THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA AND CONTINUING INSTABILITY IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

Dynamics of regional security and new challenges for the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM)

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ABSTRACT: This article provides comprehensive research on sub-regional cooperation between former Soviet Union countries in the Black Sea region. Established in 1997, the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development in Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova (ODED-GUAM), united four countries in their desire to proceed with sub-regional cooperation and the ambitious goal of challenging the traditional power distribution in the region. In the first part of this article I discuss the rationale for a new sub-regional organisation and the stages of its development. From the very beginning, the ODED-GUAM prioritised democratic and economic development, where security was a secondary factor. With Russia regaining economic might and strengthening control over the region, the security challenges become a major factor of instability for all members of ODED-GUAM. Starting with Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria conflicts in early nineties, continuing with the Georgian War in 2008 and climaxing with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the region is experiencing long lasting instability with a growing number of "frozen" and ongoing conflicts.

KEYWORDS: Black Sea region, Sub-regional cooperation, security, ODED-GUAM, Russia, annexation of Crimea

The state of the problem

For centuries the Black Sea region (Figure 1) was divided between two major regional powers: the Ottoman Empire and The Russian Empire. While the turbulences of the 20th Century led to the collapse of both empires, the distribution of power in the region remained largely unchanged. Despite two world wars and a series of revolutions, the Soviet Union and Turkey both retained their dominant presence in the region during the Cold War period, representing Warsaw pact countries and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) respectively. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of new, independent states and imposed new challenges to regional security, particularly in the north part of the Black Sea.

Today, the most important security problems in the region all reside within the countries that emerged from the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia - with Azerbaijan. Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey being the other countries that border on the

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Black Sea. It is obvious that the states of the Black Sea region differ in their military, political and economic potential (Miller, 2018; Hajizada, 2014, 2018). However, the close proximity of these nations has led to a gradual awareness of the need for intraregional integration. The backbone of a regional system is formed by the partial overlapping of several organisations including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, the European Union (EU), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Organisation of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and the Organisation for Democracy, and Economic Development GUAM (ODED-GUAM). With the growing geopolitical significance of the Black Sea region as a new trade corridor and the ongoing negotiations for multiple projects involving gas and oil pipelines, security in the region has become a primary concern for all of these organisations.

Figure 1 - The Black Sea region is strategically located between Europe and Asia (© Can Stock Photo / Peter Hermes Furian).

After the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991, the process of democratisation and modernisation affected almost all countries in the Black Sea region. However, there was significant variance in the way that each country made this transition. Social and economic instability are among the "weak points" of the bordering countries and the developing dynamic found in those countries is far from what one could call sustainable growth.

The Internal Organisation of the territories of the Former Soviet Union

In 1992 eleven countries of the wider Black Sea area signed the Summit Declaration on Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). BSEC was initiated and promoted by Turkey with the goal of uniting all the countries of the Black Sea region to become a "became a symbol for… formal post-Cold War cooperation in the Wider Black Sea Area" (Hajizada, 2014: 102). With a plurilateral model of intergovernmental decision making, the organisation soon became overloaded with bureaucracy and it was not long before differences between engaged actors began to emerge. Turkey continues to support BSEC as a main platform for Black Sea cooperation, with the goal of having the Black Sea as a "zero-problem region" (Kushnyr, 2017b: 175), but the presence of large powers like Russia and Turkey and the plurilateral format of organisation limited initiatives on democratic development and collaboration.

Often, newly emerging structures are viewed from the standpoint of the geopolitical realities in their regions and factors such as the balance of power and the influence of extra regional powers should be considered in Black Sea region. If we talk about the post-Soviet space as a whole, it must be understood that the transformation processes were accompanied by many conflicts and political contradictions. These events influenced the region's development in a significant way. The creation and functioning of the Commonwealth of Independent States was the first attempt to create an international organisation that included most of the former republics of the Soviet Union. Some consider the CIS as a mechanism for managing the collapse of the USSR in order to regulate its negative consequences.[1] Others point to the structural similarity between the CIS and the EU and argue that the CIS is best understood as a cooperative community of countries based on mutual interest.

