

## RUSSIA'S POLICY TOWARD THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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### **Introduction**

The history of Russia is about fighting to get access to the seas: from the Livonian and the Great Northern War, when Russia got under its control the Baltic Sea, to the Russo-Turkish Wars for the Black Sea basin. Traditionally, the Baltic and Black Sea regions were considered by the Kremlin key theaters of Russia's strategy to counter the European states' presence and influence through hybrid strategy, coercive diplomacy, and nuclear blackmailing. Thus, in the Baltic Sea region, Russia has strengthened its presence with the Baltic Fleet and land-based forces deployed in the Kaliningrad region, accompanied by the massive concentration of Russian troops in Belarus and the announcement of the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons at the Belarusian territory.

After Crimea's inclusion as a federal entity, the Black Sea region was officially defined as a vital zone for Russia's territorial integrity and nuclear deterrence. This approach was confirmed in the 2022 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation that declares these two regions, including the Sea of Azov, as well as the Black Sea and Baltic Straits, to be essential zones for ensuring the national interests of Russia, its economic development and national security, as well as supporting strategic and regional security. It also contains a list of challenges and threats to Russia's national interests; among them are NATO's approach to its borders and armed conflicts in the proximity of particular geopolitical importance for Russia. Therefore, the Kremlin defined the "unconditional right" to deploy and use the Russian Navy forces in the "vital zones for ensuring the national interests of the Russian Federation" as a strategy for the "comprehensive strengthening of geopolitical positions" in the World Ocean.

The Mediterranean Sea, especially the eastern part of it, is one of these "vital zones" where Russia is considered to be a "pre-eminent naval power ... earned this

role on the field” (Rettman, 2020). The direct linkage of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean in the Russian discourse raises a question about the Kremlin’s interests and objectives in the basin. Scrutinizing the strategic documents on Russian national security and foreign policy, the Kremlin officials’ statements, as well as papers dedicated to the Russian policy towards the Mediterranean region, the paper aims to clarify whether the Kremlin strategy towards the Mediterranean is an instrument of Russia’s greatness assertion or one of the theaters of its counteraction with the EU and NATO. Starting from the brief overview of Russian policy in the Mediterranean in a historical retrospective, the study will look at the conceptual and practical acts of the Kremlin in modern days, aiming to answer the question of whether Russia is a threat to the EU posture in the Mediterranean region, one of the most essential hubs for the European security and stability.

### **Russia’s Policy in the Mediterranean Region: Historical Overview**

The attention of the researchers to the history of the Russian attempts to build a position of force in the Black Sea and control under the Bosphorus and Dardanelles for having free naval access to the Mediterranean demonstrates the significance of the latter for Russia’s strategic interests. An overview of Russia’s plans towards the Mediterranean shows that Russia viewed the possession of Mediterranean territories and control over sea routes as a part of a “great plan”. This plan was a comprehensive strategy to achieve world power status and project its power and influence in Europe and the Middle East, involving military expansion and diplomatic and economic initiatives.

However, with the beginning of the Cold War, the Kremlin perceived its presence in the Mediterranean from a security outlook. As Minister of the USSR, A. Gromyko noticed that being a Black Sea power, the Soviet Union was a Mediterranean Sea power as well; therefore, its permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean basin would be a guarantee of peace and security on the southern borders of the USSR and in the entire region in general (Celac et al., 2019).

The first Soviet base with submarines was set up in Albania, though the Soviet Navy could enter the Mediterranean Sea and call on certain ports in Egypt and Cyprus. Nevertheless, the USSR's ambitions and interests were unsatisfied with such a vulnerable situation while being dependent on the relations with these countries. Moreover, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war demonstrated the crucial need for Russia to have a permanent base as a means to reassure the southern borders of the Soviet Union and to protect its projects in some Mediterranean countries like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Turkey. Therefore, the Kremlin decided to station the special Fifth Mediterranean Navy Squadron in July 1967. This squadron observed and reported on NATO and the United States' activities in the Mediterranean, provided crucial intelligence for Soviet strategic planning, and guaranteed investments in pro-Soviet Mediterranean countries (Gazimov, 2021, p. 466).

