



— SPECIAL REPORT —

12/03/2018

**RUSSIA'S
STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS
ON THE SEA OF AZOV**

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Dear Readers,

On November 25 all eyes turned towards the Azov Sea. An incident in the Kerch strait between Russian and Ukrainian vessels was commented by some experts to be the start for the next stage of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. I would like to strongly recommend reading this special report, which describes in details the complexity of the Azov Sea issue, from the very beginning to the present day. It was written by Ridvan Bari Urcosta, a true insider, who reveals why the region of the Azov Sea is so important to Ukraine and Russia.



SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has been facing numerous social, political and economic challenges, including the essential question of its territorial integrity. The Azov Sea Basin is, as a matter of fact, the source of all of the current Ukrainian problems. Since the Greek colonization in ancient times, the Azov Sea and the Black Sea along with the Crimean Peninsula and the Kerch Strait have been regarded as the area of constant dispute and the place of opposing political interests. Nevertheless, throughout history, the region has also proven to be highly profitable to the countries that managed to gain control of both banks of the Kerch Strait. Recently, the situation in the Azov Sea region has once again been intensified. Two countries, Ukraine and the Russian Federation, the former seeking the protection of its fundamental interests and the latter driven by its imperialist ambitions, have entered into conflict with each other. At present, the whole world is carefully watching Russia's aggressive moves in the Sea of Azov. So far, the Russian Navy has detained over 200 ships heading to Ukrainian ports in the Azov Sea.

This report attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

- How have the Russian annexation of Crimea and the loss of control over eastern Ukraine led Kiev to lose almost full control over the Azov Sea, which has resulted in a deepening economic crisis and a greater Russian military presence in the area?
- What diplomatic and military means are used by the Ukrainian government in order to restore Ukraine's influence in the region? How does the West support Ukraine in this conflict?
- How does the already tense situation in the Azov Sea affect, first of all, the Ukrainian economy, and second of all, the popularity ratings of Ukrainian politicians, the global position of Russia and the overall course of world politics?
- Why the direct military confrontation with Russia in this particular area may not necessarily be the best solution for the already weakened Ukrainian state? What are the potentially disastrous consequences for Ukraine if such a conflict with Russia occurs?

I wish you a pleasant read!



Krzysztof Kamiński
President of the Board
Warsaw Institute

Historical and General Strategic Considerations

The Azov Sea is a very small and semi-enclosed sea of the Atlantic Ocean. During the Ancient Greek times, it was known as Meotian Lake. This water reservoir has always been of major strategic importance to the states that have existed around its shores. Historically, the Azov Sea played a crucial role a number of times. However, because of its geo-specificity, meaning that the Azov Sea is the most isolated sea in the world that rushes deeply into the Eurasian continent, it is isolated from the key geostrategic regions of Eurasia.

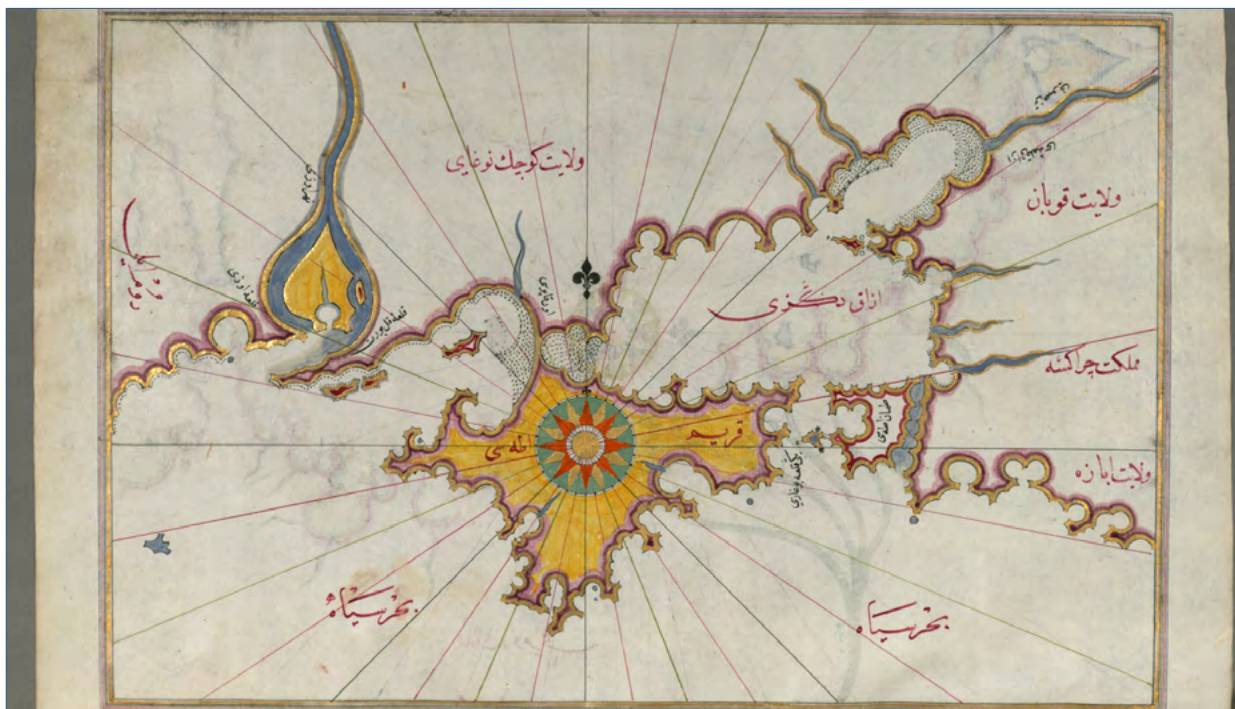
To illustrate, it is quite far from the Middle East, the Caucasus and the main theatres of Eastern European confrontations. Thus, because of its geographical remoteness, the geopolitical situation in the Azov Sea has remained dormant during major historical periods. Nonetheless, history has manifested itself in this region in the following five main cases:

(1) When a powerful state is established on one of the shores of the Azov Sea, particularly in the Crimean Peninsula. The establish-

This water reservoir has always been of major strategic importance to the states that have existed around its shores.

ment of the Bosporan Kingdom and the Crimean Khanate are well-known examples of such a phenomenon. The very essence of their existence had always been connected with the issue of security in the Azov Sea; therefore, any possibility of attack from the north had always been a matter of their permanent concern.

(2) When a powerful state annexes the Crimean Peninsula and uses it for its own strategic purposes. Here, the importance of the Azov Sea is based on security flanks due to the fact that there is a serious danger of being completely cut off from the mainland.



MAP OF CRIMEA AND SEA OF AZOV USED BY THE ADMIRALS OF OTTOMAN FLEET CA. 1520.
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

- (3) When a certain state controls both Crimea and two coasts of the Kerch Strait, it creates the situation in which any other state that is located on the Azov Sea coastline is deprived of access to any waterway out of the sea.
- (4) The next case concerns the issue of economy, which is inextricably connected to the aforementioned geographical isolation. Without permanent access to international waterways, a severe economic crisis of the most significant cities located in the Azov Sea coastline such as Rostov-on-Don, Mariupol and Berdyansk is very likely to occur.
- (5) The last case, which is brought up in almost every geopolitical confrontation, links the situation in the Azov Sea to the ownership of the Crimean Peninsula. Not only that, but also since the beginning of the 20th century the political status of Mariupol and Berdyansk, two large cities located in the Pryazovian region (also known as the Cis-Azov region), has been equally import-

ant due to their industrial and economic potential.

Together with the above-mentioned cases, it is important to indicate two crucial rules that have arisen from the analysis of the military and political situation in the Azov Sea throughout history.

The first rule, which concerns all of the aforementioned cases, is that a state or states struggle to gain full control over the Azov Sea shores. Due to the geopolitical characteristics of the sea, which are often created in the hands of the enemy, there has always been a great hazard to the security of any state that has access to the Azov Sea. In particular, it enables

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naval forces to get access to the soft underbelly of mainland countries. The history of military operations in the Azov Sea demonstrates that the ultimate solution is to gain full control of all of the sea shores. Even if some state controls the Kerch Strait, it does not necessarily mean that the area has been secured and the state has a complete strategic advantage over the region. Many times, even a small piece of the Azov Sea shore has made it possible for certain states to conduct a number of effective and devastating guerrilla operations against other states.

The second rule is more practical, because it obliges a state or a semi-state to create a number of Azovian flotillas or even a brown-water navy in order to effectively monitor their own territorial waters as well as to defend themselves against potential foreign diversions. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that nature itself imposes specific geographical conditions on any naval flotilla in the Azov Sea due to the fact that its maximum depth is only 14 meters, which makes using “standard” warships in naval operations practically impossible. Consequently, small warships have been, and still are, considered to be the most effective vessels that are capable of operating and conducting military operations in any coastal or river environment, which simply implies that they are perfectly adjusted to the natural conditions of the Azov Sea. Usually, flotillas are created for a specific period of time and they very rarely have the status of separate and completely independent military units. Overall, the geopolitical conditions in the region force any state to develop unique strategies and tactics.

If these considerations have come from the analysis of the previous situations in the Azov Sea, it should be listed here when the Azov Sea has been of major strategic importance.

- (1) When the Bosporan Kingdom controlled more than a half of the Azov Sea coastline and the security of the kingdom in many cases depended on the situation in the Black and Azov Seas. However, the main threat had always been coming from the Azov Sea side.
- (2) It is unknown who established the following military defence tradition in Taurida (the former name for Crimea), but almost every subsequent state formation in Crimea has followed the rule of having a defence system that stretches from the Perekop Isthmus in the west to numerous fortresses in the Kerch Strait in the east. Also, there should always be a stronghold in the middle area (the Arabat Spit) that defends and guards the additional land way to Crimea. This system had been maintained by both the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire, especially during numerous wars against Cossacks and Russia. Some of its aspects were imposed during the Crimean War, the Russian Civil War, the Second World War and finally since the beginning of the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian military conflict. It can be noticed that in every case a strong system of defence has been established and naval missions to the Azov Sea (flotillas) have been organised.

The Beginnings

In 1991, right after Ukraine declared its independence, a number of potentially dangerous threats to Ukrainian sovereignty were outlined. In fact, the vast majority of them pointed to one particular place, that is, the Crimean Peninsula with the city of Sevastopol, where the Black Sea Fleet was based at the time. The years 1991-1997 were very intense for Russian-Ukrainian relations. The main bone of contention concerned two issues: Crimea together with its separatist movements and Sevastopol together with the Black Sea Fleet. In 1997, the latter issue was tackled when the Partition Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Status and Conditions of the Presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet on the Territory of Ukraine was signed. According to the treaty, Russia received 81.7% of the Black Sea Fleet (388 vessels and 14 submarines) while Ukraine only 18.3% (87 vessels and one submarine)¹. Though for Ukraine it was a victory, for Russia it was a humiliation. Not only did the Russians fail to support the Crimean separatists in Simferopol, but they also failed to gain full control of the Black Sea Fleet.

This turbulent and divisive climate of Russian-Ukrainian relations has not been stopped by the signing of the Partition Treaty in 1997.