The CIS was designed to "soften" the negative consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union with a problematic model of leadership and unfocused prospects for future development (Cupchan and Cupchan, 1995). The first decade of the CIS's existence has shown its limited possibilities, in that there was not a single development goal that any of the states could be said to have adequately achieved, and the difference in assessing the objectives of this association became obvious by the end of the 1990s[2]. For some countries in the region, the CIS became an obstacle in their transformation. Isolation from European neighbors and unsubstantiated orientation to the West deprived them of an adequate vision of the realities and possibilities of the Commonwealth. This can explain the spread of regional initiatives and the desire for regional cooperation to stop the economic downturn and stabilise economic growth while laying the groundwork for future cooperation with European countries and regional organisations. Perhaps the most important reason for the inefficiency of the CIS was the failure to create a space for collective security under the umbrella of Russia. With Russia's internal problems, contested leadership in the organisation and the dysfunctional multilateral governmental model of the CIS, some country members began working on establishing new geopolitical alliances.

Since the second half of the 1990s, the region often referred to as the "FSU" (Former Soviet Union) has shown a tendency to create smaller-scale, neighbour-state associations. The process of creating these new structures is essentially a search for common identity as a

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[1] CIS originally included twelve out fifteen former Soviet Republics. Baltic States never participated in CIS and Georgia and Ukraine ended their participation in the organization in 2008 and 2018 respectively.
[2] The troubling domestic agenda (the Chechen War, the threat of Communist revanche and economic decline) diverted Russia from fulfilling the promises made by other CIS members.

reliable basis for political organisation. As such, this common identity was based on either a national-cultural identity (eg the Union of Russia and Belarus) or a protection of common interests within the security domain. The latter trend was reflected in the creation of the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty) and eventually ODED-GUAM.

CSTO, which is led by Russia, aims to counteract international non-state based terrorism and maintain military and political stability in the Central Asian region. The task of protecting the territorial integrity of the CSTO member countries is connected with the protection of the Central Asian republics' borders, especially those of Tajikistan. There are several reasons that Russia has taken on functional leadership of the CSTO. First, all Central Asian republics possess a significant military arsenal inherited from the former USSR and many of the republics lack the financial resources to keep up with the constant need to update and repair this arsenal. Because the Central Asian republics are not looking for NATO membership or other military-political alliances, and because the major technology centers were located in Russia, Russia was a natural ally and strategic partner in achieving the challenges set out by the CSTO (Afanas'yev, 2006: 126).

Given the borders and the proximity of politically unstable states such as Afghanistan, the activities of CSTO are best viewed as a form of preventive defense. In addition to the Central Asian States, CSTO includes Armenia and Belarus and (until 1997) Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. The possible reason for that is their geographic location. A separate example is Armenia, which considers Russia as an ally in the role of a formal arbiter in the resolution of interstate conflict with Azerbaijan. However, over time, the relative weakness of Russia as regional security provider coupled with the desire to proceed with democratisation and modernisation, stimulated among many of these states a political willingness to build closer relations with the European Union and NATO. For several countries in the Black Sea region that political will resulted in ODED-GUAM.

ODED-GUAM: reinforcing regional cooperation in broader Black Sea region

The work on sub-regional collaboration between Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine began in the early 1990s (Kushnir, 2016: 166). On March 14th 1996, these states issued a statement at a meeting of the OSCE Profile Committee on Security:

> *by creating a new security system, we must proceed from the realisation that our countries are not members of existing military-political associations. Cooperation between existing security organisations and individual states should consider the interests of the latter.* (OSCE Statement, 1996)

In fact, all of the members of GUAM experienced sovereignty, legitimacy and security problems (Gorovoi and Omel`ianchik, 2001: 74) at this time. The peculiarity of the situation lies in the absence of a single dominant state within GUAM. By signing a declaration about GUAM in October 1997, the four members prioritised economic development, democratic transformation, trade and security. But among many political analysts, GUAM become known as an association of states directed against Russia. This point of view is still very common (Glebov, 2009), although GUAM representatives themselves have repeatedly tried to reject the anti-Russian label. It is also noted that the purpose of GUAM is not to oppose Russia but to establish cooperation among its members (which could be construed as an attempt to break free from Russian dependence). Proponents of this approach believe that

the existence of strong, responsible neighbouring states is more in line with Russia's long-term interests than is its coexistence with weak, unstable and dependent states.[3]

