

## GEOSTRATEGIC INTERESTS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE BALTIC AND BLACK SEAS

Cosmin GUȚANU<sup>1</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.54989/stusec.2026.20.01.11>

### Abstract

*In the context of the new Russian imperialism, a phenomenon that Europe has been facing since 2014 when the power from the Kremlin occupied the Crimean Peninsula, we consider it necessary to re-evaluate the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in Eastern Europe, in the two areas of contact, namely the Baltic coast and the Pontic one.*

*In the north of the continent, the Kaliningrad exclave has a special strategic importance for Russia, as an outpost of its commercial and military interests, supported by the Russia-Belarus relationship and Saint Petersburg, the legacy of Tsar Peter.*

*The main strategic objectives of Russia in the Pontic area are, just like in the last three centuries since Catherine the Great conquered the northern shore of the Black Sea, the straits that give Moscow access to the Mediterranean Sea and later in the Atlantic Ocean. It is primarily about the Kerch Strait, which Russia fully controls, along with the Azov Sea since 2014 when Russia recaptured Crimea by force and especially about the Bosphorus and Dardanelle.*

**Keywords:** Russia; ideology; geostrategy; Kaliningrad; Baltic Sea; Black Sea

### Introduction

As hard as it may be to believe, Russia's security policy and implicitly its constant aggressiveness towards its neighbors stems to a certain extent from the vulnerabilities of its territory, the largest of the territories of any state entity on the globe; the larger, the more difficult it is to defend. In this regard, if we were to consider only the points of contact of the territory of the Russian Federation with Europe, two fundamental aspects would draw attention: the Northern European plain and the Black Sea area with its straits and the related hydrographic network.

However, to blame the aggressiveness of post-communist Russia, essentially the Putin regime, solely on geographical and geostrategic vulnerabilities is obviously a mistake. The seeds of this aggressiveness must be sought on the one hand in the causes that led to the fall of the Soviet Union, on the other hand in the ideological support that Putin's Kremlin sought and found, in order to preserve the influence of post-communist Russia threatened with dissolution and subsequently to recover the influence of the Soviet Union, including at the territorial and geostrategic level, as seen in Georgia and currently in Ukraine. Finally, Putin's goal is to make revenge on the West for the defeat suffered in the Cold War.

### Neo-Eurasianism. The Ideological Support of the New Muscovite Imperialism

---

<sup>1</sup>Doctoral School, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of History and Philosophy, International Relations and Security Studies; licensed in Journalism and Communication Science, University of Bucharest; master in Geopolitics and est-European socio-cultural interferences, Dunărea de Jos University of Galati, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3132-6263>; guticosmin2712@gmail.com

The end of the USSR has, in the view of the Russian historian Vladislav Zubok<sup>1</sup>, five main causes: the economic and military superiority of the US and its policies during the Cold War; glasnost, the reformist policy of transparency of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev who “discredited the communist ideology, but also condemned the Soviet system to failure”<sup>2</sup>, the implosion of the USSR economy; national independence movements in most of the constituent republics of the union, among which Ukraine played a crucial role; opposition to Gorbachev's reforms manifested by the most powerful Soviet elites and the military-industrial complex. Vladimir Putin's strategy and the actions he takes come precisely to correct these causes pointed out by Zubok and to anticipate and counteract the centrifugal tendencies within the Russian Federation. Putin also avoids the mistakes that, in his opinion and that of the power environment that promoted him, Boris Yeltsin's democrats made in the 90s, during the failure of democracy in the Kremlin.

For all this to happen, an ideology was needed. The Russian writer and thinker, Alexander Solzhenitsyn identified the issue of the borders of the Russian Federation as the “new Russian question”. He promoted the idea of separating the East Slavic republics from the ex-Soviet non-Slavic republics and the formation of a Russian Union consisting of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and northern Kazakhstan. The new leaders in Moscow, initially located around Boris Yeltsin, then alongside Vladimir Putin, sought to distance themselves from Soviet mentalities and faced opposition from the former communists. At the same time, they needed to maintain control over the entire ex-Soviet territory, including the non-Soviet population. As such, they were looking for a new variant of the idea of Russia.

In the 1990<sup>s</sup>, several ideological currents emerged, of which the so-called Eurasianism gathered more followers after Putin came to power in 2000. It had been initiated even before the Bolshevik Revolution. Prince Nikolai Trubetskoi and Pyotr Savitsky, intellectuals who were later exiled by the communists, laid the foundations of Eurasianism that promoted the resettlement of the old Russian imperial space along the lines of Russian culture, Orthodox Christianity and the entire imperial heritage that included the non-Slavic populations. Among the current theorists of neo-Eurasianism is Alexander Dugin, who advocated the creation of a Eurasian empire and was at one time even considered a promoter and ideologue of Russian fascism.

Vladimir Putin was also strongly influenced by the memoirs of Lieutenant General Anton Ivanovich Denikin, one of the White Army officers who promoted, at the beginning of the last century and then in exile, Eurasianism and the supremacy of the great Russian tripartite people made up of the Great Russians, the Little Russians (the Ukrainians) and the White Russians (the Belarusians). At the same time, the Kremlin leader has repeatedly expressed his appreciation for the philosopher and writer Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, known as an admirer of fascism, who argued that Russia will have to unite all its territories ruled throughout history.

