



UNITED IN THE NORTH, DIVIDED IN THE SOUTH: EXPLAINING SECURITY COMMUNITY FORMATION ON NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

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Regional security community formation succeeded in the Baltic Sea region but not in the Black Sea region of NATO's eastern flank. Using Karl Deutsch's framework, the article comparatively analyses two indicators-common identity reflected in threat perceptions towards Russia, and networks of institutional cooperation. The Baltic case study encompasses Poland and the Baltic states, while the Black Sea analysis focuses on Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which is considered a juncture point in the region's security landscape. Baltic NATO allies share a unified strategic identity rooted in historical Soviet occupation and perceive Russia as an existential threat, enabling robust institutional cooperation through formats such as joint military initiatives and coordinated defence postures. In contrast, Black Sea cooperation is hampered by divergent strategic identities and asymmetric threat perceptions. While Bulgaria and Romania view Russia as the primary threat to the region and advocate for enhanced NATO presence, Türkiye pursues strategic autonomy, positioning itself as a regional mediator rather than aligning with NATO against Moscow. The article concludes that security communities emerge when members share existential threat perceptions and common identities. For the Black Sea region, the study recommends inviting Türkiye to participate in the emerging EU Black Sea Maritime Security Hub and developing the Three Seas Initiative as an alternative cooperation framework.

Keywords: *Eastern flank of NATO; Baltic Sea security; Black Sea security; regional security community.*

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Introduction

Deterring Russian aggression on the eastern flank of NATO has become a key issue on the Euro-Atlantic agenda in the past decade. “We are all on the eastern flank now”, affirmed NATO’s Secretary General Mark Rutte at a speech held at the Chatham House in London, in early June 2025 (POLITICO 2025). The speech aimed to raise awareness among the European allies of the transatlantic organisation on the imperative of increasing defence spending, as Russia could be ready to use military force against NATO within five years. The “eastern flank of NATO” as a first line of defence against what now the Alliance is describing as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area” – i.e. Russia (“NATO 2022 – Strategic Concept,” n.d.) began to gain traction in transatlantic semantics with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

This act of aggression on the European continent prompted allies to strengthen defence and deterrence capabilities in Eastern Europe in response to these challenges. Consequentially, at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw, the leaders agreed to establish an ‘enhanced Forward Presence (eFP)’ in the Baltic Sea region. This posture, consisting of four multinational battlegroups, each led by a framework nation, was deployed in the Baltic states and Poland. Although equally exposed to the Russian threat, for the Black Sea region, NATO established only a ‘tailored Forward Presence (tFP)’ at the 2017 Summit in Brussels, deployed only in Bulgaria and Romania, as a multinational framework with rotational forces, smaller in scale than the one in the Baltic sea region (NATO, n.d.-b). Currently, the Black Sea region also benefits from four multinational battlegroups, as a result of the decisions taken at the Summit in Madrid in 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine.

Although we “are all on the eastern flank now”, even within Eastern Europe, for the better half of the last decade, some were more on the eastern flank than others. That can be observed not only by comparing NATO’s presence on the northern versus southern portion of the eastern flank between 2016-2022, but also by assessing comparatively the allies’ approaches towards the same threat – Russia, and their willingness to work together in smaller, more agile formats to mitigate it. Three years short after the annexation of Crimea, Türkiye, the NATO member with the biggest military power in the Black Sea region, decided to buy air defence missiles systems (S-400) from Russia, while publicly rejecting the proposal of Romania for a permanent NATO presence in the Black Sea. The government in Sofia also refused the idea of a NATO fleet in the Black Sea proposed by Bucharest in 2016. During the same period, the Allies from the Baltic Sea welcomed the extended NATO eFP in their region and worked together within Joint Baltic Air Policing missions to



increase deterrence and readiness in the face of a more assertive Russia. Poland and the Baltic states are also often praised publicly for their increased defence spending and strategic resolve (Slakaityte and Surwillo 2025).

Following the enlargement of NATO to include Finland and Sweden, the Baltic Sea is now a ‘NATO lake’, whereas the Black Sea region remains a theatre of war (a so called ‘Russian lake’), in which Russia’s militarisation threatens freedom of navigation with tremendous impact for the global food security landscape. Rather than picking at NATO policy leaders for allowing the Black Sea region to become the Alliance’s soft underbelly, this paper aims an answer to the question: why the formation of a regional security community was possible in the northern part of the eastern flank, whereas on its southern part we have witnessed shallower cooperation from the NATO Allies?