Between 1996-1998 the GUAM countries represented themselves as such at OSCE meetings. On the 20th November 1997 they submitted proposal attempted to establish *ad hoc* OSCE committees and took other opportunities to discuss matters of critical interest to GUAM members, including an assessment of the current situation in Europe following the end of the Cold War. In their view, the possibility of creating a new security architecture had to include key points such as the principle of solidarity, equality of sovereign states in the construction of the security system, indivisibility of security, legitimisation of the security interests of individual countries, and freedom of choice for security structures (Declaration 2002a). More specifically, they proposed the concept of "Soft Security." GUAM delegates issued a statement at the meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on 27th March 1997, stressing the need to strengthen the operational capacity of the Organisation: "We believe that joint actions in cases of violations of OSCE principles should be accompanied by effective decisions" (GUUAM, 1999). In a statement in July the same year, GUAM representatives were the first to express their official position to the CIS

> with respect to the CIS, let me note that the views on crisis management as the
> main element of the organisation's work have been finally strengthened in the
> Commonwealth structures. However, so far, the CIS has been unable to defend
> the interests of participating countries in intra-and inter-state conflicts.
> (Kubicek, 2009: 253)

During the first stage of the organisation's institutionalisation, the Member States of GUAM expressed their common interest in the security sphere, noting the preservation of the territorial integrity of the participating countries. The greatest danger for them at that time was separatism, citing examples such as the outbreak of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan, multiple cases of separatism in Georgia, the Transnistria conflict in Moldova, and strong pro-Russian sentiments among the population in Crimea (Triantaphyllou, 2009). *De facto* problems with territorial integrity at that time were experienced by all GUAM member states, differing only in the degree of actualisation. So, if in Ukraine Crimean separatism in 1996-1999 reverted to latency (albeit not for long), the problems of Transnistria and Abkhazia continued to remain relevant. Unsatisfied with the framework of the CIS, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova formed a group on the basis of their similar positions, which Parakhonski characterises as "coordination" (2001: 25). Thus, the group expressed its security interests by using the OSCE representation format and declared its commitment to the principles of the UN Charter (5). The group was critical of the CIS, considering it to be an insufficiently capable mechanism[4].

The institutionalisation of GUAM continued from 1999 to 2002 and was meaningfully strengthened by the accession of Uzbekistan. The name was changed to GU(U)AM, and the inclusion of Uzbekistan provided the organisation with a new geopolitical perspective. Located in Central Asia with a population of thirty million, Uzbekistan brought the potential to bridge the Asian market with the Black Sea. Thus, the newly formed structure, called GU(U)AM, expanded its geographical range of action, and the increasing number of

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[3] ASEAN and the African Union provide useful examples of effective models of regional cooperation based on security and cooperation.

[4] Military-technical and political cooperation with NATO and CSTO was not reflected in the GUAM documents in that period.

countries changed the dynamics of collaboration.[5] The security agenda shifted from the issues of "frozen" conflicts in the region to the problems with narco-trafficking, terrorism, and the growing radicalisation of particular groups.

Following the meeting of the presidents of the GU(U)AM countries in Washington on the 24th April 1999, a statement was issued that emphasised the importance of common interests, enabling them to establish cooperation in the multilateral format within the framework of GU(U)AM. The basis of the group's activities (the UN Charter principle and OSCE program documents) remained the same. What changed was the introduction of principles based on "consolidation of civil societies on the basis of respect for the principles of democracy, priority of the rule of law and respect for human rights" (Statement, 2001). Security was thus recognised as an inseparable concept, and its definition included combining efforts to counter the challenges and threats to peace and stability at the national, regional and global levels. Peacemaking as an activity for the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflicts was recognised as a task of multilateral cooperation among GU(U)AM members. The agenda of the New York meeting (2000) considered the establishment of a free trade area within the GU(U)AM. The motive for this, according to Presidents Kuchma and Shevardnadze, was the failure of the attempt to create a free trade area within the CIS. The presidents agreed on the implementation within the GU(U)AM of a visa-free mechanism for citizens' trips on a bilateral basis, placed these countries in confrontation with the CIS which did not have such a mechanism (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2000).

