Historically, the Black Sea region has always had great significance in Russian foreign policy. The events of the past decade, in particular the crisis in Ukraine, which started less than a year ago, are the latest confirmation of this fact. The Russian Federation’s response to the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the crisis in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (2004) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), along with the implemented and cancelled energy projects (Blue Stream and South Stream), the Russo-Georgian War (2008) and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, reveal how Russia’s interests in this part of the world affect the state of security at a systemic and sub-systemic level. The aforementioned occurrences demonstrate the extent to which the aims pursued by the Russian Federation shape the security environment in the Black Sea region.

For this reason, this treatise will examine the way in which Russian interests in this part of the world influence NATO’s security and what challenges they create in this regard. The result of this analysis will enable an understanding of the overall focus of Russian foreign policy with regard to the other countries bordering on the Black Sea. This, in turn, will enable NATO to counteract attempts to destabilise the region in a timely and appropriate manner.

First, we must look at Russia’s interests in Ukraine. In this case, the historical context cannot be disregarded, because it largely explains the nature of the relationship between these two countries. Their common origin, as related to the emergence of Kievan Rus’ in the 9th century, is more of a source of hostility than cooperation. A number of events in the Middle Ages and modern times have increased the tension between them. This has led to the creation of national identities in Russia and Ukraine on a mutually antagonistic basis. These attitudes unquestionably have an influence extending beyond the socio-cultural sphere. As a result, there exists a factor that is constantly complicating the relations between these two political entities, insofar as Moscow continues to view its neighbour to the southwest as an extension of itself.

The above shows one of the main interests of the Russian Federation: to ensure that Russian minorities retain their ethnic identity, and not just Russian speakers in Ukraine, but those in the entire post-Soviet space. This means that Russia feels entitled to interfere in the domestic affairs of these countries under the pretext of protecting the people who identify themselves as belonging to the Russian ethnic group. The current crisis in Ukraine is the freshest example of this standpoint, but the 2008 Russo-Georgian War also helps us understand the thinking behind the practical implementation of such a policy. In this way, Russia gets a chance to destabilise the countries that try to limit its influence on them. The ambitions of Georgia and Ukraine to integrate themselves into the Euro-Atlantic structures were met with resistance by Moscow, resistance that was viewed as a legitimate way of protecting the Russian minorities in these two countries.

This brings us to another of Russia’s interests: to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from becoming closer with the EU and NATO. To a great extent, the manner in which this interest has been defended has taken different forms, but the end result is identical. In both cases, the Black Sea region was destabilised, the only difference being that the consequences of the current crisis, which is yet to be resolved, are much farther-reaching. The foregoing demonstrates the nature of Russia’s foreign policy with regard to its neighbouring countries in the Black Sea region. Now is an apt moment to note that, according to the Russian expert in geopolitics Aleksandr Dugin, the very existence of a sovereign Ukrainian state constitutes the declaration of a geopolitical war with the Russian Federation (1) – an opinion he expressed around 15 years ago.

The considerations outlined above clearly show that Russia’s interests in Ukraine have a substantial effect on the security of NATO. The current conflict in this country should be seen as a consequence of precisely those interests. This allows us to formulate the following challenges for NATO Member States, all of which ensue from the aims Russia is pursuing in the Ukraine:

• Easing the internal tensions in the Ukrainian society and creating conditions for a lasting resolution of the conflict;

• Effective use of the NATO-Ukraine Commission in the preparation of solutions aimed at tackling and ending the crisis;

• Taking steps to limit Russia’s political, economic and military influence in Ukraine;

• Prevention of the further destabilisation of the Black Sea region.

We should also consider Russia’s interests in Georgia, even though they have already been partially outlined. Here we must once more take note of the historical context of the relationship between these two countries, because it allows us to understand the circumstances that have led to the accumulation of a potential for conflict between them. In this case, most important are the events that led to the formation of three separatist regions in the Georgian state – South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Adjara. Their secession is related to the years immediately after the October Revolution and Georgia’s decision to remain on the side of the Mensheviks. The subsequent ideologically-based conflicts between the independent Georgian state (1918-1921) and Abkhazians and Ossetians resulted in the build-up of mutual tension.

After Georgia had been routed in its war with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Abkhazia and South Ossetia received a status of autonomy. Consequently, during the Soviet era, the potential for conflict between the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and the autonomous political formations within its territory increased. Adjara’s autonomy, on its part, was guaranteed by the Treaty of Kars (1921). However, the historical context of the development of this area has not contributed to the creation of hostility towards the central Georgian government. The successful resolution of the crisis in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (2004) confirms this. The foregoing shows the significant influence of Russian foreign policy in the creation of internal lines of division in Georgia.

The wars in Abkhazia (1992-1993 and 1998) and South Ossetia (1991-1992) following the breakup of the USSR appear to be more the result of the conflict potential that had already built up, and all they did was bolster the divisions in Georgian society. All of this sets the context for the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which expressed to a great extent the essence of Russia’s interests in Georgia. This crisis, which occurred almost 7 years ago, demonstrated once more the way in which Moscow legitimises its interference in zones which it sees as falling within its sphere of influence. In this regard, it is important to note that changes made to Russian law in 2002 make it easier for residents of former Soviet republics to acquire Russian citizenship, and as a result of this, 80-90% of South Ossetia’s population has received such a status. (2) The situation in Abkhazia is identical.

These actions have been combined with the enhanced securitisation in relation to ethnic Russians in the neighbouring countries, as evidenced by the statement of Dmitry Rogozin of 10 February 2000: “Discrimination against and threats to the life, let alone taking the life, of Russian subjects amounts to a threat to the Russian state itself and its national security. We have 25 million compatriots in the near abroad. That problem is our number one problem, a national security problem.” (3) The aforementioned political moves gave the Russian Federation the opportunity to subsequently make a direct intervention in the 2008 conflict under the pretext of wanting to protect those of its citizens who were living in South Ossetia. In the meantime, the true aim – to retain control of South Caucasus and prevent Georgia from becoming closer with the EU and NATO – was partially achieved.

