

Russia's Contentious History with the Black Sea Littoral States

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Abstract

This article explores the complex and contentious nature of Russian relations with the Black Sea littoral states, shedding light on the prevailing animosity that has often overshadowed amicable ties. Through a comprehensive analysis of historical dynamics, the study examines the historical backdrop of Russia's interactions with each littoral state - Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia. Drawing upon a range of scholarly sources and historical events, the article uncovers the underlying factors that have shaped these relations, highlighting instances of conflicts, territorial disputes, and geopolitical rivalries. From the expansionist ambitions of the Russian Empire to the ideological clashes during the Soviet era, the narrative traces the evolution of these relationships and reveals a recurring pattern of animosity. While cooperation on certain fronts, such as defense and security, has been observed, the article emphasizes the prevalence of economic rivalries and historical grievances that have perpetuated the strained nature of these relations. By examining the multifaceted dynamics at play, this study contributes to a better understanding of the complex geopolitical landscape of the Black Sea region and the enduring challenges that continue to impact Russia's relations with its littoral neighbors.

Keywords: Russia, Black Sea, Littoral states, Animosity, Amity, Historical dynamics, Geopolitical relations.

Introduction

The Black Sea region has long been a theater of complex geopolitical dynamics where numerous powers have vied for influence and control. Among these powers, Russia has maintained a particularly contentious relationship with the littoral states surrounding the Black Sea. This article delves into the historical backdrop of Russia's interactions with these states, examining the multifaceted nature of their encounters and shedding light on the underlying factors that have contributed to the recurring tensions. By tracing the historical trajectory from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet era, this study aims to provide a comprehensive

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understanding of the dynamics that have shaped Russia's relationship with the Black Sea littoral states. Through this analysis, we can gain valuable insights into the ongoing geopolitical dynamics of the region and the potential implications for future interactions between Russia and its Black Sea neighbors.

Russian relations with Georgia

Russia and Georgia have centuries-old informal relations. It is said that cultural and trade relations between these two states started as early as the 12th century¹. Both of these Christian states have a dominant sect of orthodoxy in practice, which is why their relations have been cordial. Formal relations between the two states started in the 16th century onwards², Georgian rulers have many times in history requested military aid from Russia so that Georgia and Russia could fight their common enemies that are Persia and Turkey³. At the end of the 18th century, some part of Georgia was controlled by Turkish authorities, and that part paid tribute to the Turkish Sultan regularly. During the war between Russia and Turkey in 1768–1774, Georgia sided with Russia, and the Russian victory made it possible for the parts of Georgia that were suzerain of the Turkish government, to stop paying tributes to the Turkish government⁴. In 1782, the king of Eastern Georgia feared the great and monstrous enemy of its neighbor in the form of the Turkish sultanate, so Eastern Georgia pleaded with Empress Catherine the Great to accept Georgia as a Russian protectorate. It was in the vision of Empress Catherine the Great to have some strongholds in the Caucasus region, so a treaty between the parties was signed, and Georgia became a protectorate of Russia. Under the articles of the documents signed, the Georgian ruler recognized that the supreme authority would be Russia. In response to this, Russia agreed to guarantee the Georgian rulers that the territorial integrity of Georgia would be preserved and no harm would be done to it. It was also decided that Georgia would now coordinate all its foreign policy matters with Russia in advance. Russia pledged not to interfere in the internal affairs of Georgia. The biggest obligation that was made on Georgia was that it was compelled that if any time Russia requested military assistance from Georgia, Georgia was compelled to provide Russia with such assistance.

In order to cooperate more deeply on the matter of defense, promises promise that two inbattalionstalions will be permanently stationed in Gand thatgia and further military assistance will also be provided in case o. war . Turkey demanded that the should be annulled, and due to diplomatic pressure created by Turkey on Russia the treaty was annulled and Russian forces were withdrawn from Georgia in 1787⁵.

Turkey, with its allies, declared war on Russia in the year 1787, and after five years of intermittent clashes and battles, the war finally ended and resulted in the victory of Russia. The Peace Treaty of Jassy was signed by Turkey and Russia, and by doing so, it restored and reinstated the Treaty of Georgiyevsk between Georgia and

Russia. Since that time, Georgia has been actively involved in the Russian wars against the Iranians and the Turks. After the death of Princess Catherine the Great, in 1801 Russia formally enforced its control of the kingdom and instituted government. The nobility in Georgia didn't accept this move by Russia and termed it a violation of the Treaty of Georgiyevsk. Russia didn't care about all this but enforced its policy through power and ordered the arrest of many nobles who disagreed with Russian actions. This was not alone, but the punitive measures went beyond this as the dethronement and exile of the Georgian monarch were ordered by Russia.

