

Romania and Türkiye: Black Sea Conflict Management

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Abstract: This study examines the management of conflict spillovers in the Black Sea region by Romania and Türkiye, with a particular focus on energy governance as a domain in which distinct conflict management strategies are evident and analytically comparable. The Black Sea has emerged as a zone of complex, multilevel conflict characterized by geopolitical confrontation, territorial disputes, and infrastructural vulnerability, generating cascading spillovers that affect the governance systems of coastal states. This article posits that state responses to these pressures represent significant instances of conflict management, mediation, and adaptive governance rather than merely technical adjustments. Understanding these responses necessitates analytical frameworks derived from conflict analysis, mediation theory, and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) literature. This study develops a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing conflict spillover management, institutional filtering, and adaptive conflict response. It contrasts Romania, whose conflict management is deeply embedded in EU and NATO multilateral frameworks, with Türkiye, which operates as a strategically autonomous actor and, importantly, as a third-party mediator between the conflicting parties.

Türkiye's brokering of the Black Sea Grain Initiative is examined in depth as a case study of interest mediation and issue-specific functional dispute management, including both its operational achievements and the governance lessons learned from its eventual collapse. The comparison illustrates that institutional embeddedness is a key variable shaping not only the form but also the effectiveness and limitations of state conflict management strategies in protracted regional conflict environments. The study employs a qualitative comparative case study design and contributes to the conflict analysis and management literature by offering a replicable framework applicable to other strategically sensitive regions.

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1. Introduction

Addressing the spillover effects of conflicts is a critical yet underexplored issue for countries situated in regions affected by ongoing disputes. When violence breaks out or escalates in a strategically important area, its impact seldom remains confined to the immediate conflict zone; instead, it spreads across borders, sectors, and governance frameworks. This situation forces neighboring and nearby states to devise strategies that extend beyond mere military deterrence or diplomatic objections (Gleditsch, 2007, 2017; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). The ways in which states perceive these spillovers, the institutional resources they utilize to manage them, and the evolution of their governance strategies over time are pivotal questions that intersect with conflict analysis, mediation theory, and comparative governance.

Despite their importance, these dynamics in the Black Sea region have not been systematically explored in the existing literature. This article aims to address this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of Romania and Türkiye, two Black Sea states that face structurally similar conflict pressures yet employ distinctly different conflict management strategies (Çelikpala, 2010; Ivan, 2025; Wódka, 2023; Sýkora, 2024). Romania has responded to the conflict environment by further integrating into EU and NATO multilateral frameworks, channeling conflict risks through collective institutional mechanisms, and aligning national responses with alliance-wide priorities. In contrast, Türkiye has adopted a model of strategic autonomy coupled with active third-party engagement, positioning itself as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine and formulating issue-specific functional arrangements—most notably the Black Sea Grain Initiative of 2022–2023—to manage specific conflict spillovers without necessitating a comprehensive political settlement.

Rather than focusing solely on energy security, this study employs energy governance as a domain in which conflict management strategies are observable, measurable, and comparable (Yergin, 2011; Novikau & Muhasilović, 2023; Çelikpala, 2025). Decisions regarding infrastructure investment, alliance alignment, supply diversification, and transit diplomacy are not merely technical choices; under conditions of sustained regional conflict, they represent the practical substance of how states manage uncertainty, contain spillovers, and build adaptive capacity (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Folke et al., 2010). Furthermore, the analysis extends beyond the energy domain to encompass a broader range of conflict management challenges, including the governance of mass displacement, multilateral dispute management, and third-party mediation generated by the Black Sea conflict environment.

This study develops an analytical framework to capture these dynamics, organized around three interrelated dimensions derived from the conflict analysis and management literature: conflict spillover management, institutional filtering, and adaptive conflict response (Boin et al., 2005; Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). When applied to Romania and Türkiye, this framework not only reveals the divergence in their conflict management approaches but also elucidates the deeper institutional and geopolitical logics

that produce and sustain these divergences. This comparison contributes in two primary ways. Conceptually, it bridges the conflict management, mediation, and institutional embeddedness literatures by demonstrating how patterns of multilateral integration and strategic autonomy shape state responses to conflict spillovers. Empirically, it provides a structured comparison that illustrates how similar structural pressures can generate distinct conflict management logics—and, in Türkiye’s case, distinct third-party mediation strategies—when filtered through different institutional configurations and geopolitical traditions.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and develops an analytical framework. Section 3 characterizes the Black Sea as a conflict environment, with particular attention to conflict spillover dynamics, mediation activity, and governance challenges (Çelikpala, 2010; Chiriac, 2021; Khylo, 2023; Fiş & Obretenova, 2024). Sections 4 and 5 present the empirical cases of Romania and Türkiye. Section 6 presents a comparative analysis. Section 7 concludes with the theoretical and policy implications.