Scrupulously watching any deterioration among the regional countries or distraction of the NATO Allies, Russia has used every possibility to strengthen its position through different military, economic, infrastructure, or humanitarian projects. By writing-off of the multi-billion-dollar debt of a then-Syrian leader, the father of the current president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, Russia has got Tartus, one of its oldest military bases outside formerly Soviet territory (Gazimov, 2021, p. 467). Thus, the Tartus base became the only delivery and restoration center for the Soviet Mediterranean Navy Squadron, significantly changing the balance of power in the basin. D. C. Richardson, a commander of the USA Sixth Fleet based in the Mediterranean, noticed in a couple of years that the Soviet Squadron had become a challenge in a "NATO lake" area (Celac et al., 2019).

**Modern Russian Posture in the Mediterranean** With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow had to withdraw its ships and submarines from the Mediterranean and disappeared from the region for two decades. This absence was termed "an anomaly" by P. Ausseur and P. Razoux (2021) due to all previous references to the significance of the region for Moscow's interests. The "Greater Mediterranean" concept emerged in Russia's strategy in the 1995 Memorandum on

Russian Policy in the Mediterranean. As proposed by Y. Primakov, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, this concept suggested focusing on the Mediterranean as a region that provides direct access to the strategically important Middle East. It implied partnership relations between the countries of the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Thus, the 1995 Memorandum was Russia's first attempt to re-engage with the region (Erkan, 2022, p. 69). However, it was only under Putin's presidency that the Mediterranean region returned to Russia's foreign policy agenda. The 2001 Maritime Strategy identified the Mediterranean as an important area where the presence of the Russian Navy needs to be increased (Maksymenko, 2023, p. 91).

However, in the following years, the Kremlin's perception of the Mediterranean region was based on several factors rooted in the Russian worldview of the post-Cold War era. First, an inclusive and symmetrical political and security order was not created after the Cold War, which resulted in a strengthened sense of marginalization of Moscow, a feeling that Russia was seen as a regional state, excluded from a global dialogue of the centers of power, as well as on a tense perception of threats to the national and state interests (Maksymenko, 2015, p. 34-35). Secondly, Russian strategic culture is based upon two qualities: a deep feeling of insecurity and a major emphasis on power projection (Sinovets et al., 2015). The Mediterranean region plays a substantial role in both cases as a part of Russia's foreign policy towards the EU and NATO. With the deterioration of relations with the US and Europe, which was later accompanied by the perception of NATO and the EU as threats to its geopolitical influence, the Kremlin started to strengthen its security and strategic posture in the Mediterranean basin. In his speeches, Putin rejected the recognition of the unipolar post-Cold War order and declared his intention to resist US dominance. This demonstrates the security dilemma of Russia, which tends to assume the worst in others and respond accordingly, in some cases believing that the best, if not the only, approach to security is to attack and expand (Maksymenko, 2015, p. 35).

Such a strategy lies at the heart of the Kremlin's policy towards Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine since 2014. It demonstrates that Russia no longer sees itself as a part of the common space of security and stability but has turned into an isolated and unpredictable actor that will use all its resources to regain its hegemonic status. Analysts indicate the 2008 Russian intervention in Georgia as a major turning point in Moscow's foreign policy and strategy. Assessing the implications of the Russian-Georgian War of 2008, M. Kofman (2018) concludes the return of great-power politics, while the Kremlin demonstrated the 'will and ability to actively contest' the vision for a Europe "whole, free, and at peace", and challenge the EU and NATO "design for a normative international order". Such a position has also been reflected in the Mediterranean area, where Russia continues a standoff with the US and NATO security framework in Europe and neighbouring regions that led to the acceleration and modernisation of Russia's military capabilities, including the Tartus military base and intensification of Moscow's contacts with Turkey, Syria, and Libya.

