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The Process of Regionalism in the Black Sea Region
between 1991- 2016

- **Implications and Perspectives** -

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Abbreviations

BLACKSEAFOR - Black Sea Naval Task Force

BS - Black Sea

BSEC - Black Sea Economic Cooperation

BSR - Black Sea Region

CEFTA - Central Europe Free Trade Agreement

CFE - Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe

CPE - Contact Point Embassy

CSIS - Center for Strategic and International Studies

DABLAS - Danube Black Sea Trask Force

EaP - Eastern Partnership

EU - European Union

GUUAM - Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova)

IPAP - Individual Partnership Action Plan

IR - International Relations

ISAF - International Security Assistance Force

KFOR - The Kosovo Force

MAE - Minister of Foreign Affairs

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NMS - the Romanian National Military Strategy

NSS - National Security Strategy

OSCE - Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

SEDM - South-East Europe Defense Ministerial

SEEBRIG - South-Eastern Europe Brigade

SSNR - Romania's National Security Strategy

US -United States

WSBR - Wider Black Sea Region

Introduction

This thesis aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the nascent concept of regionalism and its implications and development in the Black Sea Region between 1991- 2016, so as to establish the extent to which it has succeeded to serve its function in the region. This will be assessed both on a general level – by emphasizing the experience of regional cooperation among all regional actors between 1991- 2016 and trying to establish its efficiency throughout this period, but also on an individual level- focusing on a single country and its say in the process of regionalism, emphasizing how one state might benefit from a cooperative attitude. The study case on this later subject will be done on Romania and its regional experience in the Soviet dissolution aftermath.

The choice of this research topic arose primarily from the desire of achieving a valuable work of great interest, by debating a topical and offering subject. Given the complexity of the events taking place in the region - especially at the moment - special attention should be paid to the ever evolving regional developments, which highly impact the global security. The utmost importance of this particular area and the necessity of keeping pace with the rapid changes taking place in the region was another reason for this choice. Generous by its very nature, this subject enables the assertion of one's own approaches and can be easily debated, arousing the interest and attention, but without imposing generally valid truths.

This study's reference period was not randomly chosen. This time-framework 1991- 2016 was decided on so as to provide the whole picture as clear as possible, emphasizing the experience of cooperation in the BSR and its development from the very beginning. Given that the concept of Black Sea Region has been only recently shaped in the early 1990s, this opened the possibility of focusing on the phenomenon in its entire length and width, allowing the development of an all-encompassing study on the matter

Research Questions

Built around the issue of regionalism in the Black Sea area, this piece addresses the following questions: How is emerging the process of Regionalism in the Black Sea Area after a 25-year span?; *How is the process of regionalism seen from the perspective of a smaller actor – in this particular case - Romania?*

Analyzing the dynamics that have characterized the regional cooperative processes in the aftermath of 1991, this paper argues that after a 25- year lifespan, the Black Sea Regionalism lacks efficiency, coordination, the cooperation formats having failed to address the increasing number of region's challenges. The evolution of the regional cooperation reveals the severe security, political, social and economic circumstances in the area and emphasizes the diverging interests and competing policies of the actors involved.

Structure

Regarding the content , this study will be structured in four parts, as follows : The first chapter will be consisting of the literature review, the thesis' methodology as well as the theoretical framework. The first section will provide an objective, thorough overview of what has already been written on this particular topic, identifying the extensively debated issue and recurrent themes that were being addressed and discussed, as part of the broad literature devoted to the process of regionalism in the Black Sea Region. This way, the main "research gaps" and under discussed topics will be identified, in order to be further addressed throughout this whole thesis. Thus, this section aims to provide a sense of direction towards the orientation this new research is headed. The second section of this chapter, "Methodology", aims to present, step by step, all the research methods used for fulfilling the purpose of the paper, and also the motivation beneath choosing these particular research techniques. It is highly important to think about and opt for the right research methods in order to gather relevant information for the final analysis, to weigh the pros and cons of every method, in order to have a good enough expectancy of the end result. It

will highlight the reasoning behind choosing the case study as a research method, the qualitative advantages of using it and, at the same time, its limitations for this particular topic.

The third section will be covering the theoretical-related issues, in order to shed some light on the complexities posed by the two nascent concepts of “region” and “regionalism”, and to emphasise the main debates and theories they have generated. This, in turn, would provide some guidance and direct this thesis towards the suitable conceptual tools to operate with when analysing this particular topic, more precisely towards rationalist and constructivist theories, will be used as guiding tools and will be referred to throughout the whole thesis.

After successfully creating a proper framework for the idea of region and regionalism, the second chapter of this thesis will dive into a more in-depth look over the dynamics of the Black Sea Region. In the attempt to assess the efficiency of the cooperation formats initiated in the region, this chapter will emphasise the experience of regional cooperation between 1991- 2016. It will commence by painting a more detailed image of the region’s architecture, linking it with the theoretical concept of the region. An important emphasis will be also placed on the main regional actors in the Black Sea Area – their interests and stance towards the process of regionalism, so as to establish the reasons they are guided by when involving in different regional formats. The second section will devote a special attention to the regional cooperation schemes initiated so far, in order to establish the main trends and to identify the challenges that have hindered the process of regionalism in the region. Therefore, in a bid to establish the extent to which the process of regionalism has succeeded to serve its function in the region, this chapter will try to answer the main following question: *How is the process of Regionalism emerging in the Black Sea Area after a 25-year span?* This broad area of inquiry would be answered to, by focusing on the following inter-mediate steps and trying to establish: What are the main regional actors and the interest at stake in the Black Sea Region?; What are the main circumstances that shape the cooperation trends in the region? What are the characteristics of the Black Sea Region cooperative processes since 1991?; How efficient proved to be the regional schemes developed so far? To whom can be attributed the main challenges experienced in the regional cooperation process?.

The third chapter aims to examine the process of regionalism seen from the perspective of a smaller actor and to highlight the possible benefits one country might have when getting actively involved in the process of regionalism - and the cooperation schemes it entails. The country chosen to be studied in order to better understand this is Romania - one of the littoral states in the Black Sea Region, which differentiate itself from other regional actors through the specific characteristics it presents, and the different path it has followed in its evolution following the Soviet Union dissolution. Therefore, this chapter will start by focusing on Romania's role in the BSR, further exploring the aims and interests it was animated by in the area. In this respect, its evolution will be analysed and special attention will be devoted to the approach adopted by it towards different cooperation schemes, but also to the relations it developed throughout this period with other regional actors. In order to better understand Romania's perspective on the process of regionalism and the policies it adopted in the region, this chapter aims to answer the following main question: "*How is the process of regionalism seen from the perspective of a smaller actor – in this particular case - Romania?*" This inquiry can be explained and answered to by focusing on the following inter-mediate questions: What differentiate Romania from other regional actors?; What are the ambitions it has pursued in the Black Sea Region? How actively did it involve in different cooperation schemes (BSEC)?; How did Romania benefit from its active involvement in different cooperation formats?

In the last chapter, the main findings will be emphasised and areas for future research will be identified and recommended.

Impact

This paper would serve as a valuable theoretical contribution to the already existing scholarly work devoted to the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area. This study provides new insights and new perspectives on a very topical and complex issue. The innovative element brought by this work is given by the holistic approach it proposes (providing an in depth analysis of the regional dynamics between 1991-2015), but also by its particular focus on Romania's active involvement in this complex picture. This latter part would highlight the importance of

regionalism and would serve as an example on how such an approach towards regional issues can positively benefit the image and the perception of a country.

Literature Review

Recently, the Black Sea Security issue has been the subject of a vast, ever-growing research. The complexity of the area, along with the important challenges it faces, propelled it to the international agendas' utmost concerns. Against this background - shaped by region's instability, economic discrepancies, environmental degradation and social challenges, it is interesting to analyze the efficiency of cooperation formats initiated by regional states and external actors in order to address these issues. Thus, this paper aims to contribute to the literature devoted to the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area, a quite nascent area of research.

Black Sea "Regionness" and Potential for Cooperation

The Black Sea regional identity is in itself a relatively new concept, which started being shaped in the early 1990s. However, to date this concept continues to attract many controversies, The Black Sea "regionness" arousing extensive debates. The scholarly work on this topic revolve around 2 main perspectives – a) the perspective according to which the Black Sea "region" is a fact, an undeniable reality, b) the perspective which denies its "regionness".

In other words, on the one hand there are those stressing the potential for cooperation in the region, emphasizing the opportunities and favourable conditions for regional initiatives. Much emphasis has been placed on the role of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) (Ayback 2001:6, Manoli 2011:1, Stritecky 2011), identified as "an active contributor to regional security"

(Özer 2012:4), the most “organized and largest regional organization in the region” (Çolakoğlu 2006: 145). It is pictured as a “multidimensional regional organization, facilitating frequent vertical, horizontal, bilateral and multilateral contacts and transactions at different levels of society” (Ayata, Ergun, Çelimli 2005: 32). According to these perspectives, it is precisely the BSEC initiative that constitutes the pillar forging security and stability in the region, boosting the global integration process and facilitating the east – west dialogue (*Babaoğlu, 2005; Manoli, 2013*).

On the other hand, there are the perspectives put forward by those contesting the coherence of the region, who bring to the fore the weak regional identity of the Black Sea area. Among the arguments advanced, the main reasons perceived to affect the potential for regionalism, have to do with the Black Sea countries’ discrepancies- ethnic and cultural diversity (King 2015), economic difficulties - long transition period to market economy (Manoli, 2013:210), struggles for power, usually stemming from the rivalry for control of energy routes and resources (Kuşku-Sönmez, 2014); divergent interests in the region; important security issues- border disputes and crime ; frozen bilateral tensions, enduring secessionist conflicts; historical misperceptions, as well as weak political commitment (Triantaphyllou, Has, 2012; Saari 2011; Manoli, 2012; Tsantoulis, 2009; Ergun and Isaxanlı 2013; Mkrtychyan and Petrosyan 2009; Winrow 2009). Besides these commonly agreed setbacks, the Black Sea area is usually thought of as making “little sense geographically, historically, culturally”, being perceived as a structurally heterogeneous region (Stritecky, 2011; Manoli, 2010).

These factors are also considered to have direct implications on the efficiency and coherence of regional projects and initiatives. Thus, contrary to the ideas put forward by the optimists who tend to picture the BSEC initiative as a developed regional economic organization, a considerable milestone in the process of regional cooperation, there are also the opinions of those more skeptical and reserved when it comes to the regional initiatives’ effectiveness and potency. Analysed by the results attained, rather than by the objectives and ambitions set, BSEC – the main regional organization, starts losing its credibility, while future prospects start being questioned. If not “reformed, recalibrated, and adjusted to new strategic realities, the future perspectives will amount to wishful thinking” (Japaridze, 2007).

Besides the causes forging the weak regional identity of the Black Sea Area, the failure of the BSEC can also be attributed to the limited financial support allocated by the member states, the

inability to attract the private sector into the decision making process, minimal inter-institutional coordination and cohesion, lack of leadership and limited institutional efficiency (Çolakoğlu, 2006 :148; Manoli, 2013; Homorozean, 2010: 14). The BSEC lack of success can be translated into minimal achievements, its failure to become a “security community” or a “free trade area” or at least a functional project-oriented organization (Tsantoulis, 2009).

All these scholarly works point to the fact that, even though some sort of “progress” has been made as part of the regionalization process in the Black Sea Area, the outcome of these cooperative initiatives - and in particular of the BSEC organization – seems to be rather poor. The potential for cooperation in the region remains for the time being quite limited. The area tends to be perceived more like a politically constructed region, where overlapping interests prevail and regional identity is completely lacking.

These two main perspectives revolving around the issue of Black Sea Area “regionness”, and potential for cooperation are recurrent themes identified in the literature devoted to the Black Sea Regionalism, which will receive further attention throughout this paper and will be put into perspective. For a better understanding of the whole picture, this work will provide an in-depth analysis of the Black Sea regional dynamics, focusing on the whole experience of regional cooperation between 1991- 2015. The novelty of this piece is given by the approach it proposes. This paper argues that the process of regionalism can only occur and be successful when smaller states are either dominated by larger ones or do have ideational interests that bind them to regional cooperation. In order to better understand why regionalism has failed in the Black Sea Area, a special attention will be devoted to the the relation between regional powers (Russia and Turkey) and local players (Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia), focusing on the intentions and actions of the hegemonic powers towards the small states and their consequences.

Regional Powers and their Strategies (Russia and Turkey)

When it comes to the region’s regionalism, the specialised literature devotes a special attention to the two major players’ (Turkey and Russia) involvement in the region (Bugajski, Doran 2016), and their relations’ dynamics (Ergun, Isaxanli 2013).