Accumulating all these pseudo-scientific and pseudo-philosophical influences of characters from different eras and conjunctures, in July 2021, just a few months before the invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin himself published a long essay entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” in which he tried to actually ideologically argue his aggressive intention to justify his planned invasion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vladislav Zubok, *Căderea: colapsul Uniunii Sovietice*, Litera, București, 2024, p. 29

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

### Russia's Similar Strategies for the Baltic and Black Seas

Stretching from the south and west of France to the Ural Mountains, the plain of northern Europe runs through France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland - where it is only 500 kilometers wide - and then suddenly widens, both towards the Baltic countries and the Finnic Gulf to the north, and to the south, in addition to Podolia and the Carpathians, to the Crimea and the Caucasus. It is easy to imagine how difficult it is to defend such a large flat surface. For the past four centuries, Moscow has been attacked across this plain by Poland in 1605, by Charles XII's Sweden in 1708, by Napoleonic France in 1812, by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1914, and by Hitler on June 22, 1941, when he launched Operation Barbarossa. The great luck of the Kremlin and at the same time the reverse of the mentioned geopolitical situation is represented by the fact that, as difficult as it is to defend, it is also difficult for the attackers to maintain the supply lines on such a vast territory, as Tim Marshall observes<sup>1</sup>. This was also confirmed in the case of Napoleon and Hitler. In addition, Russia's ally was General Winter in both cases.

In order to control this vast plain and at the same time this vulnerability, Russia's security policy envisages three aspects: the alliance with Belarus<sup>2</sup>, the access it represents to the Finnic Gulf and the Baltic Sea, the port of St. Petersburg<sup>3</sup> and especially the Kaliningrad enclave, the Kremlin's outpost on the Baltic Sea and in the northern European plain, located between Poland and the Baltic countries separated by a border with a length of about 60 km, the Suwalki Corridor<sup>4</sup>. Although the Baltic countries<sup>5</sup> first declared their independence from Moscow in 1991, in the context of the implosion of the former USSR, they are still in the way of the Kremlin's interests. Nor does the subsequent accession to NATO and the EU seem to considerably diminish the risks and vulnerabilities of the situation in which these three countries find themselves, as they turn into vulnerabilities of NATO and the EU respectively to Russian policy.

The essential criteria of Russia's policy towards the Baltic countries are reviewed by the publication *GeoPolitica*<sup>6</sup>, first the demographic criterion being considered. The Russian minorities in the three Baltic states are substantial in relation to the entire population, and the population of Russian ethnicity or Russian speaking<sup>7</sup> is predominantly concentrated near the border of the Russian Federation.

Lithuanian researcher Agnia Grigas<sup>8</sup> analyzes in detail Vladimir Putin's policy by which ethnic Russians in former communist countries, estimated to be about 25-30 million, along with Russian speakers but also Russophiles, constitute themselves through the policies promoted by the Kremlin, a major pretext for the new Russian imperialism. The Lithuanian author demonstrates that there are a close link and an undeniable continuity between Putin's neo-imperialism and the classic imperialism of the Romanovs or the Soviets. In this regard, it establishes a whole series of ideological, cultural, geopolitical and security factors. The tsars carried out in the conquered territories, with the intention of obtaining exits to the sea, a

---

<sup>1</sup> Tim Marshall, *Prizonierii geografiei*, Litera, București, 2020, pp. 26-27

<sup>2</sup> A fact confirmed by the consistency with which President Lukashenko suppresses any attempt at an uprising by the Minsk opposition led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the other democratic leaders

<sup>3</sup> The strategic edifice of Peter the Great for which Russia has taken most of Karelia from Finland

<sup>4</sup> Considered by NATO experts as the main access route for Russian troops in the event of an invasion that would isolate the Baltic countries from the rest of NATO territory

<sup>5</sup> Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

<sup>6</sup> Alex Berca, *Strategii militare rusești în zona Balticii și a Mării Negre cu efecte asupra insecurității mondiale*, "GeoPolitica", No. 4, 2022, pp. 79-92

<sup>7</sup> Byelorussians, Ukrainians and Polish

<sup>8</sup> Agnia Grigas, *Crimeea și Noul Imperiu Rus*, Corint, București, 2022, pp. 21-23

policy of Russification by imposing the Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet to the detriment of the native languages. They did not shy away from ethnic cleansing, the displacement and deportation of ethnic populations and groups, and the colonization of the territories thus obtained with ethnic Russians. Thus, multiethnic populations were formed. The Soviets pursued the same policies, while perfecting the means of reducing the native population in all Soviet socialist republics. The result of these policies was that, after the collapse of the union, the borders of the former Soviet republics no longer overlapped with the ethnic reality and thus the tsarist-Soviet legacy proved to be the bearer of the seeds of the re-imperialization of the Kremlin's policy.

Another criterion of Russian policy towards the Baltic countries that Geopolitical presents is the economic one. It manifests itself through multiple interests of the Kremlin, from the energy needs of the Baltics, poor in such resources, to the Baltic ports that do not freeze all year round, representing a gateway for trade with the West that Moscow lost with the declaration of independence of the Baltics. The second major geostrategic disadvantage of Russia is the lack of hot water ports, which do not freeze at all during the year and ensure permanent access and free trade, either through the Baltic Sea to the northern waters or through the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean. In their absence, Russia is isolated on the continent. Hence the importance that the Russians attach to the port of Kaliningrad, but also to the Black Sea with the mouths of its great tributaries - Dnieper, Bug, Dniester, Danube - and especially with the straits through which it communicates, both with the Sea of Azov (Kerch Strait) and especially with the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean Sea (Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits).

