

# **Power perception and conflict prevention in the Black Sea region: The EU, Russia and Turkey**

PhD Dissertation Booklet

*Neli V. Kirilova*

Supervisors: Dr. Christopher Walsch & Dr. Anna Molnár

Corvinus University of Budapest, Doctoral School of International Relations and Political  
Science, International and Security Studies Doctoral Program

&

European Security and Defence College, Doctoral School on CSDP / CFSP

Budapest, 2023 August

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## **I. Research background and justification of the topic**

The main contribution of this research is the newly developed concept of international relations theory. It establishes the relation between power perception and conflict prevention. I apply it to the case study of the Black Sea region, characterised with regional security crises and conflicts. The same theoretical model can be applied to other regions with the purpose the reaction of competition to be identified preliminarily. As a result, action can be implemented to prevent a conflict.

The theoretical framework begins with an epistemological approach to power. I discuss the understanding of power in neorealism, liberalism and constructivism, out of which I draw a combined classification - six elements of power. The literature on power in IR and the case study logically lead to a conceptual framework. The conceptual framework explains the relation between the six power elements and conflict in the competition for externally projected influence. It creates a model to assess the reactivity of the three regional hegemons on each of the six power elements in a fixed time period. It provides an empirical example by measuring their perception of the six power elements in their foreign and security policy concepts at a certain time, between two major crises.

*Conflict prevention and power perception in the Black Sea region: the EU, Russia, and Turkey* is a research which assesses the potential of regional competitors to escalate regional security crises, due to perceived power competition. This research is embedded in the general knowledge of conflict prevention. It assumes that conflict is the result of competition. It refers to post Cold-war regionalism. The international relations theories, related to security crises, conflict and power in the Black Sea region, on which I construct this research, are the *security dilemma* theory and the *balance of power* theory. Security dilemma shows as a main reason for security crises the misperception between regional powers. Balance of power outlines perfect competition as a main reason for preserving the stability of a region, while imperfect competition destabilises a region. In this context, I explored how the perceived value of power for each regional competitor relates to their reaction of competition, leading to security crises and conflicts.

This research aimed to contribute to it through two simultaneous approaches - regionalism and international relations theory. The theoretical framework chapter developed the IR theory approach. The conceptual framework chapter explained how it can be empirically tested. The case study chapter developed the regionalist approach. After I

examined the contribution of these approaches towards conflict prevention, I tested them in empirical chapters. The main findings, interpretations and conclusions are outlined further.

The **research impact** is on conflict prevention and power perception. The results show which elements of power are considered as more important and which are considered as less important for each actor, Russia, Turkey, and the EU. The findings show the perceived importance on each of the six power elements for Russia, Turkey, and the EU. As a result, their reaction of competition, leading to conflict, could be identified in advance. Therefore, it could be prevented. The assessment also shows the potential areas of cooperation and neutral areas.

Based on the results, an active reaction would be expected by a regional competitor if another regional competitor threatens to influence a country on a power element which is considered as highly important. A passive reaction is expected by a regional competitor on power elements considered less important. The assessment only refers to the aimed external influence towards. Namely, the impact a regional competitor aims externally.

In the **literature review** chapter I explore, critique and synthesize the leading authors of the three topics - conflict prevention, regionalism, and IR theory. The literature review integrates thematic case study and theoretical parts. This is the precondition for the developed new conceptual framework. It is later addressed empirically.

To assess power perception, I implemented several steps. First, I selected a case study with high conflict intensity - the Black Sea region. I identified three regional competitors with relatively equal power status - the EU, Russia and Turkey. Then, I identified conceptualised power, consisting of six power elements. Then, I assessed the applicability of this new concept to the three regional competitors in the Black Sea region via expert interviews. This showed whether such classification of power elements could be examined for these three competitors. I selected a peaceful time period between major international crises, for which time I assessed the foreign and security policy strategies of the three regional competitors. Based on the perceived importance of each power element for each of the three regional competitors, I assess their likelihood to react by initiating a crisis. As a result, I suggested which regional competitor would be triggered to initiate regional security crises or conflicts on which power element, for the selected time period.

## **II. Methodology and methods**

This dissertation is written via an **abductive methodological** approach. It selects a methodology of grounded theory, which means that a case study is developed in parallel with a theoretical framing, as a result of which new theory is built and tested. A new conceptual framework is proposed. It is tested empirically in the variables, derived from the case study. Finally, the assessment of the results is brought to the initial theory on conflict prevention, aiming to contribute to this set of knowledge.