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The next stage of the Russian-Ukrainian turbulence over the Azov-Black Sea region started in 2003, with a completely new form and level of intensity. This time, both sides were engaged in a much deeper and more aggressive rivalry, which was beyond mere diplomatic means and pure political rhetoric. Tuzla Island, a tiny island located between the shores of the Kerch Strait, became the “island of contention.” The island was transferred to the Crimean Autonomic Republic in 1941, but at that time the peninsula belonged to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialistic Republic. It was only in 1954 when the Crimean Peninsula was transferred to Ukraine, together with the entire military strategic infrastructure. Still, during those times it was a single country and all of those administrative-territorial differences were mostly nominal. The situation changed



RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN (L) AND UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT LEONID KUCHMA (R) MET IN SEPTEMBER, 2003, TO TALK ABOUT THE STATUS OF THE AZOV SEA. SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

tremendously when both Ukraine and Russia gained their independence. However, the problem did not seem to be as urgent as the separatist movement in Crimea or the Russian naval base in Sevastopol. Hence both sides avoided the delimitation of the border, leaving the general question of Crimea unanswered.

In 2003, a new page in Russian-Ukrainian relations has been opened when the Tuzla Island conflict began. Many political experts and politicians immediately recognised the potential outbreak of a direct war between the two states, which had been impossible to imagine since 1991. There were two obvious reasons for this conflict: economy and military strategy. Economic factors were based on the fact that since 1991 Ukraine had been con-

Since 1991 Ukraine had been controlling the Kerch Strait.

Russia had to pay duties for access to the Sea of Azov.

trolling the Kerch Strait. However, here it is important to delve deeply into the matter. At first sight, it seems that the Kerch Strait could be used by both countries, but this assumption is incorrect. The greatest disadvantage that the Russian Federation inherited from the collapse of the Soviet Union is the fact that the construction of the Kerch-Yenikale Canal, a maritime shipping canal built between the years 1874-1877 in order to improve the navigational capabilities of the strait, was dredged much closer to Crimea than to the Taman Peninsula. As a consequence, the canal had been possessed by Ukraine until 2014. It was an additional complication for the Russian Federation, because it meant that it had to pay for every Russian ship's passage through the Kerch Strait. As a result, Russia had to pay duties for access to the Sea of Azov, the amount

The basin is extremely important for Russian trade, because it connects a system of canals with the main cities of the Russian heartland.

of which, according to various estimates, reached \$16 million per year, and for 10 years it had amounted to \$100 million². Moreover, Ukraine is a country that aspires to be part of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. It also wants to control the entrance to the Azov Sea where the maritime-river Azov-Don Basin is situated. Needless to say, the basin is extremely important for Russian trade, because it connects a system of canals with the main cities of the Russian heartland, which are the following: Volgograd, Saratov, Samara, Kazan, Nizhniy Novgorod, Moscow and last but not least, Petrozavodsk in Northern Russia. It should also be noted that before the Russian Annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine had owned almost 70% of the Azov Sea territory. For years, Moscow had considered the Ukrainian monopoly utterly irritating. Eventually, the Kremlin managed to convince its Ukrainian counterpart to enter into negotiations. The early signs of Russian discontent can be found even at the end of the 1990s, but the matter entered public discourse only after Vladimir Putin came to power as President of the Russian Federation. Since 1991, the Russian Federation has officially owned the eastern part of the Kerch Strait, where two canals, N-50 and N-52, were built. However, the fairway passages are very limited in terms of length and depth.

The first inter-governmental meetings regarding the delimitation of the Russian-Ukrainian border were held in Moscow, in August 1996.

They mark the beginning of perennial debates on the Azov Sea. Nonetheless, “The Regulation of Fisheries,” the first agreement on the Azov Sea was signed in 1992³. Two years later, in 1994, “The Protocol of Cooperation in the Waters of the Black Sea, the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait” was signed, according to which the parties agreed to recognise the Azov Sea as an internal sea⁴. However, it is important to note that it was Ukraine which initiated the negotiations over the question of legal formalisation of the maritime borders between Ukraine and the Russian Federation in October 1995. Ukraine notified Moscow by a diplomatic note which included the assessment of the actions of the Russian Government and announced that Ukraine was eager to sign an agreement regarding the legal status of the Azov Sea and the issue of shipping within the waters of the Kerch Strait. Additionally, the Ukrainian side informed the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs about its proposal to undertake concrete practical conjoint efforts in order to legally formalise the state border between Russia and Ukraine. It is worth mentioning that in this note sent to Moscow, Ukraine reserved the right to take unilateral action. In practice, it meant that Ukraine was going to start the process of the border delimitation in the Azov Sea unilaterally, in case the Russian side postponed the matter further. The reaction of Moscow was relatively prompt for such a serious question in this strategic region. Between October and November 1995, Russian state institutions had been trying to formulate a common policy regarding the Azov Sea issue. Finally, in November 1995, Russia presented the following fundamentals of its policy on the Azov Sea, which fully correlated with Russian national interests:

- (1) The Azov Sea together with the Kerch Strait shall be recognised as a historical sea of both states.

- (2) No warships belonging to the third countries shall be permitted access to the Azov Sea. It implies that without the Russian or Ukrainian consent, the warships that belong to the third countries can neither enter nor leave the Azov Sea. The permission shall be granted only if the two states do not have any objections to the passage of such naval ships through the Kerch Strait.
- (3) No unilateral decisions shall be made on the delineation of the borders between the Russian Federation and Ukraine (delimitation and demarcation) or the establishment of special economic zones, e.g. fisheries.
- (4) The waters of the Azov Sea shall be under the joint Russian-Ukrainian usage and control.
- (5) All vessels and ships that belong to the Russian Federation and Ukraine shall have the freedom of navigation in the Azov Sea.

During those perennial debates, the Ukrainians had been very consistent in their policy regarding how the issue should be tackled. They had been tenaciously defending the following three positions. First, the establishment and the delineation of the border in the Azov Sea, and particularly in the Kerch Strait, had to be settled once and for all, and as soon as possible. Second, the matters concerning the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait should be resolved by the introduction of two separate agreements. Third, the maritime administrative border, which existed before the collapse of the Soviet Union in the Kerch Strait, was to be mapped, implying that the recognition of this fact was just a formality. Notwithstanding this, the Kremlin declined the approach offered by

Kiev, because, according to the Russian vision, the maritime administrative border between the former Soviet federal states was a mere formality, in the sense that they were essentially the borders of one state, that is, the Soviet Union.

As mentioned earlier, Ukraine promised Moscow that if the solution was not to be found or even postponed, Kiev was going to take unilateral steps in order to defend its own borders. Subsequently, Ukraine made its move in 1998 when it introduced the Presidential Directive “On Security of the State Border of Ukraine in the Azov and Black Seas and the Kerch Strait.”⁵ In this document, Ukraine set border lines and their exact geographical coordinates, together with the description of potential economic zones and the continental shelf. Strikingly, the Kremlin did not respond enthusiastically to this bold Ukrainian move. It needs to be mentioned that Russia was facing tremendous challenges under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency (1991-1999), implying that the Russian state was not able to respond to Ukraine in any aggressive manner. It was dealing with so many challenges all at once, to name just a few, economic deterioration, a leadership crisis and the threats to the Russian statehood coming from the North Caucasus (the Chechen-Russian conflict). Therefore, the problems connected with the Kerch Strait were quite low on the list of priorities. Russia sent Ukraine a diplomatic note stating that such a unilateral move would contradict the principles of international maritime law due to the fact that the border delimitation should be a mutually beneficial process, thus the Ukrainian decision could not be legitimate without Russia’s approval.

The Development of Russia's Military and Strategic Policy in the Sea of Azov

The situation has changed tremendously when Vladimir Putin came to power. Bearing in mind that in 1998 the share of the naval forces in Russia's military budget was 9.2%, the number has definitely been changed in the following years. Under Putin's leadership, Russia's foreign policy has become more offensive and tangible. There are a lot of important factors behind such a state of affairs; however, in this paper only two of them will be addressed in detail.

The first factor refers to the idea of what might be called the internal stabilisation of the country. It has seemingly started with the ending phase of the Second Chechen War (1999-2009), because it was only then that the Kremlin got the chance to resolve such problems. The second factor is connected with the persona and mindset of Vladimir Putin, who is apt to settle issues according not only to their

priorities, but also to the level of threat to Russia's statehood. As regards the Russian naval strategy on the Black and Azov Seas, in 2000, Putin signed for the first time in the contemporary history of Russia the document entitled "The Naval Strategy of Russia." However, the name of the document was changed to a more neutral one for political reasons. Moscow officially recognised it as "The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for the Period Until 2010."⁶ Interestingly, just ten days before the adoption of the document, Putin personally attended Admiral Vladimir Kuroyedov's dissertation defence and took part in the discussions.⁷ The topic of the dissertation was "The State Strategy for the Protection and Realisation of Russia's National Interests in the World Ocean." In fact, the dissertation served as the very basis of the "Naval Strategy of Russia" document.



THE LEADERS OF FIVE CASPIAN STATES MET ON AUGUST 12, 2018, IN THE KAZAKH CITY OF AKTAU TO SIGN A LANDMARK DEAL ON THE LEGAL STATUS OF THE WATER REGION. SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU

This strategic document indicated that for the first time in many years Russia needed to defend its national interests in the World Ocean due to the changing geopolitical situation in the world and a number of emerging threats to Russian statehood. First of all, looking at the Black Sea region, it can be seen that the Russian Federation has limited access to the areas and resources of the World Ocean, which implies that international maritime communication, particularly to the Black and Baltic Seas, is restricted. Second of all, there is constant failure to address a number of complex international legal issues related primarily to the legal status of the Caspian, Azov and Black Seas, and to deal with some territorial claims of certain neighbouring states of the Russian Federation. Interestingly, on August 12, 2018, the leaders of five Caspian Sea states were still struggling to share the so-called “Caspian pie” between each other. Furthermore, in the above-mentioned document, the Russian military staff offered some measures to

There is constant failure to address a number of complex international legal issues related primarily to the legal status of the Caspian, Azov and Black Seas

ensure the fulfilment of Russia's national interests, which once again were directly related to the Azov Sea region. The proposition was based on the fact that the Russian Federation had to create an international legal framework that would provide favourable conditions for the protection of its interests. Russia decided to address all issues regarding the delimitation process, the exclusive economic zones, the continental shelf of the Russian Federation and the Black Sea region in great detail.

The following was established:

- (1) The consolidation of the status of the inland sea waters of the Russian Federation and Ukraine beyond the Sea of Azov;
- (2) The guarantee of the freedom of activity for the Russian Federation in the Black and Caspian Seas and the guarantee of free passage for Russian warships and vessels through the international straits;
- (3) The enforcement of the international legal status and the freedom of activity of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

It is impossible to examine the Russian strategy towards the Azov Sea without discussing the future of the Black Sea Fleet. In the document, Moscow openly revealed its general strategic interest in the Azov and Black Seas. It also announced that its main goal is to make the Azov Sea an internal sea of both Russia and Ukraine.

A year later, in 2001, "The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation"⁸ was introduced, in which the Kremlin stressed once again that the Azov Sea is primarily a part of its national interests' framework. Also, the Azov Sea was defined as a part of the Atlantic region. According to the document, the long-standing interests of Russia in the Black and Azov Seas can be summarised in four key points:

- (1) the restoration of naval and merchant fleets together with a system of inland navigation (the Volga-Don Canal), including ports and other types of infrastructure;
- (2) the regulation of the legal status of the Black Sea Fleet between Russia and Ukraine;
- (3) the assurance that Sevastopol is the main base of the Black Sea Fleet; and finally

- (4) the creation of conditions for basing and using the components of maritime potential that protects the sovereign and international rights of the Russian Federation in the Black and Azov Seas. In practice, it means that if need be, Russia is free to defend its sovereignty in these two seas.

