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# Tensions Mount By The Shores Of The Black Sea

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Reuters News Agency - 2/1/2008

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The struggle between East and West is set to envelop the entire region during the coming year

If, in the coming year, you find yourself relaxing on the beach in the Bulgarian resort of Bourgas on Europe's little-noticed east coast, you may soon realize that you are in the centre of one of the world's most lavish and portentous conflicts, one that involves a dozen countries and the nuclear powers of the Cold War and is likely to produce explosions in 2008.

Look up the coast, just to the north, and you will see U.S. bombers and surveillance planes taking off in increasing numbers from Bulgarian and Romanian seaside bases as the U.S. and NATO militaries shift their major installations from Germany to locations along the formerly communist Black Sea coast.

In 2008, a year after the European Union added Bulgaria and Romania, two former Warsaw Pact nations, to its membership, NATO will make its most aggressive bids to win over the rest of the region. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's annual conference will be held near the sea in Romania, and the most explosive item on the agenda will be the proposed membership of Georgia - a Black Sea country that, if it joins, will expand the territory of this Cold War military alliance to the deep interior of the former Soviet Union.

Moscow is already reacting with anger to the expanding presence of NATO on these shores, which had previously been entirely within Russia's sphere of influence (only Turkey has traditionally been a NATO member). Half a dozen "frozen conflicts" in Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova appear ready to erupt into full-scale secession wars in the coming year; in every case, the militant movements appear to have Russian backing.

For the 100 million people who live around the shores of the Black Sea, 2008 may well feel like a return to the Cold War. This time, though, it's not clear which side any nation, any region or any people are on: Like South America or Southeast Asia during that previous Washington-Moscow standoff, the Black Sea region has become an endlessly contested ground, subject to shifting influences as money and weapons are dumped into unsuspecting populations.

In recent years, that conflict has played itself out most visibly in Ukraine, whose elections have been dramatic showdowns between Russian-supported forces and Western-backed democracy movements. This year ended with pro-Western Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who took office on Dec. 18, accusing Moscow of actively funding the opposition's parties.

The struggle between East and West is about to envelop the entire Black Sea region during the coming year, often with military implications.

The sparring is likely to begin as early as Saturday, when Georgia's five million citizens go to the polls in a presidential election and a referendum on the country's proposed NATO membership. The vote was called after weeks of violent mass demonstrations in November against pro-American president Mikheil Saakashvili. The demonstrations, which Mr. Saakashvili and a number of outside

organizations say were backed by Russia, were met with brutal police repression. Georgia, like Ukraine, appears to be divided in half between voters who support the European Union and NATO and those who prefer a return to Moscow's influence.

But there are even deeper divisions in Georgia, and in a number of its Black Sea neighbours. Breakaway regions, which hope to form their own nations - usually because their people are more loyal to Russia - have seen low-level conflicts fraught with occasional bombings and acts of violence for years. In 2008, any one of them could become full-scale war.

Georgia's troubled regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become increasingly violent in recent months, their independence movements staging bolder attacks against government facilities. Neighbouring Azerbaijan has had growing frictions in its region of Nagorno-Karabakh. And on the other side of the Black Sea, the Moldovan breakaway region of Transnistria, which is loyal to Russia, has seen increasing tensions.

These landlocked slivers of Black Sea real estate could well become conflict zones this year, for reasons rooted in another landlocked country that lies closer to the Adriatic Sea. In late January or early February, the Serbian province of Kosovo is likely to declare independence, an act that is backed by the European Union and the United States.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that if Serbia, a Slavic-speaking country, loses its disputed Albanian-majority province to Western influences, it will have a hard time guaranteeing the integrity of Georgia and Moldova. Many observers see this as a thinly veiled threat: If Kosovo goes, then so goes Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria. Some observers already say that arms are flowing into these breakaway regions.

"The chance of some kind of armed flare-up in at least one of those conflict zones in the coming year is disturbingly high," says Thomas de Waal, an expert on the Caucasus at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. "The consequences could be catastrophic."