2. Analytical Framework: Conflict Management Under Uncertainty

2.1 Conflict Spillover and Governance

Spillover is a key concept in conflict analysis, referring to how conflict in one area, region, or sector can create destabilizing impacts in nearby areas, regions, or sectors (Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). In the Black Sea region, conflict spillovers manifest in various ways, including the disruption of shipping routes, threats to or attacks on vital infrastructure, displacement of market participants, mass refugee flows, and shifts in alliance dynamics amid intense geopolitical pressure (Çelikpala, 2010, 2025; Chiriac, 2021). Spillover extends beyond the geographical spread of violence; it is a complex, multisectoral phenomenon in which military conflicts, energy dependencies, trade, maritime transport, and food security become intricately linked (Yergin, 2011; Cong et al., 2024; International Food Policy Research Institute [IFPRI], 2024).

Governance responses to conflict spillovers have been analyzed from several perspectives. Crisis management theory emphasizes the organizational and decisional dimensions of state responses to acute instability, highlighting issues of leadership, coordination, and agenda control under conditions of time pressure and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2005). Resilience frameworks focus on the capacity of institutions and systems to absorb shocks and reorganize under pressure without losing their core functions or identity (Folke et al., 2010). More recent work on governance under uncertainty highlights the conditions under which states can develop learning-oriented, adaptive responses to chronic instability, as opposed to reactive, crisis-driven responses (Sørensen & Torfing, 2025; Ansell & Trondal, 2018). Mediation theory and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) scholarship add a further dimension: they attend to the conditions under which third-party actors can

design functional arrangements that manage specific conflict spillovers without requiring a comprehensive political settlement, as well as to the structural factors that enable or constrain such interventions (Blake et al., 2018; Bercovitch & Houston, 1996; Touval & Zartman, 1985; Ury et al., 1988).

This article draws on all these traditions while situating them within the broader literature on conflict management and institutional design. Rather than treating crisis management, resilience, adaptive governance, and mediation as competing paradigms, the framework integrates them as complementary lenses that help explain how states confronted with sustained regional conflict attempt to contain spillovers, reconfigure their institutional architectures, and, in some cases, actively intervene as third parties to manage the consequences of conflict for regional governance.

2.2 Three Dimensions of Conflict Management

The proposed analytical framework identifies three dimensions that capture the key mechanisms through which states manage conflict-induced instability in governance-sensitive areas.

The first dimension is conflict spillover management, defined as the set of institutional, operational, and diplomatic measures that states deploy to contain the cascading effects of regional hostilities on critical systems and strategic assets (Welz, 2021; Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). This dimension encompasses both preventive measures, such as the diversification of energy supplies, the hardening of critical infrastructure, and preemptive alliance signaling, and reactive measures designed to limit damage and restore functionality after spillover effects have materialized, including emergency rerouting of trade flows, crisis diplomacy, refugee governance, and temporary regulatory derogations (Boin et al., 2005; Yergin, 2011). Spillover management also includes third-party arrangements that address specific consequences of conflict without resolving the underlying conflict itself, such as the negotiation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative to mitigate global food security risks (IFPRI, 2024; UN News, 2023).

The second dimension is institutional filtering, understood as the process by which domestic regulatory frameworks and multilateral institutional arrangements translate diffuse conflict risks into actionable governance priorities (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Noutcheva, 2009). Institutions do not merely respond to conflict; they shape what constitutes a conflict risk, which actors have the authority to respond, and what range of responses is considered legitimate (Buzan et al., 1998). The degree to which a state is embedded in multilateral institutions significantly influences this filtering process by channeling conflict risks through collective mechanisms and constraining unilateral responses (Ivan, 2025; European Institute of Romania [EIR], 2025). At the same time, fragmented multilateralism and the proliferation of ad hoc coalitions mean that institutional filtering increasingly occurs across partially overlapping venues—formal organizations, regional initiatives, and issue-

specific arrangements—rather than within a single, coherent governance structure (United Nations University [UNU], 2025).

The third dimension is adaptive conflict response, which refers to the incremental, iterative, and learning-oriented mechanisms through which states recalibrate their governance approaches in response to evolving conflict dynamics (Folke et al., 2010; Ansell & Trondal, 2018). Unlike crisis management, which is primarily event-driven, adaptive response is processual: it involves the ongoing revision of threat assessments, the reallocation of institutional resources, and the development of new governance instruments as the conflict environment changes. States that develop strong adaptive conflict response capacities—whether through collective institutional learning or through the maintenance of flexible autonomous relationships—are better positioned to manage chronic instability than those that rely on fixed, reactive postures.

2.3 Institutional Embeddedness and Conflict Management Variation

The three dimensions outlined above do not operate uniformly across states. A key variable shaping how states manage conflict spillovers is their degree of institutional embeddedness—the extent to which their governance systems are integrated into multilateral frameworks that provide rules, resources, and legitimacy for conflict management responses (Noutcheva, 2009; Ivan, 2025). Highly embedded states benefit from collective burden sharing, coordinated threat assessment, and access to multilateral conflict management instruments. However, they may also face constraints on strategic autonomy and respond more slowly to rapidly evolving conflict dynamics (Snyder, 1984; Buzan et al., 1998; EIR, 2025). Less embedded states retain greater flexibility to pursue autonomous conflict management strategies, including third-party mediation roles that more fully aligned states may be less able to credibly occupy. At the same time, they bear greater individual burdens and may face credibility challenges in conflict-sensitive diplomacy (Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025).