Thus, the nature of Russia’s interests was exposed – to use the Georgian separatist regions to destabilise this country whenever it tried to follow a foreign policy that was detrimental to Moscow. Based on the considerations laid out so far, we can formulate the following challenges for NATO Member States, all of which ensue from the priorities of Russia’s foreign policy on Georgia:

• Possibility of destabilising the Black Sea region and South Caucasus by activating the dormant conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia;

• Preventing Russia from interfering in Georgia’s domestic affairs with a view to delaying its integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures.

We should also look at the interests of the Russian Federation in the three NATO Member States falling within the Black Sea region. First, with regard to Romania, we must take into account the wider context set by the conflict in Transnistria. The 1992 war was to a certain extent an extension of the historical opposition between Russia and Romania, which began in the 18th century. There can be no question that there have also been periods of cooperation, but, on the whole, Russia’s interests have always been related to curbing the political, economic and military capabilities of the Romanian state with a view to ensuring Moscow’s supremacy over Southeast Europe.

Even during the communist regime, the Romanian government maintained, at least seemingly, a more or less tense relationship with the Soviet Union, largely due to the Bessarabia problem, however, without ever completely breaking off relations with the Kremlin, as was the case with the Yugoslavian government in 1948 and the Albanian government in 1961. (4) Located east of the Prut River, this area, which Romania considered its own, was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1945 and named the Republic of Moldova. (5) The breakup of the USSR catalysed the resumption of this conflict, and the subsequent 1992 war reinforced the positions of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic, which had declared its independence two years earlier. The existence of this separatist region is directly related to Russia’s interests.

On the whole, the aim of Russia’s foreign policy involves making the countries of Eastern Europe strategically dependent on Moscow. In this case, the substantial natural resources of Romania make it difficult for Russia to achieve such an outcome. It is precisely for this reason that the conflict in Transnistria appears to be the means by which the Russian Federation is able to have a direct effect on Romania’s interests. Therefore, the challenge to NATO stemming from the Kremlin’s priorities in this part of the Black Sea region represents the possibility that Russia will use the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic to further destabilise the region and influence the political factors in Romania.

With regard to Bulgaria, the interests of Russia’s foreign policy are identical, but they are being achieved in a different way. The country’s high dependence on imports of energy resources constitutes a vulnerability that is being exploited by Moscow. This has a negative effect on Bulgaria’s economic development, which, in turn, hinders the country’s attempts to modernise its armed forces and make them operationally compatible with the forces of the other NATO allies. As a result, the Bulgarian Air Force is currently highly dependent on Russia. (6) This reveals the comprehensive nature of the influence Russia’s foreign policy has on Bulgaria by taking advantage of the interrelationship between energy, economic and military aspects. Taking into account the foregoing, we can formulate the following challenges to the security of NATO ensuing from the aims the Russian Federation is pursuing in Bulgaria:

• A need to reduce Bulgaria’s energy dependence with a view to limiting Russia’s influence on the country’s policy;

• Ending the dependence of Bulgaria’s armed forces on Russia and enhancing their operational capabilities;

Finally, we should look at Russia’s interests with regard to Turkey in order to show how they affect the security of the Alliance. Here it is important to note that the big energy projects proposed by Russia in the Black Sea region are being used to some extent or another as political weapons. Russia’s attempts to build nuclear power stations in Bulgaria (the Belene Nuclear Power Station project is currently suspended) and in Turkey (Akkuyu Nuclear Power Station) are aimed precisely at strengthening Moscow’s influence in these two countries.

There can be no question that the South Stream pipeline was the main means used by Russia to increase the dependence of the countries of Southeast Europe on its energy resources and holdings. In this case, the subsequent cancellation of its construction and its replacement with the Turkish Stream project shows most clearly the focus of Russia’s interests with regard to the southwest parts of the Black Sea region. This new pipeline would have a maximum throughput of 63 billion cubic metres per year – the same amount as the defunct South Stream. (7)

In this way, and taking into account the existing capacity of Blue Stream, Turkey will be given the opportunity to resell Russian gas to other countries of Southeast Europe. The foregoing demonstrates that the Kremlin’s main objective is to create tension between the countries that were involved in the previous project and those involved in the current one with a view to creating a situation where the economic interests of the former run counter to those of the latter. Therefore, the challenge to the security of NATO ensuing from the priorities of Russia’s foreign policy on Turkey involves foiling Moscow’s attempts to disrupt the unity of the member states of the Alliance and preserving the solidarity between them.

Russia’s actions so far reveal the comprehensive influence the country has in protecting its interests in the states of the Black Sea region, as well as the Kremlin’s constant attempts to increase their dependence on Russia. This results in destabilisation in this part of the world, and here is an apt place to note that regional insecurity is always a major factor in weakening the security of the countries in the relevant region. (8) Moscow’s aforementioned political actions are being carried out against a background of the creation of a new supranational formation (the Eurasian Economic Union), which joins the circle of the already-existing amorphous political groupings created by Moscow and aimed at consolidating in some form or another the post-Soviet space.

There is no doubt that Russia plays an important part in the equation of European security. Even during its negative development at the beginning of the 1990s, this country was able to effectively use its political veto on political decisions concerning the future of Europe and the world. (9) In spite of this, Russia’s adoption of Eurasianism as a state ideology and the country’s view that the Black Sea region is within its sphere of influence will inevitably result in a situation that has a negative effect on the security of both NATO and the Russian Federation.