From that time, Georgia remained occupied by Russia for a time span of more than hundred years. Georgia gained independence and established its first republic in the year 1918. This was not an enduring independence, as just after 4 years, it was invaded by Russia once again to form the Soviet Union. With the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country once again gained independence, yet bilateral relations between the two countries haven't normalized⁶. Major reasons that were responsible for the strained relations between Georgia and Russia were that Russia was continuously supporting the separatist regions. Georgia and Russia have also shown overt disagreement with Georgia on independent energy policies, which are not in line with Russian policies. This is not alone, as Georgia's plan to join NATO has frustrated Russia many times⁷.

Period after independence

Tensions, which were already prevailing in the Georgian-Russian relations even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, were climaxed after the independence of Georgia. The major reason for the heightened tensions was that Russia was indulged in such activities inside Georgia that meant to destabilize Russia by providing military and non-military support towards the secessionist movements of Abkhazia. Russia built up so much political and diplomatic pressure on Georgia that Georgia could not stand the pressure and accede to many of the demands of Russia, including the inclusion of Georgia in the common wealth of independent states. Russia has previously accused Georgia of supporting Chechen militants by providing arms and ammunition. Russia takes any such move very seriously and considers it a threat to its sovereignty. This accusation against Georgia was valid up to some extent; separatists definitely took refuge in Eastern Georgia, and some supplies also reached the rebels through Georgian territory.⁸

In 2003, widespread protests occurred all over Georgia, especially outside the parliament, where demonstrators showed their agony by throwing red roses in their hands. Protests continued for twenty days, and they resulted in the declaration of new presidential and parliamentary elections in Georgia. The result of the election was a surprise for all, as it was decided by a solid majority that the United National Movement came to power. This was a pro-European party, and this event has marked the end of Soviet-era leadership in the country. The United National Movement

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declared that its main priorities are to integrate Georgia into the EU and NATO. With the Rose Revolution, the tensions that were already prevailing in Georgian-Russian relations were raised to new heights, and the trend continues to this day.

Georgia-Russian war of 2008 and cessation

In 2008, a fierce war started when Georgia tried to retake possession of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and launched a massive offensive. It is to be noted that Russia does not want Georgian forces to take control of these two regions, especially Abkhazia, because Abkhazia is a coastal state on the Black Sea littoral and has a lot of strategic importance. When Georgian forces started bombing heavily important cities in Abkhazia, it was a time in which Russia could not restrain itself anymore, and thus Russian forces entered Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian land forces were supported by the Russian air force and Russian navy⁹. While the air force bombarded strategic targets inside Georgia, the Russian navy defeated the Georgian navy in a brief skirmish. Since that time, Russia has stationed forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and built numerous bases there.

Russia's relations with Turkey

Russia and Turkey have had diplomatic relations since the 16th century. The Russian and Ottoman empires were normally very hostile to each other, and both of these empires have fought a number of wars against each other, which history recalls as Russo-Turkish wars. In the early 1920s, when the Bolsheviks' Russian government provided assistance to Turkey in the Turkish wars of independence, relations improved swiftly during that era. At the end of World War II, as the Russians and the Allies came out victorious and more powerful, the Soviet Union laid several territorial claims and further demanded other concessions from Turkey. The concessions they were demanding included that Turkey should allow Russia to station forces in the Turkish straits to protect Russian naval vessels. Turkey never allowed this and took measures as a threat to its security. Due to excessive pressure created by Soviet Russia, Turkey chose to join NATO, and thus this became the end of the Turkish Straits Crisis in 1952.