If one continues to analyse the following Russian maritime doctrines and strategies, it can be observed that, for instance, in the "Naval Strategy of Russia 2020"⁹ (adopted on May 29, 2012), the Azov and Black Seas are not even mentioned. According to the document, the permanent presence of the Russian Naval Forces in the following strategic places such as: the Barents Sea, the Arctic Ocean, the Caspian Sea and the Middle East is absolutely necessary; however, there is no mention of the Black Sea region. The only indirect reference to this region can be found in a list of threats to Russia's national interests. The list once again starts with the mention of legally unsettled complex international issues, the existence of territorial claims to the areas that belong to the Russian Federation voiced by some neighbouring states and its allies, which include coastal territories and water areas, and the interference in Russia's internal affairs. Furthermore, there are a number of restrictions for the Russian Federation regarding access to the international resources and areas of the World Ocean as well as international communication. In "The Maritime Doctrine 2020"¹⁰ (adopted on July 26, 2015), the Azov and Black Seas (the Atlantic direction) are described as crucial regions for Russia's national interests. However, it should be noted that the main focus of the so-called "Atlantic direction" is the NATO oikumene. For the Kremlin, NATO expansion to Russia's borders is simply unacceptable. At the same time, the fundamentals of the Russian

national maritime policy on the Azov and Black Seas are to pave the way for the fast restoration and omnidirectional enforcement of Russia's strategic positions. Thus, the following aims were established:

- (1) To set a more favourable (on the basis of international law) international regime for Russia in terms of a more advantageous establishment, which is to include the following: an international regime in the Azov and Black Seas, a system of using natural sea resources, the free use of oil and gas fields, and the construction and maintenance of pipelines;
- (2) To set an international legal regime in the Kerch Strait;
- (3) To improve the structure of the Black Sea Fleet and to develop the infrastructure of its bases in Crimea and Krasnodar Krai (also referred to as the Kuban region);
- (4) To build vessels and ships, especially the river-sea type, and to develop port infrastructure in the Azov and Black Seas;
- (5) To create three huge economic and maritime zones (centres) in the Azovian region: the Crimean zone, the Black Sea-Kuban zone and the Azov-Don zone;
- (6) To further develop gas and oil pipeline systems in the region; for instance, according to the Russian Ministry of Energy, the share of offshore fields in the Azov Sea is 9.4% of oil and 14.7% of gas in the production structure of the Russian Federation;¹¹
- (7) To provide a direct logistic connection between the Crimean Peninsula and Krasnodar Krai. Although during the adoption

of the document, a direct land connection through the territory of Ukraine was still considered a mere possibility, eventually the construction of the Crimean Bridge became the solution;

- (8) To extract mineral resources from the Azov and Black Seas.

Not only has the Annexation of Crimea made a palpable impact on the Russian strategic position in the region, but it has also developed its strategic vision. Russia's strategy has clearly become more tangible and advanced. It can even be said that this document is an example of one of the most detailed and well-elaborated doctrines in terms of the description of strategic aspects. However, the practical realisation of this doctrine poses yet another question.

Finally in 2017, two years after the initiation of the 2015 Syrian Campaign, in which the Russian Navy has been playing an important role, the Kremlin had to adjust its policy to the changes that had occurred. On July 20, 2017, Putin signed "The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030."¹² Once again, the two previously mentioned threats to Russian statehood have been pointed out, but the language of the document has changed tremendously; it became more antagonistic and aggressive. The Azov Sea was

On July 20, 2017, Putin signed "The Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Operations for the Period Until 2030."

mentioned in the document with regard to the necessity of maintaining legal regimes on the state border of the Russian Federation, its border areas, exclusive economic zones, the continental shelf as well as in the waters of the Caspian and Azov Seas. Moreover, as it has already been stressed, without the Annexation of Crimea, it is impossible to make a clear assessment of Russia's policy in the Azov Sea in terms of security implications. According to the above-mentioned document, the operational and combat capabilities of the Black Sea Fleet should be increased by establishing

multi-purpose military forces on the territory of the Crimean Peninsula. One needs to take into account the fact that under Ukraine's control, the modernisation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol was impossible, so naturally after 2014 the Kremlin decided to implement a number of programmes to "to fill in the blanks." The main purpose was to integrate the Sevastopol Naval Base in Russia's general naval strategy in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean according to the new geopolitical realities.

Selected Aspects of Russia's Foreign Policy Regarding Straits and „Internal” or „Closed” Seas

Over the years, the Russian Federation has developed a certain type of policy regarding the Azov Sea. It seems as if it is going to follow this policy and implement some additional hybrid and non-linear methods in the struggle against both NATO and its Eastern European allies. There were two interesting historical precedents that set a more general Russian approach to the issue of neighbouring waters. While the first one concerns the Soviet Union's policy in the Black Sea, especially the question of the Turkish Straits, the second one refers to the Caspian Sea. Nonetheless, both cases share some general similarities. One of the issues discussed during the Lausanne Conference of 1923 was the formation of a security regime in the Turkish Straits. The Soviet Russia delegation presented its own vision of how the Russian neighbourhood should be organised, allowing Moscow to feel relatively secure at the time. It is a well-known fact that Soviet Russia did not

join the International Straits Commission, which was established during the 1923 Lausanne Conference. Nonetheless, during the Conference, Vladimir Lenin revealed the basic principles of Russia's foreign policy towards the Turkish Straits, among which were the following: the ban on the passage of all warships through the Straits in times of both peace and war, the free passage of merchant fleets and the sovereignty of Turkey over the Straits zone. Later, during another international gathering, the Montreux Conference of 1936, the Kremlin slightly changed its concept and defended the point that the free passage of warships should only be allowed to the Black Sea riparian states. In general, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov was quite satisfied with the Conference results, but the principles proposed by Lenin could not be fully implemented during the negotiations. Additionally, the Soviet delegation eagerly defended the position that the Black Sea is, in fact, an "internal sea," implying that the principle of the

freedom of the seas did not apply here.

The Soviet Union presented the following positions during the 1936 Montreux Conference, which later became the basis for its foreign policy in the Black Sea region:

- (1) Turkey has no right to impose any obstacles to the Soviet Navy in the Turkish Straits.
- (2) The access to the Straits and the passage through the Straits must be banned for all non-riparian states.
- (3) Only the Black Sea states have the exclusive rights to the sea, particularly for military use.
- (4) According to Litvinov, the Black Sea has a “special geographical position,” hence the concept of “free seas” absolutely cannot be applied to this particular sea.
- (5) Without the agreement of other Black Sea states, Turkey cannot alter the regime in the Straits.
- (6) The Kremlin planned to establish permanent control over the Straits or at least their joint defence. In 1941, Vyacheslav Molotov presented this standpoint to Adolf Hitler on many occasions, that is, whenever he happened to be in Berlin. Taking into account the fact that the Soviet Union and Turkey were the countries that were most interested in the Turkish Straits, it was in 1946 that Josef Stalin openly revealed the Soviet Union’s strategy by asking Turkey to create “joint measures” in order to defend the Straits.

Overall, the Soviet Union planned to make the Black Sea its own *Mare Clausum Russicum*. It is also worth mentioning that in 1918, in his

Directive addressed to the then created People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, Leon Trotsky outlined a number of principles that every Soviet diplomat should defend during any negotiations with the Ukrainian Government. In the Directive, not only did he stress that Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet should remain part of Russia, but he also maintained that the Kerch Strait and the control over its passage must be exclusively under the Soviet Russian rule.

Nowadays, as regards the Caspian Sea, it appears that the Russian Federation has adopted a policy that is strikingly similar to the one pursued by the Soviet Union. As described in the very first agreements and diplomatic notes, the Soviet Government introduced the concept of the Caspian Sea as being the Soviet-Iranian Sea. Before, it had been commonly agreed that the Caspian Sea is under Russia’s jurisdiction. In 1931, the Soviet authorities in agreement with the Iranian authorities introduced yet another principle regarding the Caspian Sea, according to which only the Caspian Sea states have the right to sail in the Caspian Basin. Therefore, no third state was allowed access to the Caspian Basin. There were even some restrictions for foreign citizens who worked just as crew members.

The recent meeting of the leaders of the Caspian Sea states (Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) held in the Kazakh city of Aktau, on August 12, 2018, has made a major breakthrough in the negotiations that

The Soviet Union planned to make the Black Sea its own *Mare Clausum Russicum*.

lasted over twenty years. The Caspian states signed “The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea,”¹³ in which two significant principles from the Russian Federation point of view were outlined. The first principle refers to the concept of the destiny of the sea. The Caspian states determined that third countries have no right of access to the Caspian Sea. The second principle, which presents yet another accomplishment of Russian diplomacy, grants the freedom of action to Russia’s Caspian Flotilla. Therefore, it is worth noting that except for the countries’ territorial waters, the rest of the Caspian Sea remains open for Russia and other riparian states.

On the whole, it can be observed that the Russian Federation has been following almost the same policy as the one established by the Soviet Union in regard to the so-called “south seas” (the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Azov Sea). However, Moscow is clearly facing less resistance in the Caspian Sea in comparison with the current situation in the Black Sea and the recent events in the Azov Sea. This

Russian Federation has been following almost the same policy as the one established by the Soviet Union in regard to the so-called “south seas” (the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea and the Azov Sea

might be connected with the fact that as has been stated in the latest Convention, the Russian Federation is not only able to impose certain conditions on its neighbours, but it can also effectively block any Western attempts to interfere in the region. For instance, it has become quite evident by now that Russia blocked Astana’s plans to invite the U.S. to the Caspian Sea by signing the above-mentioned Convention.

From Yeysk to the “Island of Contention”

On January 23, 2003, Russia and Ukraine signed the famous agreement entitled “The Agreement between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border”¹⁴ in a relatively peaceful manner. According to Article 5 of the Agreement, the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait are the internal waters of both Russia and Ukraine. The Official Reference¹⁵ to the Agreement, signed on February 16, 2004, points out that the aforementioned Agreement forms a basis for the settlement of the issues related to the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait. Yet, both sides did not manage to find the resolution to the Azov Sea border problem. Ukrainian politicians and experts were not particularly satisfied with the results of the Agreement. The fact that the Azov Sea was recognized as the internal waters of both countries was inappropriate for them. From the beginning of the negotiations, it was unclear whether the two states would even sign the Agreement due to the unsettled case of the Azov Sea.