Moreover, the further contradictions in the US-Russian relations fed the Kremlin's perception of NATO as an adversary aiming to block Russia. Therefore, the 2014 Crimean annexation and Russia's entry into the war in Syria in 2015 are considered the counterstrategy of the Kremlin. The lack of interest from the EU and the US in the Mediterranean issues was favourable ground for Russia to fill the vacuum (Cristiani, 2020). It started with the creation of the headquarters and operational command of the permanent operational unit of the Navy in the Mediterranean Sea in 2013 and Putin's visit to a Russian Navy frigate to "discuss the military's naval strategic road map" for the creation of "Russia's foothold in the Mediterranean", aiming to transform the region into a zone of military and political stability and good neighborhood (Ulgen, & Kasapoglu, 2021).

These events were the turning points in the Kremlin's policy toward the Mediterranean, officially confirmed in the 2015 Maritime Doctrine. The document stated the need for the changes to the previous one due to the changing international situation and "strengthening Russia's position as a sea power," aiming

to provide an integral, consistent, and effective naval policy to protect Russia's interests (Maritime doctrine, 2015). Analysts evaluate the new doctrine as an aspirational document that introduces new military thinking of Russia and is oriented on a paradigm of great power competition (Ulgen & Kasapoglu, 2021).

The 2017 Fundamentals of Russia's policy in the field of naval activities prescribes ensuring a permanent naval presence of the Russian Federation in the Mediterranean Sea through the development of an auxiliary fleet and logistics centers (The fundamentals, 2017). However, some analysts note that Russia started to restore its "lost positions" in the region at the beginning of the 2000s with President Putin's visits to several countries there and the assignment of the Black Sea vessels to patrol the eastern Mediterranean basin. In 2013, Shoigu, Russian Minister of Defense, pointed out the significant threats to Russian national interests emanating from the Mediterranean; therefore, the Russian Black Sea Fleet located in Sevastopol has been permanently assigned combat missions in the Mediterranean zone. Moreover, the plans to deploy the cruise missile "Kalibr" on the Russian naval ships and submarines operating in the Mediterranean and granting permanent status to the large-scale naval and aviation exercises "Ocean Shield" were announced (Rumer, & Sokolsky, 2021).

The Syrian war is considered the next and the central stage of Russian efforts to gain a permanent military presence in the Mediterranean. By supporting the Assad regime, the Kremlin gained a unique deal on air and naval bases with freedom of movement and a level of sovereignty that can help Russia, first, to evade, to some extent, some restrictions of the Montreux Convention and, second, to secure its stronghold in the area that is considered a "south key to the World Ocean" (Celac et al., 2019).

So, what are the objectives of Moscow in a gradual but persistent strengthening of its presence in the Mediterranean? First, Russia's general goal is twofold due to the US and EU disengagement from the region. First, it will increase the Russian Navy's combat capabilities and ensure national security and national interests of Russia, including the maintenance of strategic stability and

strategic deterrence of adversaries in the region. Considering the Mediterranean as an area of NATO's dominance, Russia sees the region as an important coercive element in its escalation strategy, an additional leverage of influence to deter potential challenges to Russia's territorial possessions in the Black and Mediterranean basins. Moscow modernised the Tartus naval base, deployed complex air- and missile-defense systems with strategic surface-to-air missile systems, Buk-M2E missiles, Pantsir batteries and the Aerospace Forces group in the Khmeimim also having access to the strategic port Larnaka. Deployments of Russian military capabilities in Syria, which are networked with the Syrian Air Defense Force's assets and warfare systems, have finalised the creation of an A2/AD bubble over the Levant by deploying Russian Mig-29 and Su-24 fighter aircraft in Libya; thus, establishing the logistical connection with North Africa and the Black Sea. In total, this provided Russia with the ground for projecting its power in the Mediterranean and beyond. Among other goals, it is worth mentioning the following: facilitation of Russian naval diplomacy, the collection of data and information about NATO forces in the region as well as the assistance of the political forces of several countries in the wider region and a testing ground for new weapons, methods of warfare conduct and military operations in the "warm waters", which can be used for further extension of the Kremlin's presence, or destabilization and provoking of conflict potential in the Mediterranean.

