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## **BULGARIAN AND ROMANIAN NAVAL FORCES IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGES POSED BY RUSSIA'S DOWNRIGHT AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE IN 2022<sup>1</sup>**

### Abstract

A comparative analysis of the naval forces of Bulgaria and Romania is warranted by a number of similarities between these countries, e.g. in terms of geopolitics, military aspect, the economy or even religion. Hence the relevance of a comparative analysis of changes in the defence policy and the place of the Naval Force therein. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, changes in these navies have been of great importance. They were entailed by efforts to keep up with requirements of contemporary naval warfare. Subsequent challenges were caused by the pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Factors that have a significant effect on the public perception of the Navies in the countries discussed include changes in the recruiting policy as well as economic and social issues besetting Bulgaria and Romania.

**Keywords:** maritime security; Romanian Naval Forces, military security, Bulgarian Navy, Black Sea region security, naval mines

### Introduction

Factors that determine the effectiveness of a naval force in a country's foreign and domestic policy include, inter alia, structural, technological and strategic changes thereto, naval presence in the sea, potential, ability to engage in combat and to carry out international missions (including provision of humanitarian aid), participation in international exercises, search and rescue operations in peacetime, and disaster relief operations<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written as part of the author's internship at the Institute Security Sciences, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce.

<sup>2</sup> In February 2005 in Bulgaria naval aviation units were used to respond to natural disasters (N.K. Dotzev, *Transforming Bulgaria's Armed Forces for Homeland Security Missions*, „Connections” 2005, V. 4, No 3, p. 95).

A comparative analysis of the naval forces of Bulgaria and Romania is warranted by a number of similarities between these countries, e.g. in terms of geopolitics and geography, efficiency of state institutions<sup>3</sup>, military aspect (e.g. direct access only to a semi-enclosed sea which the Black Sea is), the economy<sup>4</sup>, and even religion.

The structures under examination are categorized as small naval forces<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, as tools of foreign policy of both countries, they are of limited importance.

### **History of Bulgaria's and Romania's naval forces in the years 1989-2021**

After the fall of communism, some decision-makers came to consider Bulgaria and Romania to be included in the buffer zone between Russia and the West<sup>6</sup>. Efforts to build closer relationships between these countries and NATO as well as the EU also faced internal obstacles. For example, in Romania, factors that made the situation more complex included, inter alia, shortcomings of the country's political system, internal conflicts, the government's flawed legitimacy and credibility as well as cooperation with the USSR in the years 1989-1991.

Pro-Russian sentiment shown by many Bulgarians caused the country to have to balance its efforts to integrate with the EU and NATO with good relationships with Russia<sup>7</sup>. The eventual end of the cold war confrontation and the weakened Russian state had an adverse effect on funding for both countries' navies and on the opportunity to use Soviet spare parts and technical support. On the other hand, growing Black Sea trade was a factor potentially increasing the importance of the Navies. For example, "Bulgaria's

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<sup>3</sup> The regions at risk closest to Russia (for instance, the Baltic states) have strong governance and institutions to respond to the threats, while those that lack such characteristics (such as Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania) are farther away from Russia", See: S. Pezard, *U.S. Strategic Competition with Russia A RAND Research Primer*, RAND, <https://www.rand.org>, 31.01.2022 (02.02.2024).

<sup>4</sup> K. Świercz, E. Piedziuk, M. Żukowska, *Trendy rozwojowe w infrastrukturze transportu i świadczeniu usług na rynku logistycznym wybranych państw bałkańskich na przykładzie Bułgarii i Rumunii*, [in:] *Geopolityka na Bałkanach*, ed. T.Z. Leszczyński, Częstochowa 2014.

<sup>5</sup> More on military capabilities of small navies: A. Makowski, *Dilemmas faced in developing small navies*, "Naval War College Review", 2023, V. 76, No 1, pp. 97-118.

<sup>6</sup> I.G. Moise, E.-H. Kaiter, *Romanian naval diplomacy, continuous evolution in the swirl of external diplomacy*, „Technium Sustainability”, 2021, V. 2, no 1, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> M. Seroka, *Asertywność wspomagana. Przemiany polityki Bułgarii wobec Rosji*, Warszawa 2021, p. 13.

Black Sea ports of Varna and Bourgas are the gateways of 60 percent of the nation's foreign trade and are vital to its economy"<sup>8</sup>.

Romania participated extensively in joint exercises as part of "Partnership for Peace" program". Still, Romania's application to join NATO, submitted in 1996, was rejected. In September 2001, Romania granted US forces access to, among other things, airspace as well as land and maritime facilities to help fight terrorism. This facilitated, in 2004, Romania's and Bulgaria's admission to NATO. Such access enabled the U.S. to solidify its position in the Black Sea region relative to Turkey as well as allowing NATO to significantly strengthen the presence of its navy in that part of the world<sup>9</sup>.

In 2005 and 2006, agreements were entered into, allowing U.S. troops to be deployed on Bulgarian and Romanian soil. For example, Article IX of the relevant agreement with Bulgaria gave the U.S. the right to use the former's ports and territorial waters<sup>10</sup>.

