

NATURAL RESOURCES AS POWER INCREASNG CAPABILITIES AFFECTING THE POLARITY OF THE BLACK SEA REGIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract: *Building on the neorealist assumption, the current study argues that during the analysed time frame (2006-2016), the energy related issues have contributed to a shift in the Black Sea regional structure which drastically affected the regional balance of power. The current strategic reset determined by the shift in the regional system from a “balanced multipolar” system, to an “unbalanced” one warns about the new regional context that has reached an unprecedented level of uncertainty. In order to test this assumption, the study utilizes interpretative case studies for each Black Sea riparian state focusing on analysing the trends in the energy cooperation. The results reveal that energy cooperation represents a crucial aspect for interpreting and elucidating the complexity of the Black Sea regionalisation process, for defining and characterising the space of interactions between the riparian states and for understanding the power distribution within the region.*

Keywords: *Energy security; Black Sea region; Regional cooperation; neorealism*

Introduction

Talking about energy security, Winston Churchill was arguing a century ago that “safety and certainty lie in variety and variety alone” (Churchill in Muller-Kraenner, 2008, p. 9). Apparently this rather logical inference seems to have been forgotten by the EU politicians who for the last decades failed to understand that diversification of energy supplies represents the key to energy security. After the latest geopolitical events that took place within the Black Sea region, the need for uniting efforts on energy front could not be stronger. Unfortunately, it took several energy crisis and two major military aggressions provoked by Russia to unify the interests and efforts within a very heterogeneous European energy policy landscape. In the midst of this geopolitical turmoil, the Black Sea region represents a crucial area for alternative energy routs (linking the European market with

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Central Asian energy producers), a maritime land rich in fossil fuels and the focal point of power projection derived from different regional power poles.

The current study builds on a premise that perceives energy insecurity as an existential threat that increases reciprocal mistrust between the Black Sea riparian states. Moreover, it infers that while seeking to secure their energy related interests, these states are either in a position of ensuring survival (see the cases of highly energy dependent Black Sea states) or in a position of maximising their state power in order to maintain or increase their regional hegemonic statuses (see the cases of Russia and Turkey). Both assumptions point to a very individualistic behaviour that leaves little space for regional cooperation since it relays on a self-help logic. Given these statements it is only natural to choose as a theoretical framework of analysis a theory that has an individualist ontology.

Therefore, this study uses neorealism as an analytical point of departure in the attempt of explaining the underlying causes of the current poor regional cooperation system. Before stating the neorealist theoretical grounds, it is necessary to mention the fact that we do not claim it can exhaustively explain alone the Black Sea regional dynamics. On the contrary, we acknowledge that in its classical form it is a theory that focuses on system-wide dynamics rather than regional ones and tends to simplify the analysis of system's behaviour offering little attention to the implications brought by other variable, such as geopolitics, geo-strategy and institutionalization.

However, the current study will focus more on its capacity to explain the distribution of power between the Black Sea power poles, the cooperative problems between the Black Sea riparian states, their interest in relative gains in the energy sector and how all these are reflected in the institutional malfunctions. It argues that we can identify a correlation between the energy security issues experienced by the Black Sea riparian states and their level of involvement in the regional cooperation. Moreover, the main assumption of the study states that the energy related issues have contributed to a shift in the Black Sea regional structure which drastically affected the regional balance of power. The current strategic reset determined by the shift in the regional system from a "balanced multipolar" system, to an "unbalanced" one warns about the new regional context that has reached an unprecedented level of uncertainty.

In order to test this assumption, the study utilizes interpretative case studies for each Black Sea riparian state. Being a fundamental tool for qualitative research, this method relies first on official documents (Policy and strategy texts, Black Sea Synergy reports, Committee for the Black Sea Region reports, Third Energy Package, Energy Roadmap 2050) and discourse analysis (speech acts of key political actors within each state, media coverage of related events), supplemented by scientific articles, interviews with experts and policy analysis. Given the fact that the main subject of the study is one of topical interest, the timeliest and accurate information has been gathered and interpreted from press releases and press articles that covered relevant empirical data for our case studies.



