AVİM Commentary • No: 2026 / 8 •

ROMANIA, THE BLACK SEA, AND THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC SUBSTITUTION

Teoman Ertuğrul TULUN

Analyst

Romanias passivity debate

Recent discussions about Black Sea security increasingly portray Romania as hesitant or insufficiently proactive, suggesting that it suffers from a persistent crisis of strategic voice. In this framing, Bucharest is often invited to speak and act as a leading Western voice in the region, expected to assume a more pronounced role in signalling resolve and shaping deterrence. This commentary takes these claims as its point of departure but questions whether the role thus envisaged for Romania is compatible with its geographic profile, capabilities, and institutional position. It argues that inflating expectations in this way may be less a recipe for regional stability than a form of strategic substitution with potentially destabilizing consequences[1].

Geography, capability, and Black Sea frameworks

Romanias Black Sea profile is shaped by a relatively short coastline, concentrated around the port of Constanța, and by finite military and economic resources that limit its capacity to project power seaward. At the same time, the country is embedded in overlapping institutional frameworks: it is both an EU and NATO member, participates in regional initiatives such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, and operates within a maritime environment whose overall legal architecture is strongly influenced by the Montreux □□□□□□ regime governing access through the Turkish Straits. Historically, Black Sea stability has depended on the interaction between such legal regimes, the concrete capabilities of coastal states, and the strategies of extra □□□□□□□□ powers seeking influence or access, rather than on unilateral activism by any single medium □□□□□□ actor[2]
.

Structural limits versus accusations of passivity

Given these structural features, accusations that Romania suffers from a chronic crisis of strategic voice or from undue timidity risk overlooking the constraints embedded in its objective position. Romanias defence posture, fiscal space, and domestic political

bandwidth necessarily shape the scale and tempo of its regional initiatives, making it unsurprising that Bucharest often opts for calibrated contributions within alliance formats rather than unilateral activism. Many choices that are portrayed as passivity can thus be read instead as attempts to align ambitions with available capabilities and to manage risk in a crowded and volatile theatre. Interpreting such prudence as weakness creates its own dangers, not least by encouraging external actors to project onto Romania leadership roles, symbolic responsibilities, or escalation thresholds that exceed what its geography, forces, and institutions can realistically sustain over time.[3]

Strategic substitution and the marginalization of coastal anchors

Extending this line of reasoning, narratives that seek to elevate Romania into a primary regional pillar can be understood as a form of strategic substitution, whereby external actors symbolically transfer expectations of leadership and risk □□□□□□□ onto a state whose structural profile remains that of a medium □□□□□□ coastal power. Such narratives implicitly downplay the centrality of larger Black Sea states that possess treaty □□□□□□ responsibilities, long □□□□□□□□ naval infrastructures, and accumulated experience in managing the legal and political complexities of the region. When expectations of leadership are thus decoupled from material capacities and institutional mandates, the likely outcome is not enhanced deterrence but instability: misaligned ambitions in Bucharest, overlapping and potentially contradictory initiatives in the regional environment, and greater uncertainty among both allies and adversaries about who actually anchors the Black Sea security order.[4]

Realistic division of roles

Against this backdrop, a more sustainable approach would encourage Romania to act as an active but measured contributor, rather than as an artificially elevated regional pivot. A realistic framework would anchor Bucharests role in the concrete parameters of its geography, economic and military resources, and the obligations arising from its EU and NATO memberships. Regional security, in turn, should rest on a clear differentiation between those coastal states that bear legal gatekeeping responsibilities and possess the institutional tools to exercise them, and those whose function is primarily supportive and complementary. External partners ought to resist narratives that instrumentalize Romania as a proxy for broader strategic ambitions, and instead prioritize calibrated cooperation, targeted capacity □□□□□□□□ and burden □□□□□□□ arrangements that do not outstrip Romanias structural position. [5]

Stability over symbolic activism

Taken together, these considerations indicate that durable security in the Black Sea cannot be built on symbolic role □□□□□□□□□□□□ that ignore basic constraints of geography,

capability, and law. Sustainable arrangements require that expectations placed on each coastal state be aligned with what its territory, resources, and institutional position can credibly support, and that existing legal and organizational frameworks be treated as structuring realities rather than obstacles to be rhetorically bypassed. Casting Romania as a substitute regional anchor may offer short □□□□ political appeal, yet it risks producing instability, confusion over responsibilities, and unmet promises. A more balanced, region □□□□□□□□ approach that differentiates clearly between anchoring and supporting roles, and that privileges calibrated cooperation over declaratory activism, offers a sounder basis for long-term Black Sea stability.[6]

*Picture: European Conservative

[1] Mădălin Sârbu, Romania and the Crisis of Strategic Voice, The European Conservative, January 27, 2026, accessed February 10, 2026, https://europeanconservative.com/articles/commentary/romania-and-the-crisis-of-strategic-voice/

[2]Editorial Board, A Security Strategy for the Black Sea, Atlantic Council, report, January 21, 2024, accessed February 10, 2026, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-security-strategy-for-the-black-sea/ ; George Vișan, Guardian of the Danube: Romanias Mixed Progress in Implementing a Black Sea Strategy, Eurasia Daily Monitor (Jamestown Foundation) Black Sea Battleground Series, December 20, 2021, accessed February 10, 2026, https://jamestown.org/romania-the-danube-and-the-black-sea-growing-security-challenges-and-underutilized-economic-potential/

[3] Kamil Całus, Adam Michalski, Jan Nowinowski and Jacek Tarociński , Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey in the Black Sea Region: Increased Cooperation under NATO, OSW Commentary, June 26, 2025, accessed February 10, 2026, https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2025-06-26/romania-bulgaria-and-turkey-black-sea-region-increased ; Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Türkiye and the Battle for Black Sea Order, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), analysis, October 21, 2025, accessed February 10, 2026, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/AT-THE-CROSSROADS-TURKIYE-AND-THE-BATTLE-FOR-BLACK-SEA-ORDER

[4] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, France, Türkiye, And The Black Sea Order: Legal Realities Versus Strategic Shortcutting, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), analysis, February 02, 2026, accessed February 10, 2026, https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/FRANCE-TURKIYE-AND-THE-BLACK-SEA-ORDER-LEGAL-REALITIES-VERSUS-STRATEGIC-SHORTCUTTING

[5] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Guardianship or Equilibrium? Power, and the Legacy of Order

in the Black Sea, Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM), analysis, October 15, 2025, accessed February 10, 2026, https://www.avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/GUARDIANSHIP-OR-EQUILIBRIUM-POWER-AND-THE-LEGACY-OF-ORDER-IN-THE-BLACK-SEA

[6] Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun, Guardianship Of Meaning: Russian Disinformation, European Gospels Of Hate, And Türkiyes Legal Stability In The Black Sea, Eurasian Security Bulletin (EurasiaSec), analysis, January 12, 2026, accessed February 4, 2026, https://www.eurasiasec.org/guardianship-of-meaning

About the Author :

Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun is an analyst at Ankara-based think-tank Center for Eurasian Studies. Dr. Teoman Ertuğrul Tulun received his Ph.D. in Political Science and Public Administration from İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University in Ankara. His area of research include European Union Studies, Globalization, Xenophobia, Hate Speech Studies and International Relations.

To cite this article: TULUN, Teoman Ertuğrul. 2026. "ROMANIA, THE BLACK SEA, AND THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC SUBSTITUTION." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Commentary No.2026 / 8. February 12. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/en/Yorum/ROMANIA-THE-BLACK-SEA-AND-THE-LIMITS-OF-STRATEGIC-SUBSTITUTION

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Mail: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) All Rights Reserved