At the time of their admission to NATO, both countries had obsolete military equipment and a conscript army<sup>11</sup>. For example, in Bulgaria: "In 2004, after the decommissioning and sale of old platforms, the Bulgarian navy was made up of two submarines, one frigate, and a number of fast patrol craft, corvettes, and minesweepers"<sup>12</sup>. The forthcoming introduction of a professional army could not be a solution to all problems. Improving state security aggravated difficulties affecting cooperation with Western partners in upgrading Romania's and Bulgaria's armed forces. Nevertheless, for example in Bulgaria in the years 2005-2008, among other things, three frigates and a minesweeper entered service<sup>13</sup>. Quite worn-out ships from the West accounted for a large share of the newly purchased equipment<sup>14</sup>. It made the navy dependent on Western technologies. In addition, the governments of Bulgaria and Romania, in a move to tackle the 2008 crisis, significantly reduced the budget for their naval

<sup>8</sup> D. Sanders, *The Bulgarian Navy after the cold war: Challenges of Building and Modernizing an Effective Navy*, „Naval War College Review”, 2015, V. 68, no 2, p. 69 (citation), 71.

<sup>9</sup> According to international agreements, the presence of warships belonging to states without a Black Sea coastline on the Black Sea is significantly restricted.

<sup>10</sup> *Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and Bulgaria Signed at Sofia April 28, 2006* www.state.gov.

<sup>11</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Romania and black sea security*, "SIPRI Background Paper", 2018, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> D. Sanders, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> R. Kochnowski, *Sily morskie NATO a rozszerzenie Sojuszu w pierwszym dwudziestolecu XXI w.*, [in:] *Polska bezpieczna czy nie? Służby specjalne – Wojsko - Dyplomacja w XX i XXI wieku*, ed. M. Siewier, Częstochowa 2023, p. 468.

forces<sup>15</sup>. For example, Bulgaria's 2013 military expenditure only amounted to 1.38% of GDP. The period 2006-2016 is referred to as "a decade of underinvestment in Romanian defence Modernization"<sup>16</sup>.

In both countries it was the submarine branch that was in the most dire situation. As units capable of undertaking military action they existed only on paper. Bulgaria ditched the pretence in 2011<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, the two countries worked with their allies and improved their capabilities, inter alia, by taking part in joint exercises<sup>18</sup> and foreign missions. By way of example, Romania took part in an international operation to fight Somali pirates.

Heightened tension in relations between the West and Russia since 2014 has increased the likelihood of Russia's using warships as a tool to support its foreign policy in the Black Sea, against Bulgaria and Romania. NATO stepped up pressure on its member states to increase their defence spending and to deepen mutual cooperation as well as enhancing coordination and interoperability<sup>19</sup>. In January 2015, with Romania's president involvement, all the country's major political parties agreed an increase in defence spending to 2% of GDP by 2017<sup>20</sup>.

The presence of other NATO members' warships in the Black Sea was expanded and so did the scale of NATO's rotational exercises in this sea (with the participation of the structures discussed). The problem was, among other things, that no bilateral exercises were held by the navies of Bulgaria and Romania<sup>21</sup>.

Bulgaria expanded its naval bases, thus allowing NATO to enhance its operational capabilities in the Black Sea. In 2016 Romania put forward a proposal to NATO to establish a Black Sea fleet. However, Bulgaria and Turkey did not share Romania's assessment of the magnitude of threat from Russia<sup>22</sup>. In parallel, plans were made for further projects. For example, a consortium made up of the Naval Group and the Con-

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<sup>15</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Romania...*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *The Perspectives of Black Sea Littoral States*, [in:] Aronsson L., Mankoff J., *The Inhospitable Sea. Toward a New U.S. Strategy for the Black Sea Region*, p. 15, CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/2.02.2023> (22.01.2024).

<sup>17</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Bulgaria and black sea security*, "SIPRI Background Paper", 2018, p. 13; R. Kochnowski, *op.cit.*, p. 468.

<sup>18</sup> See more broadly: D. Sanders, *op.cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Bulgaria...*, p. 14; I.-M. Drăgan, *The Evolution of Romania's Security Threats in Regard to Military Strategies: from 2007 to 2023*, "Romanian Military Thinking" 2024, no 1, PP. 70-71. DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2024.1.04

<sup>20</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Romania...*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> T. Durell Young, *NATO's selective sea blindness*, "Naval War College Review", 2019, V. 72, no 3, p. 24.

<sup>22</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *op.cit.*, p. 16, 17.

stanța Naval Shipyard won a tender to build four Gowind 2500 corvettes and to upgrade two T22 frigates. Most probably Romania's financial problems and disagreement with the French partner were to blame for failure to sign the relevant contract.

In 2018 Bulgaria made plans for ordering 2 patrol boats. Finally, it was decided to order, in Germany, vessels similar to Braunschweig-class corvettes. Despite various declarations<sup>23</sup>, the projects delivered in both countries did not include submarines.