As for Russia, it is usually referred to as the “gatekeeper” of regionalism (Milevschi, 2010-2012: 98), controlling most of the cooperation formats and setting the regionalism trends in the Black Sea Area. In its attempt to become a regional leader in the BSR, Russia has constantly pushed away and rejected any involvement or initiative coming from the outside (Homorozean, 2010:8; Milvschi:79). For Russia, the geo-strategic importance of the Black Sea resides in the potential for controlling the energy resources of the Caspian Sea (Homorozean:9), which would strengthen its position in the region and push it to the rank of “regional revisionist heavyweight in the BSR”. Russia’s interventions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its involvement in Eastern Ukraine conflict and Crimea’s annexation come to reinforce once more Russia’s tendency of “gradual re-imperialisation of the Black Sea” (Triantaphyllou, 2016:7).

Turkey, even though animated by different strategic interests and geopolitical stakes, shares Russia’s main goal, that of becoming a regional leader in the BSR. Turkey’s ambitions in the region can be attributed to the signing of Montreux Convention in 1936, which ensured its leadership in maritime security related issues and made it reconsider its position in the region (Triantaphyllou:8). In terms of foreign policy, Turkey is aiming at becoming a major energy hub, exploiting its strategic “geopolitical location” between East and West, or simply put, between the “producers and the consumers of fossil fuels” (Wigen, 2012:599). In its attempt to pursue all these objectives, Turkey plays an active role in the region, trying to improve the existing regional organizations and cooperation formats (Homorozean: 8,9). In a similar fashion, animated by its own interests, Turkey was the first to set up the early regional initiatives - BSEC and Blackseafor, (Naval Task Force), thus strengthening its position in the region and expanding its influence. (Tsantoulis, 2009:247).

The relationship between Russia and Turkey and the dynamics between them represent one of the main areas of focus, receiving much scholarly attention. The two regional powers pursue their own interests in the area, their foreign policy agendas usually overlapping. They are both guided by the same goal (of becoming the leading player in the BSR) and continuously compete for “regional hegemony” and for Europe’s energy supply routes. Their relations fluctuate, ranging from the level of “multidimensional strategic partnership” to crisis or to mutual tolerance (Weitz, 2010; Homorozean:9).

Russia and Turkey are perceived as indispensable actors in the regional security cooperation scheme (Antonenko 2009:262). However, given Russia’s isolation following the EU/NATO

enlargement wave and Turkey's shifted interest towards the Middle East region, it seems fair to affirm that the two powers are more like a hindrance, rather than major drivers for regional security cooperation in the BSR (Antonenko 2009: 262). Even though pictured as the countries taking the lead in shaping the process of regionalism and perceived as indispensable actors in the BSR, Russia and Turkey are only "paying lip service to it today", promoting their own initiatives, and being guided by their strategic interests and geopolitical stakes (Triantaphyllou, Has, 2012: 5). Against this background, it is hardly surprising that after a 25- year lifespan, the Black Sea Regionalism still lacks efficiency, coordination, the cooperation formats having failed to address the increasing number of region's challenges.

Without shifted focus to other smaller local players and their strategies, we cannot get the whole picture of the dynamics that characterise the region. Unlike the relationship between Russia and Turkey and their involvement in the region, the role of smaller states and their bilateral relations have received little attention. Given the aforementioned scenario, characterised by diverging interests and competing policies, it becomes quite clear that the prospect for regional cooperation success in the BSR are to be found somewhere else. Based on the assumption that Romania has the potential of becoming one of the main key actors in the BSR, this work will devote special attention to Romania's role in the regional cooperation context and its bilateral relations with other littoral countries.

The Role of the European Union in the Region

Another extensively debated aspect is the role of the European Union in the region. With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007, "the Black Sea became partially an internal sea of the EU". Given the developments in the region, the EU acknowledged the need for stronger involvement (Aurescu 2011:36). In this respect, the EU efforts took different forms : it provided various funding mechanisms, it was involved in local infrastructure and transport projects (CSIS:8), but it has also introduced different policies and initiatives, among which: *Black Sea Synergy* – meant to reinvigorate the ongoing cooperation within the Black Sea area (Manoli 2011:4) – and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – "a powerful soft power instrument to anchor Eastern neighbors to EU's identity and values" (Aurescu 2011:36). By developing these regional initiatives, EU stresses its will and interest in becoming a key player in the region.

However, the formats proposed proved to be quite unsuccessful, the two EU policies' limited impact being the consequence of a number of reasons: the contested nature of this area of interest; the gap between the objectives set by the EU and the means at hand, the enduring secessionist conflicts and “ and the hub- spoke character” of the relationship between the EU and the local players , which hinder the process of regional cooperation (Cottey, 2012; Homorozean, 15). Besides, these externally initiated policies tend to overlook the existing locally initiated regional formats, coming up with similar, overlapping agendas (Manoli, 2010:328).

Another thing usually considered when talking about EU and its involvement in the BSR has to do with the partial incompatibility between Russia - EU interests. The EU's ambitions to diversify its energy supply routes directly interfere with Russia's plans in the region while its position of “conflict resolution” proponent in the BSR contravenes the Russian strategy, which aims at maintaining a state of conflict and disunion in the region, rather than contributing to the problem – solving (Nillson, 2008:27).

So far, the European Union proved to be quite ineffective in attaining much of its ambitions in the region, failing to promote “its values and norms, its soft power and good governance” and being unsuccessful in articulating a sound and coherent position on regional energy-related matters (Triantaphyllou, Has: 7; Dubovyk 2011:3).

Without shaping a coherent plan and without strategic partners in the region, the EU cannot become a key actor in BSR, leaving the region prone to conflict and disunity. Therefore, this paper will stress the utmost importance of the EU presence in the region, further analysing its strategy and further exploring the issue of energy security and EU's stance on it.

Methodology

The mission of this chapter is to accurately describe the steps taken and the research methods used in order to reach the aim of this piece of work - a detailed look into the ambiguous concept of regionalism and its emergence and development in the Black Sea Region between 1991- 2016, in order to explain the reasoning behind its ultimate failure in the BSR, as well as pointing out a political actor that got involved in the process of regionalism during this period (Romania) and the effects that this involvement have had.

Before proceeding with the actual analysis, it is important to explain the way in which this research was conducted. The selection of the appropriate research method is one of the most critical decisions that should be carefully considered while designing a research. This section will outline the research methods employed in this thesis, while also making reference to the data used throughout this whole thesis. Given the nature of this paper, focused primarily on interstate political relationships, it will take the form of an explanatory, theory-based case study. This is an inductive study, providing an in depth analysis of the Black Sea Regional dynamics, and then drawing some conclusions based on them.

While there were numerous methods that could have been used in order to conduct this study, the most suitable one that this thesis opted on was conducting two case studies on this matter: a case study on Romania's involvement in the Black Sea Region after the fall of communism, and one showcasing the evolution of the Black Sea Region between 1991 - 2016 alongside all the actors and institutions involved.

Documentation is also an essential step, a necessary and indispensable phase of the research. In order to answer the research question and to demonstrate the hypothesis, this study depends upon the extensive examination of primary and secondary sources. Regarding the primary sources, this research is based on the analysis of some documents such as: official documents, specialized magazines, editorials, PhD dissertations, statistical reports, while as secondary sources have been used elements, such as: synthetic studies, reference works.

As aforementioned, this thesis provides an in-depth analysis based on two case studies. The first case study employed in this work analyses the experience of regionalism in the Black Sea area between 1991-2016, emphasizing the evolution of the cooperation process among the regional

actors. This type of research method was particularly chosen, so as to provide clarity in an otherwise vague subject, one that does not have an abundance of theoretical support to come with it and one that it is relatively new to the overall landscape of region-based politics. Moreover, the idea of regionalism has vague definitions, that can only be supported through analyzing actual events and cross-referencing these events with the theoretical framework used. In support of this, the case studies will be accompanied by the discourse analysis on the following types of text: discourses, official interviews, official documents, speeches of states' representatives.

Despite being in of itself a vague term, the discourse analysis method is defined as analyzing a pattern of words that people use when being part in activities that are relevant to the subject at hand. These people are carefully chosen, in order for their opinions to add legitimacy to the claims that this paper wants to support. About the same approach is used when analyzing official interviews and speeches, which have been carefully chosen in order to bring added value to the thesis. Diving in-depth in official documents is one of the most useful pieces of documentation that can be resorted to, especially when writing about a region and its development. The documents analyzed in this paper display a chronology of events, projects, undertakings and initiatives that show the evolution of regionalism in the Black Sea Region better than anything else could. Especially available when talking about the institutions within the BSR, these documents shed light on events that happened between neighboring states which had the scope of development the region from an economic, environmental and security point of view.

For the in-depth look on the evolution of Romania in the Black Sea Region, the same type of analysis was used in order to pinpoint the timeline of Romania's involvement in the regional affairs after the fall of communism. A case study aims at highlighting a particular case and linking its importance and findings to the overall scope of a paper. For this paper, the use of case studies was decided due to the complexity of this particular research method. It is, as stated by Rolf Johansson in 2003, a meta-method, one that comprises multiple methods of research and that has the ability to analyze a subject from multiple standpoints, using concrete, official documentation. It is a method that has a knowledge-based approach on the topic, relying on argumentation based upon historical data which, if chosen correctly, can shed clarity on most subjects.

Naturally, as any research methods, there are limitations when relying on case studies. For starters, the reach of the topic is limited by the materials and theories that have already been written, with little chance of having tailored responses to the questions that are asked in the thesis. When seeking such responses, there are other methods more suitable, for example qualitative ones - interviews - or quantitative methods - questionnaires. Both of these would offer more on-the-nose results when seeking particular answers. However, they are more suitable for other topics. Another limitation would be in the impossibility of fully covering the theories and possible findings on the thesis' subject, naturally leaving out information that might be useful. Ultimately, this approach is considered to be the most suitable for the task at hand, given the fact that regionalism has indeed developed through documented events, projects and initiatives which can be found and analyzed. The footprints left by these documents tell a full story on the regionalization attempts in the Black Sea Region, the failure of this process and the motives behind it being unsuccessful.

Theoretical Framework

Before proceeding with an in-depth analysis of the Black Sea regional dynamics, several specific theoretical perspectives and conceptual tools are to be considered and further explored, so as to understand the complexities posed by the process of regionalism and, thus, adopt a suitable perspective for this thesis. Consequently, this chapter will devote a special attention to the main theories revolving around the concept of “region” and “regionalism”, providing an overview of the early and more recent perspectives and discussions generated by these contested notions.

The first section will place a special emphasis on the region conceptualisation, presenting the main theoretical stances and approaches used for defining the region - material, behavioural and ideational - and further discussing the subsequent “physical- functional” distinction, usually referred to in the study of regions.

The second section will provide an analysis of the classical theories associated with the process of regionalism, which were highly influenced by the European model of integration – federalism, functionalism, neo-functionalism, transactionalism and intergovernmentalism, identifying their main limitation and assessing their applicability beyond the European model. This section will also devote special attention to the new approaches identified with the new wave of regionalism. In this respect, a major contribution is brought about by social constructivist perspectives, which are to be analysed and discussed in more detail.

The third and the last part will present the theoretical concepts identified as being the most suitable for explaining the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area. The two approaches used as guiding tools – rationalist and constructivist – will be assessed in this particular case and further discussed.

Conceptualising the Region

Before assessing the numerous, quite divergent stances towards regionalism as a theoretical concept, it is necessary to shed some light on the concept of “region” itself. The definition of this fuzzy notion usually takes various forms, encompassing a whole range of perspectives and arousing various debates among the IR scholars. For some, the term might only designate a geographical entity, where states are linked together on the basis of their “geographical proximity and contiguity” (Hurrell, 1995: 353) and “mutual interdependence” (Nye 1968: vii). For others, these rudimentary definitions seem to be too narrow to explain the complexities this concept entails, highlighting, for instance, the importance of “some common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social and historical bonds” (Cantori and Spiegel, 1970:12) in linking the states. Other scholars went even further and departed from these geographic-oriented perspectives, deemphasizing the physical criteria and focusing instead, on the ideational character of a region. Against this background, the region comes to be perceived more like a social structure, defined and redefined socially – through interaction (Neumann, 1993:53, Levis and Wigen, 1997).

Considering these perspectives, it can be argued that there are three main approaches to defining a region, namely - a) material – making reference to the classical theories of geopolitics; b) ideational - inspired by the critical theories of geography and c) behavioural – related to the behavioural theories of geography (Katzenstein, 2005: 9-12)

The materialist assumptions emphasize the material base of a region and focus on the rational calculations of the actors, that are thought to behave strategically, so as to attain the best overall outcome (Elster, 1989:22). Therefore, this approach explains the possible interactions between states, on the basis of strategic interests and relative gains and losses. Their intentions are primarily driven by security purposes rather than common transnational issues or commonly shared political views.

