Romanian Navy Chief Warns of ‘New Iron Curtain’



U.S. Navy Quartermaster 3rd Class Kendal Honeycut stands watch as the amphibious dock landing ship USS Fort McHenry (LSD 43) departs Constanta, Romania, after a port visit. U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Chris Roys

According to Vice Adm. Alexandru Mîrşu, chief of the Romanian naval forces staff, efforts to improve security and stability in the Black Sea region have taken a step back, thanks to the aggressive activities of the Russian Federation.

The Black Sea region includes three NATO allies in Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey along with Russia, Ukraine and Georgia, with access governed by the Montreux Convention of 1936.

After the Cold War, Mîrşu said the region enjoyed a relatively calm security environment until the Russians illegally occupied and annexed the Crimea region of Ukraine in 2014. There had been some successful post-Cold War initiatives adopted by the Black Sea nations to maintain common security and stability, including the Black Sea Naval Force (BLACKSEAFOR), Black Sea Harmony and the Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBM).

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> *Vice Adm. Alexandru Mîrşu, chief of the Romanian naval forces staff*

Until 2014, BLACKSEAFOR proved to be successful in bringing the Black Sea nations to the table and having operational successes to improve interoperability among those countries, Mîrşu said. Black Sea Harmony facilitated information-sharing among the littoral countries and included coast guards and border police as well as navies. Today, only Romania and Turkey participate. The CSBM was an agreed upon document that addressed cooperation in the naval field – contacts and invitations to naval bases, exchange of naval information and annual naval exercises.
However, CSBM is now only a “theoretical paper,” Mîrşu said at the Navy League’s Sea-Air-Space exposition in National Harbor, Md.

Since its occupation and annexation of Crimea, Russia has continued to behave aggressively toward NATO navies operating in the Black Sea. The Russian Black Sea fleet has grown its capabilities with new ships and submarines in just the past four years and has added such new weapons as Kalibr-missile carrying platforms.

Mîrşu said the 2016 Kerch Strait incident – when the Russian coast guard prevented three

Ukrainian navy vessels from entering the Sea of Azoz and then fired upon and seized the vessels in international waters – was “an open, aggressive attack upon the Ukrainian’s navy ships” and “demonstrates that the will of the Russians is actually to re-establish a new Iron Curtain into the Black Sea. And not only into the Black Sea but actually in the whole of Europe,” he said.

Last November, a Russian SU-27 fighter conducted a provocative and unsafe maneuver when it pulled directly in front of a U.S. Navy EP-3 Aries II plane operating in international airspace over the Black Sea. The Russian fighter kicked in the afterburner as it departed, buffeting the U.S. plane.

The Montreux Convention of 1936 only permits warships from non-Black Sea navies to operate in the Black Sea for 21 days. NATO’s Standing Maritime Force deploys periodically to Black Sea, along with allies and partners to demonstrate cohesion and strength of the alliance and that the Black Sea is an international sea for the use of all. Several U.S. warships have been in the Black Sea this year.

“The Romanian navy joins those ships when they enter the Black Sea to show them that nobody is alone,” Mîrşu said.

The Romanian navy has stepped up its game. It has a riverine force patrolling the Danube River, the longest river in Europe. It is acquiring new corvettes and modernizing its frigates. Romania has established a quasi-permanent presence at sea to send the message that they are patrolling the maritime domain so that the sea lines of communication are open and safe, Mîrşu said.

“We represent a NATO presence,” Mîrşu said. “Our activity is not provocative and is conducted in such a way as there could not be any misinterpretation.”

Mîrşu said the Black Sea remains “the soft underbelly of NATO’s southeastern flank.” The Russian attitude and posture in the Black Sea remains, and the Russian Federation has established a “new Iron Curtain” dividing the allies and the rest.

“Our response is our permanent presence,” Mîrşu said and that we will remain a reliable partner to our allies in the Black Sea and on the Danube and wherever we are needed. The Romanian navy will continue to be credible security provider – not security consumer – in our area of responsibilities.”