1. An overview of the Neorealist theory and its relevance for understanding the Black Sea regional dynamics

The central principles of neorealism have been presented by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics* and can be summarized as follows. First of all, the author underlines the concept of systemic structuralism stating that “a structure is defined by the arrangement of its parts” (Waltz, 1979, p. 80), adding that “a system is composed of a structure and of interacting parts” (Waltz, 1979, p. 80). While there is no need in further defining the units as they are clearly seen as states that are competing for survival, Waltz continues by identifying three features that define a political structure:

1. *The principle by which a system is ordered;*
2. *The specification of functions of differentiated units;*
3. *The distribution of capabilities across unit* (Waltz, 1979, pp. 100-101).

Regarding the first feature, Waltz differentiates between the ordering principles of the domestic system which is centralized and hierarchic and the one of the international system which is decentralized and anarchic (Waltz, 1979, p. 88). The current study argues that within the regional structure of Black Sea the ordering principle is neither anarchic, nor hierarchic. Although the overall regional structure is anarchical, there are several riparian states that are hierarchically subordinated to a central authority (see the case of Romania and Bulgaria as EU member states). Therefore, the best description of the ordering principle of the Black Sea regional structure belongs to Anlar who defines it as being a “hierarchy within anarchy” (Anlar, 2013, p. 160).

Regarding the next features, Chernoff argues that if all the units share the same functions and all the global systems have the same anarchic ordering principle, the only differentiating characteristic of the systems resides in the third feature, namely the distribution of capabilities (Chernoff, 2007, p. 51). According to Waltz, the units differentiate themselves in relation to one another on account of their score on a combination of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (Waltz, 1993, p. 5). Although Waltz does not clearly indicate in his study the exact term of *energy resources* as an essential component that adds to the national power of a state, the empirical data confirms that natural resources are included in the category of capabilities representing a source of power, while their lack may be interpreted as an existential threat which affects the national interests of a state and its way of interacting with other states inside the system. For the purpose of our study, we consider that the score on the combination of the above mentioned items offers indeed the clearest picture of a state’s power but we add that if a state has near monopoly over one capability that all the other states lack, this gives it a competitive advantage easing its rapid advancement in other capabilities. That does not necessarily mean that Russia for example, who



tried to monopolies the energy sector, would not score high on all the other items, that is to say that its energy reliant economy flourished due to its favourable energy exports to the European market and increased its regional power.

Of course, it is not enough for a state to own proven reserves in order to increase its regional power. Therefore, our study will particularly examine from an instrumentalist perspective a state's ability to extract, sell and use the resources as national assets that projects its power outside its borders. At a global level we already observe that state-owned energy companies are controlling 85% of oil and 70-80% of gas reserves (Marquina, 2014). These figures prove that states effectively managed to use energy resources as elements of power maximization. According to Mearsheimer, the ultimate aim of every state is to maximize its relative power in order to obtain hegemony which is understood as the domination of a worldwide system but can be narrowly used "to describe particular regions, such as North-East Asia and the Western Hemisphere" (Mearsheimer, 1995, pp.80-86).

Although both defensive and offensive neorealist theories share the same fundamental assumption which argues that the main motivation of states is their desire to survive, for the purpose of this study we will use Mearsheimer's theory of offensive neorealism which differentiates itself from the defensive neorealist theory, not only by emphasizing the importance of a state's geographic location, but also by shifting the object of a state's motivation from security to power. Toft (2015, p. 390) summarizes the opinion of different authors on this distinction as it follows: "Defensive realism allegedly assumes that states are only interested in maximizing their security, while offensive realists hold that states are rather inclined to maximize their relative power". Thus, we observe that power represents a central concept of the offensive neorealist theory and an end in itself. In this regard, Mearsheimer claims that power is the currency of international relations (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 12). Similarly, Weber argues that the struggle for power is the main characteristic of politics (Weber, 1986, pp. 28-37).