By examining the official strategic documents of NATO members in the Baltic and Black Sea regions comparatively, and the activity of the regional organisations and minilateral formats they are part of, the paper will test the emergence of security communities in the two subregions of the eastern flank against two indicators selected from Karl Deutsch’s framework on regional security community formation: (1) a common identity, which is reflected also on the threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia, and (2) a network of institutions through which security cooperation can be developed over time (Deutsch 1957). Each case study represents a subregion of NATO’s eastern flank: the Baltic Sea region, where the regional security community is formed between the Poland and the Baltic states, and the Black Sea region, where the regional security community should be comprised of the littoral states Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye. The analysis covers the period from 2014 up to the present, beginning with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, considered a critical juncture in both subregional security cooperation and in the strategic importance of the eastern flank in the wider Euro-Atlantic security landscape. This period marks a fundamental shift in the regional security order, redefining alliance patterns in both subregions, as exhibited by the NATO Wales Summit declaration from September 2014. The allies recognised from the highest level that the Russia’s annexation of the territory belonging to Ukraine was “a pivotal moment in Euro-Atlantic security” and committed to “continuous air, land, and maritime presence and meaningful military activity in the eastern part of the Alliance, both on a rotational basis” (NATO, n.d.-c).

The paper will prompt both literature and policy contributions. First, it aims to advance the literature on the formation of regional security communities within NATO and sub-regional cooperation in Europe in the context of the Russian threat. Second, it aims to provide actionable policy prescriptions to make sub-regional cooperation more effective within the eastern flank of NATO. This cause has become imperative for strengthening the European pillar of the transatlantic alliance against the background of a possible American disengagement.



The article employs a qualitative comparative case study design, focusing on two regional subsystems within NATO's eastern flank: the Poland-Baltics region, encompassing Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and the Black Sea littoral states, comprising Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye. The selection of these case studies was informed by the decision to analyse two distinct subregions of the eastern flank of NATO, in which one can observe a certain asymmetry in regional security community formation, with the northern half of the flank being more cohesive than the southern flank, marked by tensions regarding relations to Russia and a different view regarding NATO's role in the region (Lechner, 2025).

1. Theoretical Framework: Shaping a Regional Security Community

The concept of regional security community was coined by Karl Deutsch in 1957, in a pioneering work that defined it as a region where states have achieved “a sense of community, accompanied by formal or informal institutions or practices, sufficiently strong and widespread to assure peaceful change among members of a group with reasonable certainty over a long period of time” (Deutsch 1957). Therefore, because its existence depends on the expectations of peaceful change among its members, regional security communities represent an escape from the security dilemma that defines the anarchical world. Deutsch identified three components for a security community formation: mutual interdependence within intraregional relations, collective identity and common values, and a network of common institutions and standards that regulate relations and may contribute to conflict resolution (Deutsch 1957).

Adler and Barnett's later work reformulated this concept from a constructivist point of view, defining the security community through a “we-feeling” element – a degree of mutual consideration, trust, and an identification with another in terms of interests (Adler and Barnett 1998). A crucial distinction emerges when comparing security communities with security regimes: in security communities, states must develop shared values and understandings that generate that “we-feeling”, becoming “other-regarding” actors that perceive their interests as inextricably tied to one another, rather than self-interested actors that simply operate within the same space (Collins 2007). Adler and Barnett differentiated between loosely-coupled and tightly coupled pluralistic security communities based on their depth of trust, the degree of institutionalisation of their governance system (Adler and Barnett 1998).

Recent theoretical developments emphasise how collective meanings on which peaceful change is based can evolve through communities of practice, which Adler defines as like-minded groups of practitioners bound by shared interest in learning and applying common practices (Adler 2008). This practice-based approach implies that common practice can precede collective identity in the process of forming a



security community (Bremberg 2015). According to Adler, communities of practice may contribute to the development of new identities through negotiation and reification of meanings (Adler 2008). Another way through which security community building can be facilitated is through socialisation. The intensity of communication through meetings, workshops, seminars, summits and other gatherings at various levels creates a framework facilitating norms transfer, with socialisation direct toward individuals from administrative apparatus who can communicate outcomes back to the domestic political actors (Lucarelli 2005). The process of socialisation represents a pathway through which cooperative security practices and democratic norms may diffuse across borders, as evidenced by joint military forums where partners officers under the NATO umbrella may learn about civil-military relations and the accountability of armed forces (Adler 2008).

There are different pathways, as examined in the literature, for forming a regional security community. The Nordic security community represents a “bottom-up” model initiated through civil society interactions and transnational ties, while the European Union exemplifies a “top-down” approach, where common institutions made war too costly, with geopolitically optimal conditions allowing time for the establishment of stable peace based on community and identity (Mouritzen 2001).

Critical security studies perspectives challenge the top-down approach and state-centric nature of traditional security community concepts, emphasising that true security can only be achieved through emancipation (Chang 2016), with security conceived comprehensively to encompass not just states but individuals and society at large, shifting focus from hard military security concerns to encompass a wide range of issues, such as environmental problems, economic performance, public health, migration, and welfare (Browning and Joenniemi 2004).