Analyst Alex Berca points out in *GeoPolitica* magazine that, although the two areas, Baltic and Pontic, differ structurally, they seem to be part of the same strategy of Moscow aimed at transforming the security order of the entire Europe and even the entire world. The conquest of the north-Pontic steppe by Russia began during the time of Tsar Peter the Great who annexed to Moscow, in 1725, the territory between Kiev, Kharkiv, Poltava and Yekaterinoslav, 15 years later the Russians advanced towards Kherson.

The next important moment was the Russo-Turkish War between 1768 and 1774, which ended with the Peace of Kuchuk-Kainardji (1774). Russia then obtained Kherson, at the mouth of the Dnieper into the Black Sea and the Azov with the entire eastern shore of the Sea of Azov; nine years later also joining its western shore, from Taganrog to Kerch and Perekop, including the Crimean Peninsula<sup>1</sup>.

A new Russian Turkish armed conflict followed, concluded by the Peace of Iași (1792), because of which the Tsarist Empire crossed the Dnieper and conquered the Ochakov, at the mouth of the Bug. Tsarina Ekaterina the Great then built Odessa in 1795, just a few tens of kilometers from Ochakov, on the left bank of the Dniester, on the hearth of the Turkish settlement of Hadjibei<sup>2</sup>. This was after two years before, Ekaterina had participated, together with her two co-nationals, the sovereigns of Austria and Prussia, in the second partition of Poland (1793) and had obtained the territory north of Ochakov, from the upstream pond on the left bank of the Dniester to Ternopol and the heart of Podolia.

The tsarist ascent on the Black Sea shore will end at the mouth of the Danube with the annexation of Bessarabia by Alexander I, following the Russian Turkish conflict of 1806-1812, concluded by the Peace of Bucharest (1812). Some historians believe that only to

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexandru Dimitrie Xenopol, *Războaiele dintre ruși și turci și înrăurirea lor asupra Țărilor Române*, Albatros, București, 1997, p. 51

<sup>2</sup> Vadim Bacinschi, *Românii la Odesa*, Axis Libri, Galați, 2014, pp. 8-10

Napoleon's invasion of Moscow in the same year we owe the fact that the two Danube Principalities were not then fully incorporated into the Russian Empire, whose goal was to conquer Istanbul and take control of the Bosphorus Straits and the Dardanelles.

In the following lines, we propose brief research of the two mentioned aspects, with major implications on the foreign policy of the Russian Federation and inevitably on the security climate in Eastern Europe. We will therefore go through some stages of the history of Kaliningrad and the history of the evolution of the navigation regime on the Black Sea, but we will also try to define as accurately as possible the current state of these geopolitical and geoeconomic issues.

## **Kaliningrad. An Enclave of Contrasts**

### **A Brief History of the Fortress of Königsberg<sup>1</sup>**

The Teutonic Knights, to Christianize the Baltic and Prussian tribes living between the Vistula and the Neva, occupied the region of present-day northern Poland in the thirteenth century, after being removed by the Hungarian crown from the Land of Barsa, where their power had grown worryingly. They had also been brought by the Hungarian crown as early as 1211, to defend Transylvania from the invasions of the Pechenegs and Cumans. Here, on the Baltic Sea, the Teutons built the fortress of Königsberg<sup>2</sup> in 1255. In fact, along the two rivers, they built a whole series of forts that later gradually became cities. From here they launched violent campaigns of conversion to Christianity through repression. This is also where the offensive actions against the Slavs started. In about half a century they took control of the entire region of Prussia, building imposing and solid castles to defend the new possessions. The capital of the Teutonic Order became Königsberg<sup>3</sup>.

The state thus created became prosperous through trade, as a member of the Hanseatic League<sup>4</sup>. The Teutons traded mainly grain and additionally offered protection to the Hanseatic states. After 1300, they thus became a fearsome military and economic power throughout Central-Eastern Europe, controlling most of Latvia and Lithuania, along with Prussia and parts of present-day Germany. Gradually, the old Prussian population merged with the Germanic one, settled in the region starting with the 14th century, thus giving rise to the Prussian-German identity that is the basis of today's Germany. From a cultural point of view, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Königsberg, the capital of the Teutonic Order, became a pole of irradiation of the Religious Reformation and humanist ideas, thanks to the newly created university here.

In 1618, the Hohenzollern dynasty that ruled over Brandenburg (in today's northern Germany) also inherited Prussia, which would soon become a European power. Königsberg would remain for a time the capital of the entire Principality of Prussia, and the latter would become a kingdom in 1701, when the Roman German Emperor, Leopold I, offered the Duke of Hohenzollern the royal crown<sup>5</sup>. From 1772, Königsberg became the administrative center of the province of East Prussia within the Kingdom of Prussia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stan Petrescu, *Călătorii geopolitice-Lumea văzută de la București*, Editura Militară, București, 2010, pp.74-76

<sup>2</sup> Today's Kaliningrad

<sup>3</sup> In translation from German, The King's Peak

<sup>4</sup> An alliance of medieval trade guilds that established a monopoly over the entire Baltic Sea and a substantial part of Northern Europe for over four centuries (thirteenth century - seventeenth century)

<sup>5</sup> The coronation took place in Königsberg, and the duke became King Friedrich I, succeeded to the throne after his death in 1713 by his son Friedrich-Wilhelm

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, after the disappearance in 1806 of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation<sup>1</sup>, the city of Königsberg is the one that gives the signal for the liberation of Germany from the domination of the French armies led by Napoleon. This will be completed by the victory of Leipzig in 1813.