The current study will extrapolate this offensive neorealist claim to the study of different Black Sea riparian states and will explain why all the states are power seeking units regardless of their regional status or their levels of energy dependency. Additionally, the offensive neorealist theory offers an explanation for Russia's behaviour internally and externally by motivating its willingness to fight for maintaining the current regional *status quo* even when there is no direct threat to its national security. In this respect Mearsheimer's theory represents a better explanatory model for its claims that a state like Russia, who is already perceived as a regional power, would continuously compete for more power without excluding the possibility of going to war against other nations. As argued by the author, the offensive neorealist theory has five basic assumptions, namely:

- *That the international system is anarchic while the domestic system is hierarchic;*



- *That all states possess some offensive military capability (which vary among states), and accordingly can harm each other;*
- *That states can never be certain about other states' intentions, constantly fearing a potential attack;*
- *That survival is the primary goal of states since this represent the prerequisite of pursuing other goals;*
- *That states are rational actors, admitting that sometimes they miscalculate their action because they operate with imperfect information in a very complex system (Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 79).*

In the light of all these assumptions, we can state that the great powers that got involved in the Black Sea politics represent rational states (US, Turkey, Russia) or block of states (EU) that use their influence to maximize their power gains. The third assumption justifies EU's and NATO's eastward enlargements to the same extent as it justifies Russia's struggle to prevent further integration in the Western structures and its offensive moves that had as an outcome the Georgian and Ukrainian wars. Besides justifying Russian military open aggressions in the Black Sea, these assumptions also give explanation for its instrumentalisation and polarisation of energy resources. As some authors have argued, this kind of argumentation makes the neorealist theory unable to be falsified. Taking into consideration that every action of a state "may be argued after the fact to have been believed by the leader to be in the state's interest" (Cernoff, 2007, p. 52), we might lose the ability to accurately compare and interpret states' behaviour. Waltz himself states that "beyond the survival motive, the aims of states may be endlessly varied; they may range from the ambition to conquer the world to the desire merely to be left alone (Waltz, 1986, p. 85). However, Mearsheimer does not advocate for conquest or domination, but admits that obtaining overwhelming power represents the best means to guarantee one's own survival (Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 78).

It has been observed that holding significant energy reserves in the current global context represents a mean towards achieving more military and political power. In this sense, energy reserves coupled with the political ability to utilize them, have come to be perceived as military assets on their own. Consequently, the current study argues that Russia has immensely benefited from its energy surplus status increasing its energy profits by selling its resources to states on its periphery. This in turn allowed it to massively invest in modernizing its military forces which nurtured its hegemonic tendencies. In this respect, the study draws on the claims put forward by Michael Klare who argues that currently the world has shifted to a new international energy order. If under the old order, a nation's ranking in the global hierarchy was measured by such criteria as its nuclear weapons, naval forces and the number of persons it had under arms, in the new order its ranking is determined by the abundance of its energy resources or its ability to purchase them from other surplus states (Klare, 2008, p.14).



In the present circumstances, another aim of the current study is to inquire just how much space is left for cooperation within the Black Sea region. As shown, the neorealist theory provides a useful starting point for our analysis by stating that cooperation in an “unbalanced multipolar” system is highly improbable since this type of system favours competition rather than cooperation. The decision to cooperate is thus triggered by the same desire to remain relatively competitive, to obtain stability and power with the final aim of survival. In other words, all the alliances and memberships of the Black Sea riparian states represent above all “a tool of national governments, an instrument for the pursuit of national interest by other means” (Strange, 1996, p. 14). In order to understand the dynamics of interactions between the Black Sea riparian states and the why they form alliances, it is important to analyse their energy dependency levels.

2. Energy capability distribution and the overall political orientations of the Black Sea riparian states

As it can be observed in Table 1, the power map of the Black Sea region shows a great asymmetry between states, both in terms of their energy capability distribution and their political orientations. We have included the “significance of the geographical location for energy projects” in the “energy related capabilities category” since this is a very important variable in the regional calculus of power for several riparian states and provides explanations for their foreign policy choices and their fluctuations in the regional cooperation decisions. Additionally, the table below suggests that the current power configuration in the region falls into the bipolar category with Russia as a representative of the Eastern Bloc against NATO and EU as representatives of the Western Bloc. After analysing the capabilities of each riparian country, we will observe that the power configuration might be a different one.

Table 1. Energy capability distribution and the overall political orientations of the Black Sea riparian states

Countries	Degrees of polarization		Energy related capabilities	
	Western Bloc	Eastern Bloc	Degrees of energy vulnerability	Significance of the geographical location for energy projects
Russia	Low	High	Low	High
Turkey	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Romania	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Bulgaria	High	Low	High	Moderate
Ukraine	Moderate	Moderate	High	High
Georgia	High	Low	High	High

Source: Author’s representation. Time-dependent and subject to change.