Accordingly, the provision of the 2022 Maritime Doctrine about the "unconditional right" to deploy and use the Russian Navy forces should be perceived as a strategy to intimidate strategic rivals with escalation, which includes, first of all, the USA and the Allies (Maritime doctrine, 2022). Meanwhile, the naval potential, which significantly exceeds the Russian one, is considered a reason for increasing the number of bases of the Russian Navy outside its borders. At the same time, Russia's strategy in the Mediterranean region consists of deliberately cultivating enmity and fear, constantly stressing that an extensive military confrontation is likely, almost inevitable, because of the United States and Europe solely. Therefore, the second objective is to assert the status of a great

power that can determine political and geo-economic trends in the region of the Kremlin's particular importance. Gazimov (2021) argues that the Arab Spring events and the insufficiency of Russian military and economic capabilities to the US-NATO military assets induced the Kremlin to restore its multifaceted military presence in the Mediterranean accompanied by a mixed strategy of hybrid combat.

### **Russian Hybrid Strategy in the Mediterranean**

This complex strategy combines conventional military tactics with non-military methods such as active diplomacy and agitation efforts. These efforts aim to deepen existing cleavages within NATO, thereby increasing Russia's influence in the region. The Concept of Russian Federation's foreign policy prioritises the following aims: full-scale and trustful cooperation, comprehensive support, and deepening the multifaceted partnership with the interested countries (Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia); establishing a sustainable, comprehensive regional security and cooperation architecture in the Middle East and North Africa, based on Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region and the principle "African problems – African solution" as well as through security assistance, inter alia food and energy security, as well as military and military-technical cooperation; promoting interfaith and intercultural dialog and understanding, consolidating efforts to protect traditional spiritual and moral values, and combating Islamophobia (The concept of the foreign policy, 2023).

Thus, this document mirrors the previous Kremlin's regional aims and actions per se. Russia attempted to enter the Libyan war to open "a Russian front in the Mediterranean" due to Libya's strategic position in front of the European shores because it might extend the A2/AD bubble and gain leverage in the migration and energy issues over Europe (Fasanotti, 2024; Chivvis, & Kadlec, 2017). The Kremlin openly supported General Khalifa Hiftar through the Wagner group, air forces based in Syria, and by printing money for the opposition block that secured their political survival (Cristiani, 2020). Other examples are related to Moscow's increasing presence in Egypt in 2017 when parties agreed on Russian

combat aircraft access to Egyptian bases and permission for Russia to carry out the largest air defense training (Clarke et al., 2020). Additionally, Moscow and Cairo shared the interests in Libya that has facilitated the military and energy extraction and supply projects and created the ground for Russia's engagement in the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant.

Similar Russian diplomacy can be tracked in other countries of North Africa and the Middle East, where the Kremlin has seized the opportunity to increase its influence and perception as an ally by winning the battle through "vaccine diplomacy" as well as arms, oil, and grain export. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has turned out to be an additional ground for deepening the Kremlin's influence in the region. The Mediterranean countries import up to 90% of consumed grain, and half of consumed wheat comes from Ukraine and Russia (Bertin, & Demurtas, 2023). Russia managed to keep Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and others in its sphere of influence by cutting off money debts and providing subsidized grain and fuel supplies. Another leverage of the Kremlin over the Mediterranean is Russian Arabic media projects widely represented across the region. Russia's mainstream narratives refer to "Europe that dehumanizes and undervalues" the southern Mediterranean countries instead of representing Russia as the only partner of the Arab states (Larramendi, & Piazza, 2024). Therefore, the leaders of these countries participated in different Moscow-initiated meetings and forums and did not join the EU's sanction policy against Russia.

Moreover, these tactics are part of Moscow's strategy towards Turkey, a NATO member state and a significant actor in the Mediterranean. Ankara is crucial for Russia's ongoing rivalry with the US, NATO, and energy policy. Therefore, analysts speculate that the Russian military presence in Syria is leverage over Turkey, which Russia has to balance due to some contradictions in the Syrian, Libyan, Cyprus, and also Ukrainian cases. However, Moscow and Ankara share too many interests that oblige them to reach a deal on "conflictual connivance" (Ausseur, & Razoux, 2021; Pierini, 2021). Here is a sample of the Kremlin's flexibility and success in order to generate, provoke, and use divergences inside