Subsequently, in 1871, after another historic victory in the Franco-German War of 1870, the Second Reich, the second German empire, led by the German Emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Hohenzollern, and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the architect of Greater Germany, was born, also on the Prussian initiative. The united Germany would encompass the North German Confederation, dominated by Prussia, along with Bavaria, Franconia, Swabia and many other German states except Austria<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Twentieth Century - from Königsberg to Kaliningrad**

Triggered and defeated in World War I, Germany will be divided by the reconstruction of Poland. East Prussia will be separated from the rest of the country by the Danzig corridor<sup>3</sup>. This would also be the pretext for Hitler to start World War II, at the end of which East Prussia would disappear for good<sup>4</sup>. Initially, there was talk of joining this territory to Lithuania, which was, at that time, a union republic within the USSR. In 1946, however, the creation of a separate region within the USSR was established and it was also then that the population of the area with ethnic Russians began. The name of Königsberg was changed to Kaliningrad<sup>5</sup> in memory of Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet until 1946 and close to Stalin. At the same time, ethnic Germans were expatriated to Germany, in successive waves, until 1948.

The revolutionary year 1989, the dismemberment of the USSR (1991), the withdrawal of the Soviet armies from Central-Eastern Europe and the process of redefining international relations, outlined another Eastern European geopolitical map. For Kremlin leaders, but especially for Russian military leaders, the entry of Poland and the Baltic countries into NATO have increased the strategic importance of Kaliningrad. The exclave was seen as a real frontline of the Russian Federation in front of NATO and as a pressure factor on the neighboring states<sup>6</sup>. Currently, Russia has become, especially after Ukraine's exit from its sphere of influence, from a global power, a regional one, with great nuclear potential. This ebb again affects the population of Kaliningrad, a region where the domination of the defunct USSR had brought major changes to the landscape.

Geographically speaking, the Kaliningrad enclave is closer to Europe than to Russia, but given the administrative belonging to the Russian Federation, the neighborhood with the West is not an advantage, as in the case of the other countries around, but deepens the degree of enclave. An attempt was made to rebuild the city, but it became even poorer. The Baltic countries especially, becoming independent and practicing a market economy, have pushed Kaliningrad towards isolation, even more so as it is completely dependent on Russia for energy<sup>7</sup>. Residents now need a visa to cross Lithuania and Latvia. The Russian Federation, to avoid such restrictions on the transport of goods and people, chose a bypass route, by sea,

---

<sup>1</sup> Formally ruled by the Emperor of Austria and originated through the splitting of the Frankish Empire, in 843

<sup>2</sup> The former dominant province within the First Reich, at that time in the Austro-Hungarian dualism (1867-1918) until the dissolution, after World War I, of the Viennese empire ruled by the House of Habsburg.

<sup>3</sup> Gdansk, in Polish

<sup>4</sup> By the Allied agreements of Yalta (1944) and Potsdam (1945), it would be placed under Soviet and Polish administration, with the city of Königsberg and the northern part of East Prussia being assigned, on August 2, 1945, to the Soviet Union.

<sup>5</sup> in Russian, City of Kalinin

<sup>6</sup> Janusz Bugajski, *Pacea Rece. Noul imperialism al Rusiei*, Casa Radio, București, 2005, pp.106-107

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*

using the ferry fleet. Land transit from Russia through Lithuania has generated a series of tensions between the two states in recent years, culminating in the decision of the authorities in Vilnius to close the railway route under the pretext of repairs. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, relations between the Baltics and Russia have cooled even more.

### **Baltic Hong Kong, a Geostrategic Objective in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>**

Russia's only European port that does not freeze in winter, except for the Black Sea ports, Kaliningrad has remained a strategic outpost of utmost importance for the Kremlin power. The city has around a million inhabitants, 78% of whom are of Russian origin. This represents about half of the total population of the enclave. As an ethnicity, since the region has retained its strongly militarized character, almost all nationalities of the former USSR are present here. The region belongs to the Northeast District, one of the seven super regions created by Putin through the administrative-territorial division in 2000, the year he took power from Boris Yeltsin. During the Soviet period, the Kaliningrad region had also been of utmost geostrategic importance as the Baltic Sea was the interface between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The port of Baltiisk was the headquarters of the Baltic Fleet, which was relocated after 1991 to St. Petersburg. In Kaliningrad remained a tenth of the military personnel stationed during the former USSR<sup>2</sup>.

Currently, however, it is not only Moscow that is interested in the Kaliningrad enclave. It has captured the attention of another important capital of the world, that of the European Union, Brussels. If until the dismemberment of the USSR the enclave was a *terra incognita* for Europeans, as well as for Soviet citizens, since, due to its super militarized character, it was a closed territory, secreted by the Kremlin, after 1991 and especially after May 1, 2004, when the EU enlargement with Poland and the Baltic countries took place, the European superstructure found itself with an intruder inside its territory. The borders between Poland and the enclave, respectively between Lithuania and the enclave, become external borders of the union, although in geographical position, to Moscow they are more than 1200 km, while to Berlin or Copenhagen less than 600 km. After numerous delays, the Russian government signed in Brussels, according to the rules applied in the Schengen area, an agreement on the facilitation of crossing, a free visa or at a minimum price, valid for multiple entries, which allows the passage of the inhabitants of Kaliningrad to Russia.