With such a strong beginning and significant interest from European security structures and US, GU(U)AM cooperation would seem to have been geared for success. For example, Moldovan leaders placed emphasis on regional cooperation. Since it was originally declared, the goal of further development for the country, such as joining European structures, membership in the GU(U)AM was of interest to it, first of all, in the economic sphere. The representative of Moldova highlighted the interest of the USA in cooperation with Moldova and expressed awareness in the implementation of China's 'New Silk Road' project. In this regard, the New York memorandum coincided with the intensification of cooperation between GU(U)AM and the USA. Among other things, the issue of further expansion of the group was actively discussed during this period. The president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, for instance, asserted that Romania wanted to join GU(U)AM (although the Romanian ambassador in Washington responded by identifying that the claim was an exaggeration - Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2000). Z. Brzezinski[6] also expressed the idea that it would be desirable for GU(U)AM to accept Turkey, Romania or Poland as observers. However, in the beginning of the new millennium "Russia is taking a lead position in the regional security, other regional actors have to recon with its stand" (Ukrainian Centre and for Economic and Political Studies named after Olexander Razumkov 2011: 13).

It is not surprising then that idea of expanding the GU(U)AM Group's cooperation with the United States was floated just before the Millennium Summit of the UN, at which the New York memorandum was presented. It is characteristic that this document does not contain any mention of the USA, limiting the presentation of the directions of future cooperation

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[5] The significant difficulty of predicting the behaviour of partner countries and assessing the future scenarios of the political situation is closely related to the number of countries participating in the international association.

[6] Zbigniew Brzezinski, a well-known expert on Soviet Union and Post-Soviet transformation, was a counselor to President Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as President Carter's National Security Advisor.

with the UN, OSCE, NATO. On the 17th May 2000, at a seminar in Washington, organised with the assistance of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe, the ambassadors of the GU(U)AM group of countries announced their desire to develop cooperation between countries and with the United States.

Since the beginning of the GU(U)AM, the problem of terrorism has been repeatedly discussed within the organisation. The events of September 11th 2001 showed, with increased credibility, the need to establish a system of international relations that would preclude the recurrence of such tragedies in the future. Speaking at the UN General Assembly, the representative of the GU(U)AM noted that:

> *Today the need to create an effective international anti-terrorist Center is as acute as ever before. Assistance to individual States through the adoption of the most effective legal mechanisms to combat this phenomenon is now a priority.*

Cooperation between the United States and GU(U)AM on the basis of counteraction to the common threat of terrorism was developed on November 14th 2001, with the statement:

> The United States and GU(U)AM are jointly opposed to terrorism and strongly condemn the barbaric terrorist attacks that occurred in the United States on September 11, 2001. These attacks are nothing but a statement against the entire world community, a challenge to people of all persuasions and cultures. (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2000).

It is important to note that in this statement the US and the GU(U)AM countries recognised that terrorism is not specifically identified with any of the existing religions and cultures but has acquired the scale of an international phenomenon

Practically the fight against terrorism was conducted by the USA in the format of bilateral cooperation with the GU(U)AM countries and with Uzbekistan becoming a key ally of the United States in Central Asia. The remaining members of the GU(U)AM provided their airspace for the transit of American military cargo. The year 2002 became a landmark for GU(U)AM when Uzbekistan, one of the leading players, suspended its membership in GU(U)AM, despite the fact that the US previously called on it not to leave the organisation. Uzbekistan's withdrawal from led not only to a reduction of the abbreviation but also to the change of sentiment within GUAM, which is evident in the rhetoric of the organisation's official statements. These statements show that cooperation with the USA continued to develop[7]. A landmark event in the development of the GUAM group was the meeting of representatives in New York, which resulted in the issuance of a common US-GUAM memorandum of partnership, which emphasis the ideas of cooperation, territorial integrity, adherence to the principles of democracy and the cooperation with the UN, OSCE, EU and NATO. GUAM-US cooperation continued to develop until 2008. Interest in the broader framework of countering terrorism, drugs, and organised crime lost momentum and slowly declined after the 2008 Georgia War.