The behavioural approach did not receive that much scholarly attention, usually being employed so as to emphasize how regions are constructed and reshaped by political practices (Katzenstein, 2005, 11). According to this perspective, the region is understood as a cluster of states, territories or groups, which present some similar patterns of behaviour. Spatial distance is perceived as an important variable in this equation, directly influencing the actors’ behaviours.

The third and final approach stresses the importance of ideational factors in shaping a region, acknowledging the role of ideas, norms and identity. According to this perspective, the spatial boundaries came to be perceived as some loose concepts, that do not necessarily establish and

define the limits of a region. Depicted this way, regions are understood as some politically and culturally constructed entities, that transcend the physical boundaries.

All these perspectives contribute to the definition of “region”, providing useful yet partial insights, but none individually can provide a satisfactory account regarding the way in which the regions are perceived by actors in international affairs (Katzenstein, 2005:12).

Physical and Functional Regions

Based on these approaches, there can be made a distinction between physical (geographical and strategic) and functional (economic, cultural or environmental) regions. The former definition highlights the static conception of nations, referring to some “territorial, military and economic spaces” controlled mainly by states (Väyrynen, 2003: 27). The study of physical regions in international relations is directly linked to the notion of anarchy, which presumably guides and dictates the states’ moves in the absence of a higher authority in the international system. Thus, regions are thought of as some spatial gatherings of states, motivated and guided by their self-interests and materialistic gains, which amidst this condition of anarchy, become positively or negatively dependent on each other (Väyrynen: 27).

In contrast, the functional regions are shaped on the basis of non territorial factors - namely culture, environment or market - and are usually initiated or fashioned by non-state actors.

This functional conceptualisation of the regions stems from the subnational and transnational interactions, which take the form of various cultural, economic or environmental process, partially controlled by states and more often triggered and conducted by non-state actors (Väyrynen: 27) In the study of international relations, the functional regions are perceived as socially constructed entities, that emerge and evolve in accordance with social interactions and market (Hajizada, Marciacq, 2013 : 308). This definition rejects the static notion of regions, and perceives them as being cognitive dynamic structures, shaped through non-spatial interactions by an increasing set of actors (civil society, pressure groups, NGOs, regional elites, interest groups).

Whereas the physical definition of regions makes reference to territoriality, strategy and stresses the dynamics of power competition, the functional definition of regions designates a dynamic, concept, a social construct driven by shared cultural, historical or emotional affiliations, which

constantly evolves and changes in space and time (Behr, Jokela, 2011:13). The theories having emerged from these approaches on “region” will be discussed in more detail in the next section. As noticed, the notion of “region” remains an elusive, highly debated concept among the IR scholars, generating various theories and divergent stances. Without an absolute definition, it remains a quite volatile concept, taking various forms and being subjected to constant change. For the present study, a more analytical approach towards region will be proposed, regarding it as a complex, dynamic structure, transcending the territorial boundaries and displaying both material and ideational characteristics.

Conceptualising Regionalism

The study of regionalism in International Relations started gaining prominence especially in the aftermath of the Cold War. Ever since it became a constant feature of the international system, generating a large number of theories and concepts. This section aims to provide an overview of the main theoretical perspectives and conceptual debates that revolve around the issue of “regionalism”, focusing on those particularly relevant for the present study.

Regarded as an “elusive” concept, the process of regionalism has attracted from the very beginning extensive scholarly interest, arousing various debates. Given the quite divergent stances towards it, there can be made a clear distinction between old and new regionalism. Whereas the old regionalism is to be understood within a historical context, dominated by the Cold War dynamics, the new wave of regionalism should be explained in relation to the new transformations of the world, in the context of globalization (Hettne, Söderbaum, 1998: 1-2).

Classical theories and new approaches

The old regionalism - usually referred to as regional integration - was modeled on the European Union/ European Community experience. Thus, the early theories and perspectives on regionalism were exclusively inspired and based on the European model of integration. Federalism, functionalism and neofunctionalism, transactionalism, and intergovernmentalism

are just some of the most prominent and relevant theories that marked the first wave of regionalism and which will be further discussed and analysed hereunder.

Federalism laid the foundation of European Integration, this theory highly influencing the integration pioneers. This approach contends that nation-state is the root of all evil and aimed at drastically limiting the powers of individual states in Europe, by introducing a supranational authority (Wunderlich: 2007, p.8-9). It was perceived more like a political programme, meant to gather together previously separate, autonomous territorial units in a new form of union, under a central authority, within which the units would preserve only several powers. (Bergmann, Niemann, 2013:3).

Functionalism is another influential theory, highly relevant in the European Integration debate. According to it, the cooperation initiated in the technical, social and economic fields would also bring about cooperation in other key domains. In other words, its proponents explain the process of cooperation by means of “ramification doctrine”. This implies the cooperation transfer from low to high politics among nation-states, which eventually can lead to the emergence of supranational institutions (Dash: 2008, p.7).

Neo-functional model, whose central figure is Ernst Haas, is mainly guided by a rational assumption. This theory explains the potential for cooperation among different actors by means of gain and loss and specific pursued interests, but at the same time stressing the importance of shared values, history or culture in strengthening the process. The main actors forging the process of cooperation are perceived to be regional elites, political parties, civil society, interest groups or labour unions. Neo functionalists also stress the importance of raising level of interdependence in reaching further political cooperation, the basic concept associated with this theory becoming the “spillover effect” (Hettne, Söderbaum: 1998, 4).

It became the most notorious theory of the early debate on regionalism, but it remains quite limited to the Western European case, failing to provide a more general explanation regarding the process of regional integration.

Transactionalism is another influential theory, explaining the process of cooperation on the basis of enhanced sense of community among nation-states. This approach devotes special attention to the study of community formation. According to Karl Deutsch- the leading proponent of this approach – the communities are bound to emerge when “groups of people with common characteristics were mutually responsive and had a shared identity” (Nadkarni:2010, p. 175). He contends that enhanced social interaction would facilitate the conditions favouring the creation of a security community, as a way of increasing the prospect of peace among nation-states. This theory sets the scene for the approach identified with the new wave of regionalism – social constructivism, which will be further discussed below.

Intergovernmentalism takes a rationalist stance, contending that the actors- perceived as being the states – are following their own interests and are only bound to cooperate following a rational calculus of potential gains and losses (Rusu: 2010, p. 9).

These classical theories, identified with the first wave of regionalism were Eurocentric and particularly focused on the Western European case, failing to provide a general explanation for the process of regionalism beyond Europe. This failure has to do with the false assumption according to which the favourable conditions forging regionalism in Europe – pluralistic interest politics and economic interdependence - would also apply outside Europe (Börzel, Risse : 2016, p. 114-115). Given the historical, economic and political discrepancies, the European model of integration and the early theories of regional cooperation could not find applicability elsewhere. Classical theories associated with the first wave of regionalism tend to be mainly guided by rationalist assumptions, stressing that states’ behaviour depends on different materialist variables, Thus, the process of regionalism came to be understood as a consequence of rational calculations and bargains among nation- states. Their potential for cooperation reflects their own interests and usually their security concerns.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the process of regionalism started being reconsidered and new theories were formulated, so as to explain the emergence, dynamics and design of cooperation more generally, beyond Europe. The new wave of regionalism is highly influenced by the systemic changes that took place in the Post Cold-War world and stems from a critique brought to the old regionalism.

In this respect, a major contribution is brought about by the social constructivist approach, which emphasizes the importance of ideational and normative values in the study of regionalism, deemphasizing the materialist and rationalist beliefs, promoted by the early theories.

Social Constructivism proposes an alternative to the rational theories that depict the regionalism process as a purposeful cooperation between actors. Unlike rationalism, which explains international cooperation on the basis of strategic interests and related benefits and losses, the constructivist theory explains the process of cooperation based on shared beliefs, ideational forces and enhanced social interactions, emphasizing at the same time the role of market and civil society (Börzel: 2015, p. 3). Thus, regionalism is perceived as an ongoing process, a dynamic frame shaped through non-spatial interactions by an increasing set of actors (civil society, pressure groups, NGOs, regional elites, interest groups). For constructivists, regions are not perceived as some static entities, shaped by geographical boundaries, but rather as socially constructed settings, made and remade through interaction (functional regions).

As noticed, Constructivism and Rationalism are the focal points for debate on regionalism. While the rationalists explain the process of regionalism on the basis of rational choice theory, explaining the actors' (states) course of action as a result of a rational calculus, the constructivists emphasize the importance of ideas, culture and shared regional identity in forging the process of regionalism.

Considering all the theories and approaches generated by this concept, we can argue that the process of regionalism refers to different formats of association and cooperation taking shape between neighbouring states and sub-national actors. These associations can be based on common interests, shared perceptions, identities or ideas. The process of regionalism should be perceived as a dynamic instrument of regional and global security and stability, addressing various sensitive issues.

Based on this theoretical conceptualization, the present study contends that regionalism in the Black Sea Region can only occur when smaller states are either dominated by larger ones, or have ideational/material interests that bind them to regional cooperation. These two assumptions – rationalist and constructivist - will be used as guiding tools and will be referred to throughout the whole thesis.

Conceptualising Black Sea Regionalism

Based on the theories analysed and discussed in the previous section, this piece aims to place the Black Sea Regionalism under the appropriate theoretical perspectives. The Black Sea Region (BSR) in itself is a relatively new concept, which started being shaped in the early 1990's, following the Soviet Union dissolution. Even though perceived as an ambiguous concept, making little sense geographically and culturally, the BSR is to be understood as a socially constructed entity. Even though the cultural and ethnic diversity of the region does not necessarily reflect any dominant common regional identity, the BSR should not only be seen as a product of geopolitical calculus.

This thesis contends that the regional identity should not be perceived as a natural given, as something inherent, that reflects an ultimate idea of solidarity and unity, but rather as a socially constructed concept, fashioned by the key players in the region (states and non states) so as to perform a specific function. Therefore, regions – as socially constructed entities - are not about absolute identities and do not exclude cultural, economic discrepancies or political oppositions among countries. Another approach explaining the region building in the Black Sea area is that based on some empirical experience, making reference to the complex of linkages that bind together the lives of people and polities (King 2004a, 17).

In this respect, The Black Sea area shares common values, shaped by the common historical experience, but also a rich cultural common heritage, that has the potential of becoming an important binding element. Thus, the BSR should not only be understood in rational terms, but also as “the rediscovery of a web of connections that did in fact exist in the past and that may yet exist again” (King 2001). The ideational links forging the Black Sea Regionalism will be further analysed and debated in the following chapters.

In rational terms, the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area can be explained as an instrument to which smaller states have resorted in their attempt to come closer to the major stakeholders exercising power in the region, in the hope of gaining some strategic advantages - ‘bandwagoning’, in neorealist jargon. For developing countries in the regions, the process of regionalism - and the cooperation formats it entails - facilitated their accession into the global economic system and prepared them for the competitive environment of globalization

(Tsardanidis 2005. 362-268). Besides, the process of regionalism is also referred to as a tool for European integration and for gaining some soft power.

Under these circumstances, the Black Sea Regionalism can be thought of as a rational calculus, where the actors' course of action and potential for cooperation can be related to the interests at stake and other security concerns.

Black Sea Regionalism Dynamics

The Black Sea Region's strategic position, situated at the confluence of different cultures and civilizations - bordering Europe and Asia - contributes to the region's complexity, enhancing the struggles for dominance in the area. Given its geostrategic importance - providing the point of intersection between the Danube area and Eastern Europe, the Caspian and the Aegean Seas and found at the junction of important oil, gas, energy and trade routes, as well as defining the border between the European Union and Russia and Turkey respectively, The Black Sea Region constitutes an essential pillar, which plays a decisive role in the European and Asian security equation.

The complexity of the area, along with the important challenges it faces, propelled it to the international agendas' utmost concerns, Thus, what constituted until recently an issue of regional security, now came to be perceived and regarded more like a global security matter. Against this background - shaped by the region's instability, economic discrepancies, environmental degradation and social challenges, it is interesting to analyze the Black Sea Regionalism dynamics and to assess the efficiency of the cooperation formats initiated by regional states and external actors in order to address these issues.

In this respect, this chapter will proceed with an in depth analysis of the Black Sea Region architecture. The next section aims to provide a clear picture of the Black Sea Region, focusing on its structure - the main actors setting the trends in the region and the interests at stake – in order to better understand the cooperation dynamics. The second section of this chapter is intended to analyse the regional cooperation experience over the last 25 years, identifying the key characteristics of the Black Sea Region cooperative processes, assessing their efficiency and emphasizing the main challenges that have hindered the regional cooperation process.