This variation in institutional embeddedness constitutes the central analytical axis of this study. Romania and Türkiye occupy distinct positions along this axis. Romania's conflict management is deeply embedded within EU and NATO frameworks, which provide dense institutional filtering and robust collective instruments for managing spillovers but also constrain the scope for unilateral or autonomous action (Ivan, 2025; EIR, 2025). Türkiye combines NATO membership with a pronounced emphasis on strategic autonomy and multidirectional diplomacy, relying more heavily on bilateral relationships, issue-specific coalitions, and its control of critical chokepoints to manage conflict spillovers. This configuration also enables Türkiye to position itself as a third-party mediator in a conflict in which some of its alliance partners have adopted adversarial postures (Çelikpala, 2010; Çelikpala & Tatlıoğlu, 2023; Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025). Through this lens, the framework links macro-level variation in institutional embeddedness to meso-level

governance practices and micro-level policy instruments, providing a basis for systematic comparative analysis.

3. The Black Sea as a Conflict Environment

The Black Sea region constitutes a distinctive conflict environment, defined not merely by the presence of military hostility but also by the complex ways in which conflict dynamics permeate governance systems, disrupt institutional arrangements, and generate spillovers that cross sectoral and national boundaries. Understanding this environment requires attention to three interrelated levels at which conflict pressures operate: the macro-level dynamics that structure the regional conflict landscape; the meso-level competitions that embed conflict into institutional and infrastructural arrangements; and the micro-level spillovers that translate abstract conflict dynamics into concrete governance challenges for coastal states (Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006).

At the macro level, the region has become a site of protracted, multi-actor conflict that resists conventional resolution through bilateral negotiations or unilateral containment. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed what had been a zone of managed tensions and frozen disputes into an active conflict with cascading cross-border consequences. Crucially, the war has not remained contained within its primary theater; it has generated conflict spillovers affecting regional food systems, energy supply chains, maritime commerce, and the political stability of neighboring states, compelling regional actors to develop governance responses that go far beyond military deterrence (Cong et al., 2024; IFPRI, 2024; FAO, 2023). Thus, macro-level conflict functions as a persistent source of governance pressure that renders conventional crisis management insufficient and demands more sustained, adaptive forms of conflict management.

At the meso level, the Black Sea conflict environment is structured by overlapping disputes and rivalries that predate the 2022 escalation but have since intensified. These include contestation over energy transit arrangements that entangle economic interdependence with conflict dynamics, disputes over maritime delimitation and exclusive economic zones, and tensions over the political orientation of buffer states whose governance trajectories have become objects of regional rivalry (Frappi & Garibov, 2014; Khylyko, 2023). Energy infrastructure—pipelines, LNG terminals, and offshore platforms—has become a site where conflict and governance intersect most visibly, as states simultaneously depend on and contest the same resources and corridors (Çelikpala & Tatlıoğlu, 2023; Novikau & Muhasilović, 2023; Tsereteli, 2008). At this level, conflict management requires not simply diplomatic engagement between state actors but also the governance of contested institutional arrangements and shared infrastructure under conditions of sustained hostility.

Crucially, the meso-level conflict environment has also generated significant mediation activity and alternative governance arrangements that sit alongside and partially compensate

for the absence of formal conflict resolution. The Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), brokered by Türkiye and the United Nations in July 2022, exemplifies how issue-specific functional arrangements can mitigate conflict spillovers without resolving the underlying conflict (IFPRI, 2024; UN News, 2023). The Initiative created a temporary institutional framework—the Joint Coordination Center (JCC) in Istanbul—that brought together belligerent and third-party actors in a structured operational arrangement, managing one of the most consequential conflict spillovers of the war: the disruption of global grain markets affecting food security in vulnerable regions worldwide (FAO, 2023). Its eventual collapse in July 2023 following Russia’s withdrawal illustrates the fragility of issue-specific conflict management arrangements when they lack broader institutional anchoring and political agreement (IFPRI, 2024), providing an instructive case study for the conflict management literature on the limits of partial dispute resolution.

At the micro level, regional states face specific conflict spillovers that manifest as concrete governance problems: mass displacement and refugee flows requiring rapid institutional adaptation, market volatility affecting regulatory frameworks, disruption of cross-border infrastructure cooperation, and the reorientation of bilateral relationships previously managed through established diplomatic routines (Gleditsch, 2007; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Romania has had to absorb one of the largest refugee flows in Europe since 2022, managing the social and institutional dimensions of displacement within EU frameworks (Ivan, 2025; EIR, 2025). Türkiye has had to navigate the competing demands of alliance commitments, bilateral energy dependencies, and its self-assigned mediation role, a configuration that requires continuous adjustment of conflict management instruments (Çelikkpala & Tatlıoğlu, 2023; Wódka, 2023).

It is at this micro level that the comparative divergence between the two states becomes most analytically productive. Both face the same conflict environment and are exposed to comparable categories of spillover. However, the institutional configurations through which they interpret and respond to these spillovers differ fundamentally, producing distinct conflict management logics that the following sections trace in detail.