The Western press once called Kaliningrad, the Baltic Hong Kong. Since the 1990s, the local authorities have hoped to capitalize on the peculiarities of the city's geographical position. The region has three ports<sup>3</sup>, a special tourist potential in the coastal area, including the UNESCO World Heritage Coral Cordon and two maritime fishing fleets. Since 2003 it has been exploiting Caspian oil, contributing to the regional budget, has a wood and paper industry and an electronics industry (TV and refrigerator factory). First, however, the city is located on the world's largest amber reserve<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, EU enlargement has opened several opportunities for Kaliningrad through the emergence of numerous economic and political partners: Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Denmark, Sweden and even the EU. After several years of waiting, a German consulate opened its doors in the old Königsberg in February 2004. BMW<sup>5</sup> has also created a bridgehead here, installing an assembly line for cars destined for the Russian market. Along with the enclave's neighbors, Poland and Lithuania, Germany has become its main investor

---

<sup>1</sup> Stan Petrescu, *Op. cit.*, pp. 77-80

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

<sup>3</sup> Kaliningrad, Svetly and Baltiisk

<sup>4</sup> 90% of the world's amber reserve

<sup>5</sup> Bayerische Motoren Werke AG

and partner. The German state favors the cooperation policies of the closest states of Brandenburg and Schleswig-Holstein to the enclave.

Thus, since the end of the Cold War, the Kaliningrad region has nevertheless developed economically and implicitly increased in strategic importance. According to some calculations, the living standards of the Kaliningrad people even reached 95% of that of Lithuanians and 75% of that of Poles. To maintain this development, the Russian Federation will have to provide the enclave with greater economic and institutional autonomy. The question is to what extent is Moscow willing to grant autonomy, without fear that this could generate separatist tendencies or favor pre-existing separatist ambitions? Also, the development of the enclave in relation to the rest of Russia could call into question the Kremlin's economic policies in its own country.

On the other hand, because of the economic asymmetries between the Kaliningrad region and its neighbors or the other Baltic countries, there are certain concerns within the EU about the emergence and development of drug and arms trafficking or prostitution.

### **The Status and Geostrategic and Commercial Importance of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits from the Nineteenth Century to the Present Day**

Throughout the known history of mankind, the Black Sea has been at the interference of several civilizations, thus being an area of contact and trade. As early as the seventh century BC, the Greek colonies established along its coasts developed trade on the Black Sea, facilitating relations between the populations of the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe. Subsequently, the Roman Empire gave special importance to the Black Sea basin and Byzantium, the medieval heir of ancient Rome, dominated the Black Sea basin for almost a millennium.

The Conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans (1453) and later the entry of the north-Pontic coast under the rule of Tsarina Catherine, through the efforts of his favorite admiral, Potemkin, at the end of the eighteenth century, would trigger a series of Russian-Turkish wars that jeopardized trade relations on the east-west axis and isolated the Black Sea on the world map. Only the Crimean War (1853-1856), in which France and the British Empire allied with the Ottoman Empire and stopped the expansion of Tsarist Russia towards Istanbul, would reaffirm Western Europeans' interest in the Pontic area and access control through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.

After 1870, the unification of Germany and the expansion of the Central Powers would introduce a new geopolitical actor into the Black Sea equation. Both the Kaiser in World War I<sup>1</sup> and the Fuhrer<sup>2</sup> in the Second placed great importance on the straits. During all this time, therefore, the main strategic area of the Black Sea was constituted by the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, as they allowed/stopped the access of the belligerent powers to/from the Pontic area. How access through the straits has evolved in the last two centuries, from the Turkish monopoly to the Montreaux Convention (1936), which were the international treaties that marked the stages of establishing the current conditions of transit through the straits, we intend to follow in the present analysis.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Battle of Gallipoli

<sup>2</sup> Hitler fought for a year with the Red Army for supremacy on the Black Sea

## Navigation in the Black Sea, Allowed Only to the Ottoman, Tsarist and Habsburg Empires

Mustafa II<sup>1</sup> declared in 1703, in a letter that would be sent after his abdication by his brother, Ahmed III, who had become a padishah, that he would maintain total authority over navigation in the Black Sea and would not allow any vessel access to the Pontic area<sup>2</sup>. Ahmed III would therefore continue the restrictive policy on navigation in the sea basin that the Turks called Kara Deniz. Charles de Peyssonel<sup>3</sup> nevertheless recorded an attempt to open the straits and the Black Sea basin shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century, when the inhabitants of the fortress of Raguza<sup>4</sup> tried to intervene with Ali Pasha Hussein Oglu, the governor of Trebizond<sup>5</sup>, through his doctor, of Raguza origin, to obtain certain navigation facilities. However, the approach was thwarted by the major Western powers through their ambassadors in Istanbul.

The first to open the lock of the straits will be the Russians, in the time of Catherine II, because of the Russian Turkish war between 1768-1774 and the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji that would end this war. Article 11<sup>6</sup> of that treaty provided for free access for Russian merchant ships to the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, through the straits, as well as to the Danube and to all ports and shipyards. The Turks also allowed the Russians to carry out commercial activities in all the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, with the same facilities and under the same conditions that they offered to the English and French.

After the signing of the Peace of 1774, it seems that there had been certain problems in complying with its provisions regarding navigation, so that further diplomatic negotiations and the signing of a new agreement were necessary. It is Aynalikavak Tenkihnamesi<sup>7</sup>. It will include 9 articles, the most important of which for navigation, navigation from which the port of Sulina also subsisted, was Article 6, and for the history of the future Romanian nation, was Article 7, which regulated navigation and access of the Russians to the mouths of the Danube.

