

English version of an article from Italian

The countries of South-Eastern Europe and the Ukrainian crisis.

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Since the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to NATO in 2004, the Ukrainian crisis has been the first serious international crisis in the south-eastern part of the Atlantic Alliance. As from 2004 Romania and Bulgaria thus became the "sentinels" of NATO and of the European Union with regard to the control and supervision of traffic on the Black Sea, which connects Central Asia with Europe and the control of which is strategically of great importance with regard to the flow of energy supplies, and trade in general, between the Caspian Sea and Europe. Since the outbreak of the severe crisis in Ukraine at the end of 2013, Romania and Bulgaria have played a role of great importance as far as the control of the Western Black Sea in NATO is concerned, (along with Turkey, a NATO state which controls the southern part of the Black Sea and especially access to it, namely the Turkish Straits, as settled by the 1936 Montreux Convention favoring access to the Black Sea by the coastal states, which also laid down different conditions and access restrictions in times of peace or of conflict to the presence of military vessels belonging to non-riparian states, limiting their presence to 3 weeks). Romania and Bulgaria took part in or provided logistic support to recent naval maneuvers by the Atlantic Alliance, whose purpose it was demonstrate resolve and cohesion against Russian attempts to foment unrest in eastern Ukraine, to cause the instability of the government and/or to construct a territorial corridor that connects the territory of Russia through Ukraine to Transnistria, Moldova's separatist republic with a majority of Russian or Slavic population. The latter, a former Soviet republic, is afraid of being sucked into the Russian orbit, making it impossible for it to join the EU, although it recently signed several trade agreements with the European Union. Moldovan political forces have been engaged for several years in a heated debate about which path Moldova should take over the next few years, that is whether to continue the path of gradual accession to the European Union through the "Eastern Partnership" or to give in to the mix of flattery and threats that Moscow practices with Chisinau with the aim of persuading Moldova to adhere to her geopolitical project of the Customs Union/Eurasian Union. In this context, the issue of Transnistria and its possible exploitation by Russia is of particular importance and strategic value. Rumania is afraid of the destabilization of Moldova, due to the possible incorporation of Transnistria into the Russian sphere of influence. Rumania has historically experienced tensions with Russia, or the Russian Empire, because of Bessarabia, a border territory historically predominantly of Romanian ethnicity, but annexed by the Russian Empire at the beginning of the

nineteenth century and then again by the Soviet Union/Western Ukraine at the end of the Second World War and now part of Moldova and western Ukraine. Apart from the ethnic-territorial issues, given the number of Rumanian minorities present in Western Ukraine, and for which Romania seeks protection at the European level, Bucharest sees the Ukrainian crisis as a bright opportunity to highlight its role as a strategic outpost of the European Union and of NATO in the containment of Russian influence in the Black Sea. Romania, in turn, sees NATO as a useful tool for containing Russia's clout in the Black Sea. Over the last decade, Romania has become a sort of launching pad for the projection of NATO and the United States towards the Black Sea and the naval traffic passing through it, arousing great concern in Russia, which considers the Black Sea an essential element for the security of energy imports from the Caspian Sea. For Moscow it is therefore essential to control the northern coast of the Black Sea, so that it does not become a lake dominated by NATO forces that would ultimately dominate the energy market.

Bulgaria has had for many centuries a cultural and political closeness to Russia, strengthened by the common religious and linguistic roots, particularly intensified during the Soviet period, when Bulgaria became a sort of iron ally of Russia/the Soviet Union. Bulgaria has continued good relations with the Russian Federation up to this day, as a result of these elements of linguistic and cultural proximity, but mainly because of its almost total energy dependence on Russia, which subjects Bulgaria to a sort of energy blackmail, or at least to extremely powerful forms of pressure. Bulgaria, which since 2007 is inwardly torn between a "progressive" "European soul" and the need to maintain good relations with the big "sister Slavic nation", following the crisis in Ukraine, has come to a difficult crossroads in its foreign policy. In fact, the actual realization of Russian plans aimed at controlling the northern part of the Black Sea might seriously upset the geopolitical balance of the area and could eventually lead to a severe increase in international tensions in the area, forcing Bulgaria to choose which energy project to join (South Stream, Nabucco), in other words either an energy project sponsored by Moscow or one sponsored by Brussels and Washington. The qualitative difference compared to the past is that, until the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West was reduced mainly to economic and financial issues, whilst today territorial and military elements too, such as the recent annexation by Russia of Crimea or that of Abkhazia in 2008, following the Russian-Georgian war, have become of crucial military-strategic importance for controlling the Black Sea and the burgeoning energy trade that takes place there. The era of ideological or military confrontation between trading blocks in the Black Sea is therefore far from over, but has instead turned into an all-out confrontation, uniting once again the West, after several years of internal strife, against the old Cold War foe.

