



2026, 15 (1), 161-180 | Araştırma Makalesi

Russia's Shifting Black Sea Policies: Regional and International Implications

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Abstract

This study examines the Black Sea region within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory and focuses on the relational and multi-layered nature of security dynamics among actors. Drawing on the theoretical framework developed by Buzan and Wæver, the study argues that security in the Black Sea should be evaluated not only in terms of material capabilities but also on the basis of historically shaped perceptions and interactions among multiple actors. The security complex emphasizes the importance of relational dynamics among actors and highlights that these dynamics intensify at the regional level. The analysis addresses the historical development of Russia's security policies in the Black Sea and examines how these policies have transformed over time. In particular, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2022 are considered as turning points that have fundamentally transformed the region's security environment. The study reveals how these developments have reshaped regional security dynamics and their effects on the broader international context. In the study, the Black Sea is addressed as a critical geopolitical space where regional and extra-regional actors intersect, and Russia's central position within this space, as well as its perception of the region as a vital buffer zone for its national security, are analyzed. The study places the Black Sea within a broader international framework by considering the roles of external actors such as NATO, the United States, and China. While NATO seeks to increase its deterrence capacity in the Black Sea, the United States develops strategies through its partners due to its lack of direct access to the region. China, on the other hand, attempts to expand its sphere of influence in the Black Sea, which it regards as a key component of the Belt and Road Initiative. In the Black Sea, the military, economic, and political dimensions of security relations among regional and extra-regional actors are of critical importance. Security dynamics among actors influence one another; this influence is not limited to the regional level but also has global repercussions. In the study, an analysis based on a literature review has been conducted, and various sources have been utilized in order to interpret both historical and contemporary developments.

Keywords: Black Sea, Russia, Shifting Policies, Regional Security Complex, International Politics

Ketenci, A. (2026). Russia's Shifting Black Sea Policies: Regional and International Implications. *Journal of the Human and Social Science Researches*, 15(1), 161-180. <https://izlik.org/JA66EJ74HC>, <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.1703337>

Geliş Tarihi	21.05.2025
Kabul Tarihi	29.01.2026
Yayın Tarihi	31.03.2026
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2026, 15 (1), 161-180 | Research Article

Rusya'nın Değişen Karadeniz Politikaları: Bölgesel ve Küresel Yansımalar

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Karadeniz bölgesini Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi Teorisi çerçevesinde inceleyerek, aktörler arasındaki güvenlik dinamiklerinin ilişkisel ve çok katmanlı doğasını konu edinmektedir. Çalışma, Buzan ve Wæver tarafından geliştirilen kuramsal çerçeveden hareketle, Karadeniz'deki güvenliğin maddi kapasitelere ek olarak tarihsel olarak şekillenmiş algılar ve çoklu aktörler arasındaki etkileşimler temelinde değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Güvenlik Kompleksi, aktörler arasındaki ilişkisel dinamiklerin önemine vurgu yapmakta ve bu dinamiklerin bölgesel düzeyde yoğunlaştığına değinmektedir. Analiz, Rusya'nın Karadeniz'deki güvenlik politikalarının tarihsel gelişimini ele almakta ve bu politikaların zaman içerisinde nasıl dönüştüğünü incelemektedir. Özellikle 2014'te Kırım'ın ilhaki ve 2022'de başlayan Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, bölgenin güvenlik ortamını köklü biçimde değiştiren dönüm noktaları olarak ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, bu gelişmelerin bölgesel güvenlik dinamiklerini nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini ve daha geniş uluslararası bağlam üzerindeki etkilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada, Karadeniz bölgesel ve bölge dışı aktörlerin kesiştiği kritik bir jeopolitik alan olarak ele alınmakta ve Rusya'nın söz konusu alan içerisindeki merkezi konumu ve bölgeyi ulusal güvenliği açısından hayati bir tampon bölge olarak algılayışı ele alınarak analiz edilmektedir. Çalışmada Karadeniz, NATO, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Çin gibi dış aktörlerin rolleri dikkate alınarak daha geniş bir uluslararası çerçeve içine yerleştirilmektedir. NATO, Karadeniz'de caydırıcılık kapasitesini artırmaya çalışırken, ABD ise doğrudan Karadeniz'e erişimi olmadığı için ortakları üzerinden stratejiler geliştirmektedir. Çin ise Kuşak-Yol Girişimi'nin kilit bileşeni olarak gördüğü Karadeniz'de etki alanını artırmaya çalışmaktadır. Karadeniz'de bölgesel ve bölge dışı aktörlerle ilgili güvenlik ilişkilerinin askeri, ekonomik ve siyasi boyutu kritik önemdedir. Aktörler arasındaki güvenlik dinamikleri birbirini etkiler; bu etki sadece bölgesel değildir, küresel yansımaları da olmaktadır. Çalışmada, literatür taramasına dayanan bir analiz yapılmış ve gerek tarihsel gerek güncel gelişmeleri yorumlayabilmek için farklı kaynaklardan istifade edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karadeniz, Rusya, Değişen Politikalar, Bölgesel Güvenlik Kompleksi, Uluslararası Siyaset

Ketenci, A. (2026). Rusya'nın Değişen Karadeniz Politikaları: Bölgesel ve Küresel Yansımalar. *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 15(1), 161-180. <https://izlik.org/JA66EJ74HC> , <https://doi.org/10.15869/itobiad.1703337>