4. Romania: Institutional Conflict Management Through Multilateral Embedding

4.1 Institutional Architecture and Conflict Filtering

Romania’s approach to conflict management in the Black Sea region is fundamentally shaped by its deep institutional embedding in the European Union and NATO. This embedding functions as a conflict management architecture in its own right: it provides Romania with access to collective threat-assessment mechanisms, shared intelligence frameworks, coordinated response instruments, and multilateral legitimation of its governance choices (Noutcheva, 2009; Ivan, 2025). In the context of the Black Sea conflict environment, Romania’s EU and NATO membership means that conflict risks are not managed unilaterally but are instead filtered through institutional frameworks that set

priorities, allocate responsibilities, and coordinate responses across member states (Hodges et al., 2020; EIR, 2025).

This institutional filtering extends beyond the military and energy domains to the broader management of conflict-induced social and political pressures. Following the 2022 escalation, Romania activated conflict management mechanisms across multiple levels of governance simultaneously—not as an autonomous actor, but as a node within overlapping multilateral structures that shape both the priorities and the permissible repertoires of national responses. Thus, the multilateral institutional framework functions not merely as a resource for conflict management but also as a constraint that channels national responses into collectively legitimated forms, distinguishing Romania's approach from more autonomous models (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Buzan et al., 1998).

At the NATO level, the adaptation of the deterrence and defense posture on the Eastern Flank brought additional Allied forces, command infrastructure, and pre-positioned capabilities to Romanian territory, embedding the country's conflict management response within a collective deterrence framework (Ivan, 2025; Sýkora, 2024; Hodges, Bugajski, & Doran, 2020). At the EU level, Romania participated in the development and implementation of successive measures targeting Russian energy imports, coordinating its supply-diversification efforts with broader European strategies to reduce dependence on Russian hydrocarbons and strengthen critical infrastructure protection (Novikau & Muhasilović, 2023; EIR, 2025).

4.2 Conflict Spillover Management: Operational Responses

Romania's operational conflict management responses span several interconnected domains. In the energy sector, the primary spillover risk was supply disruption following the progressive reduction in Russian gas flows to European markets. Romania's response was shaped by its relatively favorable structural position as a significant domestic gas producer and by the EU institutional frameworks through which its response was coordinated (Roman, 2012; Fiță & Obretenova, 2024). The acceleration of the Neptun Deep offshore gas project, the expansion of interconnector capacity with neighboring states, and participation in EU-level joint purchasing and storage coordination mechanisms together constitute a layered spillover-management strategy that combines national structural adjustment with collective institutional responses (Chiriac, 2021; EIR, 2025; Global Academy, 2025).

However, Romania's conflict spillover management extends significantly beyond the energy domain, a dimension that is underappreciated in the existing literature. Mass-displacement management has been one of Romania's most consequential conflict management challenges since 2022. As a frontline state bordering Ukraine, Romania received and facilitated the transit of millions of displaced persons, requiring rapid institutional adaptation across border management, social services, housing, and legal frameworks (Ivan, 2025; EIR, 2025).

This refugee-governance challenge is not merely a humanitarian matter; it represents a direct conflict spillover—the social and institutional cascade of large-scale forced displacement—that demanded coordinated responses across national ministries, EU institutions, and international organizations, including UNHCR and IOM. Romania’s management of this spillover illustrates the breadth of institutional conflict management: the same multilateral frameworks that coordinate military deterrence and energy governance also provide the normative and operational resources for managing human displacement as a consequence of conflict.

A further dimension of Romania’s spillover management is the governance of shared infrastructure under conflict conditions. Romania’s participation in Danube River Commission mechanisms, which bring together riparian states, including conflict-affected Ukraine and Moldova, to manage waterway governance, exemplifies how multilateral institutional frameworks can sustain functional cooperation and dispute management even amid active regional conflict (EIR, 2025). The maintenance of Danube navigation and port cooperation under wartime conditions required continuous negotiation and adaptation of established governance routines, constituting a form of institutionalized conflict management that operates below the threshold of high-level diplomacy but is nonetheless consequential for regional stability.

Taken together, Romania’s spillover management can be understood as a strategy of structural adjustment through institutional coordination. The country leverages its embeddedness in EU energy governance and NATO’s Eastern Flank posture to reduce exposure, pool risks, and mobilize external resources, while simultaneously upgrading its own infrastructure and regulatory capacities to better withstand and absorb conflict-induced shocks (Fiță & Obretenova, 2024; Sýkora, 2024; EIR, 2025).

4.3 Adaptive Conflict Response and Institutional Learning

Romania’s adaptive conflict response capacity has been strengthened by its integration into EU and NATO monitoring and assessment frameworks, which provide continuous streams of information about evolving conflict dynamics and policy innovations elsewhere within the alliance (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Boin et al., 2005). This institutional learning infrastructure has contributed to a gradual recalibration of Romania’s role perception in the region—from a peripheral security consumer to a frontline contributor on NATO’s Eastern Flank and a potential energy and connectivity hub within the EU (Roman, 2012; Hodges, Bugajski, & Doran, 2020). Adaptive responses have included revisions to national security and energy strategies, investments in dual-use infrastructure that simultaneously serve defense and economic purposes, and the refinement of national positions in EU and NATO debates on Black Sea security (Khylyko, 2023; Fiță & Obretenova, 2024; Atlantic Council, 2024).