On September 17, 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma at Biryuchyi Island, a small

island located in the Azov Sea, where the two presidents discussed, among other issues, the future of the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait. The meeting was held just a day before the Yalta Summit of the Commonwealth of the Independent States, at which Ukraine was supposed to join the Eurasian Economic Union. During the meeting at Biryuchyi Island, Putin once again reiterated the Russian position on the Azov Sea matter by stating that “the Azov Sea must be the internal sea of both Russia and Ukraine.” He expressed this standpoint during an interview with Rostov journalists, which had taken place two weeks before the meeting with President Kuchma.¹⁶

The conflict itself commenced on September 29, 2003, when the authorities of Krasnodar Krai gave their permission to start building a dam. The dam was to stretch from the Taman Peninsula across Tuzla Island to the city of Kerch in the Crimean Peninsula. The Russian local authorities explained that the dam is to act as a form of prevention of erosion of the coastal strip of the Taman Peninsula and the Tuzla Spit. The first “signs” indicating that the Russian Federation had been planning to take



**PRESIDENT PUTIN DURING HIS VISIT TO YEYSK MILITARY BASE,
SEPTEMBER, 2003
SOURCE: KREMLIN.RU**

action against Ukraine appeared exactly at the beginning of September 2003. The very first one, Putin's statement in the city of Rostov, has already been mentioned. Others "signs" showcasing Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine will be presented in the following paragraphs.

Right after the meeting with Kuchma at Biryuchyi Island on September 17, 2003, Putin went to Yeysk. Although Yeysk is just a small town in Krasnodar Krai, it is of strategic importance due to the presence of the Yeysk Military Airfield, the Yeysk Higher Military Aviation School and the Ground Aviation Training and Research Complex (NITKA)¹⁷, which have been in active use since the Soviet times. Before the Annexation of Crimea, Yeysk was Russia's only military centre in the region, but now it also owns one in Novofedorivka (western Crimea).

The meeting in Yeysk was of historical meaning for Russia's geopolitical ambitions in the

southern area of its territory. All important ministers were present at the meeting, including: the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Director of the Federal Security Service (the FSB) and the Commanders of the Naval and Air Forces. During the meeting, Putin demonstrated Russia's strong commitments to the Black and Azov Seas region. At the beginning of the meeting, the Russian President said the following:

"I would like to talk about the Azov-Black Sea Basin as a whole. Military and environmental issues in this zone are very important for Russia. This is the zone of our strategic interests. The Black Sea region is of special geopolitical significance for us. The Black Sea provides Russia with direct access to the most important global transport routes, including the energy ones".¹⁸

In his speech, he clearly outlined the crucial interests of Russia in this region, implying that Russia's national interests could not be pursued

without them. In order to implement this vision in the form of a framework, Putin signed a document entitled “The Plan of Cooperation of Ministries and Agencies to Address the Diplomatic and Military Missions in the Azov-Black Sea Region.”¹⁹ The text of the Plan was kept away from the public eye, but its general aims were to adopt Russia’s complex strategy to the Black-Azov Seas region and to modernise port and naval infrastructure. Another issue, which was raised during the meeting, was the Azov Sea question. According to Putin, the difficult matter had been under negotiations. There had been painstaking efforts to resolve the existing problems of the legal status of the Russian-Ukrainian border, the regime of the Kerch Strait, the legal aspects regarding the use of the water area and resources of the Black and Azov Seas. Moreover, during the meeting, Putin signed “The Decree on the Establishment of the Black Sea Fleet’s Base in Novorossiysk.”²⁰

Many Western and Ukrainian political experts and politicians regarded it as the retreat of Russia and its ambitions from the region. However, Putin highlighted that it was not the sign of retreat. He maintained that Sevastopol would remain the main base of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Furthermore, during the meeting, Putin revealed the crucial reason why the Kremlin had not paid much attention to the Azov Sea before. He said the following:

“For a long time, a large number of ministries and departments have been focused on the Caspian Sea. I think that now is the time to come to grips with the problems of the Azov-Black Sea Basin.”²¹

The Caspian Sea case is very interesting, as even during the meeting in Yeysk, it was noted that there were some officials who were direct-

ly engaged in the matter of the settlement of the border problems in the Caspian Sea Basin. Moscow “came to grips with the problems” on September 29, 2003, when the construction of the above-mentioned dam began. One day later, on September 30, Putin called a meeting of the Security Council of Russia, during which he issued an order to the responsible services to uphold Russia’s national interests in the Azov Sea. Although this report does not provide a very detailed description of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict over Tuzla Island, it is crucial to point out and analyse some general political implications that unfolded during the conflict and even after it.

The first political implication can be regarded as both beneficial and harmful for the Russian Federation. After the end of an active military phase in Chechnya, Russia finally had the time and resources to deal with other urgent issues. It simultaneously returned to its “typical” aggressive foreign policy towards its neighbours, which are often referred to as the “near abroad” (the post-Soviet states) in Russia’s political language. To put it simply, Russia once again returned to its revisionist policy. The second political implication concerns Ukraine and the events that took place in Tuzla Island. The situation kept the entire Ukrainian nation in suspense, because they did not believe that a war with Russia could actually happen. Nevertheless, the shock has led to a new wave of Ukrainian patriotism, even in Donbass and Crimea, the areas famous for being highly affected by Russia. It can only be assumed that the Tuzla Island conflict did not have a direct impact on the events that followed, in particular, the Orange Revolution of 2004, but it certainly made a significant impact on Ukraine’s public opinion. It delivered a wake-up call to the Ukrainian people, which demolished the idea of “Slavic brotherhood” and showed Russia’s true intentions, which were to keep Ukraine closer



THE MAP PRESENTS THE BALANCE OF POWER BETWEEN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA IN THE AZOV SEA BEFORE THE YEAR 2014

than ever before. Moreover, it buried forever Ukraine's plans to become part of the Eurasian Economic Union. The third political implication points out once again that Putin is a pragmatic thinker and strategist, meaning that he rarely takes on many tasks at once. When he finished "the hot phase" of the conflict in Chechnya and dealt with the situation in the Caspian Sea, only then he was able to fully concentrate on the Azov and Black Seas region. From now on, it was Ukraine's turn to become the main object of Russia's revisionist policy. Without doubt, by building the naval base in Novorossiysk, Putin made a strategic retreat, demonstrating that Russia was prepared to leave the city of Sevastopol. Nonetheless, at the same time, Moscow was building a strategic *smychka* (linkage) that was to defend Russia's underbelly between Sevastopol in Crimea and Novorossiysk in the Caucasus. Thus, the gates to Russia would be secured from any potential sea attack. Also, it should be noted that

Moscow has never been willing to give up Sevastopol as the main naval base of the Black Sea Fleet due to pragmatic considerations. Compared with the Sevastopol Bay, the geographical conditions of Novorossiysk are far from perfect. Therefore, the development of naval infrastructure in Novorossiysk would cost Russia unbearable amounts of money at that time.

It seems evident that the Tuzla conflict and its immediate aftermath, that is, "The Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border" and "The Treaty on Cooperation in the Use of the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait,"²² which were signed on January 28, 2003, were beneficial to Russia's national interests. They bounded, one might even say forced, Kiev to recognise the Azov Sea as the internal sea of the two states. Thus, the Azov Sea was closed to third countries. Even though the Kerch Strait issue was

not fully resolved, Russia received an additional advantage, because it was allowed to pass through the Kerch Strait to the Ukrainian side without payment. Almost every goal of Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine was achieved. Ukraine's pro-European leaders were disappointed with the above-mentioned Treaties. Moreover, it needs to be mentioned that two political parties in the Russian State Duma stood against the ratification of the two Treaties. They were the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (the LDPR) and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (the CPRF). According to their viewpoint, once Kiev settles all territorial problems, Ukraine is free to join NATO.

This entire case is extremely significant for Russian-Ukrainian relations, because it was the first case since the beginning of the 20th century when Russia and Ukraine had almost a direct military confrontation. Many experts advised Kiev to apply the rules of international law as diplomatic leverage against Russia's expansionist ambitions. However, Ukraine rejected the advice and tried to resolve the problem by inter-governmental negotiations. Additionally, there was an idea that Ukraine should call for the guarantors of Ukrainian sovereignty from the infamous Budapest Memorandum. The Tuzla Island conflict led to a "purge" within the Ukrainian military staff from pro-Russian sympathisers. For instance,

Many experts advised Kiev to apply the rules of international law as diplomatic leverage against Russia's expansionist ambitions.

several admirals were dismissed for alleged pro-Kremlin sentiments. NATO behaved in a very reserved manner and even avoided to address the further development of the Russian-Ukrainian dispute. On October 20, 2003, President of Ukraine Kuchma publicly asked NATO Secretary General Lord George Robertson for intervention in the matter before his departure for Moscow. In addition to this, Javier Solana, the High Representative of the European Union for Common Foreign and Security Policy presented almost the exact same position on the matter as did NATO. He said that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine "*will be resolved and defused among themselves.*"²³ Therefore, it can be easily noticed that the two most powerful Western organisations openly distanced themselves from the Moscow-Kiev conflict.

In 2005, right after Victor Yushchenko was elected as the third President of Ukraine, another page in Russian-Ukrainian relations has been opened. President Yushchenko decided to pursue a more nationalist foreign policy. According to him, the Agreement signed in 2003 was forcefully imposed on Kiev, in particular personally on President Kuchma. President Yushchenko was determined to keep the Kerch Strait exclusively under Ukraine's control. He also expressed the readiness to make the internationally recognised maritime standard of the 12 nautical mile zone (territorial waters) to be implemented in the Azov Sea. In order to do so, a number of diplomatic notes between Ukraine and the Russian Federation were exchanged, which, in truth, turned out to be nothing more than the so-called "tit-for-tat" politics. As a matter of fact, Kiev did not present any solid arguments against Moscow at the time. The Presidents of Russia and Ukraine even met in person to discuss the future of the Azov Sea, but unfortunately without much

success. Therefore, the meetings of inter-governmental commissions regarding the future of the Sea of Azov continued to be held regularly.

During the entire period of Yushchenko's presidency (2005-2010), Ukraine persistently defended its own sovereignty by all available diplomatic means. However, the Kremlin constantly postponed real negotiations due to the fact that the majority of Russia's goals had already been accomplished in December 2003. Nonetheless, it is important to point out one particular event that took place in 2008. In Moscow, there was a series of discussions on the future of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. The Kremlin partially admitted that it was ready to move the Russian Navy to other ports and bays in the Black Sea. One possible reason behind such a decision was the construction of naval infrastructure in the Taman Peninsula (on the Black Sea shores). Yet, due to the fact that at that time Ukraine controlled the Kerch Strait, Russia's only option was to build a new canal towards the Azov Sea of an approximate length of 10 km and dredge it sometime later. As a matter of fact, the Azov Sea is considered to be the "birthplace" of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, so it was decided that the Navy would return to this particular sea in 2008. At that time, it seemed as if Russia was shrinking tremendously in its geopolitical power projection. However, the assumption turned out to be completely inaccurate, because it was only a month later that the Russo-Georgian War broke out. When Dmitry Medvedev rose to power in 2008 and became President of the Russian Federation, Russia did not change its foreign policy on the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait.

When Victor Yanukovich became the fourth President of Ukraine in 2010, the Kremlin hoped that the existing problems with Ukraine

would be fully resolved under its own terms and conditions. Ukraine and Russia signed "The Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Demarcation of the Ukrainian-Russian State Border"²⁴ that year; yet again, the Azov Sea issue remained unsettled. To compare, a similar situation occurred between Ukraine and Romania. Kiev started to make some concessions regarding the border settlement with Bucharest in the Danube River. Romania wanted to carry out the delimitation according to the waterway; however, it was highly unfavourable for Ukraine.