Date of Submission	21.05.2025
Date of Acceptance	29.01.2026
Date of Publication	31.03.2026
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Introduction

The Regional Security Complex offers a perspective that emphasizes the intertwined nature of the security concerns of actors in a region, making them inseparable. Addressing the issue of security in the post-Cold War era has necessitated different perspectives, as classical approaches have proven insufficient to explain security issues within a multi-dimensional and highly interactive international system. According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wildeye (1998, p.201), security, while taking into account the material capacities of states, is essentially a mutual interaction phenomenon shaped through relationships. Therefore, security dynamics emerge most meaningfully at the regional level, because threat perceptions and interaction patterns are primarily concentrated at this level. Security is a process shaped by historical experiences, identities, and mutual perceptions, rather than an objective state. Buzan ve Wæver (2003, pp.51- 53) state that regional security dynamics emphasize that security is primarily shaped by local actors, power balances, and historical relationships. While the influence of external powers is significant, patterns of conflict and cooperation are fundamentally fueled by regional conditions. Therefore, priority in security analysis should be given to interactions at the regional level. Regional security structures are self-sustaining, relatively independent of global changes, and possess a continuity that operates through their own internal dynamics.

Akgül (2020, pp. 555-557) in her assessments regarding many countries located in the Black Sea region, underlines that Russia is a key actor in terms of regional security dynamics for Georgia, Ukraine, and other countries. According to Toucas (2017), Russia perceives the Black Sea as a strategically vital buffer zone in terms of its national security. Since the end of the Cold War, Moscow has increasingly viewed itself as being encircled, a perception that has intensified its security concerns and, at times, prompted the use of military force. The conflicts with Georgia in 2008 and with Ukraine in 2014 exemplify this pattern, illustrating how Russia has sought to assert control over its near abroad in response to perceived strategic vulnerabilities. According to Fota (2023, pp. 31-40). NATO members Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, along with Georgia and Ukraine, are key actors in Black Sea security. NATO aimed to deepen cooperation with these countries to increase regional resilience, particularly against cyber and hybrid threats. However, the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea severely disrupted the security balance in the Black Sea and deepened regional instability. These developments demonstrate that Black Sea security has become an issue affecting not only regional but also global security.

According to Sinovets (2020), the United States has been unable to secure direct access to the Black Sea and has therefore sought to project influence in the region through cooperation with regional partners. Dunlevie (2023) refers to the critical importance of the Black Sea for the BRI and China's infrastructure investments there.

In light of this information, the theoretical framework allows the Black Sea region to be seen as a fragmented and multi-layered security space in which different security dynamics coexist. Indeed, as emphasized by Buzan and Wæver, regional security complexes are shaped by varying levels of interaction among their constituent units. In this respect, the Black Sea can be accepted as a region in which diverse historical, geopolitical, and identity-based dynamics intersect. Within this framework, the security relations among regional actors are not limited solely to the military dimension but are

also shaped by economic and political interactions. Security perceptions among these actors mutually influence one another, thereby shaping both regional power balances and the trajectory of financial and strategic relations. Consequently, the Black Sea should be understood as a multi-layered space in which security and economic interactions are deeply intertwined.

This study examines how Russia has transformed the security dynamics in the Black Sea, the international implications of this transformation, particularly in the context of the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine War that began in 2022. Russia has not only increased security concerns in the Black Sea but has also caused these concerns to transcend being a regional issue and become a global agenda item. Within this framework, the study examines the Black Sea as a dynamic geography where actors are interconnected and influence each other, and focuses on Russia's Black Sea policies.

This study employs a qualitative research design based on an extensive review of the relevant literature. In this context, the theoretical framework is constructed through engagement with the original works of key theoretical approaches. In addition, the study draws upon a wide range of academic publications, policy analyses, and reports produced by think tanks in order to ensure a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment.

The first section of the study outlines the theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on the approaches developed by Buzan and Wæver. This framework provides the analytical foundation for assessing Russia's policies in the Black Sea region. The second section focuses specifically on Russia's Black Sea policy, offering both a historical background and an analytical assessment. From Russia's perspective, the Black Sea represents both a strategic buffer zone and a critical space of interaction with multiple regional and external actors. Due to its historical legacy and contemporary strategic significance, the Black Sea occupies a central place in Russia's security thinking. The third section broadens the scope by examining the regional and extra-regional actors that shape the Black Sea security environment, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the geopolitical dynamics at play. This approach allows the broader context in which transformations in Black Sea security occur to be clearly articulated. The final section examines how Russia's Black Sea policy has evolved, particularly following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Russia-Ukraine war. It highlights how these developments have reshaped regional security dynamics and produced broader regional and international repercussions.

Theoretical Framework: Regional Security Complex

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver developed the concept of the Regional Security Complex (RSC). In the post-Cold War period, the increasing salience of regional dynamics within the international system has rendered this framework particularly significant. Within this perspective, the region emerges as a level of analysis that is as analytically important as both the state and the global system.