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[7] In 2001 the US Congress allocated 1 million dollars as aid to the GU(U)AM countries in their anti-terrorist activities. The funds provided by the program were allocated in accordance with art. 9 Act on Assistance to foreign States, 1961. (Joint Statement U.S. - GUUAM 2003)

OSCE and ODED-GUAM

Emphasising their commitment to OSCE goals, GUAM representatives have stressed the need for early resolution of "frozen" conflicts. One of the instruments here, in the opinion of GUAM, is to strengthen the OSCE's peacekeeping capacity. Another area of work is greater control over the implementation of earlier decisions, in particular the 1999 Istanbul Summit (Address 2000). In 2001 the GUAM summit in Yalta was planned, where the goals, principles and directions of the group's cooperation were clearly delineated. Priority was given to socio-economic development (strengthening and expanding trade and economic relations, development and effective use of transport and communication highways and corresponding infrastructure located on their territory) and it was noted earlier that these goals constitute the "economic dimension of security" (GUAM 2002b). The strengthening of regional security, the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking were also identified. The development of relations in the field of science, culture and the humanitarian sphere were recognised as separate goals.

Characterising the meetings of the GUAM in Yalta, it should be noted that the GUAM Charter became the program document of the Organisation, which consolidated the changes that have taken place since the proclamation of GUAM until 2001. During consultations on important issues for the group members, GUAM continued to be a forum for meetings of Black Sea leaders outside the CIS format. The declaration of common efforts to ensure stability in the region considered the ongoing transformation of the system of international security in the face of terrorism, aggressive separatism, and extremism. The concentration of such threats and related negative phenomena (organised crime, illegal migration, the spread of drugs, the transport of weapons in areas of unresolved conflicts) have led to destabilisation among the states of the Black Sea region. There is a need to further develop and strengthen the regional stability and security system in order to avoid a recurrence of the tragedies of September 11th 2001.

The climax of security and cooperation initiatives between ODED-GUAM countries is reflected by a few significant events that occurred in 2006. During its Ukrainian chairmanship the openly pro-Western president Yushchenko launched a number of initiatives aimed to change the security model in the region. First, he activated a process of peace talks on situation in Moldova and Transnistria, "format 5+2"[8]. Second, Ukraine organised and directed the meeting of GUAM Heads of State resulting in a joint communique on the necessity to intensify conflict settlement efforts among GUAM countries (Ukrainian Centre and for Economic and Political Studies named after Olexander Razumkov, 2011). The document included 9 positions. Among them, the desire to settle conflicts in the region, maintain territorial integrity and not recognise of self-proclaimed territories. The document identifies the basic steps for consolidation efforts among GUAM countries in their engagement of extra-regional powers to demilitarise conflict zones and regain separatist territories. Interestingly enough, this document emphasises the importance of "multinational peacemaking forces deployed therein under UN or OSCE auspices for providing conditions for the return of populations and the peaceful coexistence

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[8]"The 5+2 format includes representatives of the sides, mediators and observers in the negotiation process – Moldova, Transdniestria, the OSCE, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the European Union and the United States. The goal of the 5+2 talks is to work out the parameters of a comprehensive settlement based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders with a special status for Transdniestria within Moldova." Extracted from OCSE (2018).

of ethnic communities" (GUAM 2006). The Ukrainian Minister of Defense A. Hrytsenko announced the creation of join military forces of GUAM. However, this effort was almost immediately buried in GUAM's archives and there was no future development of this particular agenda[9].

Russia and GUAM: from soft to hard power

The key component of relations with Russia during the first stage of GUAM's existence could be explained thus: "Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova are much more dependent on Russia than each other" (Olcott, Aslund and Garnett, 1999: 169). Russia has many ways to exert pressure on individual members of the organisation, which the GUAM group cannot resist. Leaving multilateral cooperation within the CIS to deal with minor issues, Russia engaged GUAM countries in bilateral relations, mostly ignoring GUAM institutions: "the exceptional position of Russia (economic and military) among the countries of the post-Soviet space meant the primacy of bilateral ties" (Latawski, 2001: 79). For example, military collaboration between Russia and Ukraine was established despite statements from the Ukrainian authorities expressing their country's reluctance to join the CIS Military Union (Olcott, Aslund, and Garnett, 1999: 169). After signing the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurance in 1994[10], the governments of Russia and Ukraine finalised around 30 agreements in 1995 alone. Russia gained considerable advantage in all signed agreements, including an air defence agreement. In addition, Russia secured use of Ukrainian territory for the purpose of early warning systems and the permanent deployment of air defence components.