In 2011, in Odessa, some Ukrainian official even promised that the Kerch-Yenikale Canal would be under the joint use of both Ukraine and Russia. In 2012, Yanukovich discussed the Azov Sea matter with Putin, which once again resulted in the so-called "breakthroughs" that did not take place any time soon. In reality, Ukraine has been slowly and deliberately sucked into a diplomatic quagmire. At the same time, it is possible to say that Yanukovich was relatively confident when he signed "The Agreement between Ukraine and the Russian

Ukraine has been slowly and deliberately sucked into a diplomatic quagmire.

Federation on the Russian Black Sea Fleet on the Territory of Ukraine,"²⁵ often referred to as "The Kharkiv Pact," in April 21, 2010. Yet, it is quite remarkable that he did not have the courage to go against Ukraine's national interests in the Azov Sea, particularly in the Kerch Strait. Two years later, on July 12, 2012, Russian President Medvedev and Ukrainian President Yanukovich signed "The Joint

Statement on the Results of the Fifth Meeting of the Russian-Ukrainian Interstate Commission.”²⁶ Once again, “standard” commitments for the possibly immediate resolution of the Azov Sea issue were reiterated in the document.

The Ukrainian Government recognised the importance of the problem and offered its permission for the modernisation of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, Crimea, in exchange for a 30% gas discount, which is widely known as the “gas for fleet” agreement.²⁷ If that had been a diplomatic trap for Ukraine, it might be said that it was quite effective. In view of the above, it must be stated that the Kremlin has never seen in Ukraine only Ukraine itself: it has always been about NATO and the USA. In 2013, President Putin once again turned his attention to the Azov and

Black Seas and took under his personal control the development of port infrastructure in this region.

For the Russian Federation, the Tuzla Island conflict posed a serious challenge. To be more specific, the question of Moscow’s policy towards Kiev, that is, the choice between the policy of “brotherhood” and the policy of political pragmatism has been raised. According to what has already been written in this paper, it can be said that Moscow has been implementing the latter towards Ukraine and its political elites. Putin has learnt from the Tuzla Island conflict and the Azov Sea border conflict to settle all border disputes of Russia amicably. To illustrate, in 2004, he managed to resolve the last territorial issue between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation.

The Annexation of Crimea and the Controversy over the “Crimean” Bridge

In October 2003, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Alexander Yakovenko said the following sentence regarding the Azov Sea: “*We hope that not only NATO’s, but also Ukraine’s warships will not go there.*”²⁸ He added that the Russian dam built towards Tuzla Island had nothing to do with the Ukrainian-Russian negotiations over the Kerch Strait and the Azov Sea.

Curiously enough, if one looks at the recently opened Crimean Bridge (informally referred to as the Kerch Strait Bridge) on a map, it can be clearly observed that the dam that was built by Russia towards Tuzla Island facilitated greatly the construction of the bridge. One can even argue that the dam was a vital part of the construction project.

In 2018, fifteen years since the beginning of the Tuzla Island conflict, it has become evident that the Russian investments have finally paid off and aided the building of the Crimean

Bridge. Not so long ago, the former President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma recalled the Tuzla events from 2003 and claimed that only the tough and uncompromising policy preserved Ukrainian sovereignty over Tuzla Island.²⁹ However, in 2014, Ukraine was too fragile to properly respond to Russia.

This particular example demonstrates that the Russian Federation has adopted some form of “a floating strategy.” Sometimes it is even hard to call it a strategy. Nevertheless, it is behind official declarations and their evident inconsis-

In 2018 it has become evident that the Russian investments have finally paid off and aided the building of the Crimean Bridge.



THE MAP PRESENTS CURRENT SITUATION IN THE REGION

tency that the strategy illuminates itself. The Western strategic thought has never recognised it as a strategy, though for the Soviet Union's revolutionary and military leadership it had always been the strategy. For instance, Stalin cultivated the term "strategic retreat." There is a strong likelihood that Vladimir Putin follows this particular strategy of dodging, looping, avoiding the final blow and waiting until time provides the opportunity for counterattack. Sergey Karaganov, a Russian political scientist and the Head of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, refers to it as "strategic patience."

Thus, after more than 20 years of the so-called "strategic patience," Russia has finally resolved almost every political problem in the Azov and Black Seas. The Kremlin addressed all issues in the region that had been bothering it since 1991 by just one counterattack indirectly aimed at the West.

It was not a mere coincidence that on March 21, 2014, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov quite straightforwardly pointed out that since the Annexation of Crimea, the Kerch Strait "can no longer be the subject of negotiations."³⁰ It implies that Moscow has never considered Ukraine with its pro-Western establishment as something separate and independent. The Kremlin has always seen the West in Kiev's moves.

After more than 20 years of the so-called "strategic patience," Russia has finally resolved almost every political problem in the Azov and Black Seas.

The following list presents the main issues that have been recently resolved by the Russian Federation:

- (1) The future of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in the Black and Azov Seas has been settled, which according to Russia's military history, was regarded as a complete humiliation just a few years ago. Now, Russia does not have to pay Ukraine millions of dollars a year for the lease of the Sevastopol Bay and other facilities; it can freely modernise the Fleet's main base in the port city of Sevastopol. Before 2014, Ukraine had imposed a ban on the reinforcement and modernisation of the Black Sea Fleet's base in Crimea, which highly irritated the Kremlin.
- (2) According to Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu, "a unique multi-purpose military unit has been created in the [Crimean] Peninsula and it is constantly being strengthened. Modern high-tech weapons do not leave a single chance to a potential enemy who dares to trespass on the primordially Russian territory."³¹
- (3) Russia gained full control over the Kerch Strait and eventually the Kerch-Yenikale Canal, for which it had been fighting in the previous years.
- (4) Russia received access to potential oil and gas fields in the Black and Azov Seas. Since the Annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin has claimed the majority of the Azov Sea territory.
- (5) The financial benefits from the Kerch Strait Operational Centre that had been previously going to Kiev are now going to Moscow. The Russians want to develop their economy in the Azov Sea, as it brings huge

The financial benefits from the Kerch Strait Operational Centre that had been previously going to Kiev are now going to Moscow.

profits. Hence, the potential conflict escalation between Russia and Ukraine in the Sea of Azov is highly undesirable for the Kremlin. Therefore, the Russians are currently seeking for other means that could potentially weaken Ukraine's economy in the Azov region.

- (6) Eventually, by the aggression and violation of international law, Russia gained the ownership of the extended coastline of the Black Sea. Before the Annexation of Crimea, Russia's Black Sea coastal length was 421 km, after the Annexation it became approximately 1200 km. Also, the ownership of Crimea provided Russia with almost 500 km of the Azov Sea coastline. There is no doubt that the Kremlin is going to exploit these assets for its strategic purposes.

As can be seen above, the Russian Federation resolved all complex issues, which had been bothering it for over a quarter of a century, by just one blow.

All in all, after 2014, Russia's main strategy is to build a military stronghold in Crimea that will allow the Kremlin to control the Azov-Black Sea region, to defeat threats coming from both bodies of water and to defend the Crimean Bridge from the other Azov and Black Seas states. The control over the Kerch Strait allows Russia to close its entrance to undesired



ON MAY 15, RUSSIA MANAGED TO OPEN THE MOTORWAY SECTION OF THE CRIMEAN BRIDGE.
SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

warships, in reality, mostly to those that belong to NATO. In order to effectively defend this strategic area, the Russian Federation has established an omnidirectional system of defence in the entire zone of the Crimean Bridge. If Ukraine plans to take military action against Russia, for instance in order to gain full control over the Azov Sea's shores, it should do so now owing to the fact that the Azov and Black Seas are not entirely under Russia's control. But then again, knowing that Russia is a cunning opponent, it may not be a traditional military action. More likely, it is either going to be an artificially created action or a strategic fault of the Ukrainian authorities in the region, which could cause the local population to protest against Kiev.

Since the opening of the Crimean Bridge in May 2018, another important issue has appeared: the construction of the bridge prevents large merchant ships (the Panamax type) from entering the Azov Sea. According to Ukrainian specialists, because of the too narrow passage

The Crimean Bridge (opened in May 2018) prevents large merchant ships (the Panamax type) from entering the Azov Sea.

between the bridge arches, vessels with a deadweight tonnage of more than 18,000 tonnes cannot pass through the bridge and, as a result, are blocked from reaching the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol.³² The share of the vessels that head to Ukraine's ports in the Sea of Azov, but cannot pass through the bridge due to its span (between 33 and 35 metres) has recently increased by about 30%.

Ukraine is Losing the Hybrid War in the Azov Sea

Russia is certainly aware of Ukraine's vulnerability in the Azov Sea in terms of both economy and military strategy. If the Russian Federation decides to fully exploit Ukraine's weaknesses in the region, the results could be dreadful. What are the exact Ukraine's weaknesses in the region? It is only logical that all relevant aspects of the situation should be considered, because the Azov Sea region has profound implications for the entire eastern Ukraine.

Russia is certainly aware of Ukraine's vulnerability in the Azov Sea in terms of both economy and military strategy.

First and foremost, Ukraine is economically dependent on the Azov Sea region. Mariupol and Berdyansk, two main cities located in the Ukrainian Azovian coast, are not only the largest ports of Ukraine, but also the largest ports of the entire Azov Sea. Therefore, the two

Pryazovian port cities have always been strongly affected by the overall situation in the Azov Sea. To some extent, the 2014 Annexation of Crimea has had a positive effect on the Ukrainian Azovian ports, because the Ukrainian Black Sea ports of Odessa and Yuzhny turned about to be too far away to receive cargoes from central and eastern Ukraine; thus, nowadays, the majority of goods is being transported to the Azovian ports. Undoubtedly, the current war in eastern Ukraine has made a profound impact on the economy of the entire region. As a result, coal, metals, minerals and wheat that are produced in eastern Ukraine increase their profitability when they are transported via the Azovian ports. Otherwise, Ukraine will be forced to develop a railway system to its closest Black Sea ports, that is, Skadovsk, Kherson and Nikolayev. For instance, the distance between Skadovsk (the Black Sea port) and Mariupol

Ukraine is economically dependent on the Azov Sea region.

(the Azov Sea port) is approximately 500 kilometres. Furthermore, if Russia decides to block Ukraine's ports in the Azov Sea, the development of alternative land roads to the Black Sea ports will cost Ukraine unbelievably huge amounts of money. Also, the profitability of the transported goods will be questionable. In such a case, the development of the Ukrainian railway system will be extremely challenging since the entire burden of the transport of goods between the Black Sea and the Azov Sea will fall on its shoulders. It is also worth noting that before 2014 Russia had been exporting its own wheat and coal through the port of Mariupol due to the fact that at that time, unlike Ukraine, it did not own such well-developed ports in the Sea of Azov. The reasons behind such a state of affairs are both geographical and historical. Back in the day, the Soviet Union made sure that the infrastructure of the Ukrainian ports was well-developed. As far as geographical aspects are concerned, the Ukrainian waters in the Azov Sea are much deeper than the Russian ones. What is interesting, lately, the rate of cargo turnover in Russia's Azovian ports has been increasing rapidly. It was only since the beginning of 2018 that the cargo turnover increased to 51.6%. Although there was a general cargo turnover increase in every Russian Azovian port, in some of them the rate of cargo transshipment increased up to 81%.³³ By contrast, the Ukrainian cargo transshipment in the Azovian ports has decreased tremendously. Therefore, it can be said that due to the loss of access to the open waters of the Azov Sea and Ukraine's inability to provide basic economic security for its own merchant fleets, local industries and factories in the cities of Mariupol and Berdyansk, there is a high possibility of mass unemployment, which, in turn, could lead to mass protests in the aforementioned cities. As if that was not enough, Russia claims that Ukraine

has reportedly been holding a group of Russian citizens from the "Nord" ship hostage. Naturally, the Russian Federation uses this official excuse to its own advantage.