The process of building a security community is not without obstacles. Historical narratives that entrench regional great power ambitions, political divisions, inequalities and mistrust, along with geostrategic asymmetry between major and smaller regional players may complicate the formation of cooperative security frameworks (Antonenko 2009). Furthermore, the presence of distinct subregions with histories of instability may result in subregional identities that prevail over broader regional ones, hampering comprehensive security community development (Antonenko 2009). In spite of the establishment and maintenance of regional cooperation institutions, various factors including regional conflicts, territorial disputes, residual suspicion from historical conflicts, and divergent agendas for regional influence can prevent the development of mature pluralistic security communities (Hajizada 2018). Regional security complexes that are characterised by geographical proximity and differences in the distribution of power among main actors can maintain both cooperative and conflictual dynamics simultaneously (Ghenade and Onu 2024).



The scholarship on shaping regional security communities highlights different types of such exercises and their limitations. The simple existence of a regional organisation with a security agenda attached to it is not considered enough to be a regional security community. For example, the case study of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) presents the limits of elite-driven regionalism. Scholars released that ASEAN has never actually been a nascent security community, but has instead been a security regime, where norms regulate member behaviour through cost-benefit calculations by governing elites rather than through the “we-feeling” among populations (Chang 2016). According to Collins, if ASEAN is to become a security community, it will need to generate a regional identity among the peoples of Southeast Asia and given them a stake beyond being a club for the governing elite (Collins 2007). The European case exhibits a more developed example of a security community formation, with the EU often described as the epitome of a tightly-coupled pluralistic security community exhibiting mutual aid, functionalism, and supranationalism (Chang 2016). With war no longer a practical option after the common coal and steel production arrangements, there was some trickling-down of elite “we-feeling” to civil society (Mouritzen 2001). EU is mentioned in the scholarship not only as a security community, but also as a security community-building institution that can diffuse norms and practices outside its organisation through its enlargement process and its disciplining effects on aspiring members (Bremberg 2015). In the case of NATO, the organisation’s partnerships and enlargement policy, particularly through its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program containing more than 2,000 activities ranging from public diplomacy seminars to military exercises facilitated norms transfer and enabled NATO to emerge as a leading institutional agent of cooperative security practices (Adler 2008).

The two subregions of the eastern flank of NATO (the Baltic and Black Sea regions) represent case studies that are not analysed thoroughly in the current scholarship from a regional security community perspective, especially not in a comparative manner. Examining cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, the question arose whether the existing Nordic security community could be trickle-down to the Baltic Sea and include its eastern shore, perhaps even Russia, with the answer depending significantly on whether Baltic-Russian relations should be modeled after the Nordic or EU paradigm for building a security community formation (Mouritzen 2001). With the growing assertiveness of Russia in the region and its decision to annex Crimea in 2014 and start a full-scale invasion into Ukraine in 2022, this scenario is all the less likely. However, evidence of security community emergence can be found in the westernmost part of the Baltic Sea subsystem, with an ascendant if not mature security community existing especially concerning countries with NATO and EU memberships, as a spillover effect of Europeanisation and deeper economic cooperation (Hajizada 2018). The Black Sea region, on the other hand,



represents a more challenging case for security community formation, as the region is often characterised by a “security complex” rather than a security community. Located at the intersection of three security zones – Euro-Atlantic, Russian, and Middle Eastern, the Black Sea presents a dichotomy of cooperation and conflict (Hajizada 2018). Moreover, the legacy of Ottoman and Russian empires still linger over modern political dynamics, and, unlike in the Baltic case, the Black Sea region remained divided after EU and NATO enlargement separated new members from long-term aspirant states and those that do not wish to join (Hajizada 2018).

2. Case Studies: Regional Security Community Formation in NATO’s Eastern Flank – a Comparative Analysis of the Baltic Sea and Black Sea Regions

2.1. Security Cooperation in the Baltic Sea Region

Shared strategic identity and common threat perceptions in the national security documents

The national security strategies, defence concepts, and foreign policy documents of the Baltic states and Poland reveal a common basis of strategic and cultural identity, anchored in historical experience, democratic values, and a shared perception of threats. The strategies analysed are based on the defence of the values enshrined in their countries’ constitutions, such as democracy, civil rights and freedoms, sovereignty and the rule of law. Moreover, the strategic documents analysed are anchored in the states’ membership of NATO and the European Union (Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland 2017). This membership in the Euro-Atlantic community is perceived not only as a guarantee of security, but also as a basis for identity that ensures the development of the state. Polish strategies, for example, set strategic objectives in the field of security in accordance with national values, but also with the international order based on rules and solidarity (Poland’s National Security Strategy 2020). Lithuania considers the viability and unity of NATO and the EU, together with the security, solidarity, democracy, and well-being of all states in the Euro-Atlantic community, to be vital national security interests (Lithuania’s National Security Strategy 2017). We also note in these strategic documents a non-competitive vision of the EU and NATO in terms of security cooperation. A common position, expressed by Poland and Lithuania, argues that EU actions in the field of security and defence should be complementary to those of NATO, not competitive, and should avoid duplication of structures (Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland 2017).