Buzan defined a RSC as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another" (Buzan, 1983, p. 106). This definition, introduced in 1983, was further developed in subsequent years: "Security interdependence is markedly more intense among the units inside such complexes than with units outside them. Security complexes are about the relative intensities of security relations that lead to distinctive regional

patterns shaped by the distribution of power and relations of amity and enmity. A security complex is defined as a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another. The formative dynamics and structure of a security complex are normally generated within the unit itself. They also arise from collective securitizations and from outside pressures produced by the operation of complex metasystems, such as the planetary environment or the global economy" (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, p. 201).

"The essential structure of an RSC embodies four variables:

1. boundary, which differentiates the RSC from its neighbours;
2. anarchic structure, which means that the RSC must be composed of two or more autonomous units;
3. polarity, which covers the distribution of power among the units; and
4. social construction, which covers the patterns of amity and enmity among the units" (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 53).

According to Buzan and Wæver, security regions are approached on the assumption that international security is fundamentally relational in nature. International security primarily concerns how political communities relate to one another in terms of threats and vulnerabilities. Rather than being an inherent attribute of individual actors, security is understood as a product of interactions among them. Accordingly, security should not be analyzed as an isolated characteristic of individual states but within a broader context of interaction and interdependence. These interactions tend to be concentrated at the regional level. Although the global level remains important for understanding the behavior of great powers, security dynamics most often emerge at the regional level. This constitutes the conceptual foundation of the notion of the regional security complex. Within this framework, the security of states cannot be examined in isolation from one another. Instead, security analysis must focus on the regional level, where patterns of interaction are most intense. States' perceptions of security are shaped not only by their material capabilities but also by identities, historical experiences, and accumulated perceptions of threat and vulnerability. Security, therefore, is not an objective condition but a socially constructed and relational phenomenon. (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 10-13).

RSCs are employed to explain the critical impact of local factors on security. Within a given region, patterns of alliances and balances of power constitute the most important determinants, while the influence of external powers may be added subsequently. Regardless of the extent of external involvement, patterns of conflict largely stem from region-specific factors. Accordingly, analytical emphasis is placed first on regional dynamics and only thereafter on global factors. Historical experiences, material conditions, and political processes are therefore evaluated within the particular regional context. Regional security dynamics possess an autonomous character and operate as self-sustaining structures. For example, following the end of the Cold War, conflicts such as those between Israel and Syria continued despite the withdrawal of great-power rivalry from the region. This demonstrates that regional security dynamics persist independently of shifts at the global level (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, pp. 46-47). The dilemma faced by states regarding power is that economic power has a lower zero-sum

compared to military power. For example, despite Japan's rise, OECD countries have not become poorer. In this context, it becomes difficult to separate military security from economic security. The securitization of economic issues emerged particularly during the Cold War and became critically important in the competition between superpowers. From a liberal perspective, security is closely linked to the functioning of market mechanisms (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998, pp. 99-100).

The security relations in the Black Sea and the multidimensional interactions among the actors involved have been examined by several scholars. For example, Akgül evaluates security dynamics in the Black Sea region on a country-by-country basis. In this context, Georgia faces security challenges stemming from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and relations have become increasingly strained following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains a critical issue. In Moldova, the unresolved Transnistria problem continues to generate security vulnerabilities. Ukraine's pursuit of a Western-oriented foreign policy after 2004 constitutes one of the key factors behind the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022. For these countries, Russia emerges as a significant security challenge, prompting them to seek closer ties with the West, particularly NATO. When the national security policies of these states are considered, Russia can be identified as a critical actor in the formation of potential security complexes (Akgül, 2020, pp. 555-557).

Antonenko examines the complex security relations in the Black Sea. According to the author, a complex set of security relations, linked to Buzan's definition, is observed in the Black Sea. Although Black Sea is geographically a single area, it is not possible to speak of a holistic structure from a geopolitical perspective since the post-Cold War era; economically, a fragmented structure exists. The Black Sea contains sub-regions, each with its own unique security dynamics. The struggle between the Ottoman and Russian empires over the Black Sea, as a historical legacy, shapes the perception of security in the region. Disputed areas such as Ukraine, Romania, and Cyprus further complicate security relations in the Black Sea. The US and NATO are important actors in the Black Sea; small and medium-sized countries consider the presence of the US and NATO crucial for ensuring their security (Antonenko, 2009, pp. 260–262).

Özkural Koroğlu and Özgüven, drawing on Buzan's definition of a security complex, state that it refers to a structure in which states become interdependent due to shared security concerns. The interactions arising within this structure are not limited to the local level but shape security balances on a regional scale. In this context, it is assessed that Türkiye, using geo-economic and geopolitical arguments, aims to create rapprochements and security communities through cooperation rather than resorting to hard power elements in the region (Özkural Koroğlu & Özgüven, 2024, pp.190-192).

Importance of the Black Sea and Russia's Policies

For both the Russian and Ottoman Empires, the Black Sea historically constituted a zone of strategic competition. In the post-Soviet period, the region has evolved to comprise partially differentiated yet mutually interacting substructures. In this context, to understand the security architecture of the Black Sea, it is necessary to focus on the historical background, particularly the strategic significance Russia attributes to the region. For Russia, the Black Sea represents not merely a geographical space, but a security domain closely linked to historical memory, strategic maneuverability, and the

preservation of great power status. Therefore, to analyze the contemporary security dynamics of the Black Sea, this section examines Russia's historical and contemporary perceptions of the region and its associated security priorities.