A significant worsening of relations between Russia and Ukraine in the winter of 2019/2020 contributed to closer bilateral ties between the U.S. and Romania and Bulgaria. By way of example, in January 2020 the U.S. initiated the so-called strategic dialogue with Bulgaria. For the most part the dialogue focused on the energy sector and military cooperation.

In autumn 2020, Bulgaria and the U.S. signed the so-called bilateral 10-year road maps providing for deepened cooperation between the two countries. The contract entered into with Bulgaria envisaged, among other things, the U.S. assistance in the modernization of the Bulgarian armed forces and in prevention of violations of Bulgaria's maritime border. In 2020, Romania's defence spending amounted to 2.38% of GDP.

At the same time, after the outbreak of the pandemic, the navies of both countries tried balancing, among other things, involvement in the fight against the pandemic, with efforts to protect and train their sailors. For instance, in March 2021 the Bulgarian frigate "Смели" took part in the SEA SHIELD exercise (together with units from the U.S., Poland, Turkey, Romania, Italy, Greece, Spain and the Netherlands).

Cooperation between branches of the armed forces grew in importance too. The Integrated System for Observation, Surveillance and Control of Traffic in the Black Sea is a case in point in respect of that importance. The system made it possible to process, integrate and transfer information at all levels of the hierarchy (strategic, operational and tactical) within the structures of the Navy, and to other branches of Romania's armed forces. The system allowed users, among other things, to exchange information on friend and foe identification, detection of surface ships and submarines, and airborne targets<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> S.T. Wezeman, A. Kuimova, *Romania...*, p. 14; S. Domaradzki, *Strategia bezpieczeństwa i strategia obronna Bułgarii*, [in:] *Strategie bezpieczeństwa i obrony państw Europy Środkowej: Bułgaria, Rumunia, Serbia, Ukraina*, ed. B. Surmacz, Lublin 2022, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> V.A. Jianu, *Caracterul de interdependență a structurilor isr din forțele terestre cu structurile isr din forțele aeriene și*, „Buletinul Universității Naționale de Apărare „Carol I”, 2021, no 6, p. 116.

There are still the challenges in terms of morale and combat readiness. The challenges stem from public perception of the Navies in the two countries<sup>25</sup> and sailor sentiment. For instance, one of the key challenges faced by Bulgaria's General Command in 2019 was a shortage of men willing to enlist and a large number of trained soldiers leaving the army<sup>26</sup>.

### **Politics, public sentiment and the economy in the face of Russia's downright aggression**

A new epoch in the history of both navies was started by Russia's downright aggression against Ukraine. It led to the militarization of the Black Sea. Yet, the balance of forces and geographical determinants significantly decreased the likelihood of an attack by large Russian ground forces and air force formations against Bulgaria and Romania. Consequently, naval forces grew in importance.

Russia's Black Sea Fleet submarines had a clear upper hand in northern and central Black Sea all the more so since Bulgaria and Romania had for a long time lacked submarines, even to carry out reconnaissance in respect of the activity of Russian warships. Bulgaria and Romania were aware that the activity of Russian warships may have been designed to force concessions from the governments of both countries.

As early as 2022 Russia carried out naval hybrid attacks against Romania. For example, on numerous occasions Russia closed off a part of the Black Sea, supposedly for the purposes of military exercises, to demonstrate to Romania its capacity to block Romania's maritime routes<sup>27</sup>. However, this did not change the governments' and peoples' anti-Russian sentiment<sup>28</sup>. In autumn 2022, Romania's authorities considered their country to be playing "a key part as a transit country for Ukraine's grain exports"<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> More on this topic: T. Grozdanova, *Обществен образ на военната институция през периода 2013 – 2017 [г.] Сравнителен анализ между оценките на военнослужещите и на гражданите в българското общество*, [in:] *Годишна научна конференция*, V.3, В. Търново, 2019, pp. 1204-1213.

<sup>26</sup> Y. Yanakiev, T. Georgieva, T. Grozdanova, *Organizational Climate Assessment of the Bulgarian Armed Forces: Implications for the Military Leaders Conference Paper*, April 2019, DOI: 10.14339/978-92-837-2235-9

<sup>27</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *op.cit.*, pp. 9, 15.

<sup>28</sup> P. Oleksy, *Strategia obronna Rumunii*, [in:] *Strategie bezpieczeństwa...*, pp. 40, 43, 47-48; L.V. Scipanov, *Contribuția diplomației navale la securitatea maritimă regională, „Gândirea Militară Românească”*, 2024, no 1, p. 31. DOI: 10.55535/GMR. 2024.1.02

<sup>29</sup> As cited in: *Premier Rumunii: sojusznicy Ukrainy powinni pozostać zjednoczeni*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 8.11.2023 (8.12.2023).

Taking into account Romanian public sentiment, Romania's Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu stated in 2023, "Romania will continue to help Ukraine, regardless of the political costs. These costs are of lesser significance than the precedent that would be set by a Russian victory"<sup>30</sup>. In the face of this conflict Bulgaria and Romania, in their domestic policy, need to take into consideration the existence, on its own soil, of actors opposed to the firm stance against Russia's actions (Bulgaria's case<sup>31</sup>) or in the immediate political environment (from Romania's perspective this refers to the governments of Hungary and Serbia as well as pro-Russian political groups in Moldova).