Importantly, Romania's adaptive responses have included the development of new conflict management instruments at the interface between national and EU governance. The country's experience managing refugee flows has generated institutional learning—new administrative procedures, interagency coordination mechanisms, and EU-funded support frameworks—that represents genuine adaptive-capacity development rather than mere crisis response (Ivan, 2025; EIR, 2025). Similarly, Romania's evolving engagement in EU discussions on Ukraine's reconstruction and post-conflict governance frameworks positions it as an emerging actor in the longer-term conflict management dimension, contributing national expertise in managing conflict-induced displacement and infrastructure disruption to broader European deliberations.

Simultaneously, Romania's institutional embedding has constrained its adaptive flexibility in certain respects. EU regulatory frameworks and the requirement for coordination with partner states can slow decision-making in rapidly evolving situations, while NATO's collective procedures condition the scope for unilateral doctrinal changes, even when regional dynamics appear to demand rapid recalibration (Noutcheva, 2009; Ivan, 2025; CEPA, 2020). Thus, Romania's conflict management model is one of constrained adaptivity: highly effective within the parameters set by its institutional environment, capable of managing diverse conflict spillovers through established multilateral channels, but less capable of the rapid autonomous recalibration available to more loosely embedded states. This configuration stands in marked contrast to the more autonomous and leadership-driven conflict management approach pursued by Türkiye, which is examined in the following section.

5. Türkiye: Autonomous Conflict Management and Strategic Pragmatism

5.1 Strategic Autonomy as a Conflict Management Resource

Türkiye's conflict management approach in the Black Sea region is organized around a fundamentally different institutional logic from that of deeply embedded EU member states. As a NATO member that has increasingly pursued a foreign policy characterized by strategic autonomy and multidirectional diplomacy, Türkiye has developed conflict management capacities that depend less on multilateral institutional filtering and more on its structural positioning, bilateral relationships, and capacity to operate as an intermediary between conflicting parties (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018; Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025).

From the perspective of conflict management theory, Türkiye's structural position in the Black Sea conflict is distinctive in ways that directly affect its capacity for third-party intervention. Classical mediation theory holds that effective intermediaries require a combination of leverage over the parties, acceptability to both sides, and a degree of interest in the outcome sufficient to sustain engagement (Bercovitch & Houston, 1996; Touval & Zartman, 1985). Türkiye satisfies all three conditions in the Black Sea context, but in ways that diverge from the conventional image of a neutral mediator. As the controller of the

Turkish Straits under the Montreux Convention, it exercises structural leverage that both Russia and Ukraine, along with Western states, must consider. As a NATO member with sustained economic and diplomatic ties to Russia, it maintains a degree of acceptability to both parties that more fully aligned states have forfeited since 2022. As a state with significant economic interests in the management of conflict spillovers—particularly in grain markets, tourism, and energy transit—it possesses what Touval and Zartman (1985) call “interested mediation” characteristics: its engagement is driven not by disinterested humanitarianism but by a strategic calculus that makes sustained involvement rational and credible.

This configuration positions Türkiye as a paradigmatic case of what the mediation literature terms a “partial” or “interested” mediator—an actor that intervenes in conflicts not from a position of neutrality but from one of strategic stake (Touval, 1992; Svensson, 2007). Critically, the literature has established that interested mediators are not necessarily less effective than neutral ones; indeed, their leverage and sustained engagement can make them more capable of producing workable agreements in conflicts in which neutral parties lack traction (Touval & Zartman, 1985; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006). Therefore, Türkiye’s conflict management in the Black Sea must be evaluated in terms of appropriate mediation—not against an idealized standard of neutrality that neither the conflict environment nor the theoretical literature requires.

Çelikpala and Erşen (2018) characterized Türkiye’s regional posture as a “Black Sea predicament”: a structural tension between challenging and accommodating Russia that forces Ankara into a continuous balancing act rather than a settled alignment. More recent analyses argue that this predicament has become a conflict management resource: precisely because Türkiye cannot fully align with either side without incurring substantial costs, it is structurally compelled toward mediation and functional arrangements that manage conflict spillovers without requiring resolution of the underlying political conflict (Çelikpala & Tatlıoğlu, 2023; Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025). In terms of the analytical framework, Türkiye’s strategic autonomy modifies all three dimensions of conflict management, enabling distinctive approaches to spillover management, institutional filtering, and adaptive conflict response, which are examined in the following subsections.

5.2 The Black Sea Grain Initiative as a Mediation Case Study

Türkiye’s most consequential contribution to regional conflict management is its role in designing, brokering, and operationalizing the Black Sea Grain Initiative of 2022–2023. Analyzed through the lens of conflict management and alternative dispute resolution, the Initiative represents a significant and theoretically instructive case of issue-specific functional mediation in an active conflict environment, one whose eventual failure is analytically as informative as its temporary success.