Based on its geographical and historical importance, Russia's identity and history are linked to the region by strengthening ties with the Black Sea Fleet, established by Catherine the Great, who was the 18th-century Empress of Russia who modernized and expanded the empire through enlightened reforms, territorial conquests, and strong centralized rule, making Russia a major European power. (Sanders, 2007, pp. 65-68).

For centuries, the Black Sea has been considered an area to expand the geopolitical sphere of influence of the Russian state. Access to warm seas not only increased Russia's trade potential but also strengthened its political power. (Santora & Erlanger, 2023). Dominating the Black Sea not only means dominating this geography. In addition, it stands out as an important milestone in reaching the rest of the world. The Black Sea is important for coastal countries to mobilize regional and global actors. Russia is committed to the idea of domination in the Black Sea, parallel to the imperial vision it has carried from the past to the present (Nettles, 2022). Gaining sovereignty in the Black Sea and later in the Mediterranean is the embodiment of the Russian state's geopolitical goals; for example, cities such as Odessa and Sevastopol were considered a springboard to reach the Mediterranean (Rumer and Sokolsky, 2021).

In the aftermath of World War I, the Russian and Ottoman Empires collapsed, leading to an unsuccessful attempt to redraw the map of the Black Sea region. The first attempt at putting borders in place was the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, which failed (Montgomery, 1972, pp. 776-780).

The second effort, the Peace Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, achieved greater success as it acknowledged the borders of present-day Türkiye. By solidifying its strategic stance, Türkiye effectively utilized the Lausanne Treaty to navigate escalating tensions among European powers in the area. This led to the 1936 Montreux Convention, which granted Türkiye control over the Bosphorus straits and permitted unhindered passage for warships from Black Sea nations not engaged in conflict with Türkiye. Nonetheless, non-Black Sea nations were prohibited from deploying their naval warships to the Black Sea at that time (Papadimitriou & Solaker, 2023; Ketenci, 2023, pp.73-75).

After World War II, relations between Türkiye and the Soviet Union became strained. The Soviet Union demanded that the Montreux Convention be renegotiated so that both countries could have control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus. This led to the 1946 Turkish Straits crisis, also known as a Cold War-era territorial conflict between the Soviet Union and Türkiye where the Soviet Union increased its military presence in the Black Sea (Knight, 1975, p.75). Türkiye sought help from the US to counter Soviet pressure, so the US sent warships to the region. Eventually, the Soviet Union backed down, but the incident led to the 1947 Truman Doctrine. By 1952, the doctrine aimed to contain Soviet threats in the Mediterranean by ensuring Türkiye and Greece's membership in NATO. However, during the Cold War, an uneasy balance existed between Türkiye, NATO, the Soviet Union, and the US in the Black Sea (US Office of the Historian, The Truman Doctrine, 1947). The fact that approximately half of the Soviet Union's foreign trade was conducted through the Straits during that period was one of the main reasons for its desire to exert influence in this region. Russia's demands for influence over the Straits led to Turkey's distancing itself from the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, the

security crisis between the Soviet Union and the West deepened, leading to the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. In 1985, Soviet leader Gorbachev implemented policies of restructuring and transparency in foreign policy, placing importance on developing relations with European states and the West. However, these efforts failed to prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union, which officially disintegrated in 1991 (Kain & Asal, 2023, pp. 119–121).

Black Sea is a critical area due to its proximity to regions of power competition and the economic and demographic resources it possesses (Tüysüzoğlu, 2013, p.243). Russia sees the Black Sea as a vital security buffer shielding it from potential instability arising from the south. Since the onset of the Cold War, establishing a buffer zone along its western borders has become increasingly significant for Russia. The trauma caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent conflicts in the Caucasus caused Russia to feel surrounded. After the turmoil in these geographies, Russia came closer to the idea that it had to resort to military methods to maintain its regional dominance. When the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union was filled by NATO and the EU, Russia began to perceive the expansion of Western alliances into Eastern Mediterranean countries such as Bulgaria and Romania as a threat. After the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia began to use more hard power elements to protect its sphere of influence (Toucas, 2017). Russia considers the Black Sea as a buffer zone of critical geostrategic importance for its security while considering Ukraine, the North and South Caucasus, as its neighborhood (Polat, 2017, pp. 59-60).

After the Soviet Union collapsed, the Black Sea region lost its geostrategic significance from a Western point of view. However, it continued to play a vital role in shaping Russia's perception of its "near abroad"³. Meanwhile, if viewed from a historical, religious, and cultural point of view, countries in the region like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine tie with Russia and place them, in the Kremlin's view, rightfully in Russia's sphere of influence". Additionally, any efforts by countries seeking to be part of a Euro-Atlantic structure (for example, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) are considered a direct threat to Russia's national interests by the Kremlin. Consequently, the Black Sea and its capacity to link Russia with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East are vital to Moscow's national security perspective (Hodges, Horrell, and Kuz, 2022).