The Black Sea Region Architecture

The concept of Black Sea as a region started being shaped only recently, following the Soviet Union dissolution in the early 1990's. Given its security relevance and **geostrategic importance it has soon attracted the interest of both local and external players and has been** propelled to the international security agenda. As stated earlier, the importance given to the zone was initially undermined, with the major world powers thinking that the BSR should solve their issues independently and internally. In the meantime, the Black Sea Region became a zone of great importance, despite it being hard to oversee given its overall complicated and undefined layout. Over time, the region took various shapes and served different purposes, without being confined to a strict geographical delimitation, its boundaries remaining open and questionable.

That is why, when it comes to the Black Sea Region's structure, there can be identified three definitional approaches. The littoral states' approach depicts the BSR from a more restrictive perspective, placing much emphasis on geographical proximity and common assets. This limited definition was embraced by the hegemonic powers in the region (Russia and Turkey), in their attempt to enhance their role in the BSR, while at the same time trying to avoid the external players' involvement in the region. The second approach - the more inclusive one - usually referred to as the "Wider Black Sea Region" (WBSR), makes reference to the twelve members of the Black Sea Regional Economic Cooperation (BSEC) - Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. This inclusive approach emphasizes the actors' intent of overcoming the preexisting institutional divisions and their desire to avoid any new dividing borders. The third definitional approach is the one proposed by the EU, which implies a different level of reference. It points primarily to neighboring cross-border areas, incorporating the Eastern Partnership countries (except for Belarus), three EU members (Romania, Bulgaria and Greece) and the two hegemonic powers (Russia and Turkey). This approach deemphasizes the political role of the region and undermines any endeavor for the Black Sea to acquire regional actorness (Manoli: 2013, p. 211-212).

This polyvalent definition of the region points to the fact that everything related to the BSR and its geographical delimitation is loosely defined and comes to reflect the changing priorities in the region. Thus, the BSR should not be perceived necessarily in geographical terms, but rather as a

socially constructed entity, constantly evolving and adapting in accordance with the region actors' needs. This definitional ambivalence also confers a certain kind of policy flexibility.

Without proposing any restrictive definition and without embracing a strict geographical connotation, the following section aims to identify the main actors setting the trends in the region and the interests they are animated by when getting engaged in different cooperation formats. Therefore, this section aims to shed some light on the Black Sea Regionalism dynamics and the characteristics of the cooperative process in the Black Sea area, and to point to the main challenges and impediments that have hindered the regional cooperation process over the last 25 years.

Main Actors and Interests at stake

The dynamics in the region are set by the actors involved in shaping the process of regionalism. Given its geostrategic importance, the region came to be perceived as an important security asset, arousing the interest of both local and external players. However, these actors' approach towards Black Sea Region lacks coherence and only reflects inconsistency and a great sense of disunity. Therefore, the process of regionalism becomes a clear reflection of these actors' troubled relations, of their divergent interests in the region. Given the instability pervading the region and the wide variety of risks to which the BSR is exposed, the regionalism should be perceived as the ultimate weapon to address these pressing issues. Even though the solution to most of the problems in the region would rather be found in unity and different transnational formats, the process of regionalism and various transnational agreements initiated over the past 25 years proved to be quite limited and ineffective, failing to address these issues.

The ideal way of looking at regionalism is that of a process which enhances relationships between states so much so that they actors involved pull towards the same goals through the same mechanisms and projects. If the unity in the area would be the one desired, it would be extremely easy for all members to benefit economically, culturally and, most important of all, have a safe and secure region. These values and ideals are the reasons why countries in the region, such as Romania focus on projects that contribute to the BSR stability and why countries

such as Russia are willing to participate in organizations such as the BSEC despite not necessarily needing to be members. However, a more realistic way of viewing these participations is that of the countries wanting to gain leverage in the region through positive relationships with neighboring states and initiatives that mainly benefit them.

Judging by their geopolitical status, pursued stakes and the approach embraced, there can be identified three main categories of players setting the trends in the region and directly influencing the process of regionalism. The first category consists of littoral states - Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Georgia – on whose evolution and political trajectory depends the whole process of regionalism. The second category comprises the two regional powers, usually perceived as the Black Sea Regionalism gatekeepers - Russia and Turkey- both aspirants for the position of regional leader in the BSR. The last category includes the external players – EU and NATO – which recently acquired a prominent role in the BSR and whose involvement in the region became more and more visible. Against this background, the process of regionalism in the BSR emerges as the result of various actors' divergent interests and overlapping influences. However, before assessing the experience of regional cooperation in the BSR in more depth, this work will focus on the three categories aforementioned and their interplay.

Local Players and their say in the region

Following the Soviet Union dissolution, most of the actors in the region, found themselves in the position of recreating their identities and replacing the former socialist ideologies with a new thinking, meant to confer them a new sense of belonging (Triantaphyllou:2010, p.26). Even though they followed different paths and experienced uneven evolutions, in essence they were pursuing the same goals. In this respect, motivated to recreate their national identities and animated by the prospect of enhancing their position internationally and gaining some strategic advantages, they got involved in different cooperation schemes initiated by the major stakeholders exercising power in the region. The process of regionalism was perceived by local players in the region as a tool, meant to ease their transition and facilitate their accession into the global economic system. Thus, their potential for cooperation can be explained on the basis of a rational calculus and reflects, by all means, their own interests and other security concerns.

Their cooperation availability can be also explained on the basis of ideational links and common values they were guided by. Even though the local players are not sharing a common regional identity in its pure sense, they share a common historical experience, and also a rich common cultural heritage, which served as a binding element. As mentioned in the previous chapter, regions are not always about perfect commonalities and do not reflect essential identities, but rather refer to a hub of connections that existed in the past and which might be rediscovered (Triantaphyllou: 2009, p., 228). In this respect, the Black Sea Regionalism can be perceived as a product of history.

However, despite the interests at stake and ideational links, the process of regionalism was mainly hindered by various factors, usually stemming from former rivalries or existing discrepancies between states. In this respect, it is interesting to analyse the local players' stances towards the Black Sea Regionalism and their say in the region.

For instance, Romania and Bulgaria can be considered the external players' strategic pillars in the region, forging the process of regionalism and facilitating further external involvement in the region. Following the EU and NATO Eastward enlargements, they acquired a significant regional importance, taking an active part in most of the cooperation schemes initiated in the

region. For them, the process of regionalism provided the mechanism for European Integration and help them acquire some soft powers (Homorozean: 2010, p.14). Even though often perceived as having undergone very similar experiences, the two countries differ in their approach and political orientation. While Romania is mainly directed Westward and focuses primarily on its relations with the EU and NATO, often neglecting its bilateral ties with other BS partners (Russia or Ukraine), Bulgaria adopted a different approach, focusing both on its relations with the external partners, but also on building long term agreements with Russia. Due to its dependency on Russian oil and gas supplies, Bulgaria aims at becoming a regional energy hub, serving as a transit country for several energy pipeline projects (Homorozean: 2010, p.7). Nevertheless, both Bulgaria and Romania have concerted their efforts in order to avoid a possible “Russification” of the Black Sea Region and to balance the Russian lead in the process of regionalism. The case of Romania, its say in the region and its perspective towards the Black Sea Regionalism will be further discussed and analysed in the following chapter, in order to better understand its role in the region.

Regarding the other two littoral states – Ukraine and Georgia – they did not follow such a smooth path as Romania and Bulgaria, and constantly found themselves under the Russian pressure. The Russian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its involvement in Eastern Ukraine conflict and Crimea’s annexation emphasize Russia’s interests in the region and the impediments it poses to the Black Sea Regionalism. Their state of affairs and security condition directly impacts the entire regional stability, influencing the cooperation trends in the region.

For Ukraine, the Black Sea is of great relevance, conferring it both economic and military advantages and propelling it to the status of regional hub sub-regional leader. However, its leadership shaken credibility and failure to accomplish the requisite transformations created by the Orange Revolution, has put the eventual Euro-Atlantic integration on hold (*Triantaphyllou:2009, p. 230*). Ukraine’s indecision and its constant hesitance between East and West are best reflected in its foreign policy, which emphasizes its availability and openness to various scenarios.

The Black Sea is of a similar importance for Georgia, whose main access to Europe is facilitated by the sea, providing Russia hostility and other geographical impediments. Just like Ukraine, Georgia aspires to NATO and EU memberships and aims at maintaining a balance of power in the BSR, trying to impede a political and military Russian dominance in the region

(Homorozean, 2010, p.8). These two littoral countries' active involvement in the process of regionalism is reflected by the initiatives they came up with (Community of Democratic Choice) and the cooperation schemes they were involved in (i.e. GUUAM). On the one hand the initiatives proposed by Georgia and Ukraine reflect their need to balance Russia, which is perceived as an imminent threat in the region, but on the other hand their inconsistencies and contradictory interests come to reinforce their dependency on it in a number of fundamental respects—economically, demographically and culturally (Manoli:2013, p.212).

Even though many of the local states in the region are sharing a common communist past and similar transition experiences, in the Soviet dissolution aftermath they followed different paths and distinct political trajectories. This can basically explain the major differences and discrepancies emerging between them in terms of power, strategic importance or political development, which ultimately reveal other economic, cultural and social inconsistencies. Besides, the local players are also riddled with various structural, political and socio-economic problems and are facing important security challenges.

The littoral states in the region - their state of affairs and their interplay – directly impacts and influence the region stability and the entire Black Sea Regionalism process. Given their troublesome relations and major discrepancies between them, the process of regionalism was usually hindered and the cooperation formats remained limited and quite ineffective. The efficiency of cooperation formats in the region will be further assessed in the next section.

Regional Powers and their role in the BSR

The two regional powers' (Russia and Turkey) involvement in the region and their relations' dynamics have been the subject of a vast literature, receiving much attention in the context of the Black Sea Regionalism. Perceived as indispensable actors in the regional cooperation scheme (usually referred to as the Black Sea Regionalism gatekeepers), Russia and Turkey are known for setting the cooperation trends in the region arbitrarily, on the basis of their own interests and pursued goals. In order to better understand their role in the region and their influence on the Black Sea Regionalism, this section will focus on these two regional powers' ambitions in the BSR and the strategies they are guided by.

Even though the two main players are pursuing their own interests in the region, they are both animated by the prospect of becoming the leading player in the BSR. In this respect, their actions and initiatives in the region reflect their firm ambition to achieve "regional hegemony". They constantly rejected external influences and opposed any involvement in the region, trying to keep the Black Sea area away from the external players' agenda, so as to further bolster their position in the region. The creation of the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Force (2001) and the Operation Black Sea Harmony (2004) - two exclusionary cooperation initiatives focused on the security and stability of the Black Sea maritime area - came to reinforce their strategy and to stress their intent on keeping the external influence at a distance (Manoli: 2013, p.211).

Black Sea represents a crucial asset of Russia's national security, facilitating its control over the energy resources of the Caspian Sea (Homorozean, p.9). Even though Russia does not necessarily perceive the Black Sea as a scene for regional policies, but rather more like a Russian Lake, it became involved in the regional cooperation scheme in order to prevent the prospect of being encircled by the West and in its attempt to hamper the external players' (NATO and EU) influence in the region. Russia's ambitions in the region are also related to the energy security issue, the control over its former Soviet sphere of influence (including most of the WSRB countries) and the fight against fundamentalism, separatist incentives and terrorism. Besides, Russia has constantly focusing on fostering mistrust and discord among Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, in order to emerge as a leading power in the region and to prevent them from concerting their efforts in the regional cooperation schemes (Buhajski: 2016).

Turkey's agenda in the region often coincides with the Russian one, their interests usually interfering. However, their approach and course of action is somehow different. Whereas Russia attempts to impose its supremacy in the region by means of fear and intimidation, resembling the Soviet practices and methods, Turkey plays the peacekeeper role in the region, trying to act like a benevolent leader, aiming to become a „buffer state“ for European security (Homorozean, p.8). Turkey's ambitions in the region are also energy- related. In its attempt to establish itself as a regional leader in the BSR, Turkey became animated by the prospect of becoming a major energy hub in the region. In order to pursue these goals, Turkey played an active role in the region all throughout this period, supporting and initiating different programs (BSEC, **Black Sea Naval Force**, Black Sea Harmony) - meant to assist regional transition and to improve the existing regional organizations and cooperation formats. Turkey's ambitions in the region and its perceived role in the Black Sea Area were shaped by the 1936 Montreux Convention - which validated Turkey's leadership in maritime security related issues and made it reconsider its position in the region (Triantaphyllou:8).

Turkey – from its position of active NATO member and EU candidate - has the potential of becoming a strategic partner for the EU and to directly contribute to the Europe's energy security. However, given Turkey's recent rapproche-ment to Russia, and its shifted interest towards the Middle East region, Turkey started departed from its EU-related ambitions, its role in the region remaining fluctuant, at times hindering the process of cooperation in the BSR.