The second weakness of Ukraine is inextricably linked to the current war in the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine, which started in March 2014. With the help of Russia's regular military formations, groups of separatists managed to hold their positions in the Azov Sea shores and, as a consequence, provided the Donetsk People's Republic (the DPR) with access to the sea. The main naval strongholds of the separatists are situated in two locations: the town of Novoazovsk and the village of Obryv. Novoazovsk is situated just 40 km from Mariupol. Also, it is worth mentioning that the entire Azov Sea coastline which is claimed by the DPR is approximately 45 km long. The first Azov Sea battle between Ukraine and Russia's proxies from the DPR took place on August 31, 2014. Two patrol boats of the Ukrainian Sea Guard (a Zhuk-class patrol boat BG-119, often referred to as Project 1400M "Grif," and a small patrol boat "Kalkan") were destroyed by the DPR forces near the village of Bezymyannoe. The next fights broke out subsequently on March 4 and March 11, 2017. Of course, for the Kremlin, the fact that only a tiny part of the Azov Sea was in the hands of the separatists was not included in a "perfect" scenario; nonetheless, it was still a strategic advantage over the opponent. The perfect scenario could be fully implemented only if the separatists had managed to take over the city of Mariupol, which they did not accomplish. The DPR authorities regularly announce that they are ready to defend the Azov Sea shores which are currently under their control, but in reality, what keeps them from complete failure is Russia's assistance and Ukraine's poor naval capabilities.

At the same time, the following three powers established their own flotillas in the Azov Sea: Ukraine, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Russian Federation. Unfortunately, the lack of a legal settlement of the border issue in the Azov Sea creates a situation in which Russia's warships have full freedom of navigation in the Azov Sea. They can get to any geographical point in the sea. The absence of Ukraine's 12 nautical mile zone (the territorial sea) allows Russia to control the movement of Ukrainian ships. Also, Russia can inform the DPR forces about Ukraine's naval manoeuvres well in advance. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of this so-called "arrangement" is that in case of an emergency situation with the DPR naval forces, Russia can immediately intervene by using its own forces. As mentioned previously, the real military strength of the DPR's "Azov Flotilla" is, in fact, miserable. Therefore, in July 2016, the DPR appealed to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation to receive further reinforcements in the form of Sobol-class patrol boats (Project 12200) and Mangust-class patrol boats (Project 12150). However, the reply was negative. Later, there was some news in the press saying that Russia was reportedly going to give the DPR the requested boats. However, it is quite possible that at that time Moscow was not ready for such a bold political move, which would have shown its support for the separatists so explicitly. In general, for the separatists, this tiny, yet strategic piece of the Azov Sea shore does not only provide access to the sea, but it also blocks the activities of Ukraine's Azov Flotilla and secures the rest of the territory claimed by the DPR. Nowadays, Ukraine is facing tremendous challenges because of that factor. At the same time, the current situation allows the Kremlin to have a broad manoeuvring area. Besides, even if Russia decides not to interfere in the conflict between Ukraine and the DPR in any

The lack of a legal settlement of the border issue in the Azov Sea creates a situation in which Russia's warships have full freedom of navigation in the Azov Sea.

political manner, it could still take advantage of its proxies, that is, to a certain extent.

To change the current state of affairs, in May 2018, Ukrainian MPs introduced a draft law "On Contiguous Zone of Ukraine" (No. 8361).³⁴ According to the draft, Ukraine is to extend its sovereign territory farther from the territorial sea (12 nautical miles) to another 12 nautical miles forming the so-called "contiguous zone," which in total adds up to 24 nautical miles from the baseline. In these waters, Ukraine is to exercise its sovereign right to stop foreign vessels for security check. Also, any vessel, except for Ukraine's warships, is to be forbidden to turn off its identification system when in the waters of the Ukrainian state. Such attempts to change the law were made in both 2003 and 2007, but they were somehow rejected by the Verkhovna Rada. According to Irina Frizt, the initiator of the draft law, this time it is different, because, since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Ukraine has lost almost the entire control over its own maritime zones.³⁵

Some time later, as a result of a number of threats coming from Russia and its proxies from the Donbass region, Ukraine started conducting regular naval drills. For instance, from July 1 till September 1, 2018, Ukraine's 12 nautical mile territorial zone of the Azov Sea

that stretches from Novoazovsk to Berdyansk was closed, with the exception of the Mariupol coastline. The DPR expressed its alleged readiness to respond to any potential attack from the Azov Sea. It was only a matter of time before Russia initiated its own naval drills in the Sea of Azov. Unfortunately, this very small sea has been recently treated as a training ground, because all sides of the conflict have presented an aggressive display of military power and open hostility towards each other. In the light of such evidence, it can be said that Ukraine is really trapped right now. If it decides to confront Russia, then it should also be ready to bear in mind all potential economic and political consequences of the confrontation.

The third weakness of Ukraine refers to the concept of what might be called a “denunciation trap.” From the moment when Ukraine and Russia signed the 2003 Agreement on the Azov Sea, a number of opinions on its denunciation and some amendments to it have been voiced. As mentioned earlier, President Yushchenko tried to change the situation, but unfortunately he did not succeed. The change of the 2003 Agreement was also eagerly wanted from Putin. It needs to be highlighted that the first draft law on the denunciation of the 2003 Agreement was presented in the Ukrainian Parliament on July 16, 2015, by the current Parliament Speaker Andriy Parubiy. It is very interesting to analyse this particular document and to examine the response of Ukrainian parliamentary experts. In their report, they presented the following standpoint: “the representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Security Service during a special meeting have decided that the current national interests of Ukraine are unreasonable in order to denounce the 2003 Agreement.”³⁶ Furthermore,

the denunciation was, to a certain extent, considered undesirable, because Ukraine would have to face disastrous economic and military consequences. Therefore, two possible scenarios were presented: first, the blockade of Ukraine’s seaports in the Azov Sea and as a result, the blockade of the passage through the Kerch Strait for all Ukrainian vessels; and second, the potential decrease in Ukraine’s economy in the Azov region. The draft law itself outlined that the Russian Federation has initiated fully-fledged military aggression against Ukraine since the Annexation of Crimea in 2014. In these circumstances, the unilateral maintenance of the obligations indicated in the 2003 Agreement could no longer be continued by Ukraine. Russia by aggression violated the principles of international law. Moreover, the author of the draft law notes in Article 2 (the freedom of navigation in the Azov Sea for warships that belong to the two states) that there is a serious threat to the national security of Ukraine.

Currently, almost every Ukrainian politician is expressing the necessity for the denouncement of the 2003 Agreement, which does not meet Ukraine’s national interests. For example, 13 members of the Verkhovna Rada submitted a petition to the President of Ukraine and the Minister of Defence with the purpose of the denunciation of the 2003 Agreement. Furthermore, the above-mentioned draft law on Ukraine’s territorial waters was registered in the Parliament.³⁷ During the annual military exercises “See Breeze 2018” in the Black Sea (more specifically in the city of Odessa) President Poroshenko himself blamed the Russian Federation for aggressive actions against Ukraine in the Azov Sea and its state of constant readiness to land in Mariupol. The general line of the advocates of the denouncement is that after the denouncement of the 2003

Agreement Ukraine shall obtain 12 nautical miles of its territorial waters guaranteed by international law. Everything beyond these waters will have the status of international waters and, as a consequence, will allow NATO warships to enter the Azov Sea. However, financial concerns should also be taken into consideration, because if the denouncement occurs, then Ukraine's merchant fleets will be asked by Russia for regular payment for the passage through the Kerch Strait.

One relatively effective element of Ukraine's foreign policy caused by the Russian pursuit of hegemony in the Azov Sea was the adoption of "law binding" policy. In 2016, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (the MFA) filed a lawsuit against the Russian Federation to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (the PCA) located in the Hague, the Netherlands on "The Dispute Concerning Coastal State Rights in the Black Sea, Sea of Azov, and Kerch Strait (Ukraine v. the Russian Federation)."³⁸

Ukraine presented all of the required evidence and documents proving that Russia is violating international law. In February 2018, Ukraine submitted the documents in a memorial in arbitration proceedings.³⁹ Russia has been actively participating in the court hearings, too. The current status of the case is still pending. For Ukraine, it is the most efficient way of defending its sovereign rights, but in order to do so, Kiev should present a highly sober and undeviating course of its policy. Unfortunately, the political establishment of Ukraine is often affected by emotional poli-

cy-making. Notwithstanding this, the Ukrainian MFA, in particular Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Olena Zerkal shows a need for rationalism. As a matter of fact, the politician is going against the stream with her unconventional approach. The Deputy Minister is against the very idea of the denunciation of the 2003 Agreement. According to her, the denunciation is not going to change the legal status of the Azov Sea. Moreover, both Article 65 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties⁴⁰ and Article 33 of the Charter of the United Nations⁴¹ state that any dispute that endangers the maintenance of international peace and security should first be addressed through negotiation. In July 2018, Zerkal expressed a very unusual position by saying that Russia's detainment of Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait is, according to her, a legal right of Russia. She said the following:

*There is an artificially created aggravation concerning the Azov Sea. It has always been. The military presence of the Russians in the Azov Sea is greater than ours, this is completely understandable. However, according to all of the canons of international maritime law, warships have the right to stop civilian vessels for inspection; this does not require any mandate.*⁴²

Last but not least, the Kerch Strait itself can be regarded as another weakness of Ukraine. One the one hand, for Russia, it is certainly enough to keep the Kerch Strait closed to Ukrainian ships and it would be enough to destroy the economic stability in the Pryazovian region. One the other hand, even if Ukraine develops a sufficient military presence in the Azov Sea, it still would not be enough to save the region's economy. Alternatively, Ukraine might begin the realisation of a project that was firstly presented on the official website of the President of Ukraine and concerned the construc-

Unfortunately, the political establishment of Ukraine is often affected by emotional policy-making.

tion of a canal through the Perekop Isthmus. The implementation of such a project would allow Ukraine to maintain a permanent naval presence in the Azov Sea. It would also provide NATO warships with access to the sea. However, Ukraine is currently facing two mounting problems: the lack of financial and economic resources, therefore, it would be extremely difficult for it to complete such an enormous project. Also, one has to take into account possible long-term ecological consequences for the region. For instance, according to some Russian sources, Ukrainian engineers from “UKRHYDROPROJECT”⁴³ have asserted that the levels of the Azov Sea and the Black Sea are completely different. It seems as if this fact

The construction of a canal through the Perekop Isthmus would allow Ukraine to maintain a permanent naval presence in the Azov Sea.

would tremendously complicate the construction of the project, because it would require a well-developed system of locks, which simply means that it would cost large amounts of money.