Why are Brussels, Washington and Moscow devoting so much time, money and armaments to a stretch of shoreline that has previously languished in uneasy obscurity? Some of it has to do with geography: Georgia, Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan sit near the border of Iran, and there is a strong desire to have a Western-loyal buffer of nations and defence installations surrounding this constant site of conflict.

Another reason might become visible if you sit long enough on the beach in Bourgas.

Further out to sea, you might spot Russian ships laying an enormous undersea pipeline, known as South Stream, that will carry billions of cubic metres of natural gas from Russia, across the 900-kilometre width of the Black Sea to Bulgaria, and on to energy-hungry Western Europe.

And just behind you, running up the Bulgarian shore, will be the tail end of South Stream's Western-funded competitor, known as Nabucco, which carries equally enormous amounts of gas from Iran and Central Asia through Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey before it supplies Europe. These pipelines, carrying Europe's Russian fuel supply and its hard-fought Iranian alternative, provide the economic backdrop for this set of emerging conflicts.

Europe is enormously reliant on Russian gas and oil to heat its homes - some countries, such as Germany and Italy, are so completely dependent that they would face an immediate crisis if the pipelines from Russia were curtailed. (This occurred briefly in 2006, during a dispute between Russia and Belarus over pipeline rights, and caused a sizable shock.) As a result, the supplies of petroleum and gas from the Adriatic Sea through Azerbaijan and from Iran are considered vital. (This is an important reason why the EU has been reluctant to participate fully in sanctions against Iran over alleged nuclear weapons activity.)

So much of this dispute - though not all of it, as some would suggest - is rooted in the West's need for energy security. If non-Russian sources of fuel are to be securely provided, then the loyalty of the countries to the east, south and west of the Black Sea is vital. From Moscow's perspective, if its continued dominance is to be maintained (and good prices upheld for its supplies), then pipelines will need to pass through the west, north and east of the Black Sea.

Some countries, notably Bulgaria and Romania, stand to benefit either way: Both Adriatic-Iranian oil pipelines and Russia's new pipes will enter Europe through their impoverished territory.

As you relax on the beige sands of Bourgas - an increasingly popular vacation getaway for both Central Europeans and for Russians - these rising tensions might be visible along the shoreline and across the water. But they're likely to seem especially bizarre when you return to your hotel, which is almost certain to have EU flags flying on its awning - and to be owned by Russian tycoons.

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The push for independence

Autonomous aspirations of these three Black Sea regions threaten to flare up in the coming year. TRANSNISTRIA, MOLDOVA

A sliver of land on the Nistria River, Transnistria broke away from Moldova in September of 1990. A brief war killed hundreds before Russian troops intervened. The region of 550,000 people is dominated by Russian-speaking Slavs, who pressed for independence fearing Moldova's Romanian-speaking majority would one day join Romania to the south. Around 1,200 Russian troops remain. Transnistria covers one-eighth of Moldovan territory but is home to the bulk of Moldova's industrial base. ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH

OSSETIA, GEORGIA

Home to 200,000 people, Abkhazia is sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains and was once a renowned tourist destination. It fought a 1992-93 war against Georgia and effectively rules itself. It was isolated for years after the war but has since forged closer ties with Russia, which has given Abkhaz residents passports and pensions. South Ossetia fought to throw off Georgian rule in the early 1990s. A ceasefire was signed but the violence has threatened to reignite. Russia has peacekeepers in both regions.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH,

## AZERBAIJAN

Sporadic clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azeri and local ethnic Armenian irregulars began in 1998, escalating by 1992 into full-scale hostilities between Azeri forces and troops from Armenia. About 35,000 people died and hundreds of thousands fled before a ceasefire was signed in 1994. The territory remains part of Azerbaijan but is controlled by Armenian forces. A major BP-led pipeline linking Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea oil fields to world markets passes a few kilometres from the conflict zone.

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