The two regional powers, even though having adopted different stances towards the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area, seem to have been animated by similar ambitions and common interests. The cooperation process in the region is perceived by them as a means through which to maintain regional power and to retain control over the BSR. Therefore, the regionalism process from this perspective, appears as a means used by Turkey and Russia to maximize their share of world power. Their strategies in the region continue to be guided by the realist paradigm and their overall involvement in the BSR come to reinforce the principles they are guided by. Thus, this thesis contends that the two regional powers, often perceived as crucial players in the regional security cooperation scheme, are only paying lip service to it today, being perceived more like a factor of regional instability, rather than major drivers for regional security cooperation in the BSR.

External players and their interests in the BSR

The Black Sea Region started receiving extensive external attention following the NATO enlargement in 2004 and the EU accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. Until that particular point, the external players did not manifest a specific interest in the region, remaining quite aloof towards the dynamics taking place in the BSR. The EU and NATO Eastward enlargements have symbolically marked the region redefinition and signaled the commencement of a new era in the region. These two moments were followed by key systemic changes, having impacted the entire process of regionalism in the Black Sea area.

The region is of great importance for the global players for a variety of reasons. For instance, the US interests in the region can be described as both idealistic and pragmatic. The idealistic goals pursued by the US in the region reflect its interest in promoting and instilling democratic practices and values in the developing countries. In more realistic terms, the US involvement in the Black Sea Regionalism is to be understood in relation to the US national interest. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the US have encountered new challenges, its priorities having been reshaped. For instance, pressing issues such as - counterterrorism and the fight against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction- gained momentum and became the US' main priorities. This can explain its shifted interest towards the BSR, which was perceived as a strategic field of action – given its proximity to Iran, Iraq or Afghanistan (Hatto, Tomescu: 2008, p.IV).

In order to strengthen its position in the region, the US has established close bilateral relations with local players in the BSR- Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine - and have intensified the NATO presence in the Black Sea Area. This approach and intense activity in its neighbourhood has instilled in Russia a sense of insecurity, its role in the region being progressively undermined.

This negatively impacted the process of regionalism, Russia constantly impeding any concerted efforts in the region.

Soon after Romania's and Bulgaria's accession, the EU has reconsidered its position and strategy towards Black Sea, and started adapting to the newly created scenario. Ever since, it

played an active role in the region, its efforts taking various forms. The EU involvement in the BSR has been reflected in the various initiatives it proposed and supported (i.e. Baku Initiative, INOGATE, TRACEA, Black Sea Synergy, The Eastern Partnership), but also in the active contribution brought to the BSR - it provided various funding mechanisms and got involved in local infrastructure and transport projects. Part of the tools to which the EU resorted in its strategy towards the Black Sea Region, also included the establishment of bilateral relations. In this respect, the EU got engaged in various partnerships and cooperation agreements with all the littoral states in the region, in order to assist them in their transition and to facilitate their accession into the global economic system. Regional cooperation was perceived by the EU as an important asset, forging stability and promoting mutual confidence in the region (Fischer: 2009, p.340).

However, assessing the effectiveness of the initiatives proposed by the EU and reviewing the approach it adopted in the region, one cannot assert that the EU involvement in the region brought about significant improvements, the policies and tools proposed by it proving to be quite unsuccessful.

The contradictory initiatives projected by the EU and the poor coordination between the agendas of the externally proposed cooperation schemes and locally initiated regional formats, come to reinforce the limited impact of EU policies on political developments in the BSR. Besides, the EU activity in the region was also hindered by the partial incompatibility between Russia and EU interests in the BSR. The energy dimension, and more precisely the EU's ambition to diversify its sources of energy, setting up new pipelines directly connected to the producers in Central Asia highly contravenes the Russian interests in the region (Hatto, Tomescu: 2008, p.II). Another source of tension, which limits the potential for cooperation in the region has to do with the values and practices the EU is trying to instil in its neighbourhood. One of the major goals of the EU is to promote and support the democratisation of these countries, assisting them in the transition process. The EU goals are clearly emphasized in the European Security Strategy (endorsed by European Council of December 2003) – and namely to “make a particular contribution to stability and good governance in our immediate neighbourhood [and] to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union” (Commission Of The European Communities, 2004, p.3). These ambitions and EU's position of conflict resolution proponent in the BSR interfered with Russian plans, aimed at maintaining a state of conflict and

disunion in the region, rather than contributing to the problem – solving. The EU's relations with Russia greatly impacted the process of regionalism in the BSR and negatively influenced the cooperation trends in the region. Without a coherent strategy and an appropriate approach towards Russia, the EU cannot achieve much in the Black Sea Area, leaving the region prone to conflict and disunity.

The EU's shy advance towards the Black Sea emphasised this organisation's limitations in the approach it adopted towards the BSR. Without having developed a coherent strategy for this region and without having initiated discussions and even some strategic partnerships with the key players in the region (especially with Russia), the EU did not manage to attain much of its ambitions in the region. It only made clear its intentions in the BSR and the interests it was animated by (especially the energy security), but it failed to come up with a coherent plan, meant to guide its course of action in the region.

The process of regionalism in the BSR represents a clear reflection of the dynamics taking place in the region, a product of the regional actors' interplay. Given the aforementioned analysis, it becomes quite clear that Black Sea Regionalism - and the cooperation schemes it entails - were shaped mainly by the major stakeholders (Russia, EU, US) projection of power politics. Their lack of strategy, divergent interests and inconsistent policies directly impacted the process of Regionalism in the Black Sea Area, impeding the potential for cooperation in the region. The following section will more closely examine the experience of regional cooperation between 1991- 2016, focusing on the main regional agreements taking shape in the BSR and further analysing the regional actors' stance towards one of the most pressing issue in the region – the energy security.

The Process of Regionalism in the BSR

The process of regionalism is a relatively new concept in the BSR, started being shaped in the early '90s. Its emergence and development in the region is to be understood in relation to both exogenous (the end of Cold War, NATO and EU Eastward Enlargements, globalization, the world economic crisis) and endogenous factors (historical legacies, cultural values, economic circumstances etc.) (Manoli: 2010, p.6). In order to better comprehend the BSR dynamics and the variables at play in the region, one should take both endogenous and exogenous factors into consideration. The process of regionalism should not be only perceived as a response to external challenges, as argued by neo-realists, but also as the outcome of shared experiences and common legacies among regional actors.

Black Sea Regionalism : State of Play

The Black Sea regionalism did not follow a smooth path, usually being caught between two “dominant centers of geopolitical gravity - Brussels and Moscow” (Manoli: 2011, p .2). This can explain the burdensome evolution of regional cooperation schemes, which further reveals the severe socio-economic and political circumstances in the region, but also the misguided approaches adopted by the stakeholders towards the BSR.

The regionalism in the Black Sea area did not take the shape of a structured process, of a coherent regional cooperation scheme, but it was rather the expression of multifaceted networks. It was not a static process, constantly evolving and emerging under various forms, and performing different specific functions. The process of regionalism in the Black Sea area is known for having undertaken two major phases.

The first one can be traced in the early 1990s, right in the aftermath of the Soviet Union dissolution, being marked by the systemic changes specific to the post- Cold War period. While for some actors the Black Sea Regionalism was seen as an opportunity, contributing to the legitimization of their leadership in the region, for the developing countries it was perceived as a tool having the potential to enhance their international position, while at the same time helping

them gain some strategic advantages. This early phase of Black Sea Regionalism was understood as a rational calculus, where the actors' course of action and potential for cooperation reflected the interests at stake and other security concerns.

The second phase begins in early 2000s and is directly linked to the systemic changes taking place in the new strategic environment – following the EU and NATO eastward enlargements. It brought about new cooperation initiatives, meant to tackle the growing regional impact of global issues. These new security challenges, posing serious transnational threats - organized crime, climate change, environmental degradation - started reshaping the region actors' agendas and their relations. Whereas the first wave of regionalism was solely a product of the regional states - animated by the incentives created by the post Cold-War World, the second phase was marked and shaped by the involvement of the external players – EU, NATO, that came to set the trend in the region.

However, despite the multitude of regional arrangements initiated over the last 25 years in the BSR and despite the efforts undertaken in this respect by the regional actors , the outcome proved to be poor, most of the cooperation formats having failed to materialize. The following section will closely look at the most important formats initiated in the region, in order to further assess their function and establish the main challenges that have hindered the regional cooperation process.

Main Frameworks of Cooperation

One of the main important factors forging the cooperation process in the region was the economic dimension, identified as a key binding element in the area. This is particularly emphasised by the most important initiative to have ever been shaped In the region – namely Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).

Initiated in 1992, at Turkey's initiative, the BSEC became the institutional expression of the Black Sea Regionalism. It takes the form of an inclusionary cooperation scheme, designed on the basis of historical legacy, cultural and societal ties. Its emergence was perceived as a milestone

in the regional cooperation process, representing the first coherent expression of cooperation in the BSR which committed the regional actors to the vision of further integration.

Relying on the neo-functionalist assumption, according to which , the cooperation initiated in the economic field would potentially create the favourable conditions for further collaboration and cooperation in in other key domains (by means of spillover effect), The BSEC “creed’ was guided by the belief that successful economic cooperation would also provide for increased mutual confidence and prosperity, which in turn, would enhance the potential for political cooperation. Therefore, In spite of its predominantly economic sphere of activity, the BSEC also acquired a major political importance, coming to address and tackle sensitive hard security issues. Given its expected function, the BSEC was intended to constitute the pillar forging security and stability in the region, boosting the global integration process and facilitating the east – west dialogue. However, even though depicted as being the most advanced expression of regional cooperation in the BSR (Celac, Manoli:2006, p.193-194), it presented some serious limitations and serious inconsistencies. Analysing the results attained over this period, rather than judging by the objectives and ambitions set, the BSEC starts losing its credibility and its efficiency starts being questioned. The BSEC lack of success can be reflected in its minimal achievements, the slow and inefficient decision- making procedures, its failure in promoting regional trade and economic convergence or in setting up a free trade area (Homorozean:2010, p.14). The main drawbacks that have hindered the BSEC from attaining its objectives have to do with the poor inter-sectoral coordination, the limited financial support allocated by the member states, security dilemmas, stakeholders’ divergent interests or the inability to attract the private sector into the decision - making process. However, despite its limitations and deficiencies, to date the BSEC remains the most inclusive scheme of collaboration having been formulated in the region, continuing to set the pace of regionalism in the Black Sea Area.

In addition to the BSEC, there have been established numerous other bilateral and multilateral cooperation schemes, either set up at the littoral states’ initiative or as a consequence of the external impetus. For instance, during the 1990s’, the regional formats in the region were predominantly shaped by the local actors and were reflecting their main concerns in the region. Thus, issues such as environment, naval cooperation, energy infrastructure and soft security have constituted top priorities, and were being addressed since the earliest phase of Black Sea Regionalism. The new era of regional cooperation was marked by the establishment of various

agreements and association formats, among which – the Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BlackSeaFor), Operation Black Sea Harmony, Black Sea Coast and Border Guards Cooperation Forum, Confidence and Security Build-ing Measures in the Naval Field in the Black Sea, the Black Sea Commission or the Black Sea Defense Ministerial Process (Manoli: 2011, p.4). The external involvement in the BSR –even though, originally in an incipient form - started taking shape in the 90's, when the EU started establishing bilateral agreements with individual regional states, while at the same time launching and getting involved in different cooperation formats - INOGATE, Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACEA), Baku Initiative, the Energy Community, Danube Black Sea Task Force (DABLAS). These technical programmes – concerned with issues related to environmental protection or transport and energy infrastructure – had an important impact in fostering multilateral cooperation, becoming the Black Sea Regionalism key drivers. However, their performance did not only fail to meet the expected outcomes, but did also hinder and substantially undermine the relevance of other cooperation schemes – such as the BSEC sectoral working groups on environmental protection and transport (Manoli: 2011, p.3).

Following the NATO and EU eastward enlargement in 2004 and 2007 respectively, to further include Romania and Bulgaria - the external players' started reconsidering their approach to the Black Sea Area, becoming directly interested and involved in the process of regionalism. This is particularly reflected in the initiatives they came up with and also stressed by the enhanced attention they manifested, with regards to the security and stability of this area.

Among the more recently introduced initiatives, The Black Sea Synergy (BSS) (2007) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) were intended to reinvigorate the existing regional cooperation and to strengthen the relation between the EU and other regional actors , while at the same time to promote regional stability by means of trade agreements and democratic institution-building (Park:2014). These two initiatives in conjunction with the EU's active involvement in the region came to reinforce the EU's will and clear intent to become a key player in the BSR. However, the EU's tendency to overlook important aspects inherent to the BSR and its somewhat inconsistent approach adopted in the region, can explain why the EU proved to be quite ineffective in attaining much of its ambitions and why it did fail to promote its values, norms and good governance strategies in the BSR. Besides, its shaky position towards the pressing

issue of energy reflects once again the lack of strategy and prevailing incoherence that emanates from its activity in the region.