The Explanatory Convention of Ainali Kavak will be followed by the Convention on Trade and Navigation with Russia<sup>8</sup>. The Austrians will also enjoy the same freedom of trade and navigation in the Black Sea and Danube basin, starting only with the signing of the Sened of August 6, 1783, on the insurance of Austrian ships against barbarian corsairs, in fact Berbers. This will be followed by the most important treaty, namely the Senate of Trade and Free Navigation of February 24, 1784, the Muslim year 1198. The treaty convention was not as thick and precise as the one concluded with the Russians, comprising only 8 articles. The phenomenon of opening navigation on the Black Sea had therefore begun in two stages, once in 1774, the second time in 10 years, in 1784, the beneficiaries being first Russia, then Austria. Among these, the French would also infiltrate, using the Russian flag, a flag that the tsars offered to anyone in the absence of their own trade fleet in Ciornoie More. The fact is presented, among others, by a famous French shipowner, namely Anthoine Baron de Saint Joseph.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sultan of the Ottoman Empire from 1695 to 1703 (6 February 1664 – 29/30 December 1703)

<sup>2</sup> Tudose Tatu, *Afurisita strămoare de Sulina (1741-1786)*, Axis Libri, Galați, 2020, p.5

<sup>3</sup> The French consul in the Crimean Khanate

<sup>4</sup> Today's Dubrovnik in Croatia

<sup>5</sup> The former Trapezunt, today the Turkish city of Trabzon

<sup>6</sup> Tudose Tatu, *Op. cit.*, pp.197-198

<sup>7</sup> Explanatory Convention of the Treaty of Kuciuk Kainardji, concluded at Ainali Kavak on March 10/21, 1779, Muslim year 1193

<sup>8</sup> Signed in Constantinople on 10/24 June 1783 / 21 Redjeb 1197

Following these treaties signed with the Ottoman Porte by the Russians and Austrians, a series of trade agreements became necessary and were concluded by Russia with: Austria, in 1784, the one signed in 1785 by Russia with France, and on January 21, 1787, the Treaty of Commerce between Her Majesty the Empress of All Russians and Her Majesty the King of the Two Sicilies<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Western Powers, France and Great Britain, Gain Access to the Black Sea**

By signing the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation on June 25, 1802, the French merchant fleet will be allowed access to the Pontic basin, and France will have entered into force a new commercial treaty with the High Porte, signed in 1830, after the Peace Treaty of Adrianople (1829) which ended a new Russo-Turkish war<sup>2</sup>. England, on July 29, 1802, also obtained, through the notification of the Turkish Foreign Minister, Reis Effendi Raif Mahmud Pasha, the privilege for English merchant ships to sail in the Black Sea with access to the Danube ports as well<sup>3</sup>. This notification is reinforced by the Hati Sherif of Sultan Selim III<sup>4</sup>, which allows an unhindered commercial activity in the Black Sea and on the Lower Danube, according to the norms of the old capitulations concluded with the Porte<sup>5</sup>.

A new trade and navigation treaty was also concluded between the Ottoman Empire and England after Adrianople in 1838. The Russo-Turkish War of 1806-1812 will bring the closure of the straits during the period of hostilities. They will be reopened after the conclusion of the peace in Bucharest, until the outbreak of another conflict, that of 1828-1829. The provisions of the Adrianople Peace Treaty of September 14, 1829, among other things, will include that the subjects of the Russian Empire will have full freedom of trade within the possessions of the Ottoman Empire, by land and sea, the passage through the straits being open and free to all Russian goods (Articles 7 and 9), together with the damages due by the Porte as war reparations, amnesties on both sides (art. 13), the return of prisoners of war (14), etc. The treaty was to be ratified within 6 weeks of signing.<sup>6</sup>

The advantages obtained by the Russian Empire through the Treaty of Adrianople were summarized particularly suggestively by Karl Nesselrode (1780-1862)<sup>7</sup> in the letter sent to Grand Duke Constantine, on February 12, 1830. He presented the Adrianople agreement as an extraordinary success of Russian diplomacy that made Turkey dependent on Russia, to the detriment of the Western Powers and especially of the British Empire.

After long Russian Turkish negotiations, which resulted in the conclusion of a system of alliances between the two regional powers, the right of free movement through the straits extends to the Russian military fleet. The Treaty of Unkiar Iskellessi (1833)<sup>8</sup> thus increased Russia's enormous prestige in the Near East. But the Russian influence in Constantinople was rightfully annihilated by the others and especially by the English, as proof that the sultan no longer wanted to renew the treaty in 1841.

---

<sup>1</sup> concluded at Tarskoe Selo on 6/17 January 1787

<sup>2</sup> Tudose Tatu, *Dunărea veche, margine tulbure - Sulina au Sunne (1812-1817)*, Farul, Constanța, 2023, pp.47-48

<sup>3</sup> *idem*

<sup>4</sup> Royal act dated 15 zilhidje 1217 Muslim year, corresponding to 8 April 1803

<sup>5</sup> customs duties of 3%, judging commercial disputes by joint commissions, etc

<sup>6</sup> Tudose Tatu, *Dunărea veche, margine tulbure - Sulina au Sunne (1812-1817)*, Farul, Constanța, 2023, p.49

<sup>7</sup> Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Tsarist Empire between 1816 and 1856 and also a fervent defender of the conservative precepts of the Holy Alliance

<sup>8</sup> Tudose Tatu, *Dunărea veche, margine tulbure - Sulina au Sunne (1812-1817)*, Farul, Constanța, 2023, p.48

## The Treaties of London (1841, 1871) and the Crimean War (1853–1856)<sup>1</sup>. Western Offensive Against Russia

However, these new Russian Turkish alliances were intensely contested by the great Western powers of the time, England, France and Austria, who sought to limit Russia's rights arising from its position as a country bordering the Black Sea. Consequently, a convention is concluded by which in time of peace, if Turkey is not engaged in any armed conflict, it should not allow military ships to pass through the straits, regardless of the flags under which they sailed (London, 1841).