The Black Sea, besides being an area of rivalry between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, has also been a region of persistent mutual distrust during and after the Cold War. The presence of different sub-regions such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East has played a significant role in the continued instability in the Black Sea. This situation has made it difficult to establish a holistic regional security framework. Turkish-Russian relations also hold particular importance in the context of the Black Sea. Both countries have approached the increasing influence of external actors in the region cautiously,

³ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation faced various challenges regarding the newly independent states in the post-Soviet space. In this process, Moscow developed the "near abroad" approach to fill the vacuum that had emerged in this geography. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991 served as a message that ties with the former Soviet republics would not be severed. In the 1992 Foreign Policy Doctrine, these countries were officially defined as the "near abroad." In this context, the "near abroad" represents Russia's foreign policy perspective that identifies the former Soviet space as its special sphere of influence (Saraçlı, 2015, pp.71-74).

considering the Black Sea a sensitive area in terms of their own security interests (Antonenko, 2009, pp. 260–262).

The Black Sea is the only sea with warm waters, where the water does not freeze in winter, and with free access to the world's largest trade routes (Stronski, 2021). The Black Sea is important for the economic interests of Russia. Through the Black Sea, the Kremlin strengthens its position and influence, and it maintains and strengthens its economic and trade ties with the European market and beyond. (Borisocheva, 2007). The Black Sea region is of great strategic importance for Russia, including its role as the largest hub of transport and infrastructure used for the supply of gas and oil to European countries and beyond. Through energy or infrastructure policy, as a matter of security, Russia's economic task in the region is conceived as a geo-economic issue with the highest priority. As the main energy operator, Moscow provides control over gas distribution networks, transforming economic influence into long-lasting political power over local governments. By managing to develop energy projects and further strengthen its position from the Caspian to the Mediterranean Sea, for example, the Blue Stream and Turkish Stream projects, which today are key financiers in many countries in Europe (President of Russia website, 2022).

The Black Sea region is of critical importance for Russia as a gateway to the European energy market. Russia derives significant revenues from both natural gas exports and transit routes. Moreover, Moscow has used its economic power in the energy sector as a political tool, employing a carrot-and-stick strategy in which energy leverage functions as both a threat and an incentive. For instance, Russia has at times used energy incentives to distance Türkiye and Bulgaria from NATO and the EU. The existence of pipelines carrying gas from Russia across the Black Sea and beyond is thus perceived as an economic lever by Moscow. The TurkStream pipeline stands out as a striking example of how Russia instrumentalizes energy ties to advance its political and security objectives in the Black Sea and Europe. Operated by Gazprom, this twin natural gas pipeline runs beneath the Black Sea from Russia to western Türkiye, near the Bulgarian border (Flanagan et al., 2020, pp. 35–38).

The South Stream pipeline was one of Russia's most significant economic projects directed against the EU through the Black Sea. Its primary aim was to exclude Ukraine as a transit country in the energy sphere, to increase Gazprom's, the leading energy company of Russia, market share in Southeastern Europe and thereby deepen these states' dependence on Russian gas, and to weaken the EU unity through energy leverage. Countries such as Italy and Austria, which were relatively more dependent on Russian energy, benefited from comparatively lower prices and consequently adopted a softer stance toward Moscow. For Russia, this formed part of a broader strategy to undermine the EU's common energy policies. In addition, the South Stream sought to diminish the strategic importance of Western-backed projects designed to bring Azerbaijani gas to the EU via Türkiye. However, the timing of South Stream coincided with the Ukraine crisis, which strengthened the EU resistance and ultimately led to the project's cancellation. This outcome exposed the limitations Russia faces when deploying economic tools in a highly charged geopolitical context. Thus, South Stream demonstrates that Russia employed geo-economics not merely for economic profit but also as an instrument to expand geopolitical influence, deepen divisions within the EU, and obstruct competing energy routes (Wigell & Vihma, 2016, pp. 617-619).

The Crimean Peninsula is in a very strategic position for the region, between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, which makes it important geographically, in addition to the fact that it houses the largest port on the Black Sea, the port of Sevastopol. Russia considers Crimea a strategic base (springboard) to project its power into the wider Mediterranean region. Although its influence in the area, along with Crimea's strategic value, declined after the Cold War, particularly in the context of deterring the USA and NATO, this changed after the 2014 annexation. Since then, Russia has expanded its naval, land, and air defense capabilities in the region, recognizing the Black Sea's vital role as a trade and transportation corridor (Stronski, 2021).

Key Actors in the Black Sea

One of the most important agendas of Putin's era policies is the expansion of Russia's power projection in the Black Sea. However, Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania are NATO member states in the Black Sea littoral, and Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are also important actors in the region (Santora & Erlanger, 2023; Akgül, 2020, pp. 555-556).

NATO members Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, along with Georgia and Ukraine, which are seeking to strengthen their relations with the West, are critically important for Black Sea security. NATO is working to deepen cooperation with these actors in the Black Sea and to combat cyber and hybrid threats. The importance of the Black Sea for Euro-Atlantic security was emphasized at the NATO Summit held in Istanbul in 2004. This approach has been reaffirmed at subsequent summits, and the Black Sea has been declared among NATO's security priorities. The 2008 intervention in Georgia and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 complicated cooperation processes, deepening and increasing the fragility of security fault lines in the region. These developments demonstrate that Black Sea security has ceased to be merely a regional issue and has gained a dimension that affects global security (Fota, 2023, pp. 36-40). NATO has made the Black Sea one of its key priority areas by strengthening its deterrence capacity. The 2022 Strategic Concept and the decisions of the 2023 Vilnius Summit have been concrete indicators of NATO's commitment to Black Sea security. Within this framework, efforts to ensure Black Sea security in Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye have gained momentum (Sinovets, 2020).