NATO's involvement in the Black Sea area took different shapes, but mainly reflected its direct interest in the region, perceived as a geostrategic base in its fight against terrorism. This was clearly emphasized in NATO's Concept against Terrorism published in 2002, and reinforced during NATO and US missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, when they took advantage of the Black Sea airspace. Besides, in order to enhance the cooperation with local actors in the BSR and in order to help them strengthen the military capabilities, NATO launched in 2002 the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). The first to sign the IPAP was Georgia in 2004, followed by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Moldova (Hatto, Tomescu:2008, p.V). However, the NATO presence and involvement in the region was not welcome by all regional players, but was rather perceived as a source of threat by Russia and Turkey, which vehemently expressed their concern with regards to the over-militarisation of the area.

The US involvement in the region can be also observed at the level of different backed up programmes in the region. One of the important cooperation schemes in the region is GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), which was shaped in 1996 with the assistance of the United States. Often perceived as an anti-Russian alliance, GUAM was intended to bolster the independence and sovereignty of these former Soviet states. Another similar regional initiative is the Community of Democratic Choice, established at the initiative of Georgia and Ukraine. Its prerogatives covered issues of democratization, good governance, human rights, security and civil society, resembling much of the GUAM's mandate. This way, the two initiatives scope has been considerably diminished, and their regional effectiveness weakened.

The Black Sea forum for Dialogue and Partnership represents another important cooperation scheme initiated in the region at Romania's initiative, intended to promote synergy between the numerous regional cooperation initiatives. This initiative's effectiveness will be further assessed in the next chapter, as part of Romania's involvement in the BSR.

This thorough analysis of the main regional cooperation frameworks initiated over the last 25 years, reveals several important aspects inherent to the BSR, which directly influence the regionalism process and partnership formats in the region. Even though some sort of progress has been made in terms of regional cooperation, the overall progress of these initiatives seems to

be quite poor. However, this outcome was rather expected given the persisting security dilemmas and various hindrances at play. As noticed throughout this chapter, the process of regionalism lacks success in the BSR can be attributed to a variety of factors, ranging from weak political commitment among regional leaders to limited financial and institutional resources, from overlapping agendas to the stakeholders' inconsistent approaches towards regionalism. Besides, the relationship between the states in the region continues to be influenced by former rivalries, being marked by doubts, resentments and divergent interests.

Even though many of the states in the region are sharing a common communist past and similar transition experiences, the region seems to be quite heterogeneous and highly diversified, due to the major differences and discrepancies between states. Besides, the states in the region are riddled with various structural, political and socio-economic problems and are facing important security challenges, which makes the region prone to a wide variety of risks. Even though the solution to most of the problems in the region would rather be found in unity and different transnational formats, the process of regionalism and various transnational agreements initiated over the past 25 years proved to be quite limited and ineffective, failing to address these issues.

As noticed, the Black Sea area and its dynamics seem to reflect a cooperation – conflict paradox. On the one hand, the potential for cooperation in the region, along with the numerous regional formats initiated already, indicate the regional actors' desire to cooperate and overcome the existing institutional divisions. On the other hand, the process of regionalism and cooperation initiatives seem to be constantly hampered or even stagnated due to the conflicts and other impediments in the region.

Against this background, we can rationalise that thinking and acting regionally was not one of the main priorities of the stakeholders in the BSR over the last 25 years, their own interests prevailing over the collective ones. The relations in the region and the potential for cooperation continue to be dictated by rational calculations, the regional actors' involvement in the region clearly reflecting the realist paradigm they are guided by.

The Process of Regionalism Seen from Romania's Perspective

Romania in Black Sea Region

Romania emerged in the region as a stable actor, taking on a mentor-state position in its relation with other regional actors. Despite the domestic challenge it has faced, and still faces, Romania succeeded to become one of the most reliable partners in the region and to impose itself as a strategic member of the BSR. Even though its evolution and political trajectory in the aftermath of the 1989 did not follow a smooth path, Romania - through its consistency and reliability – made a considerable progress and took important steps in its attempt to enhance its position in the region, but also at the international level. That is how, in the meantime, Romania did not only manage to establish strong relations with the external partners, but also to become a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004 and of the European Union (EU) in 2007. This position granted it many opportunities and charged it with an even greater sense of responsibility towards the affairs developing in the region. Before analysing the approach and policies adopted by Romania towards the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area, it would be interesting to focus on its role in the BSR and to further explore the aims and interests it was animated by in the area. Therefore, the first section of this chapter will closely analyse Romania's evolution and trajectory in the region, focusing on the strategy and course of action it adopted in the region immediately after 1989 and emphasising its interests and main priorities in the BSR. The second section will devote a special attention to the approach adopted by Romania towards the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and will further analyse its activity in The Black Sea Region, emphasising the cooperation schemes it got involved in and the initiatives it came up with in the interest of the regional actors. The last section is intended to shed some light on Romania's relations with other neighbouring regional states, in order to emphasise its strategic role in the region. In this respect, this section will closely look at different cooperation schemes and bilateral partnerships initiated between Romania and its other counterparts, analysing the extent to which one can talk about Romania as a key player in the region.

Romania's strategic role in the Black Sea Region

Following the 1989 revolution, Romania found itself in the position of recreating its identity and rethinking its whole strategy in the region. From an internal point of view, after the 1989 moment, Romania remained riddled with various pressing issues regarding the validity and legitimacy of its “wanna-be “ democracy, but also with problems regarding corruption, national security and financial stability, just to name a few. There were a few very tense years following the fall of communism that left Romania with little options other than to try and seek support Westward. The country was seriously in debt and found in the middle of an internal crisis, having undertaken one of the toughest transitions in the Ex-Soviet space. As a newly democratic state, it had to actually learn how to open discussions with other states and set up trade markets, communications about economy, education and - most important of all, given the context - security. This would mean swiftly changing its attention towards the West while also seeking diplomatic relationships with neighbouring countries within the Black Sea Region. It was in fact, against this background, that Romania has realised the importance and strategic advantages it could take, by trying to establish itself as an important actor in the region. Romania's affiliation to the Black Sea and its strategic position in the region have highly influenced Romania's political trajectory and its overall evolution. This positioning offered Romania an edge when it came to its relationship to the E.U., which wanted to push its borders closer to Russia. The goal of integrating Romania in the E.U. was helped greatly by the positive attitude that Romania had towards integrating itself in the Black Sea Region, becoming a political ally to most of the countries in the zone and also Romania's leniency towards Europe rather than Russia. This proved that an European Integration for Romania did not only make sense from a geographical standpoint - bushing the European border even further towards the East - but also because it would bring on a strong political actor which would have potential of becoming a leader in an otherwise E.U.-free zone. It would also mean that the European Union would have access to the Black Sea - through Romania and Bulgaria - and the trades that would go through there. Given

that the BSR is rich in resources, it was important for the E.U. to be part of the conversation from an economical point of view. Consequently, these are the reasons why Romania knew that it was in a position which had the potential of delivering great gains to the country. The only thing that it had to do was to try and involve itself in the politics of the region.

Over the last 25 years, Romania has been constantly trying to affirm itself as an important player in the Black Sea Area. Animated by its geostrategic position – right between the Danube River and The Black Sea, in the immediate vicinity of Central Europe and Mediterranean Area and close enough to Middle East Region and Central Asia - Romania took on itself a great sense of responsibility and acted all the way in accordance.

The Black Sea has always been perceived by Romania as its main security asset, providing it a great strategic importance. As such, the Black Sea area has always constituted a top priority in Romania's foreign policy, its strategy and overall plan of action, being shaped in accordance to the dynamics taking place in the Black Sea Area. This was particularly emphasized by former foreign minister and President of the League of Nations – Nicolae Titulescu, who stressed that everything that is remotely linked with the Black Sea is of utmost importance for Romania. He also emphasised Romania's main priorities in the region and pointed to the great importance It devotes to building sound relations with other regional neighbouring states, through cooperation and through initiatives that provide for cross-regional peace and unity. These two beliefs have guided Romania's foreign policy and course of action throughout this whole period. It was against this background, that Romania started being perceived as an important actor in the region, but also as a reliable partner, eventually becoming one of the most active of the littoral states, contributing to both security-building, but also region-building.

In its attempt to establish itself as a leading actor in the Black Sea Area, Romania has been a vocal proponent of regionalism in the Black Sea area, supporting and promoting various types of interactions and cooperation between the regional actors. It has also encouraged the establishment of different bilateral and multilateral programmes, intended to strengthen the relations among the regional players and, eventually lead, to a sense of unity and regional cohesion. Given its troubled vicinities and the overwhelming threats persisting in the region, Romania aimed to promote itself as a regional security provider, focusing its attention on instilling a sense of security and stability in the Black Sea area. In this respect, Romania has

shown its support and expressed its willingness to assist the less capable regional actors in their affairs on numerous occasions. Besides, it placed a great emphasis on its foreign policies with smaller states of the Black Sea Region, seeking to establish close relationships with the neighbouring countries and to transfer them the democratic practices it acquired. This was reinforced by the Romanian former President – Traian Basescu, when he emphasized Romania's commitment to “become a springboard for promoting the values of freedom and democracy in the Black Sea region” (Basescu: 2005).

Romania has always tried to set an example of unity and cooperation, getting often involved in various pressing issues and crises in the region that were not directly affecting it. This way, it managed to differentiate itself and became a more imposing actor in the region. Gradually, it started becoming an influencer in the Black Sea area, respected by neighbouring countries and relied upon by the European Union. It also became one of the NATO's most important partners of NATO, thus acquiring a great sense of responsibility in the region.

Romania has also constantly tried to propel the Black Sea region and its security-related issues to the external actors' agenda top priorities. A clear evidence in this respect is represented by the vocal position adopted by the Romanian President – Traian Basescu, with regards to the involvement of the external partners, calling for enhanced participation of the EU, NATO, OSCE and the US. Therefore, he contends that “...new conceptual framework is now needed for changing the perception that the Black Sea Region is the periphery of Europe and acknowledging its new geopolitical features as an interface towards Central Asia and the Middle East” (Basescu, 2005).

Romania's Interests in the region

Romania's regional ambitions are clearly reflected in its national security strategy (NSS 2006), and came to reinforce its goal of becoming a leading actor in the region. This can be easily noticed by the objectives it pursued in the region, which refer to the active engagement in different cooperation schemes intended to fight terrorism and cross-border organized crime; and

to the necessity of developing different regional partnerships and cooperation formats, meant to deal with the crises in the area so as to instill stability and a sense of security in the BSR (SSNR: 2006, p.18-19). Romania made a priority from preventing and acting towards the conflicts in the region, especially through the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the Stability Pact. Therefore, Romania was directly interested in strengthening the OSCE's relevance and enhancing its efficiency in settling the frozen conflicts and in managing crises and post-conflict rebuilding (MAE: 2010).

The Romanian National Military Strategy (NMS) also stressed Romania's potential to become the enforcer of regional security, and an important contributor to peace and stability in Europe. In this respect, as stipulated in the National Military Strategy, Romania focused its attention on restructuring and modernizing its military structures, while at the same time, focusing on enhancing its bilateral and multilateral partnerships with other states in the region (Military Strategy of Romania: 2005).

In addition to these clearly emphasized strategic objectives, Romania, in its attempt to establish itself as a regional leader, also aimed at playing a pro-active role in the region, in order to assist the less capable regional actors on their way to the European Integration. From its position of mentor state, Romania constantly tried to instill the democratic values and principles into the regional partners, by furthering the Western practices it had attained and sharing the lessons learned from its transitional experience.

Its objectives in the region are also economy-related and refer to the development of energy and transport corridors, meant to connect economically and commercially the Black Sea area with the Euro-Atlantic region (SSNR:2006, p.22). From its leading position in the BSEC, Romania has constantly tried to pursue different economic policies, meant to promote and establish a regional free trade, so as to boost the economical development of the region. This, in turn would have also facilitated the expedited development of the infrastructure in the area. Linked to this idea, Romania was a strong proponent of the idea of building a Black Sea Ring Highway - a four lane highway that would cross every country around the Black Sea, intended to strengthen "trade, economic, humanitarian and tourism ties: in the Black Sea region (Romania Insider: 2012). Another similar project supported by Romania was the Motorways of the Sea - a project which was designed to provide an alternative to land transport, being intended to reduce traffic congestion across-Europe.