Bulgaria's political scene and the public are divided in their views on the aggression against Ukraine. President of Bulgaria is exploiting this fact as a political instrument to criticize the government: "Our armed forces should guarantee our territorial integrity and security, and not just be a donor to the Ukrainian army"<sup>32</sup>.

In the face of new threats, needs assessments were carried out. For example, Romania was short of warships, submarines, new coastal defence missile batteries, maritime reconnaissance aircraft, marine helicopters. Bulgaria's navy's situation was worse. In 2022 there were ca. 4 thousand sailors on active duty in the Bulgarian navy. It operated bases in Varna and Atiya. The navy's most important vessels were 3 frigates. One of them, a Koni frigate, was built in the late 80s in the twentieth century. The other frigates, i.e. Wielingen ones, were launched in Belgium towards the end of the 1970s. Bulgaria's other vessels, mainly older ones, include, amongst others, 3 corvettes<sup>33</sup> (1 Tarantul-class corvette and 2 Pauk-class ones), 3 mine-destroyers and 17 mine-sweepers. In assessing the age of vessels, it needs to be mentioned that in 2022, 40 % of EU member states' passenger ships were built before 1990<sup>34</sup>. Bulgaria's maritime air force was composed of three modern helicopters manufactured in the Western Europe (two AS565 Panthers and one AS365 Dauphin). What was very worrying was the number of unfilled vacancies. In 2022, as many as 20% of positions in Bulgaria's armed forces were unfilled<sup>35</sup>.

At this point, it is important to mention an ongoing project. In a shipyard near Varna, a ca 503 million euro project is underway to build

<sup>30</sup> As cited in: *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> S. Domaradzki, *op.cit.*, pp. 26, 28.

<sup>32</sup> As cited in: *Bulgaria: "wojsko nie może być jedynie dostawcą broni dla Ukrainy"*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 23.02.2023 (15.11.2023).

<sup>33</sup> R. Kochnowski, *op.cit.*, p. 468.

<sup>34</sup> *Доклад за европейската морска безопасност – основни моменти*, Luksemburg 2022, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Cf S. Domaradzki, *op.cit.*, p. 23, 27.

one of two new corvettes, i.e. Multipurpose Modular Patrol Vessels (displacement of ca. 2,3 thousand tonnes, length of 90 m). Once completed, these will be Bulgaria's largest vessels of this class. Each corvette is to be equipped with RBS-15 Mk 3 missiles, a 76-mm gun and a helicopter. However, there is the problem of distant dates for the completion of the vessels. The first corvette was scheduled for delivery to the Navy in autumn 2025, and the other one in 2026<sup>36</sup>.

The opportunities for the expansion of the Navies were impacted by the fact that, despite their geographical proximity, at the start of the war the economic situations of the countries under consideration were different. It was Romania's economy that fared better. In 2021 Romania's economy grew by 5,9%, and in the first half of 2022 by 5,8%. At the time, projections of real GDP growth for the entire 2022 were ca. 2%.

By contrast, Bulgaria's economy was in much worse shape. In 2022 GDP per capita, assuming purchasing power parity, amounted only to 55% of the EU average (ca. 20% less than the figure for Romania). Furthermore, due to its corruption<sup>37</sup>, rate as well as economic and political oligarchization, in 2022 Bulgaria was the EU's member state with the highest level of income inequality<sup>38</sup>. In September 2023 Bulgaria's annual GDP growth rate was calculated as 1,76%.

The countries' governments' room for manoeuvre is limited by their complex economic relations. Ioan Gabriel Moise and Edith-Hilde Kaiter rightly point out that in 2022 both countries were still partly dependent on Russia for imports of energy products. The degree of dependency was varied<sup>39</sup>. For example, for Romania natural gas imports from Russia were meant to supplement the former's own production, just as imports of Russian coal supplemented Bulgaria's own output. On the other hand, imports of uranium from, or through, Russia, to the both countries' nuclear power stations<sup>40</sup> were easier to replace than oil imports. At the same time, given the current system of natural gas transmission networks, both countries were (and in respect of Hungary and Serbia still are) important gas transit operators for on-land transmission of Russian gas.

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<sup>36</sup> M. Dura, *Ruszyła budowa bulgarskich korwet patrolowych*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 9.12.2021 (01.12.2023).

<sup>37</sup> About problems in this regard in Romania: F.A. Roman, M.V. Achim, R.W. McGee, *Fraud related to EU Funds. The Case Of Romania*, "Journal of Financial Studies" 2023, V. 8, no 14; P. Oleksy, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Only Turkey ranked ahead of Bulgaria on the continent (Income inequality)*, OECD, <https://data.oecd.org>, doi: 10.1787/459aa7f1-en).

<sup>39</sup> I.G. Moise, E.-H. Kaiter, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *op.cit.*, p. 20.