Firstly, there is Russia, a revisionist riparian state which poses deep security concerns to other regional and extra regional actors. Russia conducts an aggressive foreign policy which encourages regional fragmentation and appears to be driven by its will to become a hegemon. Due to its abundant energy resources, Russia had the opportunity to influence overtime the course of regional interactions and to threaten the balance of the Black Sea regional system. According to Mearsheimer, a state that desires to acquire hegemony has two strategic choices. It either directly attempts to gain power or it indirectly impedes other states from making gains. He continues by stating that the main method of gaining power is to directly abolish the rival states by going to war against it. A second option would be to threaten rival states in order to obtain assent by blackmailing them and the last option refers to the o called “bait-and-bleed or bloodletting” strategies that imply triggering and maintaining two rival states into long-drawn-out conflicts, a situation that allows the dominant state to get stronger while its rivals become weaker (Toft, 2008, pp. 147-153). If we analyse the Russian Black Sea policy over the last decade, we observe that its main actions are strikingly consistent with the power gain methods proposed by the above mentioned author.

Concerning the “bait-and-bleed” strategy, Russia benefited greatly from preserving the status quo of the Black Sea frozen conflicts even if we refer to it as an active third party in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (which has recently erupted after being frozen for more than two decades) where it delivered arms to both sides or as an actor who directly provoked and conserved the conflicts in Transnistria, Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia by keeping a leading military presence and offering official protection to the local *de facto* authorities. Concerning the “blackmail” method, Russia used a series of threats ranging from embargos on imported products, gas cut-offs, lower gas volume deliveries, gas overpricing. As we observe, energy was Russia’s favourite blackmail weapon and the foundation of its “divide et impera” strategy. Finally, in the recent period, Russia’s aspiration for hegemony seems to have grown to a point where an actual war with the West does not appear such a surrealist scenario anymore, especially if we take into consideration the current escalating tensions over Ukraine.

The Black Sea is a key component of the Russian strategy that seeks to restore itself as a power pole not only in the region but worldwide. With the annexation of Crimea, Russia becomes the direct maritime neighbour of Romania, automatically sharing a maritime border with NATO and the EU. This offers Russia more maritime control over the Black Sea and its gas and oil reserves and brings it one step closer to achieving its hegemonic goals.

Secondly, we have Turkey, a riparian power and a geopolitical pivot which recently has become a very influential player in the EU-Russia energy relations. Its foreign policy of “strategic depth” seems to reflect a desire to secure the regional balance of power and maintain the status quo created by the Montreux Convention. Given the current geopolitical context, Turkey’s main challenges for the coming decade will be to preserve regional stability and enhance its role as an energy hub



(Anlar, 2013, p. 12). This latter statement reminds us to take into consideration the valorisation of the geographical location as a power enhancement capability in the complicated energy security game. Even if this type of capability could probably fit in the hardly quantifiable neorealist category of “competence”, we will use geopolitics in order to explain how the ability to exploit the significance of a state’s location for energy projects or NATO’s ballistic missile defense can be converted into political influence. This would be of particular relevance for analysing Turkey’s ability to make use of its geostrategic location in contrast with the Ukrainian case.

During the last decade, Turkey did not seem to challenge Russia’s Black Sea plans and overall the two countries had a good economic and political cooperation which was based also on the close ties between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, in November 2015, Ankara entered into a dispute with Moscow after shooting down a Russian warplane that allegedly violated the Turkish airspace. Adding to this, the dispute between the two over Syria might deepen the dividing line and might determine Turkey to act as a counter power pole within the region. Moreover, according to Bugajski and Doran “Ankara increasingly views Russia as the regional aggressor, and this can bring Turkey closer to the United States and favour a stronger NATO presence in the region” (Bugajski and Doran, 2016, p. 6). Similarly, in the wake of the refugee crisis, several developments have been made concerning the EU-Turkey relationship. Turkey received three billion euros from the European Union for managing its internal refugee crisis and opened a new chapter in accession talks after two years of waiting. All these point out that Turkey can represent a major power pole within the region and a decisive stabilizing factor.