Foundation of Modern Turkey and Soviet Russia

The Russian Bolsheviks come out victorious in the Russian civil war. They considered the revolution led by Mustafa Kamal Atatürk friendly and benign for Russia, so they provided support for the Turkish war of independence. When the Kemalists were lacking funds to continue the war, the Soviets at that time of need provided the Kemalists with gold and ornaments, and that aid from the Soviet Union proved a game changer for the Kemalists successful consolidation of power. Soviet Russia was the second state to formally recognize the Kemalists with the government of Turkey in 1921 with the treaty of Moscow. Under the articles of the Moscow Treaty, both Turkey and Russia agreed to take steps to establish friendly relations between the two countries. Relations were improving gradually from that time until

1936, when the Montreaux Convention was signed and Turkey was given control of the straits. These were actions that Soviet Russia did not accept at all, and in the subsequent years, Russia requested to station military forces on the Turkish straits, which Turkey never allowed. These events led to the Turkish Straits Crisis.

Era after Soviet dismemberment

With the dismemberment of the erstwhile Soviet Union, relations between the two countries improved to a large extent. With the visit of the Turkish Prime Minister to Moscow in 1992, the meeting was very successful, and both sides agreed to a Russian-Turkish treaty. Despite the treaty signed by both parties, many issues of disagreement regarding the border dispute and the fact that each country is supporting the adversaries of the other country remain outstanding. Russia is a bit confused on the matter, such as Turkey's bid to join the Western economic bloc EU. If any such thing happens in the future, then it would be a massive blow for the relations between the two countries.

Bulgaria-Russia relations

Russia and Bulgaria have enjoyed friendly and cordial relations, and their relations are decades old. Their relationship dates back to the 19th century. Both of these nations have similarities in their traditions and cultures, and both of them have the tradition of calling their monarchs tsars, which is the Slavic word for emperor. Bulgaria has long been ruled by the Ottoman Empire, and finally it gained independence with the help of Russia . Since that time, Russia has been respected by the Bulgarian people, and they have shown their love for Russia by building an orthodox church in Sofia named after the Russian saint. This, along with many other measures, was done to honor the soldiers of Russia who helped Bulgaria gain their independence¹⁰

Relations in the 20th Century

Bulgaria started World War II as an ally of the axis power, but as the Soviets invaded the Balkans, Bulgaria changed sides and started supporting the Soviet troops. In the year 1944, a Russia-backed coup d'état enabled the communists to overthrow the legitimate government and come to power. Since the communists came to power in 1944, Bulgaria largely comes under the influence of Russia. Following years have seen Bulgarian-Russian relations reach new heights, and in 1955, Bulgaria joined the military bloc blocked by the Soviet Union known as the Warsaw Pact. During those years, any political activity in the country was discouraged and even penalized in the worst cases. The Soviet Union provided so that Bulgaria could setup an indigenous industry. It is estimated that during the communist regime in Bulgaria, the Soviet Union provided military aid worth \$16 billion. Bulgaria remained part of the Soviet bloc until 1989, when Bulgaria witnessed a drift away from the USSR. It was due to the fact that the first multiparty elections were held in 1990 in Bulgaria, in which the longtime ruling party witnessed a clear defeat from pro-European parties.

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After the fall of the USSR and communism, Bulgaria-Russia relations entered a new phase. Relations between the two countries were worsened by the policies adopted by the new government in power [12]. It is widely said by historians that during the Cold War era, Bulgaria acted as a satellite state of Russia, a history that was challenging for both Bulgarian foreign policy and the relations between the two countries as well. Even with the change of power in Bulgaria and the vision of the new government, which is totally different from the BCP, Russia did not stop intervening in Bulgarian matters. In 2001, relations came to a worst point once again when Bulgaria ordered the expulsion of two Russian diplomats that were trying to remove elected and legitimate officials. Bulgarian government with the help of Russian agents present in the Bulgarian government.

In the year 2004, Bulgaria chooses to join NATO, the anti-Russia military alliance of the West. This was not alone, as in 2007, Bulgaria was also included in the economic block of the West, the European Union. Russia was angry at such moves by Bulgaria, but relations did not drop below a certain level and remained at a moderate level.