The **case study** chapter justifies the selected conflict factors in the Black Sea region – time, participants, reasons for conflict, interests. In the Black Sea region, I identified the EU, Russia, and Turkey as the three main regional competitors with comparable power status, as suggested in the theory. The case study aims to identify some of the interests of the regional competitors with equal power status in the Black Sea region. The case study chapter, in a descriptive way, discusses the preconditions for their perception of power areas over which they compete. I address the existence of constant regional security crises and conflicts around the Black Sea. I examine it as a result of the power competition between regional competitors. The current research examines as a reason for competition the different perception of power between the regional competitors. Therefore, it aims to define their perception of power. I assume that the competition leads to conflict. I assess potential areas of competition and cooperation. I identify the relation between power perception and the lack of regional stability. Through this approach, the research aims to contribute to the knowledge of conflict prevention for the specific region. I test its applicability through expert interviews.

In the further **empirical chapters**, I assess the foreign and security policy strategies of the EU, Russia, and Turkey in a fixed time period between two crises. For the EU, it is through discourse analysis. This shows the yearly change of attitude. For Russia and Turkey, it is through comparative content analysis. It shows their static interests. This particular information can be used for EU conflict prevention.

### **Assessment of the methodological choices**

The selected abductive methodology applies a case study, for the purpose of building and testing new theory. Relevant case study regions are those characterised with security crises and conflicts are ongoing for centuries. Such examples are, among others, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region. The general knowledge on the main conflict drivers in these two regions suggests two factors – the nationalism of the local population and the

geopolitical competition between regional hegemons. I examined conflicts as a result of the external competition for influence. The main regional powers, competing for influence in these regions, are Russia, Turkey and the EU. As a measurable aspect of this influence, I conceptualised power in international relations. Furthermore, through discourse and content analyses I assessed how power is perceived in the foreign and security policy strategies of the regional competitors for a fixed time period. This was achievable, due to the limited number of documents, the exact values of time, and the clearly established values to be measured - six power elements, for three regional competitors.

### **III. The findings of the dissertation**

The dissertation develops the topic of conflict prevention and power perception in the Black Sea region. Further, it is explained how the results of every chapter of the dissertation meet the research objectives. The contributions of the research are discussed as: theoretical for conflict prevention, conceptual to the meaning of power in IR, empirical to the case study of the Black Sea region, particularly Russia, Turkey and the EU, and practical for EU diplomacy.

- **Conceptual contribution: a new theory to the knowledge of conflict prevention**

The perception of power affects the reactions of regional IR actors. Those are either competition, cooperation or neutral. The reaction of competition leads to conflict. The aim of this research was to detect the reaction of competition in advance. Thus, it could contribute to conflict prevention. A conceptual framework was created, aiming to make possible such measurement. It consists of six elements of power and three regional hegemons, whose perceptions could be measured on these power elements for a fixed time period. The *validity* is high for a selected time. However, the validity is not constant, because the values for the regional competitors might change in different time periods, depending on which IR actors possess comparable power status at a certain time. The values for power elements might also differ for different regional competitors in different time periods.

- **Theoretical contribution: the meaning of power in international relations**

The conceptualisation of power in international relations is multidimensional, with main aspects of power as status of IR actors or as areas of competition. The estimation of perception of power elements is implemented through conceptual division of power in six

elements. Through it, I measure the perception of IR actors with comparable power status - the regional competitors. This theoretical conceptualisation of power is created as a model to assess power perception and the reaction attitudes, leading to competition. Such knowledge corresponds to the starting research presumption, stating that competition leads to conflict and identifying the perceived power could contribute to conflict prevention.

- **Empirical contribution: the Black Sea region, Russia, Turkey, the EU**

I empirically test the new theory to the foreign and security policy strategies of the EU, Russia and Turkey. I examine: *What importance is given to military, economic, energy, political, social, and information components in the foreign and security policy strategies of the three regional competitors?* I refer only to their external power projection, not considering any internal factors.

This question is addressed via comparative content analysis of the foreign and security policy strategies of Russia and Turkey. For the EU, I apply discourse analysis. I compare the relative value that each hegemon gives to each power element. I assess how they perceive each power element. The perceived low value of a power element means less likelihood to compete, but higher likelihood to cooperate. The perceived high value of a power element means high likelihood to compete on that element. Defining the power perception, and therefore likelihood to compete on a certain power element at a certain time, contributes to the knowledge of conflict prevention.

I empirically test the new theory to the case study of the Black Sea region. I assess how power is perceived for the three regional competitors in the same period of time. I select their corresponding foreign and security policy concepts. Through content analysis, I identify the importance attributed to the six elements of power for Russia and Turkey. For the EU, as it has annual revisions of the same strategy, I assess through discourse analysis how the perception of the six power elements progresses. For Russia and Turkey, I select the relevant strategies to the foreign and security policy, as well as to the identified power elements. Thus, I can compare the perceived value which they attribute to the six power elements.

Based on the results, the theory of six power elements is applicable to the method of expert interviews, assessing competition and cooperation between three regional competitors. This contributes to building the theory on conflict prevention in a specific region only as a supplementary method, as additional primary data is needed from other sources. Nevertheless, interesting views were found, which added new perspectives on potential development of the relations in the region. Therefore, the academic and diplomatic approach

towards conflict prevention in a region needs to be developed simultaneously, aiming for optimal results on both practical and theoretical grounds.