## Increase in capital investments in the navies

Russia's attack on Ukraine, on one hand, resulted in increased requirement for defence and on the other hand, as is already known, led to economic problems in both countries. It is against this backdrop that increases in both countries' defence budgets should be assessed. What was also important was the previous military expenditure and the aforementioned different sentiment among the public to the war in Ukraine and capital investments in the navy.

In 2022, Romania increased its military spending to 2.5% of GDP. In the time period until August 2022 alone, this allowed the government to increase planned investments in military equipment eightfold (compared with 2020 and 2021). At that time, tenders and contracts entered into amounted to a total of nearly EUR 1.07 billion<sup>41</sup>. The figure related, among other things, to the Navy.

Romania in cooperation with the United Kingdom is implementing its "Mine Hunter" program, to a total net value of EUR 150,000,000. The program provides for crew training and delivering two mine hunters from the United Kingdom.

On 15 November 2023 the first of the vessels purchased in the UK set sail for a Romanian port - the British M 270 Sublocotenent Ion Ghiculescu with Romanian crew, trained in the UK. It is a Sandown-class mine sweeper, with length of 52.5 m and width of 10.9 m<sup>42</sup>.

In February 2024, in Romanian media there were reports of plans to use the privately-owned Galați<sup>43</sup> shipyard to build warships for the Romanian Navy. At the same time, the Bucharest government revisited its plans to rebuild the Romanian Navy's submarine potential. On 15 June 2022 Romania and France signed a letter of intent aimed at increasing cooperation between the two countries in the naval field. The letter envisages Romania's purchasing French Scorpène submarines<sup>44</sup> and helicopters. The purchase of submarines was discussed in the Romanian Parliament in May 2023.

<sup>41</sup> K. Całus, *Boksując poniżej wagi. Dylematy polityki zagranicznej Rumunii*, Warszawa 2023, p. 35, 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Un vânător de mine care a aparținut Marinei Regale Britanice, intrat în serviciul Forțelor Navale Române, a plecat spre portul Constanța*, Defence Romania, <https://www.defenseromania.ro>, 15.11.2023 (18.11.2023).

<sup>43</sup> *Nave de luptă de ultimă generație, în sfârșit pentru România? De ce s-au deplasat ministrul Apărării și șeful Armatei la Șantierul Damen de la Galați*, Defence Romania, <https://www.defenseromania.ro>, 2.02.2024 (3.02.2024).

<sup>44</sup> A Scorpène submarine can use cruise missiles. It can have a displacement of 1500 - 2000 plus tonnes, length ranging from 62 m to 75 m, six 533 mm torpedo launchers, capability to fire SM39 anti-ship missiles and MdcN cruise missiles.

Similar to the situation before the pandemic, the implementation of the navy expansion plans is not certain due to the state's enormous current account deficit. In 2022 it stood at 9.3% of GDP, and in 2023 - (projected) 8%. Probably due to financial reasons, in August 2023 the Ministry officially confirmed speculations that the program to acquire 4 multi-mission Gowind 2500 corvettes had been abandoned<sup>45</sup>. As plans to expand the navy are being drafted while Romania may be required to play the role of a host country, it has become necessary not only to carry out patrolling and monitoring operations but also to significantly expand port infrastructure.

However, issues arose because of the situation in the weapons market. It is true that in January 2023 the US placed a 208 million USD order with the Raytheon corporation for mobile coastal anti-ship missiles for delivery to Romania, but it will not be fulfilled (contrary to what Romania and the US agreed in 2021) until 2028<sup>46</sup>.

The level of funding available for the Bulgarian Army was several times smaller. That was due not only due a diametrically smaller economy. In 2021, Bulgaria's defence spending was only 1.56% of GDP (USD 1,25 billion<sup>47</sup>). In a budget proposal for 2023, one of the Bulgarian governments provided for defence spending of 1.83% of GDP, while another proposed a figure of 2% of GDP. Despite the fact that the defence needs were significantly higher, the authorities could not reach even this level of spending<sup>48</sup>. In October 2023 Bulgarian Deputy Minister of Defence Atanas Zapryanov made a public statement that military expenditure would reach the level of 2% of GDP in 2024 at the earliest. That was necessary not only for the purposes of upgrading military equipment. In order to fill vacancies, it was proposed that, amongst others, there would be an increase in salaries and changes in the benefits package<sup>49</sup>.

Apparently, Bulgaria's planned capital investments in its navy looked promising. Following up on the huge shock experienced by Bulgarian politicians and the public as a result of Russian's blockade of communication routes from Ukraine<sup>50</sup>, Bulgaria's interim government

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<sup>45</sup> M. Dura, *Rumunia: Program Gowind do kosza. Brak pieniędzy?* Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 11.8.2023 (12.12.2023).

<sup>46</sup> K. Całus, *op.cit.*, p. 36; R. Muczyński, *Rumuńskie NSM opóźnione*, The Military Magazine, <https://milmag.pl>, 9.01.2023 (30.01.2024).

<sup>47</sup> M. Szopa, *Armie Świata: Armia Bułgarii*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 30.09.2022 (3.12.2023).