Thirdly, we have a category of relatively minor powers like Romania and Bulgaria which are part of the Western structures (NATO and EU) and as such they are perceived as promoters of the external power poles within the region. They do not have the ability to directly challenge the regional balance of power, but they act as strategic fronts hosting US military assets on their territories. Far from being game changers in the region, these states are merely means towards facilitating and achieving the Euro-Atlantic policy goals in the Black Sea area. Romania and Bulgaria have very different degrees of vulnerability in terms of energy dependency. Unlike Romania, Bulgaria is lacking critical energy infrastructure and natural resources of its own, a fact that at times makes its policies prone to Russian influence, Russia being its main energy import source. If Russia is being perceived as a “hegemonic guardian” who tries to encapsulate the region in its own sphere of influence, Bulgaria and Romania act as “the open gates of European and Euroatlantic integration”.

Fourthly, we have weaker states with limited capabilities like Georgia and Ukraine, which gravitate around the regional power poles in order to ensure survival. Although they are Western-oriented states, they have ambivalent foreign policies especially when the Russian dominant power threatens their territorial



integrities, establishes embargos on their export products or cuts their gas supplies (as it was the case in Ukraine). They have both been trapped in the Russian coercive diplomacy while experiencing secessionist movements and Russian military attacks. These riparian states are not content with the current *status quo* but since they have very little space of manoeuvre, they cannot challenge it. Their western orientation aims to help them to exit the Russian sphere of influence but their close vicinity to Russia increases their overall vulnerability. Despite the fact that both countries can play an important role as transit routes for energy projects, their poor economic and political environments have weakened their bargaining potential.

Finally, there are the two representatives of the so called “Western bloc” who includes NATO and EU. Both of them are recognized as global power poles and share the same formal objective in the Black Sea region, namely the wish to expand security and stability eastward. Beyond this formal objective, there is a plethora of specific interests meant to counterbalance the Russian power in the region, the most important of them being the ones in the energy sector. Their recent enlargements in the Black Sea region have been perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its regional hegemony. Out of the two power poles, EU appears to be the least attractive option for the weaker riparian states due to its numerous accession criteria and its decision to temporarily stop the enlargement process which leaves the aspirant states with no clear prospect of membership in the near future.

Additionally, EU alone cannot counterbalance the Russian regional dominance since it has no credible military capabilities. However, if we take into consideration the energy and economic dependencies between the two powers, EU’s recent sanctions imposed to Russia can be considered as “hard power” tools. Although considered by many an external regional actor, once Romania and Bulgaria became member states, the region became its Eastern border and as such its engagement in the region became more visible. As a result, EU was the first entity to design and implement a policy which directly targeted the region in 2007 and since then it unsuccessfully continued its struggle to find an appropriate policy tool to stabilize the region and promote its regional interests by involving other regional non- member states as well.

The second external power pole in the region is US who represents the first power in the world. Its main policy instrument in the region is NATO, an organization that gathers three riparian states that are used as regional power projection platforms. Given its numerous military capabilities, NATO exerts a strong influence in the region and is perceived as the only actor capable to counterbalance the Russian regional power. As opposed to EU, NATO’s selection criteria for membership correspond to its strategic interests and the accession process can be artificially accelerated if the geographic location of one state is considered to be of great strategic importance for its regional projects.

The upcoming NATO Summit in Warsaw is expected to bring significant transformations in the region. Besides strengthening deterrence measures that have



been already taken, the agenda of this summit contains discussions regarding the creation of a NATO Black Sea fleet and granting the status of NATO associate partners to Ukraine and Georgia. This recalibration of military capabilities is accompanied by a recalibration of energy capabilities. In this sense, in April 2016 the first American LNG shipment reached Europe. On a long term, the cheap prices offered by the American companies might start a price war with Gazprom which delivers more than a quarter of the total consumption in Europe. This can contribute to further deterioration of the Russian economy which was already affected by the sanctions imposed in the aftermath of Crimea annexation as well as by the significant decrease in gas and oil prices (MarEx, 2016).