The US is a significant actor seeking to establish a sphere of influence in the Black Sea. According to international maritime law, the US Navy cannot reach the Black Sea on its own accord. Therefore, the US needs its partners to ensure its interests in the Black Sea. Russia is trying to provide a deterrent against NATO by actively using its Black Sea fleet operationally. The Black Sea, which provides Russia with tactical and operational power projection, is considered the gateway to a vast geography extending to the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean (Sinovets, 2020).

An important player that affects the stability and development of the Black Sea is China. China plays a significant role in influencing developments in the Black Sea region. China has expanded its presence by making substantial investments, particularly in infrastructure and port facilities within the region. Beijing views these investments as critical for ensuring access to European markets. Notably, China's involvement in the Black Sea is important for Russia, potentially prompting a shift in Moscow's strategic approach in the region (Dunlevie, 2023).

Since China views the Black Sea region as part of the New Silk Road, Beijing may take advantage of the strategic location of Black Sea ports to connect the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—the land-based and maritime components of the New Silk Road—via a north-south intermodal corridor running through the center of Europe. With the new Silk Road project, China is actively investing in the Black Sea region and is gradually becoming a key player in the region, while the attention of Russia and the West remains focused on the confrontation aimed at deterring the Russian invasion of Ukraine. China's growing presence is an opportunity for Black Sea countries to modernize infrastructure and stimulate foreign investment to develop their economies. In this context, several projects have been launched, although not along the official axes of the new Silk Roads, such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line, which opened in 2017, connecting Azerbaijan to Türkiye via Georgia. This new connection will shorten travel times from China to Europe to about 15 days, which is more than double the speed of the maritime route, at under 50% of the cost of air travel. Regardless, such investments enable Beijing to enter into European markets and the main ports of the region, allowing the reorganization and shortening of trade routes (specifically from the BRI) (Sanders 2021, pp. 416-420).

Russia and China have diverging interests in the Black Sea. While China aimed to provide an uninterrupted transport route through the Black Sea with the BRI, this aim was interrupted by the Russian-Ukrainian war. The war complicates China's economic and political interests in the Black Sea. China abstained from the United Nations resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's defeats in the Black Sea in the Ukraine War have also damaged its power projection in the Black Sea, paving the way for China to increase its influence in the Black Sea. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia and China conducted joint military exercises in the Black Sea, indicating that both actors are cautious about the desire of other great powers to expand their influence in the Black Sea (Dunlevie, 2023).

Changing Security Dynamics in the Black Sea and Their Implementations

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 enabled it to gain an important power projection in the Black Sea (Santora & Erlanger, 2023). Russia's influence in the south has increased significantly with the annexation of Crimea. An additional 1,000 km of coastline on the Black Sea coast was gained, and the ports of Kerch and Feodosia were acquired. These gains not only increased Russia's presence but also reinforced Russia's strategy and dominance in the seas, including the port of Sevastopol, home to Russia's Black Sea fleet (Frühling and Lasconjarias, 2016, pp. 103-104). After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, many Russians were settled here, and the Ukrainian population was deported. The Kremlin made a serious investment to strengthen the military infrastructure in Crimea. Crimea is militarized with air, land, and sea forces. Russia's ballistic missiles cover the Black Sea region from land and air. One of Russia's most important threats to the security of the Black Sea is the nuclear weapons that have been placed in Belarus (Hooker, 2023). Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent efforts to strengthen the Black Sea Fleet have profoundly altered the strategic balance in the region. Moscow's attempts to establish geopolitical dominance in the Black Sea have brought about ongoing and escalating tensions with NATO (Lewis, 2019).

Despite the extensive militarization of Crimea, Russia was unable to fully secure the northern shoreline of the Black Sea, which limited its ability to establish dominance in the

western basin and to deny entry to foreign, particularly NATO, naval forces (Kollakowski, 2023, pp 123-125).

Following 2014, Russia experienced profound shifts shaped by broader transformations in the international system. Russia had once used economics effectively to keep the EU divided. However, when Putin shifted to traditional geopolitics, European states became more willing to put aside short-term economic interests to strengthen their unity. In this way, Putin's geopolitical approach weakened his own economic leverage. (Wigell & Vihma, 2016, p. 607).

Russia aimed to achieve a geopolitical revisionism in the region by intervening in Ukraine in 2022. After increasing its sphere of influence and power projection in the Black Sea region, it is an important goal for Russia to increase its influence in the Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East, and Western Balkans. While Russia wants to cut Ukraine's Black Sea connection and secure its land connection with Crimea, it also seeks to increase Russia's power over energy and trade routes. With Sweden and Finland becoming NATO members, Russia, which considers that it is surrounded by the Baltic Sea, pursues a balancing policy by becoming a more effective actor in the Black Sea (Dalay and Sabanadze, 2024). At the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian War, despite the technical and theoretical superiority of Russian naval forces, Russia was unable to fully exploit this superiority. Ukraine attacked the Russian military infrastructure in the Black Sea with drones and recorded significant successes. Russia had started to strengthen its Black Sea Fleet in the 2010s and by 2022 had made significant progress in this regard. At the outbreak of hostilities, the task of the Russian Fleet was to ensure and strengthen Russia's supremacy at sea. The fleet has a non-nuclear but strategic deterrence mission. Since a significant part of Russia's maritime trade (about 30 per cent) passes through the Black Sea, ensuring the security of this region is an important agenda (Delanoë, 2024).