<sup>48</sup> S. Domardzki, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Участниците в учението „БРИЗ 2023“ Показаха отлична подготовка*, Военноморски сили, <https://navy.mod.bg>, 2023 (19.11.2023).

<sup>50</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *op.cit.*, p. 20. More on the blockade and its consequences: D. Szeligowski, M.A. Piotrowski, *Możliwości zabezpieczenia swobodnej żeglugi handlowej na Morzu Czarnym*, „PISM Strategic File” 2023, no 12 (133), pp. 1-2.

submitted to the parliament a 10-year plan for upgrading the Bulgarian armed forces. The program provided for purchases of, among other things, submarines, warships and anti-ship missiles to the value of EUR 3.32 billion. In addition, ca EUR 1.3 billion was set aside to finalize the contracts already signed, the contract for the afore-mentioned corvettes being a case in point<sup>51</sup>. However, given Bulgaria's economic situation at the time, those plans were not realistic; they were more of an appeal to public opinion, designed to help the government maintain support from the public and the president.

According to the global firepower ranking for 2023, the Romanian Navy was composed of 3 frigates, 7 corvettes, 3 patrol vessels and 5 mine warfare vessels whereas the Bulgarian Navy had 4 frigates, 2 corvettes and 12 mine warfare vessels<sup>52</sup>.

### Intensified cooperation

In order to increase the possibility to effectively patrol its own territorial waters, protect shipping lanes and critical infrastructure, Romania has intensified cooperation inside NATO, for example, naval and aviation cooperation with Bulgaria<sup>53</sup>. NATO's governing body's attitude was conducive to such cooperation. At NATO summits in Madrid in June 2022 and Vilnius and July 2023, NATO publicly declared that it attached great importance to maritime security on the Black Sea, with particular attention being paid to communication routes<sup>54</sup>.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has also added significance to cooperation between individual branches of the armed forces within the two member states and between them and other NATO partners. In order to boost capabilities and military morale, both countries took part in NATO exercises<sup>55</sup>. National military exercises were not neglected either. For example, Bulgaria held its national exercises with participation of foreign personnel - Breeze Wind 2023 ("Бриз – 2023").

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<sup>51</sup> *Bulgaria stawia na modernizację armii. Okręty, myśliwce, BWP*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl>, 26.10.2022 (10.11.2023).

<sup>52</sup> *2023 Military Strength Ranking, 2023 Military Strength Ranking*, Global Firepower, <https://www.globalfirepower.com>, 2023 (19.12.2023).

<sup>53</sup> L. Aronsson, J. Mankoff, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> For example *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid 29 June 2022*, <https://www.nato.int>, point 23 (19.12.2023).

<sup>55</sup> *Тактическо учение на Военноморска База – ВМС „Черно Море 2014”* Военноморски сили, <https://navy.mod.bg>, 2014 (20.11.2023).

In order not to further deteriorate the already strained relations with Russia, the drills, held on 13–22 October 2023<sup>56</sup>, were officially designed to facilitate improvements in coordination of crisis response and protection of the population.

### **Consequences of Russia's decision not to extend the grain deal**

Such factors as military disparity, NATO's and EU's unwillingness to further exacerbate the confrontation with Russia as well as Turkey's special relationships with Russia led to the inability on the part of the Romanian and Bulgarian Navies to play an important role in protecting merchant ships carrying grain under the grain initiative<sup>57</sup>.

The importance of the navies under consideration has grown as a result of Russia's gradual tightening of its policy in respect of shipping within the Black Sea. What started this trend was Russia's increasing the rate of actual violations of the grain agreement. Another important event was Russia's decision, in July 2023, not to renew its consent for Ukrainian grain to be transported by sea. The next move involved, as is widely known, Russia's shelling Ukrainian port infrastructure and warehouses storing goods intended for transport across the Black Sea. There were instances of Russia's opening fire at merchant ships registered under flag of convenience in Ukraine's territorial waters (at least once there were crew casualties).

In such circumstances, due to financial considerations, the only viable solution was to transport grain (and, incidentally, other commodities) from Ukraine through Romania's and Bulgaria's territorial waters. From August to December 2023 Ukraine managed to export 15 million tonnes of goods along a route running across Romania's and Bulgaria's maritime economic zones.

It was rightly assumed that this would meet with Russia's hostile reaction. In order to intimidate merchant ships carrying goods from Ukraine, Russia, violating the law, shut off to shipping a part of Bulgaria's exclusive economic zone, on the grounds of holding military exercises. That met with a strongly worded response from Bulgaria's government and its navy.

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<sup>56</sup> *Започва военноморското учение „Бриз-2023” с международно участие*, BNR, <https://bnr.bg>, 12.10.2023 (06.09.2023).

<sup>57</sup> Grain exports from Ukraine in the first half of 2022 are discussed in detail in: Y. Khomenko, A. Okokofov, *Дослідження експортних вантажопотоків зернових з України*, „Транспортні системи та технології перевезень”, 2023, no 26, pp. 85-91.