In 1997, it seemed like Russia and Ukraine had finally ended long debates on the Black Sea Fleet by signed the Partition Treaty and establishing two independent national fleets and dividing armaments and bases between them. Ukraine also agreed to lease major parts of its facilities to the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2017. However, the treaty was not completely satisfactory for both sides: permanent tensions on the lease details, control and military presence continued. In 2009, under the presidency of Yushchenko, Ukraine declared that the lease for Russian Black Sea would not be extended and that the fleet would have to leave Sevastopol, on the south-western tip of the Crimean Peninsula, by 2017. But under Yushchenko's successor, President Yanukovych, Russian leasehold was renegotiated with an extension until 2042 and an option for an additional five years until 2047. With an established presence on the territory of Ukrainian Crimea, with the military personnel numbering somewhere between 12,000 and 24,000, the Russian Fleet become a significant player in the Black Sea.

From the point of view of Azerbaijan, it is not only the intraregional dimension of cooperation that is important but also attitudes towards GUAM on the part of the world's leading powers. US foreign policy has viewed political relations with countries of the former Soviet Union through the prism of Russia-USA relations. So engaging in closer collaboration with the USA using the platform of GUAM was considered a main benefit of participating. At the same time, Azerbaijan remained tied with Russia via military supplies, long-lasting

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[9] In 2007 this topic was blocked by Georgia in its pursuit to focus on broader cooperation with NATO (Socor, 2009).

[10] Memorandum on accession of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

partnerships in the energy sphere and via Russia's role in the moderation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

For Moldova, the Transnistrian conflict is a major threat to its security and it can be argued that "without the resolution of this conflict, it is not possible to speak of comprehensive stability and security in south-Eastern Europe" (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2000). In fact, the political leaders of Moldova have identified Russia's military presence in the region as a major destabilising factor. At the same time, the ambiguity of Moldova's political system locks it into strong trade and economic relations with Russia. Georgian-Russian relations[11] have a strong affect in the formulation of the goals and objectives of the GUAM activity on the part of Georgia, so is unsurprising that Georgia has sought to secure its connections with Turkey, the European states and the United States via regional organisations.

From Georgia's viewpoint, the main benefits and advantages of cooperation within the GUAM group was the possibility of holding intraregional consultations and establishing strong ties between the members of the Organisation through the implementation of "The New Silk Road" project and engaging in stronger cooperation between GUAM countries and China.

The commonality of views between GUAM members was expressed in their support of initiatives aimed at strengthening existing borders, combating corruption and organised crime. Unsolved territorial issues, Russian support for separatism and the presence of Russian troops in all countries of GUAM continue to revitalise anti-Russian sentiments. At the same time, all of the countries show the signs of being internally divided between pro-Russian and pro-European groups. That is one reason why a coherent and cohesive security agenda never developed. But while there were common interests, a majority of documents show a high responsiveness in joint activities related to oil, oil transportation, and pipeline projects. The increasing threat of terrorism and positive attitudes towards military-technical cooperation with international organisations have been identified in numerous documents (mostly regarding NATO). In relations with extra regional powers, mention of the USA is strongly correlated with anti-terrorism. In matters of political cooperation with international organisations, the EU and the United Nations were seen by the CIS and OSCE to retain important positions (Afanas'yev, 2006). Negative attitudes towards the CIS was expressed primarily in the isolation of the organisation among the other partners because of its "inefficiency" and "formalist structure" (Kubicek, 2009: 256). By the mid-2000s, further development and institutionalisation of the ODED-GUAM structure was interrupted by Russia's new strategy in the region.