– Conflict Context and Ripeness

The Initiative emerged from a specific conflict spillover: the disruption of Ukrainian grain exports following Russia’s naval blockade of Ukrainian Black Sea ports in early 2022. This disruption generated cascading effects on global food markets, disproportionately affecting import-dependent states in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, while creating political pressure on both Russia and Western states to address the humanitarian consequences of the conflict independently of its broader political resolution (IFPRI, 2024; FAO, 2023). In Zartman’s (1989) terms, a “mutually hurting stalemate” existed at the issue level: Russia faced reputational and diplomatic costs from the food crisis associated with the disruption, while Ukraine and its Western partners faced the humanitarian and political costs of the export restrictions. This issue-specific ripeness—the existence of a specific, bounded problem whose costs were sufficiently asymmetric to create incentives for a functional arrangement—created an opening for Türkiye’s mediation intervention (Zartman, 1989; Regan & Stam, 2000).

– Process and Mechanism Design

Türkiye’s mediation approach in the BSGI was process-centered rather than settlement-oriented, a distinction with important implications for conflict management theory and practice. Rather than seeking to broker a political agreement between Russia and Ukraine, Türkiye, working alongside the United Nations, focused on designing a bounded functional arrangement that addressed the specific conflict spillover without requiring broader political concessions from either party (IFPRI, 2024; UN News, 2023). This approach aligns with what the alternative dispute resolution literature identifies as “interest-based” rather than “rights-based” or “power-based” dispute resolution: the arrangement was designed around the shared interests of the parties in reducing the costs of the food crisis rather than around claims of rights or demonstrations of power (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988).

The resulting mechanism, the Joint Coordination Center (JCC), established in Istanbul in July 2022, was architecturally innovative as a conflict management instrument. It brought together representatives from Russia, Ukraine, Türkiye, and the United Nations in a single operational body responsible for coordinating vessel inspections, authorizing convoy movements, and monitoring compliance with the terms of the arrangement (UN News, 2023). The JCC thus constituted a form of institutionalized contact between belligerent parties mediated through a neutral operational structure—a design that avoided the political impossibility of direct Russian-Ukrainian negotiations while enabling functional cooperation in a specific domain. Between August 2022 and July 2023, the Initiative facilitated the export of over 32 million metric tons of grain and foodstuffs from Ukrainian ports, contributing to the stabilization of global food prices during its operational period (IFPRI, 2024; FAO, 2023).

– Collapse and Conflict Management Lessons

The collapse of the BSGI in July 2023, following Russia’s unilateral withdrawal, should be analyzed as an integral part of the conflict management case study rather than treated as a disconfirming anomaly. Russia’s stated rationale for withdrawal—that Western sanctions were preventing Russian agricultural exports and fertilizer shipments from reaching global markets despite commitments made alongside the Initiative—reveals a fundamental structural limitation of issue-specific functional mediation: arrangements that address one conflict spillover while leaving related grievances unresolved are inherently vulnerable to breakdown when parties reassess the balance of costs and benefits (IFPRI, 2024; UN News, 2023). The collapse illustrates what conflict management scholarship identifies as the “linkage problem” in partial agreements: when parties perceive that a bounded arrangement has become asymmetrically beneficial, they may withdraw to restore leverage in broader negotiations (Zartman, 1989; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006).

Türkiye’s response to the collapse—sustained diplomatic engagement with both Russia and Ukraine, continued advocacy for the Initiative’s renewal, and maintenance of its mediating position despite the breakdown—constitutes an instance of adaptive conflict management. Rather than abandoning its intermediary role following the failure of the specific arrangement it had brokered, Ankara recalibrated its diplomatic engagement to preserve the relational capital and structural positioning that had made the Initiative possible, thereby sustaining conditions for future conflict management interventions (Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025). This pattern reflects what the mediation literature identifies as “persistent mediation”—the maintenance of third-party engagement through successive rounds of conflict rather than withdrawal following a single failed intervention (Bercovitch & Houston, 1996).

5.3 Multidirectional Diplomacy as Systemic Conflict Management

Beyond the specific case of the BSGI, Türkiye’s conflict management in the Black Sea region operates through a broader architecture of multidirectional diplomacy that constitutes what recent scholarship has termed “hybrid mediation”: a combination of normative positioning, operational pragmatism, and context-specific leverage that operates in parallel with—but is not fully embedded in—formal multilateral structures (UNU, 2025). This hybrid quality distinguishes Türkiye’s approach from both traditional state mediation, which typically operates through established diplomatic channels, and formal international organization-led mediation, which operates through institutionalized procedures and mandates.

Türkiye’s hybrid mediation architecture is based on three interconnected pillars. First, its control of the Turkish Straits under the Montreux Convention provides structural leverage that functions simultaneously as a conflict management instrument and a source of recognized international authority. Türkiye’s invocation of the Montreux Convention

following the 2022 escalation—restricting the passage of warships belonging to non-Black Sea states—was both an exercise of legal authority and an act of conflict management: it reduced the risk of direct NATO-Russia naval confrontation in the Black Sea while preserving Türkiye's position as an actor operating within international law rather than outside it (Erşen, 2023; Isachenko, 2023). Second, the maintenance of high-level diplomatic channels with Moscow, including sustained energy and trade relationships, provides informational and relational resources that are prerequisites for effective mediation (Touval & Zartman, 1985; Köstem, 2021). Third, Türkiye's parallel engagement with Ukraine, including the supply of military equipment and sustained political support for Ukrainian sovereignty, has allowed it to maintain credibility with Kyiv that might otherwise be undermined by its refusal to join Western sanctions (Wódka, 2023; Öniş & Uluyol, 2025).

