for the region have created opportunities for Russia to project power and create insecurity for the EU member states.

Russia and Turkey, as the key countries in the region, have their strategies for the Black Sea. Both define themselves as the dominant actor in the region, and, and for them, both, the Black Sea is a crucial geopolitical intersection to project power beyond the region toward the Middle East, the South Caucasus, and the Mediterranean. Consequently, for Moscow and Ankara, it is a crucial element of their regional policy beyond the Black Sea. Both want to prevent a strong US engagement in the region because it would challenge their power positions. Although both share this interest, they disagree on other key questions like Crimea, the war against Ukraine, and the military balance in the Black Sea.

While Russia's position in the Black Sea has been weakened by Ukrainian attacks on its Black Sea Fleet since 2022, even giving up its headquarters in Sevastopol, Turkey's position as a NATO member with the second biggest army in the alliance after the USA is growing. With the Montreux Convention of 1936, Turkey has had a key role in controlling access to the Black Sea. Relations with Turkey are complex for European countries, but it is a key country in all crucial Black Sea questions, including security, that cannot be ignored. At the same time, Crimea is vital for the military and strategic dominance in the Black Sea and European security. Any ceasefire or other agreement between Russia and Ukraine should not accept permanent Russian dominance over the peninsula.

## Revising EU Black Sea Policy

The EU's Black Sea policy should be treated not solely as a geographical approach but as a policy in which the EU's sectoral policies overlap coherently and are harmonized. The war in Ukraine remains central to any EU efforts towards the wider Black Sea region. Security and stability in the Black Sea can only be ensured with Russia's war ending and its military role diminished permanently. A prospective Black Sea strategy should include Ukraine's reconstruction and economic modernization in the framework of EU integration. A key precondition for this policy is the provision of security guarantees for Ukraine. The EU must develop instruments for norm-setting

in the broader region. Russia has become a significant competitor in norms in the EU neighborhood, as we can see with Georgia moving towards a consolidated authoritarian state.[3] Restoring maritime safety and re-establishing freedom of navigation according to international law is imperative. While the enforcement method remains unclear, one idea is to patrol ships that sail under the flags of littoral states but are being coordinated by the EU in cooperation with Turkey. While NATO involvement in such patrolling initiatives is unlikely due to Ankara's hesitance, there might be some leverage to allow the patrol of vessels of littoral states, which are both EU and NATO members.

The Russian aggression has led to increased intra-regional cooperation, such as the demining initiative by Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria, allowing the EU to support such endeavors and strengthen ties between littoral states. At the same time, the interconnection between different regions in the broader neighborhood of the EU is growing. It is becoming increasingly important to link policies in the adjacent areas – such as Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, or the Middle East – to the Eastern neighborhood policy. Thus, the EU should connect the different (sub)regions and policy areas. EU institutions should assess the possible overlaps of the new Black Sea strategy with other initiatives, such as the Eastern Partnership or Global Gateway. Connectivity initiatives should be the key element of the EU policy towards the wider region and be part of the Black Sea strategy. One focal point in

[3] <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11900-2024-INIT/en/pdf>.

Brussels is that the connectivity policy should be investment in the protection of strategic infrastructure in the Black Sea, such as ports, pipelines, and submarine cables. While the Middle Corridor will not reach the trade volume of the Northern transit route via Russia, even in the best-case scenario, it is still crucial for the EU to diversify its trade routes and reduce dependencies while building up leverage on littoral states such as Georgia and Turkey, but also Azerbaijan.

In the context of a broader external contestation of the EU in its neighborhood, the Black Sea has become of increasing interest to other powers like China. Thus, to remain a relevant player, the EU needs to consider the transactional mode of operation of different powers. Yet, it must preserve its normative agenda. The seemingly unconditional offers by China are prevalent among authoritarian governments, has been showcased with the example of the Chinese-Georgian Free Trade Agreement signed in 2017,[4] and a Chinese company won the tender to build Georgia's deep-seaport in Anaklia on the Black Sea. Therefore, the EU should be more strategic in its investments and conditions for infrastructure construction, considering excluding Chinese companies if this undermines its role or control over projects. The EU and member states should support Romania's natural gas production in the Black Sea through investments. The yielding of these considerable reserves of natural gas would not only benefit the two littoral states, but the gas export could also support Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria in decoupling from Russian gas.