The Military Balance in the Azov Sea

On March 25, 2018 an incident occurred in the Sea of Azov that triggered the escalation between Russia and Ukraine. The Crimean fishing vessel “Nord” (the seiner type) was detained by Ukraine’s border guards. Ukraine considered the ship crew to be Ukrainians, but Russia claimed that they were Russian citizens. However, the main problem was that the Russian Federation, apart from the exchange of standard diplomatic notes, was persistently seeking the answer. It was interesting to observe the reaction of Russia’s intellectual and political elites and their critique of the Russian Government for its inappropriate response to Ukraine’s actions.

Eventually, the Kremlin found a method for stopping and searching through Ukrainian vessels or those of them which were going to Ukrainian ports. The searches were carried out with the purpose of prolonging the stay of the vessels in the Kerch Strait, which simply meant that any delay cost the ship-owners enormous expenses. In fact, Russia detained Ukrainian vessels a number of times; and simultaneously,

by doing so, it decided to deliver a major blow to Ukraine’s economy in the Azov Sea region. For instance, Russia detained two Ukrainian fishing boats “Amur” and “YMK-41” in May 2018. The diplomatic response of Ukraine was unusually moderate. Initially, Moscow was trying to convince Kiev to release the crew members by using the “tit for tat” strategy, but unfortunately it did not work. As a result, the Kremlin started to impose a more harmful policy towards Ukraine. Afterwards, in July 2018, President Poroshenko issued an order to the Ministry of Defence to stop Russia’s provocations.⁴⁴ Also, it is worth noting that, according to Russia, there are gangs of “Ukrainian pirates” that operate in the Azov Sea.

It is possible that yet another incident in Mariupol was also the result of Russia’s actions. To illustrate, somebody started sending automatic short text messages to fishermen from the port city of Berdyansk with the demand on the Ukrainian Government to release the crew of the “Nord” ship and to return the vessel to Crimea. As a consequence, Russia was alleged-

ly to stop its aggressive behaviour in the Azov Sea. A group of Ukrainian MPs asked the Security Service of Ukraine (the SBU) to take steps to prevent any collaborationist actions in Berdyansk. The reason behind this concern was quite serious, because the majority of the fishermen were afraid to lose their boats.

The incident with the “Nord” ship has set the conditions for the “war” between Ukraine’s and Russia’s border guards. Only when an economic downturn began to be clearly noticeable, Kiev alerted the international community that Russia violated the sovereign rights of Ukraine in the Azov Sea. It is very thought-provoking to analyse how Russia has been forming the relationships with its neighbours throughout the years. To put it simply, the Russian Federation creates a set of conditions that leads the other side to take action and eventually Russia becomes the one that responds to “unlawful” deeds of the neighbouring states. Russia has always been making “rational” excuses for its actions. Considering the case of the “Nord” ship, the Kremlin claimed that it was Kiev that made an aggressive move first, which meant that Moscow “needed” to respond to it. In order to prevent the occurrence of such cases, Russia has been increasing its naval presence in the Azov Sea.

This decision of Russia triggered Ukraine’s response. As a consequence, both Kiev and Moscow introduced their plans to build naval flotillas in order to restore the strategic balance of power in the Sea of Azov and to secure the fishing industry.

The Ukrainian plans include the following:

- (1) As it has already been mentioned, the Ukrainian sea coast is extremely close to Russia and its proxies, so that it automatically leads to an escalation of hostilities between the sides.

- (2) The role of the international community, in particular Ukraine’s Western allies, in the Ukrainian-Russian dispute. On the one hand, it has some important political consequences for Ukraine, because it clearly impacts the preservation of Ukraine’s sovereignty, but on the other hand, it leads to military hostilities in the strategic choke points in the region. In October 2018, the European Parliament passed a non-binding resolution “On the Situation in the Sea of Azov,”⁴⁵ in which it proposed the implementation of the three following measures: the extension of the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine in the Sea of Azov, the appointment of an EU Special Envoy for Crimea, the Donbass region and the Sea of Azov, and the provision of an EU full assessment of the economic damage in the cities of to Mariupol and Berdyansk.

- (3) The creation of a naval force (flotilla) for the effective defence of Ukraine’s coastline in the Azov Sea. Ukraine has been planning the deployment of its Naval Forces in the Azov Sea since 2016. In February 2016, President Poroshenko signed a Decree “On Military and Administrative Division of the Territory of Ukraine in Land, Air and Sea.”⁴⁶ According to the document, there are two maritime zones: the Black Sea zone and the Azov Sea zone. Furthermore, in August 2016, Commander of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Ihor Voronchenko visited Berdyansk and ordered the building of a permanent base in this port city.⁴⁷ The 501st Battalion of Coastal Artillery from Odessa and a number of battalions of small artillery gunboats “Gurza-M” (Project 58155) were dislocated and currently serve as additional reinforcements to the Marine Corps, which

had been deployed to the city earlier. According to Vice Admiral Voronchenko, the primary aim of the new military base in Berdyansk is to restrict the domination of the Russian Naval Forces in the Azov Sea. This Azov Naval Base is the third naval base located in the most strategic choke point of Ukraine. The other two are the Western Naval Base (Odessa) and the Southern Naval Base (Nikolayev and Ochakov), the latter being responsible for guarding the Dnieper River and its entrance. It seems very likely that it is the Ukrainian response to the recent activities of the DPR, because in February 2016 Russia's proxies announced the establishment of the new 9th Separate Mariupol-Khinganski Special (Assault) Regiment of Marine Infantry.⁴⁸ The regiment was created for the purpose of landing and counteraction of amphibious assault forces. Under some previous arrangements, the Marine Corps in Berdyansk received modern means of communication such as: Harris radio stations and sets of TuWay satellite communications.⁴⁹

- (4) The implementation of the “Mosquitoes Fleet” strategy. In September 2017, Deputy Head of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Captain Andriy Ryzhenko presented the strategy of the “Mosquitoes Fleet” (no less than thirty vessels)⁵⁰ which, according to him, should be an integral part of the Ukrainian Navy’s “Strategy 2035,” together with

American coastal patrol boats “Island.” Captain Ryzhenko is one of the most active advocates for the denunciation of the 2003 Agreement and the establishment of the 12 nautical mile zone of Ukraine’s territorial waters.⁵¹

- (5) The development of the “Strategy 2035” in many aspects has been determined by Russia’s naval predominance in the Black and Azov Seas.⁵² Many NATO naval specialists were engaged in the creation of the strategy. In his analytical article entitled “The Development for Victory,”⁵³ dedicated to the “Strategy 2035,” Chief of Ukrainian Navy Staff Igor Voronchenko recognises Russia’s aggression in the Azov Sea as a real threat to Ukraine, but at the same time the author observes that Ukraine’s ability to resist and act as a deterrent in the Azov Sea is highly limited as compared to Russia’s capability. Nevertheless, as stated in the article, Ukraine has no other choice than to defend itself. Ukrainian naval officers are fully aware of the Navy’s weaknesses. That is why, gradual development is the only solution, which assumes the building of small ships that will be a part of the so-called “Mosquitoes Fleet.” In the upcoming years, six “Gurza” class small artillery boats (Project 58155) are going to be built. In general, the Ukrainian Navy grasped the importance of the “Mosquitoes Fleet” strategy and coastal defence. However, Ukraine’s inability to countervail the Russian Fleet in the open seas is still a cause for serious concern. The most realistic option is the further development of missile boats and their corresponding missile systems, or the purchase of military ships from abroad. Therefore, it is highly probable that the presented approach is going to be a part of Ukraine’s naval strategy.

**„Mosquitoes Fleet”
should be an integral
part of the Ukrainian
Navy’s „Strategy 2035”.**

(6) Mining the Azov Sea. This point mostly concerns Ukraine's pre-emptive measures against the access of Russian warships and reconnaissance vessels into Ukraine's territorial waters. This idea was voiced by the former Commander of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Sergey Gayduk.⁵⁴ It provoked a negative response from the Russian Federation.⁵⁵ It should be noted that any kind of militarisation will be harmful to the "peaceful environment" of the Azov Sea and eventually both sides will become victims in the process. Even the slightest mining activities in the territorial waters of Ukraine will threaten the international trade. For example, in June 2015, a small UMS-1000 patrol boat exploded as a result of coming into contact with a mine and unfortunately one crew member died.⁵⁶ It is quite remarkable that because of the lack of warships, Ukraine's border guards restored this vessel.

(7) Organising convoys of Ukrainian vessels in the Azov Sea and through the passage of the Kerch Strait. The main advocate of such an idea is Ukrainian Admiral Ihor Kabanenko. It needs to be mentioned that if two flotillas have almost the same mission and travel through very narrow waters, the situation in the sea becomes very dangerous. Russia could allow the passage of any Ukrainian vessel that does not have weapons on board through the Kerch Strait, but no warship that belongs either to NATO or Ukraine and is equipped with weapons could be allowed such a passage. It is very likely that the Kremlin will once again follow its old tactic that was used during the last years of the Cold War. One of the most interesting events was when a Soviet warship rammed a U.S. navy destroyer. Today, this tactic could be adopted in the Kerch Strait and Crimea

against both NATO and Ukrainian warships as a non-violence technique.⁵⁷

(8) The imposition of sanctions against all Russian ports in the Black and Azov Seas. This is a very drastic measure which could gravely harm the Russian economy. Also, it is still uncertain if the European Union and the United States of America are prepared for such a daring move. Furthermore, Ukrainian Minister of Infrastructure Volodymyr Omelyan stressed that sanctions must be imposed in retaliation for the construction of the Crimean Bridge and the blockade of Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait.⁵⁸

Ukrainian Minister of Infrastructure Volodymyr Omelyan stressed that sanctions must be imposed in retaliation for the construction of the Crimean Bridge and the blockade of Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait.

(9) The denunciation of the 2003 Agreement between Russia and Ukraine. It has been observed that political and governmental positions on the matter are quite different. However, it seems highly probable that the former is going to prevail over the latter.

(10) The blockade of the Turkish Straits. In his comment to a controversial Internet website "PolitNavigator,"⁵⁹ Oleg Soskin, a Ukrainian political expert, claims that in order to stop Russia's dominance in the

Azov Sea, NATO should block Russia's access to the Mediterranean Sea, which overall presents an interesting point of view. However, the Mediterranean Sea is of major significance to the Russian Federation, so that the blockade of Russia's access to the Turkish Straits could lead to grave geopolitical repercussions, but it is still unknown how Turkey would react to such an idea, because the 1936 Montreux Convention still represents Turkey's main interests in this region.

Kiev is planning to strengthen its naval presence in the Sea of Azov

(11) The reinforcement of Ukraine's Azov Sea Flotilla. Kiev is planning to strengthen its naval presence in the Sea of Azov with the use of three methods. First, there is going to be the redeployment of forces from the Danube River and the city of Odessa to the Sea of Azov. Second, as a matter of fact, Ukraine is going to ask NATO for more help than was already promised. For example, the US promised to deliver two Island-class patrol boats to Ukraine. The main reason behind the delay is reportedly the fact that it is meant to benefit the Kuznya Na Rybalskomu, a Kiev-based shipyard that belongs to President Poroshenko.⁶⁰ Third, there are some internal issues regarding the Kuznya Na Rybalskomu that need to be taken into account. Two Gurza-class artillery boats have been built in this shipyard since 2014. Four more boats should be completed by 2020. The official discussions on the matter have been held since 2014. On the whole,

Ukraine needs both types of boats. However, it needs to be highlighted that Island-class patrol boats are far more important than Gurza-class boats, because they are more technologically advanced.