Challenges arise: War in Georgia (2008) and the Russian annexation of Crimea (2014)

In their article 'GUAM-NATO cooperation: Russian perspectives on the strategic balance in the Central Caucasus' (2008), McDermott and Morozov argue that Russia will never accept regional GUAM peacekeeping missions or NATO troops to solve "frozen" conflicts in the

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[11] Russia has actively supported separatist movements, resulting in military conflict in Abkhazia in 1993-94. Russia also dominates the collective peacekeeping missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but has been criticised by Georgia, and, more recently, by several Western diplomats, for failing to maintain neutrality in the conflict zones.

region. The brief military operation by Georgian military forces in early August 2008 to regain control over the rebellious region of South Ossetia – despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers in the region and close proximity of Russian forces - saw the operation soon take an unplanned turn. The furious fights over Ossetia soon developed complications when Abkhazia (another separatist region in Georgia) opened a second front with artillery support from the Russian Black Sea fleet, stationed in Crimea. The military conflict ended with a ceasefire on 12th August, but the results of the conflict were apparent a few weeks later when the Russia recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The reaction of GUAM countries to the conflict in Georgia was underwhelming.[12] But even before the war in Georgia, understandings among GUAM countries about finding common solutions to "frozen" conflicts was weak. For example, the president of Moldova, V. Voronin, did not attend the Baku Summit (2008), where this question was supposed to be discussed and all discussion of joint GUAM peacekeeping forces soon ended because of strong Russian disagreement with the proposal (Radio Liberty, 2008; McDermott and Morozov, 2008).

With a shared failure to provide adequate reaction to the events in Georgia, ODED-GUAM moved its focus to cooperation, trade and economic development, seeking new partners in different regions (Japan, China and the Baltic States). Despite obvious security problems, growing separatism and Russian interference in the region, the security agenda of GUAM was moved off the table once again (Tsantoulis, 2009). This neglect of the security situation in the wider Black Sea region soon become obvious. The chain of events commenced in Kiev on 21st November 2013, with the Euromaidan protest movement against President Yanukovych erupting,[13] continued with the Russian annexation of Crimea and protracted conflict in the Donbas region and, most recently, the development of Russian-Ukrainian confrontation in Azov Sea in November 2018.

The annexation of Crimea came as a shock for members of GUAM, partially because situation in Crimea in 2014 developed rather quickly. Together with the over 12,000 strong Russian force already stationed in Crimea (under a basing agreement), Russia deployed a covert military operation, utilising special unmarked military units to capture and disarm Ukrainian soldiers located at strategic government and military sites (Carment, Nikolko, Belo, 2019). On 27th February, Crimea's Parliament was seized by unidentified soldiers and by the end of that day a statement was issued that declared that a new Premier, Sergey Aksyonov would be appointed. A status referendum was announced for 25th May, 2014 (which was subsequently moved forward to 16th March). With the paralysis of the Ukrainian army in Crimea, and a decision-making vacuum in Kiev, the only institution in Crimea loyal to the Ukraine was the regional organisation of the Crimean Tatars or "Mejlis." The organisation had been advocating for moderate levels of self-determination for regional Tatars as well as respect for indigenous special status within Ukraine. Once the annexation of Crimea took place, the organisation was outlawed by the Russian authorities thus undermining the status of Tatars in regional politics.[14] As with the case of Georgia in 2008,

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[12] GUAM member states' ambassadors (2013).

[13] The protests spread fast in different regions of Ukraine, where the eastern regions and Crimea were mostly in support of Yanukovych's presidency. In February 2014 the wave of violence on Kiev streets resulted in more than hundred dead (the majority of whom were protestors). Failing to secure an agreement with the Opposition, Yanukovych fled the country, leaving behind the chaos in Kiev and growing separatism in the regions.

[14] Since 2014 Russia has almost tripled its military presence in Crimea (from 12,500 to 31,500), installed 16 air defense missile systems and there is no evidence that Russia will slow down its militarisation of the region (InformNapalm, 2018).

ODED-GUAM showed very moderate support to Ukraine: Georgia and Moldova issued a statement on the so-called referendum in Crimea, and a resolution was passed in the Georgian parliament supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine[15].

Since the annexation of Crimea and the rise of the separatist movement in the Donbas region, all of the ODED-GUAM countries have experienced significant problems with control over their territories. Figure 2 indicates GUAM countries and red areas indicate separatist controlled territories and Russian occupied Crimea.[16]

Figure 2 - The Azov Sea confrontation and the security issues in the broader region

Key:
    1 Transnistria.
    2 Crimea.
    3 Uncontrolled Ukrainian territories of Donbas (Donetsk People Republic
      and Luhansk People Republic).
    4. Abkhazia
    5. South Ossetia
    6. Nagorno-Karabakh