As Turkey is a key country for the EU's Black Sea policy, more engagement is needed to bring Ankara on board. Turkey should be involved in future EU security initiatives like patrols in the northern Black Sea or countering hybrid threats. In its efforts to restore maritime safety and re-establish the freedom of navigation, the EU must cooperate with Ankara. As the Turkish government needs Western support to stabilize its economy, the EU might also link economic cooperation with Turkey to collaboration in the Black Sea. The EU's support for Turkey's economic and financial stabilization, updating the Customs Union, and progressing towards a visa-free regime are potential entry points despite the authoritarian trends in domestic policy.

[4][https://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/2017/foreign\\_trade/tavisufali\\_vachrobis\\_shetanxmeba\\_georgia\\_china/shetankhmeba\\_2018/page\\_0\\_60\\_145\\_179\\_china\\_georgia\\_fta\\_for\\_georgia.pdf](https://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/2017/foreign_trade/tavisufali_vachrobis_shetanxmeba_georgia_china/shetankhmeba_2018/page_0_60_145_179_china_georgia_fta_for_georgia.pdf)

# Stefan Meister



Dr. Stefan Meister is Head of the Center for Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia at the DGAP. From 2019 until 2021, he worked as director of the Heinrich Böll Foundation's South Caucasus Office in Tbilisi.

From 2017 to 2019, Meister was head of the Robert Bosch Center at DGAP, where he previously headed its program for Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Before that, he was a senior policy fellow in the Wider Europe Team at ECFR in Berlin and London. In the 2015/16, Meister was a visiting fellow at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington, DC, working on Russian disinformation and propaganda.

He has served as an election observer for the OSCE and the EU in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and worked on conflict transformation and institution building in post-Soviet countries. Currently he is visiting fellow at IWM in Vienna (Spring 2015).

Meister is co-editor of *Security Dynamics in the Black Sea region* (Springer 2024), *The Russia File* (Brookings, 2018), *Eastern Voices* (Center for Transatlantic Relations/DGAP, 2017), and *The Eastern Question* (Brookings, 2016).

He studied international relations and East European History in Jena, Leipzig, and Nizhni Novgorod and holds a PhD from Friedrich Schiller University in Jena with a thesis on the transformation of the Russian higher education and research system.



The Black Sea region has long been a focal point of geopolitical competition, shaped by historical rivalries, strategic interests, and evolving security dynamics. In recent years, the region has witnessed growing instability due to escalating tensions, hybrid threats, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These developments have not only disrupted regional security but have also posed broader challenges to the European and transatlantic security order. Given NATO's strategic interest in the region, a comprehensive reassessment of security frameworks is necessary to address emerging threats and enhance regional stability.

SecureBlackSea seeks to examine and propose a future security architecture for the wider Black Sea region, aligning with NATO's evolving strategic priorities. Through an in-depth analysis of existing security structures, regional conflicts, and cooperation mechanisms, it aims to provide evidence-based insights into key threats and potential policy responses. A particular focus will be placed on the intersection of conventional military threats, hybrid warfare, economic security, and geopolitical rivalries, recognizing the complex and multi-dimensional nature of regional security challenges.

The project activities include expert workshops, field research, and data-driven assessments. It will evaluate the effectiveness of existing regional security frameworks and NATO's role in shaping stability in the region. In collaboration with policymakers, security experts, and academic institutions, the project team will facilitate policy dialogues and strategic foresight discussions to identify pathways for strengthening regional security cooperation. These efforts will result in the development of comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at enhancing institutional resilience and fostering a more cooperative security environment.

The expected outcomes of this initiative include a thorough assessment of regional security threats, a set of actionable policy recommendations, and strengthened dialogue between NATO and regional stakeholders. By producing analytical reports and policy briefs, the project will contribute to an informed security discourse and provide practical solutions for mitigating risks in the region. By fostering collaboration between academic and policy communities, it will support long-term strategic planning and resilience-building efforts.

SecureBlackSea aspires to provide a timely and in-depth examination of the evolving security landscape in the Black Sea region. It will offer insights that can guide NATO's strategic engagement in the region. Thus, it aims to contribute to a more stable, secure, and cooperative Black Sea security environment in the face of emerging geopolitical complexities.