(12) The implementation of the "law binding" strategy. Although the matter has been previously discussed in this paper, it should be emphasised once again that Ukraine's strategy must be in accordance with the principles of international law as regards the fight against Russia's aggression. Only a set of complex measures could turn the current situation into a more positive scenario for Ukraine. Some Ukrainian experts have acknowledged the fact that when the "Nord" ship was detained, Ukraine provoked the Russian reaction without having any resources or real naval capacities for an adequate response.⁶¹ It has been clear from the very beginning of the dispute that Moscow will respond in a much broader manner. Official Representative of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine (the SBGS) Oleg Slobodan said that after the incident with "Nord" ship, Russia has seen "*the potential development of the situation.*"⁶²

(13) The development of a missile system for the coastal defence of Ukraine in the Azov Sea. On August 17, 2018, the Ukrainian Army pompously tested missile weapons with a 300-kilometre range with much success.⁶³ The weapons could act as a powerful deterrent against Russia in the Azov Sea. However, it is still unclear how successful this new defence system is going to be.

(14) The establishment of regular military exercises in the port cities of Mariupol

and Berdyansk. Russia is known for using additional tools of deterrence, therefore Ukraine decided to organise a series of regular military exercises against any possible attacks from the sea, which also includes the unilateral closing of the entire Ukrainian coastline in the Azov Sea from Russian ships.

The only problem with all of these measures presented here is that the successful strategy could reach its primary goal in times of hybrid war. It only becomes possible when the state uses its power in full potential with a high level of flexibility, and when political and military aims are coherent without unnecessary divergence among them. For instance, it is obviously divergent when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine vehemently defends the resolution of the conflict in the Sea of Azov through internationally recognised means. Although there are certain political and military forces that take advantage of the Azov Sea confrontation, they do so in order to fulfil their own political purposes, rather than to simply resolve the issue or at least avoid direct military confrontation. Nevertheless, the mentioned measures demonstrate that Ukraine has both political and military instruments for at least deterring Russia from carrying out a direct attack against it in the Azov Sea. Another issue concerns Russia's proxies in the Azov Sea. Russia could always reinforce their naval capabilities and use them in order to weaken Ukraine's presence in the Azov Sea.

Despite the fact that Russia has been cautiously observing Ukraine's military countermeasures, it needs to be pointed out that it is, in truth, the real winner of the situation. In contrast, the real victim of the situation is unarguably Ukraine. The concept of a vicious cycle is quite

evident here. If Ukraine strengthens its military presence in the Azov Sea, it will automatically harm its economic system in the Azovian region. As a matter of fact, this is going to happen with or without Russia's blockade of the Kerch Strait. Money loves peace, which suggests that many international companies will either decide to seek alternative routes to eastern Ukraine or will slightly change their economic strategies. As it has already been indicated, the goods produced in eastern Ukraine could be redirected to the Ukrainian Black Sea ports.

The Kremlin tends to react to every Ukrainian political statement regarding Russia's policy in the Azov Sea. The most critical response was provoked when the Atlantic Council, an American think tank specialising in the field of international affairs, published Stephen Blank's article entitled "How Trump Can Get Putin's Attention,"⁶⁴ in which the author suggests that the White House should send warships to the Azov Sea. With regard to Ukraine's statements, Russian politicians and political experts issued a list of the following statements and measures:

- When threatened, Russia will use aircraft from the military bases in Yeysk and Crimea.
- Russia has always deployed sufficient military forces in the Opuk Polygon situated in the Kerch Peninsula and will continue to do so in order to prevent Ukraine's sudden attack and to defend the Russian coastline.
- The Kremlin plans to deploy Raptor-class high-speed patrol boats (Project 03160) to the Azov Sea. According to the contract signed with a Saint Petersburg-based shipyard "Pella," ten more boats should be

constructed by the end of 2018.⁶⁵ The boats are known for being perfectly adjusted for diversionary military operations and for such places as the Azov Sea.

- Both the Russian Federation and Ukraine are currently reinforcing their military presence in the Azov Sea. Since the incident with the “Nord” ship, Russia created the Operational Group in the Azov Sea, which compared with its Ukrainian counterpart, is definitely stronger. However, the main aspect of the situation is the fact that Russia has permanent forces in the Kerch Strait zone. It means that Moscow can always use them as reinforcements for the Black Sea Fleet either in Sevastopol or the Azov Sea. Nonetheless, it seems as if the Kremlin is not interested in any direct military confrontation. The Russian Federation attempts to deprive Ukraine of economic access to the Azov Sea by other means. According to Andrey Klimenko, a Ukrainian political expert, Russia has six Shmel-class artillery boats, which originally belong to the Caspian Flotilla, and six or perhaps even seven small Serna-class amphibious assault ships in the Azov Sea.⁶⁶
- In May 2018, a division of Russia's three Shmel-class artillery boats was transferred from the Caspian Sea to the Azov Sea through the Volga-Don Shipping Canal. Again, it was Russia's response to the

Both the Russian Federation and Ukraine are currently reinforcing their military presence in the Azov Sea.

incident with the “Nord” vessel. After the settlement of the border dispute in the Caspian Sea, which was in Russia's favour, the Russians were free to relocate their military forces from the Caspian Sea to the Azov Sea. For a long time, it was unclear whether Kazakhstan's plans to invite the USA to the Caspian Sea would be implemented; however, the signing of the mentioned agreement was one big sigh of relief to Russia.

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Conclusions

It has become clear by now that the Russian Federation has determined that the Azov Sea should be entirely under its military control. It seems as if only Russia must be the main stakeholder of such a geographic asset. If Ukraine wishes to share the Azov Sea with Russia, the only option left is the silent submission of Russia's superiority in this body of water. However, it is also clear that Ukraine is not going to merely accept the role that was offered to it by Russia. Currently, Ukraine is reacting and adopting pre-emptive measures against further Russian advances in the Azovian region.

This region has become strategic for Russia due to several crucial reasons. First, the Annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 brought up the question of security and defence of the peninsula itself. In this regard, the Azov Sea plays an important role. Second, the geopolitical position of the Kerch Strait and the Crimean Bridge "force" Russia to gain full control over the Azov Sea. Third, the control over the Azov Sea allows Russia to freely relocate its military forces between the Caspian Sea and the Azov Sea due to their close geographical closeness. Russia could make a "conjunction" of its two flotillas in the Caspian and Azov Seas. A great example of such unification was when small missile ships "Grad

It has become clear by now that the Russian Federation has determined that the Azov Sea should be entirely under its military control.

Sviyazhsk" (MRK) and the Buyan-class "Velikiy Ustyug" (Project 21631) passed through the Volga-Don Shipping Canal and went to the Mediterranean Sea. In autumn 2015, Russia for the first time struck ISIS positions in Syria from the very same ships that were at that time located in the Caspian Sea. Fourth, Russia aspires to have the permanent right to make land connections through Crimea to the entire eastern Ukraine. For that purpose, the Russians have to gain full control over the small part of the Azov Sea that currently belongs to Ukraine. Fifth, the full ownership of the Kerch Strait will allow Russia to considerably decrease the level of the Ukrainian economy in eastern Ukraine without direct military engagement. For this, Moscow only needs to impose some "symbolic" sanctions and to force international companies to seek other routes to eastern Ukraine, apart from the one through

the Azov Sea. Sixth, after finally signing the agreement in the Kazakh city of Aktau and establishing its hegemony in the Azov Sea, Russia could carry on with a recently reanimated idea of the construction of a direct canal between the Caspian Sea and the Azov Sea.

Nevertheless, as has been indicated above, with regard to Russia's strategic importance in the Azov Sea, Ukraine still has a chance of keeping Russia out of its borders. The goal is to provide a set of effective and complex measures in the fields of military, naval forces, international law, diplomacy and politics against any Russian attempt to weaken the Ukrainian presence in the Azov Sea. Unfortunately, since the Annexation of Crimea, Ukrainian political experts and politicians have been preoccupied with the sweet hope that the Crimean Bridge would never be built, which unfortunately turned out true, along with lots of other unrealistic wishes. This kind of attitude to international relations ought to be stopped, because it will only cost Ukraine further heavy losses. Ukraine does not accept Finland's foreign policy, which tries to be more flexible in relations with Russia. However, in the present circumstances, Kiev should realise that there is too much at stake right now. Thus, it can be stated that only a politically and economically stable state can provide the conditions for effective resistance against Russia's revisionist policy.

The following list presents four observations which prove that since 1991 the Russian Federation has been exploiting Ukraine in the Azov Sea region:

(1) Russia has been implementing the strategy of the so-called "negotiation engagement" as long as the proposed conditions are in its

favour, which has been the case until 2014. As regards the Annexation of Crimea, Moscow just sealed the deal with "one strike," because the historical circumstances enabled it to do so.

- (2) The Kremlin usually chooses the path of least resistance. For instance, Russia followed this tactic during the Tuzla conflict when it stopped the building of the dam 100 meters from the Tuzla Island. It implies that Moscow makes moves only as far as Kiev allows it. However, it has also been noted that Russia's advances (the construction of the dam) eventually paid off when the Crimean Bridge was built.
- (3) Russia has been tightening its "stranglehold" on the Ukrainian economy in the Azov Sea region, while at the same time fulfilling its own goals in the industrial port cities of Mariupol and Berdyansk.
- (4) "The mouse makes the first move." If one examines almost every Russian international move carefully, then it becomes evident that Russia only "answers to" or rather "defends" itself from the actions that are taken against it. This mechanism was clearly depicted in Crimea in 2014, as well as, in the recent incident in the Azov Sea, when Ukraine's border guards detained the crew of the "Nord" ship.

Although it seems a bit peculiar to explain it this way, nonetheless, Russia's foreign policy appears to be dialectical or even parallel to the foreign policy pursued by the Soviet Union. During the Soviet era, the concept of historical materialism was the most prevalent. Its basic assumption is that historical and political conditions need to be ripe. Only when the conditions are ripe, a move should be made.

All things considered, Russia's methods are hybrid, systematic and cold-blooded. The primary aim of the Kremlin is to strike the weakest elements of the enemy's defence. In order to achieve it, the Russian Federation has adopted a tactical step-by-step approach, even if it means that it sometimes needs to be prepared for retreat, which the Russians always consider a temporary measure. As regards Ukraine, there are only two options left. It can either defend its sovereignty by trying to outfox Russia or come to grips with the existing problems without delving too deep into the current as well as future Russian traps, which will definitely occur in order to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Unfortunately, violence has once again returned to the Sea of Azov and together with it tragedy and damage have come to people's lives. The European Union and the United States have exhausted almost all diplomatic

and economic means in order to help Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Today's world is, in general, divided in a geopolitical dichotomy often called "the West and the Rest." During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the main opponent of the West. Nevertheless, the world has changed tremendously since that time. Nowadays, there are many strong political players in the world arena, and thus the further escalation of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict and the pushing of Russia farther to the East will eventually worsen this dichotomy. As can be observed, history has recently taken a dramatic path and is moving straight towards the climax. Notwithstanding this, whether we decide to make peaceful moves or not, we are the only ones who are responsible for the decision. The situation in the Sea of Azov perfectly demonstrates that when the West finally exhausts all of its diplomatic and economic measures, it is very likely to reach a strategic impasse.

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