The identity of the four nations is also united by a common historical experience of threat from the Russian Federation, and this awareness shapes the modern



perception of security among the elites. The Russian Federation is consistently identified as the main and greatest threat to national security and democratic interests in Lithuania and Latvia. Lithuania, in particular, considers the imperialist ambitions of the Russian Federation to be an existential threat not only to its own country, but to the entire Euro-Atlantic community (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2021). One can observe the introduction into the strategic vocabulary of the value struggle between democratic and authoritarian states, mainly the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2021). The Russian Federation is identified as the existential threat to Estonia's security. Estonia's strategic documents mention the Russian Federation's objective to dismantle and rewrite the European security architecture, as well as the rules-based international order (Estonia's National Security Concept 2023). In the case of Poland, similarly, the Russian Federation is identified as the main and most serious source of instability and threat to Poland's national security and NATO's eastern flank. Russian aggression and revisionism demonstrate this actor's desire to challenge the rules-based international order. Poland recognises that it is permanently exposed to threats defined as hybrid, which operate below the threshold of war and are often difficult to attribute or diffuse (Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland 2017).

The states analysed perceive the Baltic Sea region through the prism of security, infrastructure, and regional cooperation priorities. Thus, Lithuania's strategic documents describe the region as a vulnerable security space, but also as a vital platform for cooperation (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2021). The Russian Federation's growing military power and its decisions to use force in violation of international norms have a negative impact on the security environment. NATO's visibility and military presence in the region are considered the most effective way to demonstrate the solidarity of allies and a reliable deterrent. The Baltic Sea region is an area with energy vulnerabilities, which is why Lithuania emphasises the importance of projects that enhance the economic and energy security of the Baltic states and synchronisation with European continental networks (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2017). Latvia describes the Baltic Sea region as an area subject to significant deterioration in security, but also as an essential framework for political and economic cooperation. According to its strategic documents, Latvia is concerned about the militarisation of the region by the Russian Federation, with an emphasis on force mobility, highly trained forces, and blocking access to the Baltic Sea by sea and air (Latvia's State Defense Concept 2020). Estonia describes the region as an area of high regional cohesion, but also a region facing new challenges with major geopolitical changes. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO will strengthen the security of the region, and Estonia is actively engaged in formulating new unified regional security commitments (Estonia's National Security Concept 2023). Poland's strategic documents identify the region as an area of vital



strategic importance, especially after NATO's expansion, and as a pillar of European economic development, through the Three Seas Initiative for increasing regional interconnectivity (Poland's Foreign Policy Strategy 2017-2021 2017). According to their assessment, with Sweden and Finland joining NATO, the Nordic-Baltic region becomes a fully qualified security space, reducing the military significance of the Russian Baltic Fleet and the Kaliningrad region. This change enhances the alliance's capacity to deter the Russian Federation (Poland's National Security Strategy Recommendations 2024).

But who are the key players for achieving regional security? Lithuania, for example, considers its strategic partnership with the US to be one of the most important instruments contributing to a favorable security environment, with the active military presence of the US in NATO and the Baltic region being considered the key guarantee of Lithuania's security (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2017). For Lithuania, cooperation with the other Baltic states is also considered strategic, with the Vilnius government seeking to coordinate and synchronise national defence plans and capability development, as well as representing common interests in international organisations (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2021). Lithuania also seeks to strengthen its strategic partnership with Poland in the areas of military, transport, energy security, and joint advocacy in international organisations, as well as more active cooperation within the minilateral NB8 format (Lithuania's National Security Strategy 2017). For Latvia, close cooperation with the United States is equally vital, with a view to securing the timely political will of the US to commit to the defence of Latvia, including through a permanent military presence (Latvia's State Defense Concept 2023). By virtue of leading the NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroup stationed in Latvia, close security partnership with Canada is particularly important (Annual Report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2023). The other two Baltic states are considered Latvia's closest allies, as Latvia supporting comprehensive military cooperation at the Baltic level, promoting greater compatibility of armed forces and the integration of command-and-control systems (Latvia's State Defense Concept 2020). Poland is described by Latvia as an important international partner with growing military potential and the capacity to strengthen regional security (Latvia's State Defense Concept 2023). Intensifying cooperation with Poland is crucial for Latvia, as is strengthening the NB8 regional format. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO has increased the importance of regional cooperation formats. For Estonia, the political attention and military presence of the US in Europe, including in the Baltic Sea region, are key for assuring security (Estonia's National Security Concept 2017). The UK is also an important ally. Cooperation through the NB8 is another priority for Estonia's foreign and security policy (Estonia's National Cybersecurity Strategy 2024-2030 2024). Poland seeks to intensify regional and bilateral cooperation to strengthen



NATO's eastern flank and increase its geopolitical influence. Warsaw is also seeking new areas of cooperation with the Baltic states and Bucharest. Cooperation between Poland and the Baltic states intensified in 2024 in terms of decision-making coordination and the development of joint defence capabilities, as highlighted by Latvia's 2024 Annual Report of the Foreign Minister (Foreign Minister's Annual Report on Latvia's Foreign Policy and European Union Affairs 2024).