Thus, for many riparian states, NATO represents the only security guarantee they have against the mounting Russian military threats. As argued by Hyde-Price, “America’s global role is therefore to act as an ‘off-shore balancer’, intervening in distant regions in order to prevent the rise of a potential hegemon, particularly if the regional great powers are unable to contain it themselves” (Hyde-Price, 2007, p. 45). This argument goes in line with Waltz’s theory which asserts that when a state attempts to acquire hegemony, the other powers in the system will build balancing coalitions in order to prevent its rising. For analysing the behaviour of states when faced with a hegemon, he coined the two well-known neorealist options of ‘balancing’ and ‘bandwagon’ (Waltz, 1979, p. 126). Furthermore, Hyde-Price considers that the great powers and smaller states have more than two options. The great powers can ‘balance’, ‘buck-pass’, ‘bandwagon’ or adopt ‘aggression’, while the smaller states have two more options, they can ‘hide’ and ‘transcend’. Another categorization differentiates between ‘clients’ and ‘allies’ and allows us to separate between the ‘candidate’ and ‘member state’ statuses (Hyde-Price, 2007, pp. 42-49).

3. Black Sea regional balance of power

Throughout our research it can be observed that the main options chosen by the Black Sea actors are: ‘balancing’, ‘bandwagoning’ and ‘aggression’. However, if we are to reduce the entire region to only two typologies of actors, Weaver concludes that in 2010 the Black Sea region included four “balancers” (EU, NATO, Russia and Turkey) and all the remaining “balancing” actors (Weaver, 2011, p. 9).

For the purpose of our study we argue that in 2016 the situation remains unchanged at least as long as Turkey does not show a clearer sign of “bandwagoning” towards East or West. As we can observe in Table 2, the Black Sea riparian states have been driven by the desire of obtaining relative gains and have chosen to join those structures that have the power to balance against the Russian power.



Table 2. Black Sea riparian states' alignment to the western structures and their position in the regional balance of power in 2016

Countries	EU		NATO		Regional balance of power
Russia	-	-	-	-	BALANCER
Turkey	<u>Client</u>	<u>Balancing</u>	<u>Ally</u>	<u>Balancing</u>	<u>BALANCER</u>
Romania	Ally	Bandwagoning	Ally	Bandwagoning	BALANCING
Bulgaria	Ally	Bandwagoning	Ally	Bandwagoning	BALANCING
Ukraine	Client	Balancing	Client	Bandwagoning	BALANCING

Source: Author's representation. Time-dependent and subject to change.

After analysing the regional power configuration in the Black Sea, we are confronted with several questions that need to be answered in order to have a clear picture of the regional dynamics and the regional potential for cooperation. The first important question concerns the structure of the system and particularly refers to its polarity. At the global level, Mearsheimer differentiates between four types of system structures:

- **Unipolarity** as it was the case after 1989 when the US became the only superpower in the European Security world;
- **Bipolarity** which was the situation during the Cold War prior to 1989;
- **Balanced multipolarity** which is less stable and predictable than bipolarity and occurs when no single power can make a bid for hegemony;
- **Unbalanced multipolarity** where one state has greater power than the others and can make a bid for hegemony (Weaver, 2011, p.16).

According to Makarychev the situation within the Black Sea region perfectly illustrates how all the above global concepts can be transferred to the regional level and how unprepared are all the regional actors to face this transfer (Makarychev, 2011, p. 10). If we apply these concepts at a regional scale, we observe that similarly to the global system, the Black Sea polarity has changed over time from the *unipolarism* of the imperial times, to the *bipolarism* of the West-East divide and the current *balanced multipolarity* if we are to consider Turkey, US and EU as the main 'balancers' of Russia (Weaver, 2011, pp. 7-8). Given all the current regional tension and Russia's renewed drive for regional hegemony, the study inquires whether the Black Sea region can still be considered as having a 'balanced multipolar system'.

As we have argued throughout this study, between 2006 and 2016 the region slowly drifted from a 'balanced multipolar system' to an 'unbalanced' one. The main arguments for this statement are the gradually strengthened regional position of Russia, at the detriment of all the regional cooperative efforts made so far by other regional actors. Its renewed drive for regional hegemony has drastically changed the geopolitical architecture of the region.

These historic geopolitical transformations are best illustrated by the ongoing Ukrainian crisis which reveals a much more determined Russia and a concerted effort of EU and US to counter Russian actions. Unlike the 2008 Georgian war which lasted only five days and ended with a six-point peace plan, the Ukrainian military aggression is lasting for almost two years now and the cease of fire included in the Minsk agreements has not been respected. The Russian increased self-assertiveness in the Ukrainian crisis could be observed also if we are to analyse the change in its military tactics. If the Georgian war ended with Russia recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, in Ukraine's case Russia unexpectedly began the aggression by annexing Crimea. In addition to this, Russia started to build up military capabilities in the Black Sea, hugely increased its spending on defense and elaborated a new military doctrine which treats NATO as a key external risk to its security (Reuters, 2014).