The consequences of the strategic mistakes made by Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war are reflected in the power struggle in the Black Sea. Also, Ukraine's successes in the Black Sea caused Russia to retreat from time to time and remain on the defensive. The prolongation of the war may lead to further erosion of Russia's power in the region. In this case, Türkiye's influence in the Black Sea is likely to increase. In this context, Türkiye's ties and partnership with NATO and the United States are significant. The weakening of Russia's power in the Black Sea is welcomed by the US and NATO. The security of the Black Sea is specifically critical for ensuring the security of the Euro-Atlantic alliances. All actors with a sphere of influence in the Black Sea are trying to use the conditions of war for their own interests (Coşkun, 2024).

The Montreux Convention is important for Russia's policies in the Black Sea. This Convention severely limits the military mobility of Russia and other Western states in the Black Sea (Delanoë, 2024; Kılıç Yaşın, 2022). Russia's strengthening of its military presence in the Black Sea has certain limitations due to the Montreux regime. Türkiye has taken the initiative in this regard and has exercised its authority in favor of not allowing the military vessels of either Western states or Russia to pass through in conflict situations (Santora & Erlanger, 2023). The Russian-Ukrainian war raised security concerns in the Black Sea, leading to a blockade and a breakdown of the supply chain. Türkiye's authority in the Black Sea, depending on the Montreux regime, limits the influence and military power of many actors, including the US and NATO (Clough, 2024). In the Russian-Ukrainian War (2022), the EU and Western states helped and contributed to Ukraine, in

a common understanding and security cooperation increased. Türkiye's rights under the Montreux Convention have, to a certain extent, prevented Russia from strengthening its Black Sea Fleet. For instance, on 28 February 2022, Türkiye closed the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits (except for ships returning to their original ports) (Dalay and Sabanadze, 2024).

The Black Sea is important to Russia as a security buffer zone or a geographic buffer to ensure the security of Russia itself. The importance Russia attaches to deepening security concerns and sharpening competition in the Black Sea is reflected in its policy documents. To exemplify, this is clearly seen in the Maritime Doctrine approved by the President of Russia on July 31, 2022, in which the Black Sea is described as an area of Russian national interest. Also, the recent events in the Black Sea have been explained by the Kremlin as actions in defense of national interests and for the security of Russia in the future. Based on recent events, it is clear that the Black Sea plays an important role in its stability and development in the future, and Russia and the West are fighting not only for influence in Ukraine but also over the future of international relations on a global scale in the coming decades (President of Russia website, 2022).

The Russia-Ukraine War has severely tested Russia's military capabilities in the Black Sea, exposing critical vulnerabilities and generating significant threats. The *Seraphim Sarovskiy*, transiting through the Sea of Azov, sustained damage during the conflict. More importantly, the sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* marked a symbolic and strategic setback. While Ukraine claimed responsibility through the use of anti-ship missiles, Russia attributed the loss to an onboard fire. Regardless of the explanation, the incident highlighted Russia's inability to establish uncontested naval dominance in the Black Sea (Kollakowski, 2023, pp 130-131).

Although Russia attempted to shift the balance of power in the Black Sea in its favor as the war progressed, it was unsuccessful. The sinking of the Russian flagship *Moskva* and the forced withdrawal from critical points like Kherson serve as examples of this. Russia's capacity is not sufficient to completely block Ukraine's access to the sea. At this point, some economic consequences are significant for Ukraine. For example, Odessa exports more grain than before the war, and the port plays a crucial role in the country's exports. The Black Sea has ceased to be merely a regional security issue and has become a global security area (Bechev, 2025).

The Russian-Ukrainian war deeply affected Russia's economic policies in the Black Sea region. With the war, security risks in the Black Sea have increased. The increased risks are critical for Russia, as the Black Sea is a gateway to the Russian economy's access to world markets. Novorossiysk, located on the northeastern coast of the Black Sea, is an important port for Russia's grain and oil needs, and Russia carries out most of its global maritime trade through the Black Sea (Delanoë, 2024). The projection of having a great impact on the Black Sea has become more important militarily and economically with the war, also becoming a battlefield for the Russian and Ukrainian armies, for military vehicles such as drones, airplanes, and warships. The struggle for a sphere of influence over the Black Sea affects energy and grain prices on a global scale (Santora & Erlanger, 2023).

Russia and Ukraine are the world's major exporters of grains such as barley and wheat, much of which is distributed to world markets via the Black Sea- Ukrainian ports. In the aftermath of February 2022, Russia attempted to blockade Ukrainian ports to prevent

Ukrainian grain exports. This has led to global food supply insecurity and rising food prices. With the ports rendered unusable, 20 million tons of grain destined for export could not be delivered to world markets. Developments that could lead to a global "food crisis" have the potential to affect countries in the Middle East and Africa the most. For example, Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia depend on Russia and Ukraine for 90% of their wheat (Dellal, 2022; Wintour, 2023)

Therefore, in July 2022, Türkiye, the UN, and Russia came together to negotiate the Black Sea grain initiative, an effort aimed at ensuring that Ukraine's grain could be exported via the Bosphorus. Ukraine is a significant contributor to the global food supply, and exporting its grain through the southern ports is crucial to meeting the world's food demands. (Ay & Söylemez, 2023, pp.6- 7).