Russian relations with Romania

Relations between Russia and Romania date back to the 19th century when they enjoyed warm ties. However, tensions between the two countries began to rise towards the end of the 20th century. In the past, Russia had supported two Romanian principalities in their quest for independence from the Ottoman Empire. During the 19th-century Russo-Turkish war of 1877, Romania aligned itself with Russia and played a significant role in the famous Siege of Plevna, which resulted in the victory of the Russian forces and Romania gaining independence. Despite past cooperation on defense and security issues, both countries have also experienced economic rivalry. Romania is often seen as a natural adversary by some due to various reasons. Notably, during the early 1940s, Romania ranked as the fourth-largest food exporter globally, following Russia, Canada, and the United States.¹¹

During those times, Russia took this massive cultivation of wheat as a challenge for its own agricultural products. Russia believed that if the port facilities at the Black Sea and Danube rivers were improved, it would result in massive exports of Romanian agricultural products to the world, and thus it would be a threat to Russian wheat exports. Russia's interest in the principalities was essentially strategic, as Russia exploited its position as the protector of the principalities by allowing the mouth of the Danube to be set up because this hampered better shipping. It was the policy of Russia to have a hold on the principalities and not hamper any initiatives that could result in the growth of the agricultural sector in Romania.

Russia has an expansionist view of the Balkans and wants to capture the strategic and important ports of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Due to this, Romania's relations with Russia begin to deteriorate. During the late 19th and early

20th centuries, before the start of World War 1, Russia and Romania had diverging interests and were part of opposing alliances. During that time, the interests of these countries also diverged in the Balkan area.

Relations were again improved during World War I as Romania and Bulgaria allied against the central powers in what history calls the Romanian campaign. After the Second World War, Romania came under the influence of the communists, and Romanian policies were aligned with the international policies and goals of the communists as part of Soviet Russia. After 1952, as the regime changed in Romania, the country started to drift away from Russia slowly but steadily. In 1962, it was announced that no Warsaw Pact troops would be allowed on Romanian territory. Previously, it had already made the decision to participate in field exercises under the Warsaw Pact.

Romania adopted an independent foreign policy after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the year 1993, Romania officially declared its will to join the military and economic blocs of the West, including NATO and the EU. In order to assure its former ally Russia that Romania also wants good relations with Russia, it signed a treaty of military cooperation with Russia in 1994. Despite some measures taken by the Romanian government to improve relations with its former ally, relations between the two countries deteriorated continuously.

Views of two states on the Black Sea

NATO has called the area of the Black Sea an area of strategic importance, and a former Romanian president named the area of the Black Sea a "Russian Lake" back in 2005. In response to the remarks by the Romanian president, Russia named and dubbed the Black Sea NATO's lake. Romania has been very dependent on the Black Sea for trade activities for decades, and that is why it considers the Black Sea its best neighbor. Romania has long recognized the strategic importance of the Black Sea, even before the Russian annexation of Crimea. It has joined NATO and the EU by establishing such a narrative in the minds of the Western countries that by inculcating Romania in the block, the West would get territorial access to the region, which is important for its energy resources as well as connecting Eurasia to the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Romania has behaved cleverly by becoming a part of the NATO and EU alliances. First, it has solved its economic difficulties, and second, it has resolved many of its own shortfalls relating to defense.

As soon as Romania joined the NATO alliance in 2004, it started to increase its economic and military presence in the Black Sea. After becoming a member of the NATO alliance in 2004, it tried to secure the shores of its Black Sea region and militarized those shores. This was accompanied by a more practical political presence in the region as it initiated the Black Sea. NGO forum as well as many other such measures to improve the tense relations between the littoral states of the Black Sea. It was Romania that hinted in advance that tensions in the Black Sea region could flare

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up, which might cause any possible war. Despite being conveyed to NATO and the EU, this ballad could not get sufficient political and military support to stop the Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukraine wars. Romania had long insisted that due to the strategic importance of the Black Sea, it should become the focus of NATO attention, but besides getting little support, it could not get the support it was demanding. Romania has sometimes also appealed to the United States, which is one of its biggest strategic partners, and it secured an American airbase on Romanian territory, which was accompanied by a ballistic missile defense system in Romanian territory.¹²

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Romania added something new to its Black Sea security rhetoric and tried to put pressure on NATO and the EU by contending that Romania had already conveyed that, after the Cold War, Russia has been acting aggressively in the Black Sea region. It has been activating frozen conflicts in the region, such as in Crimea and South Ossetia. Concluding all that in the Romanian context, it becomes evident that Russian policies in the Black Sea region constitute a continuation of Russian imperialism in the Black Sea.¹³

Russian-Ukrainian relations

Russia and Ukraine were founding members of the Soviet Union, and both of the socialist countries enjoyed cordial relations during the Cold War. Their first interactions started in the 17th century, and their relationship has seen many ups and downs since that time. In the 1920s, Ukraine was run by the Soviet forces, and at that time, their relations transitioned from international to national. After the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991, the relations between these two countries have undergone periods of ties, tensions, and nasty hostilities.¹⁴