Romania has been a country which has had a tumultuous period immediately after the 1989 revolution and the end of the communist regime. As such, the first thing that Romania sought out to do was to turn to its regional allies for some sort of guidance. Romania's strategy for involving itself heavily in the regional affairs has been understood as being for the greater good of the Black Sea Region and in order to aid smaller states, but in reality, it did not have a good enough position internally in order to have such objectives in mind from the very start. Romania's motivations were, at first, to gather allies. For a country with little regional support during communism, a strong presence in the BSR would be extremely beneficial for its immediate development.

The analysis of the objectives pursued by Romania reveals its ambitions in the region and point to the role it aims to acquire in the Black Sea area. However, the extent to which these goals are attainable will be analysed in more depth as part of the following section.

The Policy of Romania towards the BSEC and the Black Sea Region

Romania's Role in the BSEC

Given its particular interest in turning the Black Sea Region into a secure, democratic and thriving area, Romania took a very positive stance towards the Black Sea Economic Cooperation from the very beginning, welcoming Turkey's initiative in 1992. The BSEC was intended to provide as a tool forging the European Integration and promoting the economic cooperation between the regional actors, which ultimately, would have also furthered collaboration and cooperation in other key domains. As founding member, Romania has placed a great importance on the BSEC, directly supporting its activities and, actively contributing to its development. Romania saw in this regional cooperation programme an opportunity to stimulate its own economic development, and consequently, to enhance its chances of joining the European Union. This line of reasoning proved, indeed, to had the desired effect. Hence, Romania - by its active engagement in the BSEC and by the contributions brought to the development of this organization's activities – strengthened its position in the region, while at the same time smoothing the way to its European and Euro-Atlantic accession (to the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and, the European Union) (Manoli:2007, p.102).

As aforementioned, Romania proved to be an active member and an important contributor as part of this organization. It was one of the main proponents and initiators of the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly (PABSEC) foundation in 1995 – a means of including member-states governing forces in the decision making process of the BSEC, greatly improving the way in which the cooperation was conducted and helping in the development of more meaningful and productive initiatives. This new body also conferred legitimacy to the BSEC and positively impacted the regional cooperation, while at the same time stimulating the democratic evolution of the regional actors.

The second BSEC Summit Meeting - which was hosted in Bucharest in 1995, was of particular importance for the future evolution of this organization as a whole. During this particular

summit, the broadening of this programme's sphere of activity has been decided, so as to include three other pressing issues on its agenda. The first of the three additional areas of acting upon was identified as the necessity of combating the spread of organized crime, while also combating the drug and weapons trafficking issue as well as the acts of terrorism in the region. These pressing problems were aimed to be solved through means of a concerted effort. The second area which needed to be greatly improved was the development of unity and cooperation between medium-sized corporations. This also could only be done through improving inter-state dialogue, and opening the borders of these states to these corporations as to positively benefit the economies of the involved countries. Lastly, an ever-growing aspect which all states agreed upon was the need for a greater involvement of the members in the protection of the environment, translated into a concrete program of actions against the detrimental effects of pollution in the region (Manoli: 2007, p.103).

Romania has also supported the idea of turning the BSEC into an organization, meant to focus its activities on the creation and implementation of different programmes, covering matters of common interest. In this respect, Romania has organised the first Business Forum for the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. It attracted numerous investors and entrepreneurs from the regional neighbouring countries, which analysed and discussed different viable possibilities for enhancing the cooperation in the region. Romania also had an important say in the establishment of Black Sea Trade and Development Bank (BSTDS) and significantly contributed to the creation of the International Center for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) (Micu: 2007, p.103). Among other positive contributions brought about by Romania as part of this organization, it can be also mentioned its initiative with regards to the establishment of the Black Sea University Network (BSUN). This was regarded as an important measure, intended to contribute to the development of a common regional approach towards the Black Sea area and to the shaping of common practices among the regional actors (BSUN: 2017).

However, one of the major contributions brought by Romania was its initiative to embark on creating a regional forum, namely – the Black Sea Forum for Dialogue and Partnership. It was designed as a consultative process, a medium for idea exchange and networking, addressed to the countries from the extended Black Sea Region. The first session was held in Bucharest on 5 June 2006 and aimed at “ defining a common vision of democratic and sustainable development”. This forum was also initiated as a means for promoting and enhancing the regional cooperation

between states at other international organisations under various forms – be them multilateral or bilateral partnerships. This meeting was attended by representatives of the regional states and other countries, but also by members representing international organisations, who expressed their interest in getting involved and directly backing the regional efforts to accelerate economic development and to create a sense of unity and stability in the region (Manoli: 2007, p. 105). Unlike many other cooperation schemes established in the region, the Black Sea Forum took a more "politicised path", tackling with issues of democratization, security, good governance and other social aspects. However, the objectives pursued by this initiative resembled much of the BSEC goals, somewhat undermining the forum's overall function.

Given its important contribution to this organization, we can fairly affirm that Romania made the most of its presence in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. On the one hand, it has proven once again its support and consistency towards the process of cooperation in the region, implicating itself in the establishment and development of its organization in all its phases. On the second hand, Romania, by the actions it initiated in the BSEC and by its active involvement, reinforced its position in the region. This brought Romania closer to the external partners (The EU, NATO and US), which started perceiving it as an important partner in the region.

Romania's Policy towards the Black Sea Region

Romania's involvement in the region was not only confined to its direct participation to various regional cooperation formats, but it was also reflected in the different policies it adopted in the region.

For instance, throughout this period it pursued an agenda of regional assistance, meant to support the regional actors in need, when encountered with unexpected predicaments. In its attempt to maintain and provide for regional security, Romania took a quite considerate stance towards different pressing issues the less capable actors had come across. This is reflected by the way in which it has taken upon itself some decisions and initiatives, such as aiding Kyrgyzstan with financial aid after a snowstorm that left thousands of people homeless or helping Uzbekistan

with their refugee crisis of 2005 by offering accommodation to those in need (Moroney, Hoggler: 2006, p.28).

Romania also played an active role in the region, by participating in various regional initiatives revolving around security issues. Among the programmes that Romania was part of and which strengthened its position in the region are - the South-East Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) and the South-eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG)– just to name a few. Headquartered in Romania – Constanta between 2003-2007, SEEBRIG plays an important role in maintaining security and balance in the Southeastern Europe and Black Sea Region. It takes the form of a military organization, amounting to around 5000 troops, often conducting military exercises together with NATO. Romania has been implicating itself significantly in the development of SSEBRIG, backing it up considerably (Moroney, Hoggler, p.28). The SEDM is also a regional format of cooperation, shaped by the actors in the South-Eastern region, intended to ensure regional stability and to enhance the inter-state cooperation. Going further with the efforts of maintaining peace and of developing itself as a regional leader, Romania has also been implicated in ten U.N. observation missions, regarded as peacekeeping operations. One of the most notable in this respect is SHIRBRIG – the Multinational Standby Force High Readiness Brigade.

Romania's active involvement has been also reflected in the fight against terrorism. Given the pressing threats the region is exposed to, Romania got involved in different US and NATO led operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, making noticeable contributions to the war on terrorism. Romania's contribution was particularly remarked in two important missions: ISAF Afghanistan operation in 2008, when Romania deployed more than 760 troops, directly contributing to the stabilization effort of this country; and IRAQI FREEDOM operation – intended to re-establish the regional stability - to which Romania contributed with an infantry battalion, intelligence detachment, liaison and staff personnel (around 500 troops) (NATO: 2009). Another important operation in which Romania got involved is KFOR mission in Kosovo. Animated by the idea of contributing to the Western Balkans security, Romania participated to the mission with around 150 troops (Nato: 2009).

Romania proved to be an incontestable military force in the region, getting involved in various security operations and, hence, directly contributing to the security and stability of the region.

Besides, its active involvement and military commitment, shape it into one of the most important and reliable partners of EU and NATO in the region.

As abovementioned, Romania has also made a priority from preventing and contributing to the regional conflict settlement. In this respect, it proposed the organization of a summit in 2006, meant to address the unresolved conflicts in the Black Sea Area. Romania's pro-activeness in the region and beyond, has bolstered its position regionally and positively influenced the way in which Romania is being perceived in the BSR, elevating it at the level of a mentor-state for others. Besides, Romania has constantly expressed its willingness to support other regional actors in their attempt to advance towards membership of the EU and NATO. For instance, in December 2013, during the official visit of the Georgian Foreign Minister to Romania, The Romanian representatives expressed their "support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration" and proved to be eager to share the lessons learned by Romania on its way to European Union accession and to NATO membership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia: 2013).

In its attempt to enhance the process of cooperation in the region and in order to facilitate the developing states' accession into the global economic system, Romania has tried to develop different economic cooperation schemes with other regional actors from the Black Sea Area. Besides, from its leading position in the BSEC and CEFTA (Central Europe Free Trade Agreement), it has proposed on numerous occasions the establishment of a Free-Trade Zone in the South-East Europe.

Romania's active involvement in the Black Sea Region, its leading roles in the regional cooperation formats, and its status of "regional mentor" reflect its potential to become a key player in the region. Given the worrisome dynamics in the Black Sea Region and the undermined roles of the two regional powers (Russia and Turkey), there are strong prospects for Romania to take the lead in the region, and soon have an important say in the unfolding of cooperation schemes in the BSR, while at the same time formally assisting and providing guidance to the less capable actors in the region.

Romania's relations with other Regional Actors

As stated previously, Romania is a country which, over the last 20 or so years has tried to become an important player in its region. As such, one of the top priorities of Romania was focused on establishing meaningful collaborations and stable relationships with its regional neighboring countries. Romania understood that regional stability is directly linked to the well being and rightful development of the countries that made it up and acted accordingly. Given its influential position in the region - conferred by its membership to both NATO and the EU- Romania took on itself the responsibility of assisting its regional less-capable partners, and also the commitment of instilling in the region the democratic values and principles it started being guided by. It was precisely its post-communist evolution and the perseverance it has proven over the last 25 years that help Romania differentiate from other regional actors and acquire this mentor-state position. At the same time it came to assume the role of forging strategies, projects and initiatives, intended to provide for a stable medium in the Black Sea and in the Western Balkans regions. That is why, throughout this whole period, but especially in the aftermath of its Euro-Atlantic accession, Romania placed a great emphasis on its foreign affairs and partnerships with smaller regional actors in the Black Sea Region.

For instance, over the past two decades, Romania has established a strong partnership with Georgia, which ultimately became Romania's main economic partner in the region (MAE: 2010). From these positions, the two countries got involved in different bilateral partnerships, covering a wide range of fields, and have shown potential for further collaboration. In this respect, Romania and Georgia expressed their interest with regards to the creation of Black Sea – Caspian Sea freight corridor. Their cooperation schemes are very extensive, but particularly focused on the economic, energy and transports areas. Beside the cooperation formats initiated between these two countries, the two countries have developed a relation based on reciprocal support. On many occasions Romania expressed its endorsement towards Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and have always sustained its European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions. Thus, between 2013-2014 Romania acted as NATO Contact Point Embassy (CPE) in Georgia, enacting a set of public diplomacy activities within annual Actions Plans (MAE:2010).

Another very important regional player, together with whom Romania has developed several inter-state projects, but has also had very vocal disputes is Ukraine. The Ukraine - Romania relationship has been started, diplomatically, in 1992, when the two embassies were established

in Bucharest and Kiev respectively. One of the most important bilateral accord signed by both states was the "Agreement of Good Neighborly Relations and Cooperation between Ukraine and Romania". This document was of utmost importance for Romania's attempt on joining the European Union and NATO, as it stated that it did not have any territorial claims against Ukraine. This aspect became crucial given the following dispute between the two countries and represented the main reason for which the two countries went through a tense couple of decades, characterised by mutual friction. The relations between Romania and Ukraine started deteriorating considerably with the dispute regarding rightful ownership of Snake Island. Following a series of unsuccessful bilateral negotiations, Romania went further and brought its case in front of the court in 2004. Romania contested the Ukraine administration of the island, and challenged the technical definition of it, as the land holds importance for both countries. Whomever would have owned the island would have had exclusivity of the economic zones between Romania and Ukraine. While the International Court of Justice did not rule in full favor of anyone, it did draw the border as to try and please both parties. The landmass was to be considered an Island, but the maritime borders would be drawn as if it was not one. While this whole dispute made the relationship between the two countries a bit tense, it did not hamper Romania's intent to continue to want to make an ally of Ukraine in the region. Romania became well aware of the fact that, if it wanted to become an important figure in the Black Sea Region, Ukraine was not one of the neighboring states that it wanted to have disputes with.

In more recent times, Romania has been a very vocal supporter of Ukraine in its dispute with Russia, standing as one of the most important actors of the EU in this crisis, mainly due to its geographical proximity. The first official act that Romania has undertaken in its attempt to resettle its relation with Ukraine was offering free-passage - without visas - to half a million Ukrainian citizens that were living close to the Romanian border in the aftermath of the Russian occupation of Crimea and in the context of raising tensions in the area (Institute of World Policy: 2016). Romania's firm position against the action undertaken by Russia in Ukraine and its support for Euromaidan have had a positive impact on these two countries' relationship evolution.