From an ADR perspective, this architecture constitutes a form of shuttle diplomacy operationalized through standing bilateral relationships rather than discrete negotiating sessions: Türkiye functions as a persistent channel between parties that cannot communicate directly, translating signals, managing expectations, and identifying spaces for functional agreement in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988; Bercovitch & Houston, 1996). The Istanbul negotiations of March 2022, which produced a draft framework agreement that ultimately was not implemented, represent the most concentrated expression of this approach, demonstrating both the potential and the limits of Türkiye's mediation capacity in the face of deep political incompatibilities between the parties (Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025).

5.4 Adaptive Conflict Response: Flexibility and Structural Vulnerability

Türkiye's adaptive conflict response capacity is substantial in absolute terms but qualitatively differs from Romania's institutionally grounded adaptivity. Its strategic autonomy enables the rapid recalibration of diplomatic and economic relationships in response to shifts in the conflict environment, while the maintenance of relationships across the conflict divide provides informational resources that more tightly aligned states may lack (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018; Erşen & Çelikpala, 2019). This flexibility has been demonstrated repeatedly since 2022: Ankara has simultaneously supplied military equipment to Ukraine, maintained energy and trade cooperation with Russia, engaged in intensive dialogue with NATO allies, and sustained its UN-backed mediation role, adjusting the balance among these vectors as circumstances have evolved (Öniş & Uluyol, 2025; Wódka, 2023).

However, Türkiye's conflict management model generates specific structural vulnerabilities that partially offset its adaptive advantages. The model depends heavily on the personal authority and strategic vision of political leadership, making it susceptible to the consistency problems associated with personalized foreign policy and to the risks of overreliance on bilateral relationships that can shift rapidly in volatile conflict environments (Köstem,

2021; Balta & Bal, 2025). More fundamentally, the same multidirectional positioning that enables mediation creates recurrent credibility challenges: signals designed to preserve room for maneuver may be interpreted as ambiguous or unreliable by different audiences simultaneously, undermining the trust that effective mediation requires (Touval, 1992; Erşen, 2023).

Furthermore, Türkiye's conflict management model is institutionally thin, creating governance vulnerabilities that are less pronounced in Romania's more deeply embedded approach. Whereas Romania can draw on the EU and NATO's collective institutional infrastructure to manage conflict spillovers, Türkiye must construct functional arrangements largely through bilateral relationships and issue-specific coalitions that lack comparable institutional depth and durability (Wódka, 2023; UNU, 2025). The collapse of the BSGI illustrates this vulnerability: an arrangement that lacked robust institutional anchoring could not withstand the reassessment of interests by a key participant. This structural thinness is not simply a deficiency; it is also a correlate of strategic autonomy in a conflict environment that constrains deep multilateral integration. However, this means that Türkiye's conflict management, however innovative and contextually effective, remains more fragile and contingency-dependent than models embedded in denser institutional architectures. In terms of the analytical framework, Türkiye demonstrates substantial adaptive conflict response capacity and possesses significant unilateral spillover-management and mediation capabilities. However, its institutional filtering is more fragmented and politically contingent than that of more deeply embedded states, such as Romania.

6. Comparative Analysis: Two Models of Conflict Management

A comparison of Romania and Türkiye reveals two structurally distinct conflict management models operating within the same regional environment. Romania's model—institutional conflict management through multilateral embedding—derives its capacity from collective burden sharing, regulatory coordination, and access to shared institutional resources, but at the cost of constrained autonomy and potentially slower responses (Ivan, 2025; EIR, 2025). Türkiye's model—autonomous conflict management through strategic pragmatism—provides greater flexibility, mediation capacity, and informational access through strategic independence, but at the cost of heavier individual burdens, credibility-management challenges, and greater dependence on leadership-centered decision-making (Çelikpala & Erşen, 2018; Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025).

These models are not simply different choices from a common menu of options; they reflect deep structural differences in the institutional environments and geopolitical traditions within which Romania and Türkiye operate. Romania's integration into EU and NATO governance frameworks has produced institutional path dependencies that make alternative models difficult to pursue, even if desired (Noutcheva, 2009; Ivan, 2025). Türkiye's

tradition of strategic autonomy, distinctive geographical position, and domestic political dynamics have similarly produced a path dependency toward an autonomous model in which regional ownership, control of the Turkish Straits, and energy interdependence with Russia are central to conflict management (Çelikpala, 2010; Erşen & Çelikpala, 2019; Novikau & Muhasilović, 2023; Wódka, 2023).