According to NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe General Philip Breedlove, Russia is using Crimea as a power projection platform in the region by deploying air defense systems that reach nearly half of the Black Sea and surface attack systems that reach almost all of the Black Sea area (Breedlove, 2015). From a military standpoint, the current pattern of Russian behaviour encourages more negative scenarios that include a potential war and the current situation resembles more and more Mearsheimer's definition of unbalanced multipolar systems which as he argues "feature the most dangerous distribution of power, mainly because potential hegemonies are likely to get into wars with all of the other great powers in the system" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 338). For a clear delineation between the two types of regional structures, refer to the Table 3 below.

Table 3. Differences between balanced and unbalanced multipolarity

	Concern over relative gains	Security competition	Prospects for cooperation	The influence of norms and values over states behaviour
Balanced multipolarity	Lower	Lower	Higher	higher
Unbalanced multipolarity	Higher	Higher	Lower	lower

Source: According to Adrian Hyde-Price, *European security in the twenty-first century: the challenge of multipolarity*, London: Routledge, 2007, p.43

Beside the growing military aggression, there are other important indicators of the Russian growing hegemonic tendencies. The Russian domination over the European gas market can be listed as its main power source that boosted its economy and helped the development and modernisation of the military sector.



As Luft and Korin (2009, p. 340) stated, “through history, certain commodities, and in particular energy commodities, minerals, water and food have had a strategic value beyond their market price and as such they have been repeatedly used as tools of foreign policy by exporters and have been among the prime catalyst of armed conflict”. Over the last decade we have witnessed three Russian gas interruptions (in 2006, 2009, 2014), a consistent effort to downplay every European energy diversification pipeline project, major Russian open aggressions towards two Black Sea riparian states (Georgia and Ukraine) and the creation of the Eurasian Union as an alternative integration project meant to counter Western interests in the region.

All these moves have definitely impacted the equilibrium of the region and they represent empirical data that supports our assumption, namely that the increased Russian regional influence has gradually transformed it into a regional hegemon determining in the same time a shift from a “balanced multipolar” regional system to an “unbalanced” one. This Russian hegemonic evolution is evident if we observe its capabilities and compare them with those of the other Black Sea states. Although the Black Sea region has a multipolar structure, Russia is the single regional energy hegemon which uses energy to shape up its geopolitical ambitions within the region and beyond. Given this context, we cannot talk about regional energy cooperation but rather about heavy-handed Russian political pressure to comply with its norms in its own terms.

In the present circumstances, it is important to inquire just how much space is left for cooperation within the Black Sea region. As shown, the neorealist theory provides a useful starting point for our analysis by stating that cooperation in an ‘unbalanced multipolar’ system is highly improbable since this type of system favours competition rather than cooperation. However, in their attempt to threaten the regional hegemon, weaker riparian states might choose to engage in different cooperative forms of collective balance. As Grieco argued, “relatively weaker states may choose to cooperate through an institution in order to attain ‘voice opportunities’ with regard to their stronger partners” (Grieco, 2002, p. 42). The decision to cooperate is thus triggered by the same desire to remain relatively competitive, to obtain stability and power with the final aim of survival. In other words, all the alliances and memberships of the Black Sea riparian states represent above all “a tool of national governments, an instrument for the pursuit of national interest by other means” (Strange, 1996, p. 14).

The normative and institutional order inflicted by the Western structures has created a hierarchy within the Black Sea region, but overall the structure of the region remains anarchic. Again, the neorealist theory helps us to explain why under anarchy the willingness for cooperation is inhibited and why the international institutions are unable to alleviate the constraining effect of anarchy on inter-state cooperation (Grieco, 1988, p. 485). Collard-Wexler asserts that “cooperation under anarchy is similar to a prisoner’s dilemma in which the dominant strategy will be to defect, making states worry about cheating” (Collard-Wexler, 2006, p. 400).