Despite Russian losses during the war and a decrease in the military prestige of the Russian Navy, the asymmetry of forces between the navies of the two countries within the Black Sea was glaring. Therefore, the Bulgarian government was in no position to demonstratively put its navy on the state of alert in order to protect its prestige and economic interests. Moreover, such a step would also have required agreement within NATO, which, given Turkey's stance, was unable to deliver to the Black Sea warships from countries other than those with coastlines on the Black Sea<sup>58</sup>.

This indirectly contributed to further investments in the Bulgarian navy's equipment. For example, in the first half of September 2023 Bulgaria decided to purchase for its navy missiles and torpedoes as well as Swedish RBS-15 anti-ship cruise missiles.

### Naval mines

The war brought to the Romania's and Bulgaria's coast and territorial waters a long-forgotten threat to shipping (and tourism) – naval mines. In late March 2022 Bulgaria as well as Romania's Maritime Hydrographic Directorate<sup>59</sup> reported a threat from Ukrainian mines that broke free from their anchor. At the turn of March and April 2022 mines reached Turkey's territorial waters. As early as mid-April 2022 the problem of naval mines in the Black Sea was one of the key topics at a conference attended by the ministers of defence of Romania, Bulgaria, Poland and Ukraine. The meeting did not resolve the issue as Russia had started to place its naval mines in the sea.

In summer 2022 Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish and Georgian divers, together with US specialists trained to enhance their mine neutralization skills<sup>60</sup>. In spite of such developments, spring 2023 saw the naval mine threat to Black Sea shipping increase further. Already at that time this

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<sup>58</sup> More on Turkey's policy on the Black Sea in 2022 and 2023: D. Bechev, *Sailing through the storm Türkiye's Black Sea strategy amidst the Russian-Ukrainian war*, EUISS, <https://www.iss.europa.eu>, 6.02.2023 (18.12.2023). More on the context of Turkey's particular stance: D. Bechev, *Worst of Friends, Best of Rivals: Agency vs Structure in Turkey-Russia Relations*, „Uluslararası İlişkiler”, 2023, V. 20, No 79, pp. 5-31, DOI: 10.33458/uidergisi.1357630.

<sup>59</sup> A. Chirileasa, *Naval mines possibly drifting in the Black Sea pose concerns*, Romania Insider, <https://www.romania-insider.com>, 22.03.2022 (21.11.2023).

<sup>60</sup> *Ukraine war: Drifting mines pose deadly threat in Black Sea waters*, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com>, 11.08.2022 (10.12.2023).

forced Bulgaria and Romania to intensify the activity of their navies in the countries' exclusive zones in order to destroy mines. The aforementioned failure by Russia to extend the grain deal in summer 2023 led to another increase in Russia's naval mine-laying activity in the Black Sea. In October 2023 in the Black Sea several merchant ships were damaged after hitting naval mines.

In mid-October 2023, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey declared their readiness to undertake joint de-mining of the afore-mentioned shipping route crossing the territorial waters of Ukraine, Romania and Bulgaria. Simultaneously, 7 Bulgarian and Romanian minesweepers started clearing mines in this Black Sea area<sup>61</sup>.

In response Russia planted new mines using its aircraft<sup>62</sup>. The need to intensify the navies' demining action, especially by the Romanian navy, was made more apparent by subsequent incidents. In December 2023 alone, two ships hit Russian mines off the Ukrainian coast when sailing in a lane through Ukrainian, Romanian and Bulgarian territorial waters<sup>63</sup>. It is estimated that in the latter half of 2023 and in January 2024 Russia planted ca. 400 naval mines in the Black Sea<sup>64</sup>.

An agreement on mine action, announced in autumn 2023, was eventually signed by Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey on 11 January 2024. The Task Force to Combat Sea Mines in the Black Sea is expected to clear mines in the territorial waters and economic zones of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. According to information from Bulgaria, each of the contracting parties was expected to assign one warship and a command unit to the Task Force to Combat Sea Mines in the Black Sea. The task force was to carry out demining action maximum four times a year (for 15 days each time)<sup>65</sup>. The role of Romania's and Bulgaria's navies in combating drifting mines is made all the more relevant by Turkey's afore-mentioned objection to plans to allow other NATO members' ships to enter the Black Sea for demining purposes.

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<sup>61</sup> K. Nieczypor, *Ukraina – największe pole minowe świata*, OSW, <https://www.osw.waw.pl>, 22.11.2023 (24.11.2023).

<sup>62</sup> D. Axe, *Russian Planes Reportedly Dropped Mines Along Ukraine's Safe Corridor For Grain Ships*, Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com>, 25.10.2023 (20.11.2023).

<sup>63</sup> *Cargo ship hits naval mine in Black Sea en route to Ukraine*, AFP, <https://www.france24.com>, 28.12.2023 (29.12.2023).

<sup>64</sup> *Turkey: Turkey Has Problems From Libya to the Black Sea*, StrategyPage, <https://www.strategypage.com>, 29.01.2024 (30.01.2024).

<sup>65</sup> A. Wilk, P. Żochowski, *An agreement on security cooperation between the UK and Ukraine. Day 691 of the war*, OSW, <https://www.osw.waw.pl>, 16.01.2024 (31.01.2024).