The merchant ships of all countries, however, had this permission. The Black Sea thus becomes, through the Treaty of London, a demilitarized zone, thus blocking the Russian military fleet. The Sultan, closing the straits to military vessels, struck primarily at the Russian fleet, which remained sequestered in the Black Sea. But, in the event of war, he could open the straits to the military fleets of friendly states, just as he allowed England, France and Sardinia, in 1853-1855, to enter the Black Sea, to start the Crimean War<sup>2</sup>.

In conclusion, through the London Convention of 1841 on the regime of the straits, tsarist diplomacy suffered a failure, a situation consecrated and reinforced by the Treaty of Paris (1856) which ended the Crimean War.

Moreover, the powers present<sup>3</sup> at the Paris Peace Congress<sup>4</sup> undertook to “respect the independence and territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire”, considering that any act likely to bring the slightest damage to it is “a matter of general interest” (art. 7). The integrity of the Ottoman Empire meant that Russia's hands were tied and could do virtually nothing as it came into conflict with the major European powers as a bloc. It also meant putting the brakes on the struggle for the total emancipation of the peoples of South-Eastern Europe.

In this context, the Black Sea was declared neutral, open to the merchant navy of all nations, and the waters and ports were forbidden to warships of any power, even of the riparian powers (art. 11). Trade in the ports and waters of the Black Sea was free from any hindrance, from any restriction, and for the purpose of securing the commercial and maritime interests of all nations, Russia and Turkey will admit consuls to their ports, in accordance with the principles of international law (art. 12). In addition, the Black Sea being declared neutral, both Russia and the Ottoman Empire were not allowed to have fortifications or naval arsenals (art. 13).

As if these were not enough, in 1871 a new conference was held in London by which the right of free movement through the straits was extended to the military ships of the Western Allied powers, to the detriment of those of Russia. These principles were again enshrined and strengthened by the Treaty of Berlin (1878)<sup>5</sup> which also recognized the independence of the Romanian Principalities and the exchange of the three Danube counties<sup>6</sup> with Dobrogea, at the request of Russia.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles King, *Marea Neagră, o istorie*, Brumar, Timișoara, 2005, pp. 264-270

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

<sup>3</sup> France, England, Prussia, Sardinia, Austria, Russia

<sup>4</sup> Charles King, *Op. cit.*, pp. 264-270

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 302-305

<sup>6</sup> Ismail, Cahul and Bolgrad

### **World War I. The Treaty of Sevres (1920) and the Lausanne Convention (1923)<sup>1</sup>**

During the First World War, a new geopolitical actor - Germany - made its presence felt in the straits area, which thus became the scene of heavy battles between the Franco-British military forces and those of Turkey, Germany's ally. Turkey is defeated and the straits pass under the military occupation of the Entente because of the Armistice Convention signed by Turkey in 1918. By removing the discriminatory nature of previous treaties and conventions, the legal regime of the Ponto-Mediterranean straits enters a new phase of its evolution, that of guaranteeing full freedom of navigation for ships of all countries, both commercial and military.

Two regulations drew attention in this regard after the end of the World War: The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) and the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), around which fierce disputes were fought. The Treaty of Sèvres, not recognized by Turkey, provided for the demilitarization of the area of the straits by destroying all the fortifications on their shores previously erected and ensuring complete freedom of navigation, both for commercial purposes and for military vessels, without charging any tax. Basically, the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles and the coast of the Sea of Marmara were made available to the League of Nations, but also to the forces of the Entente that won the First World War.

After Kemal Ataturk's Revolution<sup>2</sup> and the defeat of Greece and Armenia<sup>2</sup>, republican Turkey signed the Lausanne Convention with the Western powers, a document advantageous for both sides. The Convention strengthened the provisions of the Treaty of Sevres only in the commercial and civil spheres, proclaiming the internationalization of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits under the patronage of the League of Nations. This provision was imposed because of the internationalization of European rivers, including the Danube. At the same time, certain sanitary and safety rules were established for traffic through the straits, especially in times of war, and Turkey's total independence was recognized.

### **Montreux Convention (1936). Current State of the International Law on the Status of the Straits and the Black Sea**

The Montreux Convention, Switzerland, takes up the principles of free passage and navigation, but gives Turkey the right to block the traffic through the straits to the ships of another state, if it felt threatened by it with any armed conflict. If Turkey is not a belligerent party, commercial vessels have total freedom of traffic. In addition to these, the Convention also regulated a few technical problems concerning traffic and navigation procedures. The Montreux Convention, which is still in force today, stipulates, more clearly than in previous agreements, the rights of riparian and non-riparian countries in the use of straits, with the consent of their international regime.