The institutional infrastructure of the Baltic-Polish security community

In addition to a sense of collective identity that helped shape a security community between the Poland and the Baltic states on the northern part of NATO's eastern flank since 2014, as outlined by the respective countries' strategic documents, a series of institutions, multilateral formats, security initiatives, and ad-hoc coalitions were mobilised to increase this regional cooperation between like-minded partners. A strategic objective of these initiatives was to mobilise allied support and deterrent capacities for the Baltic Sea region as a response to Russia's increased aggression. Following Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014, NATO allies agreed at the 2016 Warsaw Summit to deploy four multinational battalion battle groups to Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. By July 2017, these battlegroups were deployed, led by the United States in Poland, the United Kingdom in Estonia, Canada in Latvia, and Germany in Lithuania. As a reaction to the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine in 2022, in January 2024, the defence ministers of the three Baltic states reached an agreement on the Baltic Defense Line to strengthen the eastern border with Russia and Belarus, with Poland announcing its participation later through its similar "Eastern Shield" project in May 2024 (Bellamy 2024). In September 2024, the four defence ministers met to coordinate their efforts and seek EU funding for this project. A particular area of cooperation for the four states is infrastructure and border security. Poland proposed establishing a Baltic Sea patrol mission to protect critical infrastructure (Szacawa 2024). In January 2025, as part of the Summit of Baltic Sea Allies, NATO launched Baltic Sentry, a new military initiative in the Baltic Sea aimed at improving allied ability to respond to destabilising acts such as sabotages on Critical Undersea Infrastructure (CUI). Annual multinational exercises such as BALTOPS bring together the Baltic states and Poland to strengthen NATO's readiness and preparedness in the region (Maciata 2025).

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), as the regional international organisation for the Baltic Sea region, has undergone certain changes since Russia annexed Crimea. As a sign of protest against Russia's takeover of Ukrainian territory in 2014, the traditional annual CBSS meeting at foreign minister level was suspended. From 2017 to 2020, the organisation undergone a reform process with the intent to increase the relevance, efficiency, and visibility of the organisation, fostering more focus and flexibility in the work of the CBSS, including improving the cooperation



with other international fora and formats active in the region. Following Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in 2022, the ministers of foreign affairs from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden and the High Representative of the European Union publicly called for the exclusion of Russia from the proceedings and projects of the CBSS. Their declaration noted that the members see "no possibility to continue our cooperation as envisaged with the Russian Federation within the framework of the CBSS" and that Russia should not benefit from continuing to participate in any form of cooperation under the CBSS umbrella. At the same time, Belarus was suspended from the participation in activities as CBSS observer state. Russia withdrew voluntarily from the CBSS on May 2022. The remaining member states and the EU decided to continue the work of the CBSS, including through the organisation of a first formal meeting of the Council since this tradition has been stopped as a protest to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. In July 2025, Poland assumed the rotating Presidency of the CBSS, placing emphasis on protecting critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and preventing hybrid threats, including those posed by Russia's shadow fleet operating in the region.

Another institutional avenue through which the Polish-Baltic security community was consolidated in the past decade is represented by high-level joint statements on security and defence topics. For a start, in March 2014, the Nordic-Baltic Eight member countries' Ministers of Foreign Affairs issued a joint statement with the Visegrad Group's Ministers of Foreign Affairs in response to Russia's actions in Crimea. In August 2020, the president of Lithuania, Poland, Latvia, and Estonia issued a joint declaration urging the Lukashenko regime to stop the use of force against peaceful protesters and initiate dialogue with the Belarusian people. Also from the presidential level, a joint declaration from Poland and the three Baltic States from May 2021 marked the celebration of the 230th anniversary of the May 3 Constitution for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, outlining its principles on fundamental democratic values. In January 2023, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the four countries inked a joint statement in Riga on enhancing regional cooperation, sharing a "close vision on the actions necessary to deter and defend against security threats in the region". In June 2024, the leaders of the four states wrote a joint letter urging the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission calling for the fortification of defensive installations and infrastructure on borders with Russia and Belarus. A similar joint statement from the ministers of defence in September 2024 called to building a Baltic Defense Line protecting NATO and EU external borders. Quoting the specific challenges of countries bordering Russia and Belarus, the ministers responsible for planning and implementing the Cohesion Policy of the four states signed a joint statement in December 2024 aiming to secure additional funding from EU Cohesion Funds



beyond 2027. In March 2025, the defence ministers of the Baltic States and Poland issued a joint statement announcing their decision to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines, stating that the military threats to NATO member states bordering both Russia and Belarus have significantly increased (Ferran 2025).