Prior to Euromaiden, relations between the two countries were cooperative, and both have signed various agreements relating to trade and commerce. Forces, whether Relations between the two countries were at its lowest level and worst state after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Crimea in 2014. During the crisis, Crimean crisis Ukraine lost control of almost government important gov. iCrimea, including in Crimea military, port naval bases, and Nav-Soviets to pro soviet forces then were citizen invaders or local pro-Russians. The crisis started in February when unmarked people captured the Crimean parliamentary building. On the same day, things turned in an unimaginable manner when the Crimean parliament replaced the local government with a pro-Russian government that wanted unification with Russia. The new government organized a referendum and asked the voters about their choice, whether they wanted to join Ukraine or Russia, and to no surprise, the Crimean people overwhelmingly decided in favor of Russia. In March 2014, the government of Crimea, considering the views of the local population, decided to declare the independence of Crimea. Without any surprise, the treaty incorporating Crimea and Sevastopol into Russia was signed the very next day. Observers of world politics believe that events with such speed are possible, and they termed these events a

planned plot by Russia. It is also very interesting to know that without wasting any time, the law incorporating Crimea was approved by the Russian parliament and signed by the Russian president. The same month witnessed the withdrawal of all the Ukrainian forces from Crimea. President Putin states in his statement that the Russian military has intervened in the Crimean peninsula and has supported the separatists, and further states that this is necessary because it is important to ensure proper conditions for the people of Crimea so that those people can freely express their will.¹⁵

Russian intervention was not only limited to Crimea; it was also intervening and supporting rebels in Eastern Ukraine. These actions of Russia have been suspected by NATO as well as the European Union, which have termed them a threat to the overall security of Europe. In response to the violation of international law (as the Ukrainians call it), the parliament of Ukraine registered a draft decree that says to cut down all kinds of diplomatic relations with Russia. Relations with these two nations have been determined because of the Russian intervention in Crimea¹⁶. Of course, there are other outstanding matters too, but this was the point where Ukraine made it clear that the intervention and cordial relations cannot move in parallel. It's important to discuss important aspects of the Crimea crisis to know how each country projects its own view on Crimea.¹⁷

Russian-Ukrainian War of 2014

In February 2014, Russian troops with any insignia entered parts of Ukraine and helped the pro-Russian separatists. Ukrainians believe that it was because of the Russian forces that Ukrainian forces were defeated because separatists were not capable of such power that they could defeat Ukrainian forces. In late 2014, a Ukrainian military spokesperson stated that intense movement of troops from the Russian sides to rebel-held areas in Ukraine was seen. The Associated Press has reported in the same days that at least 80 military vehicles without insignia are seen in the rebel-held areas, and the greater possibility is that they are of Russian military personnel. The same phenomenon has been observed by the organization for security and cooperation in Europe: a lot of heavy weapons along with tanks without any insignia have been seen in the rebel-held areas of Ukraine. These Russian actions have not only been condemned by Ukraine, but widespread criticism of them has been made by NATO, the European Union, and organizations like Amnesty International. International Russia has been condemned by the international community for breaking international law and also for challenging the sovereignty of Ukraine. In response to these relations made by Russia, the international community implemented sanctions on Russia, both economic and military sanctions. It is estimated that, up to this date, about 7% of Ukrainian territory is controlled by Russia.¹⁸

Conclusions

In conclusion, Russia's history with the Black Sea littoral states reveals a

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complex tapestry of interactions characterized by both cooperation and conflict. From the Russian Empire's expansionist ambitions to the Soviet Union's pursuit of ideological influence and the post-Soviet era's struggle for regional dominance, Russia's relationship with the Black Sea littoral states has been shaped by a range of political, economic, and strategic factors. Throughout the years, contested territories, energy resources, geopolitical rivalries, and historical grievances have contributed to recurring tensions and occasional cooperation in the region. As the dynamics of the Black Sea continue to evolve, it becomes imperative for policymakers and scholars alike to understand the intricate historical context and underlying motivations that drive Russia's engagement with its Black Sea neighbors. By recognizing the complexities and nuances of this contentious history, stakeholders can foster dialogue, promote stability, and seek avenues for constructive engagement that may contribute to a more cooperative future in the Black Sea region.



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