The Russian strategy towards Crimea is significantly different from its dominant model of dealing in a semi-partisan way with the separatist territories in the region. Since March 2014 Crimea was rapidly incorporated in Russian Federation: the Crimean federal district was

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[15] Also see GUAM (2014a and 2014b).
[16] Tactical regional cooperation continues among GUAM countries, see GUAM (2018).

created, all of the national and municipal enterprises were "refurbished" under the Russian law and large infrastructural projects were initiated (Petrov, 2016). The most important among the latter was the Crimean bridge, designed to connect Crimea with Russia over the narrow pass of Kerch Strait. The project soon becomes a subject of a new wave of Western sanctions on Kremlin and Russian business, nevertheless, the bridge was opened by Russian president Putin in May 2018. Since then, the tension between Ukrainian and Russian cargo and military fleets in the Azov Sea have grown (Urcosta 2018a). During summer 2018 both sides were reporting the multiple issues in navigating via Kerch Strait, including delays and logistical problems. For Ukraine, the Crimean bridge is a new threat for commercial transportation from the port of Mariupol and Berdyansk and a significant problem for the security of its southern region. As the situation continued to develop open conflict became increasingly likely and confrontation occurred at the end of November 2018 when contact between Russian and Ukrainian navy vessels resulted in the seizing Ukrainian ships (Miller 2018). The international reaction was immediate and was highly critical of Russian actions.

However, the problem with Russia's control over the Kerch Strait and its domination of the Azov Sea needs to be considered in a much broader spectrum. The Soviet legacy of dealing with its "south seas" (Black Sea, Azov Sea, Caspian Sea) as an "internal" or "territorial" matter, where the principal of the free sea cannot be implemented, continued to be a major aspect of Russia's strategy in the region. The recent meeting of the leaders of the Caspian Sea states (Azerbaijan, Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) held in the Kazakh city of Aktau, on 12th August 2018, has made a major breakthrough in the negotiations that have occurred over a twenty-year period when the Caspian states signed The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea. The document finalised the long-lasting debate over the Caspian Sea and increases the potential for prosperity in the Caspian basin, but two core principles were determined by pressure from Russia: the first principle refers to the concept of the destiny of the sea, and denies third countries' rights to have access to the Caspian Sea. The second principle grants freedom of movement for Russia's Caspian fleet. Therefore, it is worth noting that except for surrounding countries' territorial waters, the rest of the Caspian Sea remains open for Russia and other riparian states.

A brief analysis of the Azov Sea confrontation and the results of Caspian Convention shows that Russia uses similar models of pressure tactics to secure control over the territories and waters and that there has been a "constant failure to address a number of complex international legal issues related primarily to the legal status of the Caspian, Azov and Black Seas" (Urcosta 2018b: 13).

Conclusion: "Do or die"?

Should ODED-GUAM proclaim regional security as its main priority in order to avoid complete failure and disintegration? My analysis allows for the following conclusions. During the formation of the Organisation (1997-2002) GUAM positioned itself as a special interstate structure in post-Soviet space, claiming to have a unique role in expressing the interests of its constituent states. At the same time, it overlapped with some regional organisations, such as the BSEC, placing it in a permanent latent conflict with existing organisations (CIS and CSTO). Despite the fact that GUAM has declared a generally neutral attitude towards the CIS, reproach for the CIS as an excessively formal and ineffective structure was found in GUAM documents. The operation of the organisation can be clearly divided into three periods: a) the initial period following the declaration the creation of the organisation; b) the period when it expanded its geographical framework (with the

accession of Uzbekistan); and c) the period of its integration, its criticism of the CIS and the narrowed the geographical scope of its participants. Despite the obvious security problems in the region, security has always been a peripheral goal for the organisation. The few initiatives which have focused on reorganising the security system in the region, most notably that originated by Ukrainian President Yushchenko in 2006, all failed. Today, even after Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the countries of ODED-GUAM still rely on bilateral relations with Russia. Its members continue to underuse the communication platforms and collective power of the GUAM organisation. With security issues substantially undermined GUAM, countries have in turn failed to develop sustainable cooperation among themselves. This failure in cooperation has resulted in a growing number of ongoing and "frozen" conflicts. Long lasting periods of instability are unavoidable under such circumstances unless and until GUAM states begin to work together with a common purpose and a shared vision of the future.

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