2.2. Security Cooperation in the Black Sea Region

Divergent strategic identities: Euro-Atlantic anchoring vs. Türkiye's strike for autonomy

Bulgaria's strategic identity is strongly anchored in Euro-Atlantic collective security structures. Bulgaria's national defence strategies are harmonised with key NATO (Strategic Concept) and EU (Global Strategy, Strategic Compass) documents (National Defense Strategy of Bulgaria 2025). Bulgaria considers itself a NATO eastern flank state involved in measures to increase NATO's deterrence and defence capabilities in the Black Sea region (National Defense Strategy of Bulgaria 2025). Romania's strategic identity, on the other hand, is defined by its active membership in NATO and the EU, its existential strategic partnership with the US, and an extended national security concept (National Defense Strategy of Romania 2020-2024). The United States is considered Romania's strategic anchor and the partner that shares its perception of threats on the eastern border. Romania positions itself as a pole of regional stability and a provider of security in the Black Sea region and on the eastern border of NATO and the EU (National Defense Strategy of Romania 2020-2024).

Turkey's strategic identity, as reflected in the documents analysed, is defined by the pursuit of strategic autonomy and an expanded vision of national interests ("Türkiye's Axis") that goes beyond mere NATO membership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2014). In line with the "Century of Türkiye" vision, the Ankara government has a long-term vision of becoming a regional and global power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2022). This concept represents the manifesto of an autonomous and sovereign foreign policy that does not compromise its interests and identity. Türkiye sees itself as a dynamic, proactive actor that takes initiatives in its region, including through the use of military force, as demonstrated by its operations in Syria and Iraq (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2017). Türkiye's security doctrine assumes that problems will not be waited for at the borders but will be solved on the spot and even beyond the borders. Türkiye's "Blue Homeland" doctrine aims to transform Ankara into a maritime power, defining the need to secure a cordon around national waters to prevent encirclement, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020). According to strategic documents, Türkiye aims to reduce its external dependence in the field of defence and become an arms exporter, capitalising in particular on the development of drone technology (SIHA) and artificial intelligence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2021).



Romania, like Bulgaria, focuses its regional cooperation on the strong anchoring of NATO and the EU and on its strategic partnership with the United States. Romania is working to make its allies aware of the role of the Black Sea and the importance of securing this area, including by strengthening NATO's deterrence and defence posture and increasing the allied presence on Romanian territory (National Defense Strategy of Romania 2020-2024). In terms of key partners and cooperation formats, Romania mentions its strategic partnership with the US, regional allies grouped in formats such as Bucharest 9, the Three Seas Initiative, and the Turkey-Romania-Poland trilateral security and defence format, as well as partners in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighborhood (such as the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia), which should be supported in their institutional development efforts (National Defense Strategy of Romania 2020-2024).

Türkiye views regional cooperation in the Black Sea through the prism of maintaining peace and stability and preventing escalation, often acting to limit external military influence (non-riparian NATO) by applying the Montreux Convention (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020). Türkiye mentions in its strategic documents that it has been the driving force behind several regional initiatives involving the littoral states, such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), BLACKSEAFOR, and Black Sea Harmony (open to all littoral states, including Russia and Ukraine). Türkiye is interested in maintaining military and defence cooperation with Ukraine, based on a “win-win” principle, which could also be seen as an attempt to balance relations with Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020).

Hard security's failure, soft cooperation's survival:

Black Sea regional organisations and formats

The Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group (BLACKSEAFOR), launched in 2001 at the initiative of Türkiye with the participation of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Georgia, is a naval cooperation program designed to serve as a regional security organisation that ultimately failed after Russia's increasing acts of aggression in the region. Following the 2008 war, Georgia stayed out of BLACKSEAFOR activations “for a reason which is unknown to the BLACKSEAFOR command”, though the reason was obvious: Russia occupied Georgia's territories (Sanchez 2012). Russo-Georgian war led Tbilisi to suspend its involvement in this naval cooperation program, while Russia refused to take part in the activities involving Georgia. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea led to the naval partnership being suspended. BLACKSEAFOR operations were halted after Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria concluded that this format was insufficient to curb Russia's aggressive behaviour, therefore it could not ensure Black Sea security and stability.



Another Turkish-led naval operation, started in 2004, had a similar fate of going *de facto* defunct because of Russia's increasing aggression in the region. Although originally a national Turkish operation, Black Sea Harmony became multinational with the participation of other Black Sea littoral states, with Russia officially joining the operation in 2006. Russia, Ukraine, and Romania participated in Black Sea harmony in accordance with their bilateral agreements with Türkiye. While Türkiye is continuing Black Sea Harmony with its submarines and maritime patrol aircraft to this day as a national operation, after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria concluded that Black Sea Harmony is also an incomplete mechanism to assure collective security in the region (Coffey and Kasapoglu 2023). Therefore, after these states refused to participate in the military activities under this framework, its multilateral character collapsed.