and among the regional actors. By supporting President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016, while the EU and the US demonstrated their skepticism, Russia provided itself with positive dynamics of further relations with Turkey. It determined the loyal position of Ankara and Erdogan personally in the Mediterranean and Ukrainian theatres. It can be considered a turning point in Turkish NATO and EU relations and a significant win for Russia in securing its influence and interests in the Mediterranean. Notably, playing with anti-European and anti-American sentiments, the Kremlin agreed with Turkey on conducting several Russian-Turkish joint military and police operations in Syria and deploying the Russian anti-missile defense system instead of NATO missiles. Additionally, Russia has become a partner of Turkey in constructing the latter's first nuclear power plant, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant, as well as in continuing several ongoing gas projects, despite the outbreak of Russian full-scale invasion in Ukraine and many attempts by sanctions groups to establish gas embargoes against Russia.

Hereof, the Kremlin's policy towards the Mediterranean region consists of the following principles. First, due to its limited geo-economic and military capabilities compared to the EU and NATO, Russia carefully calculates its projects' costs, benefits, risks, and returns to ensure its interests within the Mediterranean region. Second, Moscow seeks to maintain dialogue and assist any political actors whose policy might correlate with the Russian agenda. Third, Russia has no intention of solving economic troubles; however, it actively uses them to project its power and pursue interests. Finally, to undermine the influence of the EU and NATO in the Mediterranean, Russia uses a complex of all available means. The Kremlin's strategy advanced in exerting influence through successfully balancing and profiting from the cooperation with opposing states, including the EU and NATO traditional partners, in the Mediterranean simultaneously: with Iran and Israel, with Israel and rival Palestinian Fatah and Hamas, with Turkey as well as with the Syrian Kurds; and with opposing sides and their external sponsors in Libya and Yemen (Katz, 2023). Furthermore, this strategy enables the Kremlin to

incentivize the Mediterranean countries to cooperate while maintaining ties with the European ones, thus prospectively expanding Russian influence and presence in the sub-Saharan Africa and the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula.

### **Conclusions and Implications for the EU Policy in the Mediterranean**

While Russia views the Mediterranean as a strategically important key to guaranteeing its interests and access to the open ocean, it lacks a coherent and comprehensive strategic approach to the region. The Kremlin's policy is initially shaped by its interests, ambitions, and threat perception currently reflected in twofold intentions: to counteract the presence of the EU and NATO and to project its power and influence. However, its limited capabilities have been embodied in a policy of constantly balancing several divergent principles, goals, priorities, and ways of interacting with partners and opponents in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, even this approach has been successful due to the weakening of the US attention to regional issues and the decline in the effectiveness of EU policy.

Moreover, the EU's incorrect assessment of the threats from Russia and the demonstrated doubts and inaction, limited by economic sanctions and political statements in the aftermath of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, have allowed Russia to strengthen its position in the Mediterranean, seizing the initiative from the EU and unilaterally appointing itself a mediator on several conflicts in the region. Today, Russia is a military and politically influential actor in the Mediterranean, which has complicated the positions of the EU and NATO, strengthened its military presence in Syria, created positive relations with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, and Turkey, restored communication channels and strengthened its position as an ally and partner among many states in the region. In this way, Moscow becomes part of regional disputes, not to find solutions but to guarantee its interests, intending to use regional contradictions for its benefit. Mainly to maintain a balance of power in the region that is favorable to Russia.

Russia's war on Ukraine has shifted the focus of some southern Mediterranean countries toward China, which, being a newcomer, is already

perceived as an important regional player. Mutual interests and concerns on the EU and NATO threats to their standoff in the region facilitate Moscow and Beijing's collaboration on the fragmentation of the unity of Europe, thus posing additional risks and challenges to the EU interests and objectives in the region.

The main challenge to the EU's position in the Mediterranean, originating from Russia's "divide-and-conquer" strategy, is the necessity to develop a unified approach to the region. The only way for the EU to effectively counterbalance Russia is to change its role: to be an active political actor, not just a finance source. Moreover, it is necessary to develop tools that may help manage "the semblance of stability" that the Kremlin's approach creates in the region, prevent it from inspiring or maintaining low-intensity conflicts, and limit the opportunities for controlling key energy sources and manipulating the migration issue.

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