### **In the face of the prospect of the navies' increasing protection of critical infrastructure**

As is known, extensive resources in the seabed are conducive to investments in navy equipment, as navies are expected to protect against attacks oil rigs controlled by the respective countries, and mineral deposits in the ocean floor against illegal over-exploitation<sup>66</sup>. Russia's sending drones in 2022 to areas with Norwegian oil rigs begs the question if Romania's and Bulgaria's navies are capable of effectively protecting such extraction infrastructure. In this context, account needs to be taken of the possibility of submarines attacking Bulgarian or Romanian infrastructure.

For warships to prevent such an attack, they need to be present close to extraction installations. In the first half of 2022 this problem was of utterly practical nature given both countries' plans to extract natural gas from the seabed within their territorial waters<sup>67</sup>. The role of the navies took on added importance in this respect after the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines in 2022; after Ukraine's successful attack (in 2023) on one of the offshore drilling platforms occupied by Russia in the Crimean area, and after damaging, in October 2023 a gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia.

The protection of drilling platforms is not the only challenge in relation to Black Sea infrastructure in both countries' exclusive economic zones. On 18 May 2023 at the international Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum, the Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă pointed out that there was another challenge, i.e. ensuring security for other installations under the surface of the Black Sea<sup>68</sup>. These include transmission pipelines (e.g. from Romanian Black Sea fields to the EU) as well as a proposed submarine cable for transmitting electricity from Azerbaijan to Romania and Hungary, bypassing Russia.

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. H.S. de la Barquera, *The maritime components in the armed forces of Latin America... using the example of Brazil, Columbia and Mexico*, "Austrian Military Journal", 2021, no 5, p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> T. Skrzyński, *In times of pandemic and war. Security of natural gas supplies to consumers in Romania and Bulgaria (January 2020 – August 2023)*, "Facta Simonidis", 2023, V. 16, no 2, pp. 346, 348, 352, 353, 355, 357, 358.

<sup>68</sup> J.M. Raubo, *Rumuńskie spojrzenie na bezpieczeństwo – relacja z konferencji Black Sea and Balkans Security Forum w Bukareszcie*, Defence, <https://defence24.pl.23.05.2023> (2.02.2024).

## Conclusion

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has resulted in increased expenditures on military equipment in Romania and Bulgaria, including spending on naval equipment. Paradoxically speaking, increased pressure from the public and politicians to expand the navy is evident in the country that has a significantly shorter coastline, i.e. in Romania. An important factor conducive to the expansion of both navies is NATO's attitude to such measures and the related cooperation with German<sup>69</sup>, French and British companies. Similar as before 2022, the main obstacles primarily include the question of funding, which have many times caused the plans to purchase modern vessels to be abandoned. Further expansion of the navies is being hampered by corruption level in both countries. Another factor that contributes to Bulgaria's lower per capita expenditures on the navy is the favourable sentiment towards Russia, expressed by many Bulgarians as well as Bulgaria's weaker economy.

Factors that could additionally stimulate the expansion of both countries' navies include: attempts to achieve better compatibility with warships of other NATO members, and plans to expand (Romania) / build (Bulgaria) extraction infrastructure in the Black Sea.

It is naval mines that are likely to have a serious and adverse impact on the economies of both countries (and that of Turkey) in the nearest future. The importance of the tourism industry in the countries discussed is such that negative impact will easily materialize if the media provide intensive coverage of even just a few cases of fatalities among foreigners holidaying in summer on crowded beaches where naval mines have reached the shore. It can be argued that such a scenario particularly applies to Bulgaria given the location of its tourist attractions and its long Western Black Sea coastline.

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<sup>69</sup> Critical view of Germany's policy in the current geopolitical situation: R. Kochnowski, *RFN wobec imperialnej polityki Federacji Rosyjskiej. Źródła i perspektywy*, „Wiedza Obronna”, 2023, v. 282, no 1, pp. 113-115.



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## **Marynarki wojenne Bułgarii i Rumunii wobec wyzwań związanych z jawną agresją Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 r.**

### Streszczenie

Przeprowadzenie porównawczej analizy marynarek wojennych Bułgarii i Rumunii uzasadnia szereg podobieństw tych państw m.in. pod względem geopolitycznym, militarnym, gospodarczym, a nawet religijnym. Stąd istotna jest analiza porównawcza przemian polityki obronnej i miejsca w niej marynarki wojennej. W XXI w. duże znaczenie miały przemiany w tych marynarkach. Były związane z próbami nadążenia za wymaganiami współczesnych działań wojennych na morzu. Kolejne ważne wyzwania przyniosła pandemia, a następnie agresja Rosji na Ukrainę. Ważny wpływ na postrzeganie marynarek przez społeczeństwa omawianych krajów miały zmiany w rekrutacji, problemy gospodarcze i społeczne trapiące Bułgarię i Rumunię.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bezpieczeństwo militarne, bezpieczeństwo morskie, bezpieczeństwo regionu Morza Czarnego, marynarka wojenna Bułgarii, marynarka wojenna Rumunii, miny morskie