The Montreux Convention on the Status of the Straits is an agreement from June 22 to July 21, 1936 by which Turkey effectively regains control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. The negotiations took place with the participation of the states: Turkey, the USSR, Great Britain, France, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Yugoslavia, Australia and Japan. Despite efforts initiated in 1982 to legalise the issue of straits globally, in a broader context of continental shelves and exclusive economic zones, the United Nations Montego Bay

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, Wayne State University, Detroit, 2003, p. 303

<sup>2</sup> Greece and Armenia were supported by the Entente in their attempt to conquer Turkish territories in Asia Minor which they claimed on historical grounds.

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>1</sup> to which most of the world's states subsequently acceded, does not change the legal regime of the straits for which previous agreements were signed. This is therefore also the case with the Black Sea Straits, which therefore remain under the Montreux Convention.

## Conclusions

Access to the Black Sea is vital for all coastal or neighboring states, as it is a strategic crossroads between continents and cultures. From an economic perspective, the Pontic area is a corridor of utmost importance for the trade and transport of various goods between Europe, Asia and Africa, including an energy corridor.

For Russia, the Black Sea is a pivot through which it can project its power either in the Middle East or in southern Europe, along the Mediterranean. The Russian Black Sea Fleet is considered an important operational-strategic resource in this regard.

The strategic points of the Black Sea are the Turkish straits, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, but also the Strait of Azov, also known in history as the Cimmerian Bosphorus, which is the subject of the Russian Ukrainian competition for the north-Pontic coastline, along with Crimea.

With control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, as well as the largest littoral area of the Black Sea, Turkey asserts itself as an important regional player, a hub of regional geopolitics and geostrategy, with interests both in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where President Erdogan has traced the axis of world pan-turanism, in his attempt to bring together all the states of Turkish-Mongolian origin.

At the same time, from an economic perspective, it should be noted that the Turkish straits are transited daily by about 3 million barrels of oil per day.

Although fluctuating, Russian Turkish relations are marked by the economic and commercial interests of the Turks and the strategic interests of the Russians. More recently, with the outbreak of the Russian Ukrainian conflict in February 2022, Turkey asserts itself as a mediator and a factor of stability in the area.

Of the other three Pontic countries - Romania, Bulgaria and Georgia - it draws attention to Moscow's policy by which it limited the pro-European tendencies of the Caucasians, continuing to ensure its presence in Transcaucasia through the two enclaves it controls on Georgian territory, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is even though Russia has lost control of Armenia, defeated in the conflict with Erdogan-backed Azerbaijan.

Currently, the Armenian Azerbaijani peace proposed by Donald Trump by operationalizing the Zangezur Corridor that crosses Armenia, uniting Azerbaijan with the Azerbaijani enclave between Armenia and Turkey, Nakhchevan, ensures the American presence in the Caucasus and the transit of oil products on the Turkey-Caucasus-Central Asia axis.

Russian Bulgarian relations, beyond the cultural-historical affinities determined by belonging to the great family of the Slavic peoples, experienced sinusoids after Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the EU. Sofia has stopped certain Russian initiatives to transport gas and oil products on its territory to Europe, but a certain substantial part of its leaders, such as President Rumen Radev, continue to show goodwill towards Moscow.

Romania's accession to NATO and the EU, but especially our country's strategic partnership with the US, make Bucharest the main opponent of the Putin regime in the Pontic

---

<sup>1</sup> UNCLOS was signed on 10 December 1982 and entered into force in 1994, establishing the boundaries of territorial maritime waters, continental shelves and exclusive economic zones belonging to riparian states

region. The anti-missile shield in Deveselu, the military bases in Câmpia Turzii and especially Mihail Kogălniceanu, were qualified by the Putin regime as a threat to Moscow. Diplomatic relations are currently cold, with Moscow adding Romania to the list of unfriendly countries. Even more so since on Moldovan territory the Russian Romanian hybrid war has often taken on acute forms, it is seen as being in a connection with the conflict in Ukraine. Like Ukraine, Moldova wants to belong to the Euro-Atlantic world, while the reminiscences of the Russian world in Chisinau manifest themselves systematically, obstructing the European path of the second Romanian republic.

### Bibliography

#### Books

1. Bacinschi, Vadim, *Românii la Odesa*, Axis Libri, Galați, 2014
2. Bugajski, Janusz, *Pacea rece, noul imperialism al Rusiei*, Casa Radio, București, 2005
3. Grigas, Agnia, *Crimeea și noul imperiul rus*, Corint, București, 2022
4. King, Charles, *Marea Neagră, o istorie*, Brumar, Timișoara, 2005
5. Marshall, Tim, *Prizonierii geografiei*, Litera, București, 2020
6. Morgenthau, Henry, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, Wayne State University, Detroit, 2003
7. Petrescu, Stan, *Călătorii geopolitice-Lumea văzută de la București*, Editura Militară, București, 2010
8. Tatu, Tudose, *Afurisita strâmtoare de Sulina (1741-1786)*, Axis Libri, Galați, 2020
9. Tatu, Tudose, *Aspre vremuri în bogazul de Sulina turcesc (1786-1812)*, Axis Libri, Galați, 2020
10. Tatu, Tudose, *Dunărea veche, margine tulbure - Sulina au Sunne (1812-1817)*, Farul, Constanța, 2023
11. Xenopol, Alexandru, Dimitrie, *Războaiele dintre ruși și turci și înrâurirea lor asupra Țărilor Române*, Albatros, București, 1997
12. Zubok, Vladislav, *Căderea: colapsul Uniunii Sovietice*, Litera, București, 2024

#### Studies and Articles

1. Berca, Alex, *Strategii militare rusești în zona Balticii și a Mării Negre cu efecte asupra insecurității mondiale*, "GeoPolitica", No. 4, 2022