One regional organisation for the region that, although contains both Russia and Ukraine, did not collapse after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, is also the one where hard security issues are deliberately avoided. Unlike the suspended BLACKSEAFOR and the now-defunct Operation Black Sea Harmony, the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) remained institutionally intact despite the conflicts between their members Russia and Ukraine. BSEC's mission is focused primarily on economic cooperation in areas such as trade, transportation, energy, and environmental protection. Despite the acts of aggression of Russia in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, no member has left or even publicly threatened to leave this economic forum. North Macedonia joined BSEC as the 13th member in 2020, showing the organisation continued expanding after Russia's growing aggression in the region. In 2023, during Türkiye's chairmanship, BSEC renewed its Economic Agenda, revived the dormant Project Development Fund after it was frozen for six years, and reactivated the BSEC Business Council (Hanedar 2023).

As a response to Russia's militarisation of the Black Sea, Romania proposed in 2016 a permanent NATO Black Sea naval fleet including Türkiye and Bulgaria (Ilie and Ilie 2025). Although Romania's proposal received some initial support, including from Türkiye, Bulgaria's then-Prime Minister Borissov refused the plan, stating that his country would not want to participate in military buildup in the region, but rather "see in the Black Sea sailing ships, yachts, tourists, love, and peace" (Euractiv 2016). After Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine, both Romania and Bulgaria called for broadening the NATO presence in the region, and as a result, the Black Sea was included as an area of interest to the security of the Alliance in the Strategic Concept in 2022. The alliance elevated its regional presence through the establishment of multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, led by Italy, and in Romania, led by France (Lancaster 2023). The United States also expanded its military presence in Romania to brigade size (Joja 2024). In 2023, the commander of the Turkish navy publicly stated, concerning NATO's strategy towards the Black



Sea, that Türkiye prefers to deal with the region through its own capabilities and that Ankara does not want NATO or America in the Black Sea. Despite these differences in perceptions regarding the opportunity of expanding NATO presence in the region, in 2023, the Alliance announced the establishment of the Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group between the 3 Black Sea NATO navies (Vazquez 2023).

3. Why Regional Security Community Formation Succeeded in the Baltic Sea Region, but Failed in the Black Sea?

Using Deutsch's framework, the different success of the Baltic and Black Sea regions in establishing a security community will be explained through the two critical factors: a common identity feeding similar threat perceptions and institutional networks (Deutsch 1957). The case studies reveal differences that prevented Black Sea NATO allies from reaching the same degree of security cooperation as their northern counterparts.

The Baltic NATO allies share a unified strategic identity rooted in their historical experience of Soviet occupation and their perceptions as vulnerable frontline states, as exemplified by their national security and defence strategies. For these states, the threat perception is singular and existential: Russia represents the primary security threat, one that requires robust collective defence and increased NATO presence. One cannot see the same level of strategic alignment in the Black Sea region. In the southern portion of the eastern flank, Bulgaria sees that security in the region could be achieved “only through collective efforts of NATO and the EU”(National Defense Strategy of Bulgaria 2025). Romania's strategic identity evolved from merely conceiving itself as a Wester-protected state to a self-image that has been lately defined as as “a pole of regional stability and a provider of security in the Black Sea region”, one that anchors its foreign and security policy in its Euro-Atlantic membership and the “existential strategic partnership with the United States” (National Defense Strategy of Romania 2020-2024). Türkiye, on the other hand, who is the only country among all the ones analysed in this study that is not also part of the European Union, defines itself through the “pursuit of strategic autonomy” and rejects dependence on NATO for regional security. The “Century of Turkey” vision and “Blue Homeland” doctrine reflect the country's ambitions of becoming “a regional and global power” with an “autonomous and sovereign foreign policy that does not compromise its interests and identity” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2022).

Threat perception asymmetries in the Black Sea region also make regional security community formation less likely. While Bulgaria and Romania, much as Poland and the Baltic states, identify Russia's aggression as the paramount threat, Türkiye's threat matrix is different. The formation of “anti-Türkiye blocs” in the



Eastern Mediterranean ranks alongside or above Russian threats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2017). The strategic documents outline that Türkiye envisions the Black Sea as “a center of geopolitical competition” between Russia on the one hand and the Euro-Atlantic coalition on the other hand, positioning itself as managing this competition rather than fully aligning against Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey 2020).