Similarly, Waltz argues that the main impediment for cooperation is the insecurity over the future actions and intentions of other actors involved in the cooperative agreement. He states that when states have the opportunity to cooperate for achieving mutual gain, the most insecure states will always question the division of gains being primarily concerned whether the other state will gain more and whether it will use its increased capabilities to destroy the weaker one (Waltz, 1979, p. 105). We argue that the most emblematic example for such interactions can be found in the energy sector, particularly in the case of EU-Russia energy relationship. Their competing pipeline projects have shown at a smaller scale how EU and Russia counterbalance each other cancelling any attempt of achieving relative gains and how cooperation in the energy sector is always transformed in a competition with zero-sum game.

Conclusions

During the analysed time framework, the energy sector became so highly politicised that currently it is very difficult to differentiate between the political and economic will to cooperate. Taking a decision in the energy sector is no longer a simple economic decision. Such a decision is first and foremost a political one that can cause repercussions in different areas of national and international politics. Moreover, even if the decision refers to a bilateral agreement it does not have a unilateral character, but it also affects the decisions of other actors. In many ways, the decision making process in the energy field it is similar to military strategic planning in which tactical moves become crucial for a state's survival. In the current regional chaos, planned pipelines maps might give us hints regarding the potential configuration of national preferences and regional alliances.

In this sense, Neorealism provided a good framework for understanding the regional deadlock, considering energy a crucial capability, a source of power and threat that shapes the national interests of the Black Sea riparian states. This theoretical approach also allowed us to understand why the current zero-sum mentality will most probably prevail within the region for the years to come, unless the West finds out a solution to contain Russian aggression and attract the state into the Black Sea network of cooperation.

A comprehensive perspective upon the region cannot be achieved overlooking the new energy politics of the Black Sea region as energy represents a sector of utmost importance for all the riparian states and has critical geostrategic implications for the EU. At the moment there seems to be a common understanding that if there was something that could be used to drastically challenge the Russian energy hegemony in the Black Sea region that is the destabilization of its energy market. Thus, the realization of the European energy diversification plans seems more urgent than ever.

Nonetheless, the first signs of this strategic imperative seem to have finally appeared. Firstly, although their actions determined widespread protests, several



states including Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine attempted to replicate the shale gas revolution. Secondly, there were also attempts to exploit the offshore hydrocarbon potential in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Thirdly, the Third Energy Package has challenged Gazprom's business pattern by promoting higher degrees of transparency, competitiveness and liberalisation in the energy cooperation process. Fourthly, EU has showed an increased interest in accelerating its grid interconnectivity (Pachiu and Dudău, 2014, p. 4). Fifthly, starting with 2020, the TANAP-TAP pipeline tandem which for many appeared to be a "never-ending odyssey" will complete EU's Southern Gas Corridor diversification strategy strengthening thus the European supply security (Hafner, 2015). Finally, probably the boldest EU decision in this sense is the recently launched Energy Union that has been intensely discussed for the last decade. Although it will take a great deal of effort, time and money to harmonise the national energy policies of the member states, EU should not lose the momentum created by the current low oil and gas prices and build a European integrated market. As the Black Sea region represents an area of vital interest for crucial energy infrastructure projects, the Black Sea riparian states have a very important role to play in the implementation of Energy Union's goals. Unfortunately, the track record of regional energy cooperation over the last decade was poor and there are enough evidences that confirm the continuity of this negative trend.

If we are to apply Nash's game theory to our case, we observe that a more cooperative environment focused on finding a regional solution for the energy issue would optimize the returns for all the states involved, as it will prove crucial for endorsing major trans-national gas infrastructure projects and will diminish the question of competitive advantages. Furthermore, the spill over effect of this cooperation will constitute the core of re-structuring the patterns of regional amity and enmity and of the region itself (Gkanoutas-Leventis, 2015). It is perhaps naive to think that the Energy Union would produce immediate results. For now, it represents nothing more than an initiative born out of a common desire to put an end to the current Russian political pressure, disproportionate pricing and energy cut off concerns.

In conclusion, the unbalanced multipolarity of the Black Sea regional system will persist as long as the riparian states will remain energy dependent on Russian resources and as long as the main regional power poles (Turkey, NATO and EU) will not find an appropriate formula to cooperate effectively within the region.

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