The relationship between Romania and Ukraine has been recently revigorated by several important measures, that contributed to the strengthening of bilateral cooperation, especially in the security sphere. Thus, Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko has recently expressed his

accord and support towards the Romanian initiative of creating NATO flotilla at the Black Sea and shown his willingness to join it as soon as this initiative is consented to by the Alliance (Poroshenko: 2016).

The Russian-Ukraine crisis opened Romania's eyes with regards to the Kiev's true intentions and political orientation - more Westward directed than originally thought. Even though Romania, initially, perceived Ukraine as being more Russia-dependent (especially in terms of resources) and politically oriented towards Moscow, the events having unfolded during the Crimea crisis showcased an image of a more West-oriented Kiev. For Romania, the crisis had a significant importance, due to the fact that Crimea was a mere 300 kilometers away from the borders, consequently, emerging as a significant threat to Romania's national security. Given these events taking place in its immediate proximity, Romania decided to launch, together with the U.S. their missile defense shield systems.

As expected, this decision was not welcome by Russia, president Vladimir Putin expressing his strong disapproval and contending that Romania would be in the crosshairs of a Russian retaliation if these actions wouldn't be suspended. (Putin: 2016). In fact, this pretty much summarises Romania's relation with Russia throughout this whole period. Mainly focused on its Westward directed partnership, Romania tended to overlook its relations and bilateral cooperation with Russia, whose foreign policy and strategy in the region was perceived as a constant threat by Romania. The relationship between the two states has never been particularly good following the communism fall, Romania constantly being in contradiction with Russia over the energy problems and a number of other issues. The tensions have been fluctuating over the years, but the relation between Romania and Russia never surpassed the status of neutral.

The former Soviet State has manifested expansive aspiration ever since the dissolution of the USSR, with more and more actions being taken lately in this sense. The Russia's direct involvement in Moldova's internal affairs, its role in Transnistria, Russia's suspension of activities under the CFE treaty, Crimea's annexation, and the August 2008 intervention into Georgia reflect its expansionary tendency and the constant pressure it creates in the region (Global Security:2016). Given these Russia's bellicose predispositions, Romania distanced itself from the idea of enhancing its relationship with Russia and focused on ways through which to control and put a stop to these expansionary tendencies. In this respect, Romania has made clear its desire to develop a small fleet of ships that would have defensive purposes and that would be

placed in the Black Sea. However, this initiative would have also necessitated the support of Turkey and Bulgaria.

An interesting thing to know is that Romania has had a strong ally in a somewhat unexpected country: Turkey. It is, by all means, the second most powerful state in the BSR, following Russia. Romania always sought to have close relations with Turkey and to attract it to its side, as an important partner in the Black Sea Region. This was particularly emphasised by Traian Basescu - former president of Romania – who contended that Turkey was an "indispensable ally for regional stability" (New Strategy Center: 2017, p.3). Turkey has been - all throughout this period - a strong proponent of the process of regionalism in the Black Sea Region, constantly promoting the dialogue between the regional actors and coming up with various initiatives, intended to strengthen the relations between the states and to enhance the cooperative attitudes at the regional level.

Over the last 25 years, the diplomatic relationship between the two states was characterized by mutual respect and support. As such, Turkey actively supported Romania's acceptance to NATO while Romania proved to be a strong proponent of Turkey's accession to European Union. In fact, this was made particular clear by Traian Basescu, who asserted that Turkey's presence in the EU would highly benefit and contribute to the revitalisation of the traditional Europe (Basescu: 2011). Romania and Turkey have initiated numerous dialogues and have sent delegations to one another on various occasions, so as to further enhance their cross-country cooperation schemes and to plan and discuss long - term goals. Out of the regional actors, Romania and Turkey set an example of successful collaboration and partnership. The document that comes to reinforce this particular fact is the Strategic Partnership Declaration, signed by Traian Basescu and his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gull in 2011 (MAE:2011). The document emphasized all the sectors of cooperation between the two countries, focusing mainly on security and economy related issues.

Besides, in the attempt to enhance their relationship, Romania and Turkey have also developed other means of action, such as the Turkish- Romanian Joint Economic Commission - a platform used for discussing economic issues and laying the groundwork for trade agreements and business investments between the two states. The two countries were well -aware of their economic potential and the advantages they would take by getting involved in different economic cooperation schemes. Thus, their partnership key focus was directed towards the

economic development. Among other areas of discussion between the two countries, there are also energy-related project and strategies. Therefore, they started developing a potential subsea interconnectivity plan in the electricity sector, that would benefit them both (Colibasanu: 2016). However, the recent events taking place in Turkey and, more precisely, the 2016 Coup have somewhat changed Turkish foreign policy and its political trajectory, departing it from the US and from idea of becoming a EU member. Its policy towards Romania did not change drastically, the two countries further pursuing their common plans and projects.

Another important actor in the region, together with whom Romania got involved in various partnerships is Bulgaria. The two countries have almost followed the same path following the Soviet Union dissolution in 1989. Romania and Bulgaria present a lot of similarities with regard to their role in the region and have shared common experiences. They have followed the same route towards the EU and NATO integration, becoming full members in these organisations in 2004 and 2007 respectively. These important moments also symbolise the West expansion Eastward, which conferred them access to the Black Sea for the first time. Against this background, Romania and Bulgaria came to be perceived as the external players' strategic pillars in the region, becoming the most reliable actors in the BSR.

The relations between Romania and Bulgaria have fluctuated over time, and particularly reflected some sort of competition in the region between the two countries. However, there have been several discussions and some potential for cooperation has been revealed, especially with regard to the development of joint infrastructure projects. The two countries have also concerted their efforts so as to avoid a possible "Russification" of the Black Sea Region and to somewhat counterbalance the Russian lead in the process of regionalism. However, they took quite different approaches and adopted distinct stances towards Russia. While both countries became more or less equally concerned about Russian expansionary tendency, over the last few years Romania proved to be more vocal, harshly criticising Russia's actions on various occasions. Bulgaria, on the other hand, preferred to maintain its relations with Russia rather than jeopardizing its image of a reliable partner. This became quite apparent when Bulgaria's prime minister - Boiko Borisov- expressed their strong disapproval to join any NATO Black Sea fleet, describing Bulgaria as a peaceful country (Reuters:2016).

Another important partner for Romania in the region – this time from The Wider Black Sea Region (WBSR) – is Greece. Immediately following the 1989 Revolution, Romania discovered a new reliable partner, with whom it developed fruitful relations. Ever since, they got engaged in different partnerships and participated in various programmes that benefitted them both. Its common agenda covered various issues, ranging from economic growth to migration problems, but also security related issues. In this respect, they were expressing a common interest towards the affairs taking place in the Western Balkans (MAE: 2017).

The first phase of their partnership was oriented towards educational and economic cooperation schemes. In economic terms, the partnerships developed between the 2 countries proved to be very successful, by 2015, the total value of bilateral trades between the two countries growing up to 1,5 billion Euros for the year, equally divided between exports and imports. Until 2016, around 7000 Greek capital enterprises were headquartered in Romania, which in total made up of around 5% of the foreign enterprises total capital in the country (MAE:2010). As aforementioned, Romania and Greece have frequently opened discussions about cross-country educational projects in the domains of IT, medicine and engineering. Another key factor in the relationship between these two countries is comprised of the religion aspect. These are two of the countries amounting the highest number of orthodox people, something less common in Europe and a criteria which set common ground for collaboration on numerous occasions.

Romania's relations with its regional neighbouring countries reveals its openness to discussion and the importance it pays to the development of fruitful relations with its other counterparts. The numerous cooperation schemes it got involved to, along with the different programmes and partnership schemes it initiated in the region, come to reinforce its particular importance in the region and its main priority of creating and providing for a stable and secure neighbourhood.

As already mentioned above, Romania took on a sort of mentor role in the region, constantly trying to assist the smaller regional countries and to involve them in different partnerships, that have benefitted them. Besides, Romania has always shown its support and implicated itself diplomatically in different crises taking place in the region, seeking to obstruct Russia's expansionary tendency and to counterbalance its dominance in the region. All these actions enhanced Romanian image in the Black Sea Region as well as in Europe in general. Romania became the main partner of the external actors in the region and emerged as the primary regional

provider of security and peace, given its cooperative attitude and its constant attempts to counteract Russian expansive activity. Such efforts truly showcase the role that Romania has tried to acquire over the last 25 years in the region and it seems fair to affirm that, it succeeded to become one of the most important players in the BSR, its active involvement and participation revealing its potential for even further engagement in the region and beyond.

Final word

Taking into consideration all the elements presented throughout this study, it became quite clear that the process of regionalism in the Black Sea Region did not manage to serve its main purpose - to act as a dynamic instrument of regional and global security and stability, failing to address most of the sensitive issues the region is riddled with. However, the failure can be entirely attributed to the regional actors, which did not understand the importance of thinking “regionally” and did often overlook the idea of acting for the common good.

This paper have - from the very beginning - contended that, the process of regionalism and the cooperation schemes – if properly developed and conducted , would have the potential to significantly benefit the participants involved, but also, to provide for stability and security in the entire area. However, analysing the experience of regional cooperation over the last 25 years, it seems that we can clearly talk about a failed attempt of regionalism in the Black Sea Region. The involved actors, animated by personal interest and other immediate gains, have constantly overlooked the idea of creating a functional, working-base region, that would have laid the groundwork for a secure stable and flourishing area. The regional actors did fail to understand the benefits the unity, cohesion and cooperation would have brought and acted all along in their own best interest, shrouding any possibility of common meaningful actions being taken for the good of the entire Black Sea Region. These actions, in turn, were replaced by political scandals, security crisis, economical misunderstandings and the inability of major powers in the region to guide this cooperation process towards a positive outcome.

The two main players in the region , Russia and Turkey, presumably, supposed to shape and guide this whole activity in the region, did only pay lip service to the process of regionalism in the BSR, getting involved in different regional cooperation only to maximize their share of world power and to pursue their own interests. Under these circumstances, it can be said that they have constituted important factors of instability in the region , having hindered the process of regionalism in the BSR, which, after a 25- year lifespan, lacks efficiency, coordination and coherence. Therefore, what could have become the single most important region in Europe, the

one that could have mended the fences between the West and the East became the most volatile area of Europe. The evolution of the regional cooperation comes only to reveal the severe security, political, social and economic circumstances in the area and emphasizes the diverging interests and competing policies of the actors involved.

However, in the context of this failed regionalisation process, there have been political actors that have risen to the task of keeping the BSR as closely together as possible. A clear example in this respect was Romania, which became well aware of the benefits brought by cooperation and mutual coordination and acted all the way, consequently. Thus, it has constantly focused its foreign policy on developing stable partnerships with neighbouring countries and getting involved in as many programs and cooperation schemes as possible. Besides, it came up with a number of initiatives meant to further enhance the cooperation in different fields of common interest and to provide for security and stability of the region. Its cooperative attitude in the region brought it many advantages and strengthened its position in the eyes' of its neighbours, but also of the external actors. Thus, Romania- a state which did not seem initially to have great potential of becoming an influencer in the BSR, ended up eventually being the most relied upon partner by the external actors (NATO, US, EU) in the region. Therefore, Romania started aspiring to the prospect of becoming a regional leader in the BSR and took on a great sense of responsibility, constantly trying to assist the smaller regional countries and supporting them on their way towards the Euro-Atlantic integration.

Overall, despite it still being a very ambiguous concept - giving rise to numerous debates and generating many theories - the importance of understanding the process of regionalism is not something that should be ignored by any political actor. A strong region can lead to stronger member-states which would, in turn, lead to local developments. A great example in this regard is Romania, a country which focused on the idea of regionalism and ended up greatly enhancing its position and status among other states in the region and becoming the most reliable partner of the western political powers. If the stronger political powers would follow suit, the process of regionalism in the region would become far more successful, enhancing the prospects for economic development and contributing to the stability of the region. Given the instability pervading the region and the wide variety of risks to which the BSR is exposed, the regionalism should be perceived as the ultimate weapon to address these pressing issues. Regionalism, despite its ambiguous nature, it is a process that has proven its utility and that has the potential of

being the “alibi” for bringing countries together, through communication, collaboration and unity.

The literature on Black Sea area and its security context is in a continuous expansion. Given this region’s utmost importance, it comes as no surprise that recently, the shift has been directed towards this geographical point of interest. However, the research on the process of regionalism in the Black Sea area and the responses of regional actors towards this new concept, that can act as a security stabiliser in the region are still to be researched.

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