The contrasting fates of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organisation provide a stark illustration of how different threat perception intensities shape the boundaries of cooperation with Russia. The Baltic states and Poland’s perception of Russia as an existential threat made continued institutional cooperation with Moscow under the CBSS untenable. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, CBSS members suspended Russia’s participation in the format. The Baltic threat perception of Russia is so severe that even functional non-military cooperation became politically and strategically impossible to maintain. In contrast, BSEC not only survived Russia’s aggression, but actually expanded since 2014, and renewed its economic agenda during Türkiye’s chairmanship in 2023. This survival through compartmentalisation of security issues versus non-security matters proved viable for the Black Sea region and it was viable also because the threat is perceived as manageable rather than existential.

When assessing regional security community formation against the second indicator – i.e. the network of institutions, it is observed how hard security cooperation formats have largely been unsuccessful in the Black Sea region. The Baltic states and Poland developed institutional networks for military cooperation, joint exercises, integrated air defence, and coordinated NATO force posture. Their insitutional cooperation strengthened as the Russian aggression grew, which is also seen through the shared activism on the international arena through joint statements release in key moments (Joint Declaration signed by Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland 2024).

The same cannot be said about the Black Sea region. Naval cooperation programs led by Türkiye and designed to include Russia collapsed, and military cooperation between the 3 littoral states is limited, as the three NATO members in the region cannot seem to agree on the role NATO should play in the Black Sea. On the one hand, Romania is calling for a firm U.S. commitment in the region and applauds the Senate adopting a Black Sea Security Act in 2023. On the other hand, Türkiye in the same year calls for limited interventions from NATO in the area. Rather than an activist voice for stronger Euro-Atlantic presence in the region, as Romania and Bulgaria have been, since the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine started in February 2022, Türkiye seeked to embrace the role of a mediator, including by brokering the Black Sea Grain Deal and offering to host possible Russia-Ukraine peace talks (Sezer and Dysa 2024). Despite the challenges in formalising security cooperation



formats amongst Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, the Mine Countermeasure Black Sea Task Group announced in 2023 shows that there is limited room for working together for achieving precise goals that would benefit the region in the context of Russia's growing militarisation of this key waterway (Buyuk 2024).

The Baltic Security community succeeded because all members shared an existential threat perception of Russia and a common identity as states that benefit from collective defence. The Black Sea allies cannot form a security community as Türkiye's pursuit of strategic autonomy and its concurrent priorities in other theaters where it seeks influence (Eastern Mediterranean) often contradict the defensive alignment sought by Bulgaria and Romania under the umbrella of NATO and the EU. Where Baltic states deepened integration in response to the Russian aggression since 2014, Black Sea NATO allies often moved in opposite directions: some seeking more NATO in the region, while others explicitly reject it.

Conclusion and Implications

For the scholarship on security cooperation on the eastern flank, this study adds a modest contribution to the examination of different security communities within the same geostrategic area - the eastern flank of NATO. While the surveyed literature demonstrated that we now have a number of studies tackling the Baltic Region and the Black Sea region separately, the studies that tackle them in a comparative manner is limited. A comparative study such as the one attempted in this paper would be all the relevant today, when the war in Ukraine elevated the strategic importance of the eastern flank and its status as a front line of defence of NATO.

The paper also prompted some policy contributions after this comparative study. For increasing the security cooperation in the Black Sea region, drawing from the Baltic example, two policy recommendations emerged:

1. Inviting Türkiye to participate as an associate member in the emerging EU Black Sea Maritime Security Hub, mentioned in the EU Strategic Approach for this region, which was launched by the EU Commission in May 2025. This hub is envisioned to "strengthen maritime safety and security, protect critical maritime infrastructure and the marine environment" (European Commission 2025). Inviting Türkiye in this hub, although it is not an EU member state, would fulfill its need for recognition as a regional power (Pup 2025). As a non-US-centric initiative for the region, it will also likely be accepted as a less interventionist project than a permanent NATO presence in the region, which Türkiye rejects firmly. As Romanian President Nicușor Dan suggested that his country is interested in becoming the host nation of the hub, the government in Bucharest could address this invitation to the authorities in Ankara, as part of their strategic dialogue.



2. Promote alternative formats, other than BSEC, for assuring economic cooperation in the Black Sea region without creating further interdependencies with Russia. The Three Seas Initiative, in which Türkiye has recently been accepted as a strategic partner, can be further developed at the request of Romania and Bulgaria, through a denser institutional structure, regular intergovernmental meetings in between partners, and alternate sources of investment for the priority projects listed under the 3SI framework.

In addition to the policy implications, this paper made a modest contribution to the scholarship on shaping regional security communities in the Euro-Atlantic environment. A future research agenda might include testing the hypothesis against the remaining third factor Deutsch promoted as key for creating a regional security community, which is the ability of states to communicate effectively, respond to each other's needs, and predict their behavior reliably. Further refining the methodological models would benefit the study of asymmetric security communities within the eastern flank of NATO, which continues to be a strategic frontier of the Euro-Atlantic institutions as the war in Ukraine continues to be waged, and sustainable peace in Europe is still a distant prospect.

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