In the security environment that emerged in the Black Sea after 2022, significant regional initiatives have been implemented under the leadership of Türkiye. Among these, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, aimed at maintaining grain exports, and the mine clearance cooperation involving Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria stand out. These initiatives demonstrate that Türkiye, despite the conflict environment in the Black Sea, plays a role in supporting stability and security within the framework of international law (Özkural Köroğlu & Özgüven, 2024, pp.199-201). The initiative was necessary as the alternative methods of road or rail through Poland or by canal and river through Romania were inadequate to meet the export requirements. Türkiye played a crucial role in the initiative because, as per the Montreux Convention of 1936, it oversees maritime traffic in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits. The initiative was a collaborative effort among the involved parties, and it highlights the importance of international cooperation in addressing global challenges. It can be inferred from this initiative that the Black Sea's intricate nature is a subject of great sensitivity among the stakeholders, which sometimes hinders the successful implementation of such initiatives (Ay & Söylemez, 2023, p. 7).

The Russia-Ukraine war has disrupted trade flows in the Black Sea, leading to rising prices for vegetable oils and grain products in the aftermath of the conflict. Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, which are heavily dependent on Russian and Ukrainian grain, have been particularly affected by food shortages, with trade at times being interrupted. Harsh sanctions have been imposed on Russia, aiming to exert economic pressure and limit its capacity to sustain the war. Moreover, these sanctions have not only weakened Russia's access to international markets but have also highlighted the vulnerability of its economic leverage, which had previously been one of Moscow's primary tools of influence in the Black Sea region (Lewis, 2019).

Conclusion

This study examines the Black Sea within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, suggesting that security dynamics in the region are shaped not only by military capabilities but also by historical experiences, perceptions, and multilayered interactions. In this context, the Black Sea is conceptualized not merely as a regional security space but as a multidimensional security complex in which regional and global power struggles, energy and trade routes, and military and political interests intersect.

The study analyzes the policies of regional and extra-regional actors toward the Black Sea. While the United States' limited direct access to the region has led Washington to pursue influence through its allies, China has approached the Black Sea as a strategic transit and connectivity zone within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. NATO littoral states such as Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria, along with Georgia—which maintains close relations with the West—have emerged as key actors shaping Black Sea security.

From Russia's perspective, the Black Sea has historically constituted a buffer zone and an area of strategic depth. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2022 marked critical turning points in the regional security architecture. These developments reflected Russia's efforts to project regional power while simultaneously revealing the limits of its military and political capacity. The sinking of the Moskva cruiser and Ukraine's effective use of asymmetric maritime capabilities clearly demonstrated Russia's difficulty in establishing absolute dominance in the Black Sea. On the other hand, the intensification of Russia's security concerns in the Black Sea has contributed to the emergence of a sense of unity and solidarity within the European Union, leading many EU member states to provide military and material assistance to Ukraine. During this period, NATO also expanded by admitting new members, namely Finland and Sweden. At the same time, the Black Sea has become not only a zone of military competition but also a critical arena for global economic and food security. The grain corridor crisis demonstrated the strategic importance of the region for global food supply, particularly for countries in Africa and the Middle East.

In this context, Türkiye has emerged as a key actor shaping the security architecture of the Black Sea, not only due to its geographical position but also because of its diplomatic and legal capacity. The Black Sea Grain Initiative, in particular, highlighted Türkiye's central role in regional crisis management. Through its implementation of the Montreux Convention, Türkiye both limited military escalation and contributed to preventing a broader humanitarian crisis.

In conclusion, Black Sea security has evolved into a multilayered structure shaped by Russia's power projection, Western deterrence strategies, increasing assistance to Ukraine, the consolidation of unity among Western states, and Türkiye's balancing role, alongside the growing involvement of external actors. The Regional Security Complex approach provides a robust analytical framework for understanding these dynamics and demonstrates that the Black Sea constitutes not merely a regional arena but a critical node in the contemporary global security architecture.

Değerlendirme	İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme
Etik Beyan	* Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.
Benzerlik Taraması	Yapıldı – İthenticate
Etik Bildirim	itobiad@itobiad.com
Çıkar Çatışması	Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.
Finansman	Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.
Yapay Zekâ Kullanım Beyanı	Bu çalışmada noktalama işaretleri ve APA7 kaynakça biçimlendirme için yapay zeka asistanından yararlanılmıştır. Bilimsel içerik tamamen yazara aittir..
Peer-Review	Double anonymized - Two External
Ethical Statement	* It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.
Plagiarism Checks	Yes - İthenticate
Conflicts of Interest	The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.
Complaints	itobiad@itobiad.com
Grant Support	The author(s) acknowledge that they received no external funding in support of this research.
Use of AI Tools	In this study, artificial intelligence assistant was used for punctuation marks and APA7 bibliography formatting. Scientific content belongs entirely to the author.

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