The results from content and discourse analysis of the foreign policy strategies show that indeed, each regional competitor perceives differently the importance of the six power elements. Therefore, their reaction of competition depends on their different perception. An expectation that all IR actors compete on the same power elements with the same attitude would lead to inappropriate assessment of a conflict situation. To raise awareness and undertake appropriate action for conflict prevention, namely the specific perceptions of power for each regional competitor in a selected time need to be identified. Therefore, triggering a conflict due to the perceived high importance of a power element could be prevented.

- **Practical contribution: EU diplomacy**

Particularly, EU diplomats and the EEAS as an institution implementing the EU foreign and security policy could benefit from the results of this research. Comparison between several EU neighbouring regions - the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, has shown the urgent need to develop knowledge of regional conflict prevention. This can improve the EU image as a conflict prevention actor in the selected region. Also, the newly developed framework can contribute for upgrading the next strategies of the EU foreign and security policy. It can bring new focus on conflict prevention, instead of the currently approached crisis management.

- **Validity**

Its validity of the theoretical conceptualisation is high, because measurable variables are selected: six power elements and three regional competitors. The assessment of their foreign and security policy strategies is also high, because it selects documents for the same fixed period of time. The **validity** of the results is high for the countries of the Black Sea region, because it examines their specific characteristics. However, the same theoretical model can be applied to other regions only after modifications. *Validity*: The empirical results are only valid for the selected time period, the selected three regional hegemony, the selected documents and the selected six elements of power. If any of these variables changes, this would probably reflect the whole result. Therefore, if any variable changes, then all other components need reassessment.



The results are **measurable**, because they follow the same theoretical pattern - examining the value of each of the six power elements per each regional competitor. Time limits are settled according to the major geopolitical events before and after it.

- **Reliability**

The **reliability** of the results is high, because each method specifically addresses an aspect to be clarified. The latest foreign and security policy strategies of the EU, Russia and Turkey are examined in the original languages, and modifications are accepted to include relevant for each actor highly significant power elements. The type of analysis, discourse or content, is adapted to the characteristics of each competitor. *Reliability*: The results are reliable, because only assess the latest foreign and security policy strategies of the three regional competitors. I compare their perception on the same framework of six power elements. This approach provides high reliability of the results, as they are specifically drawn for the selected three actors, six topics, and fixed time period. Based on the exact selection of variables, the reliability of the results is high. This means that the research can contribute to conflict prevention based on the perception of the competing regional hegemony in the selected time period.

- **Applicability**

I have selected the Black Sea region as a case study. However, the theory can also be applied to the Western Balkans, or to other regions where regional powers compete, resulting in security crises. The condition is that IR actors with comparable power status are selected, as well as a fixed time period. The **applicability** of the theoretical model to regions, which are composed of regional hegemony competing for influence is high. However, the specific characteristics of each region, including its involved regional hegemony, must be separately examined. The conceptual results of the research are universally applicable to any region. *Applicability to other time and competitors*: The study has created a conceptual framework on conflict prevention. It has been designed and applied in the case study of the Black Sea region. It could be applied to the Black Sea region in a different time period. It can be applied to other regions if the specific characteristics of the participating regional hegemony are considered. Particularly, it can be further applied to unstable world regions, with regional security crises and conflicts, where at least two regional powers have a major role in preserving the balance.

- **Limitations**

*The selection of IR actors:* I only examined the main competitors as equal power status IR actors. Among the IR actors, I have selected states and suprastate organisations with characteristics of a state. It is possible that different results are reached if non-state actors are brought into focus. Further analysis might be implemented on the specific characteristics of each selected IR actor. Also, their relation with non-state actors might be examined.

*The empirical application of new theory towards the EU.* This is a qualitative assessment of the EUGS 2016-2019 for foreign and security policy, which considers the EU's strategic image. It examines the EU approaches in relation to six elements of power. It enables comparisons to be made on an equal basis with other IR actors, if the same categorisation of elements of power and time period are applied.

*The empirical application of new theory towards Russia and Turkey. Languages:* The original sources from Turkish language are translated to English - Entrepreneurial and Humanitarian Foreign Policy. The original sources in Russian language for three of the documents – Energy Strategy, National Security Strategy, and Foreign Policy Concept are used. This aims to provide as authentic results as possible. *Strategic documents:* The results evaluate possible initiation of regional crises and conflicts in countries of shared interest with other regional hegemons. The results show only the latest accessible foreign policy of Turkey from December 2020, and Russia's Foreign Policy 2016, Energy Strategy 2020 and National Security 2021. If the priorities change in future documents, or if past strategic documents are compared, the results might be different.

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