The comparison also reveals important dynamics across the three analytical dimensions. In terms of conflict spillover management, both states have developed operational responses through different mechanisms: Romania primarily through collective EU and NATO instruments, EU-backed energy-diversification schemes, and refugee-governance frameworks; and Türkiye through bilateral diplomacy, interested mediation, issue-specific coalitions such as the BSGI, and the exercise of structural leverage over maritime access and energy flows (Novikau & Muhasilović, 2023; Cong et al., 2024; IFPRI, 2024; UN News, 2023). In terms of institutional filtering, Romania's multilateral embeddedness provides a denser and more predictable filtering infrastructure but also imposes greater constraints, as national policy must be aligned with alliance-wide decisions and regulatory frameworks (Ansell & Trondal, 2018; Sykora, 2024; EIR, 2025). Türkiye's filtering is more centralized and responsive, driven by domestic political leadership and security bureaucracies, but is also more vulnerable to political volatility and shifts in bilateral relations (Köstem, 2021; Balta & Bal, 2025; Öniş & Uluyol, 2025). In terms of adaptive conflict response, the two models exhibit comparable forms of adaptivity but draw on different sources: Romania relies on collective institutional learning and peer comparison within the EU and NATO, while Türkiye draws on strategic flexibility, multidirectional diplomacy, and bilateral relationship management (Ivan, 2025; Erşen, 2023).

A further dimension of comparison concerns the role of mediation and third-party conflict management, which differentiates the two models most sharply. Romania's institutional embedding largely constrains the kind of intermediary role that Türkiye has played: a state whose governance is tightly coupled to alliance-wide positions may face difficulties in positioning itself as acceptable to both parties in a conflict in which its allies have adopted adversarial postures. Türkiye's strategic autonomy, precisely because it entails a departure from full alliance alignment, creates structural conditions for interested mediation that the literature identifies as potentially consequential in conflicts in which neutral parties lack sufficient leverage (Touval & Zartman, 1985; Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006). The BSGI illustrates both the reach and limits of Türkiye's mediation capacity: it demonstrated Türkiye's ability to construct functional dispute-management arrangements in active conflict environments, while its collapse underscored the fragility of issue-specific arrangements that lack robust institutional anchoring and broader political agreement.

Through the lens of emerging debates on fragmented multilateralism and ad hoc coalitions, Romania and Türkiye can be situated at different points along a spectrum of conflict management strategies, ranging from deeply institutionalized, rule-bound approaches to more ad hoc, coalition-based, and leadership-driven practices (UNU, 2025). Thus, the

Black Sea becomes a laboratory for observing how different models interact—sometimes complementing and sometimes complicating one another—in governing conflict spillovers in a strategically sensitive maritime region.

7. Conclusion

This article argues that the Black Sea conflict environment presents regional states with a set of conflict management challenges that cannot be adequately understood through the lens of energy security or geopolitics alone. By developing and applying an analytical framework centered on conflict spillover management, institutional filtering, and adaptive conflict response, and by integrating insights from mediation theory and alternative dispute resolution scholarship, this study shows how Romania and Türkiye—facing comparable structural pressures—have developed divergent conflict management strategies that reflect their distinct institutional configurations and geopolitical traditions (Çelikpala, 2010; Ivan, 2025; Wódka, 2023; Sýkora, 2024).

The theoretical contribution of this comparison lies in demonstrating that institutional embeddedness is a key variable shaping not only the form but also the effectiveness and limitations of state conflict management strategies. Multilateral embedding provides collective resources, information, and legitimacy for conflict management, but constrains strategic autonomy and can impede the kind of third-party mediation role that requires a degree of independence from the parties to a conflict. Strategic autonomy enables flexible, pragmatic, and potentially mediation-oriented conflict management, but generates individual burdens, coordination problems, and credibility vulnerabilities (Noutcheva, 2009; Ansell & Trondal, 2018; UNU, 2025). The relative advantages and limitations of each model depend on the specific characteristics of the conflict environment, the types of spillovers at stake, and the institutional and geopolitical constraints under which states operate (Global Academy, 2025; Atlantic Council, 2024).

For the conflict analysis and management literature, this study offers a replicable comparative framework for analyzing how states govern conflict spillovers in strategically sensitive regions. The three-dimensional framework of spillover management, institutional filtering, and adaptive response can be applied to other regional conflict environments, such as the Baltic Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and Gulf regions. The BSGI case study, analyzed through the lenses of interest-based mediation, ripeness theory, and ADR mechanism design, offers an additional contribution to the mediation literature by highlighting the conditions under which issue-specific functional arrangements can mitigate conflict spillovers and the structural factors that affect their durability. Future research could explore how ad hoc coalitions, informal institutions, and regional organizations interact with formal multilateral structures to shape state responses to conflict spillovers, as well as how lessons from the Black Sea experience apply to other protracted conflicts in which energy and food governance intersect with active hostilities.

From a policy perspective, the study suggests that effective conflict management in complex regional environments requires both institutional depth and strategic flexibility—resources that individual states may struggle to combine on their own. The limitations of both the Romanian model, constrained by the pace of collective decision-making, and the Turkish model, dependent on the maintenance of a delicate diplomatic balance, point toward the potential value of institutional designs that combine the burden-sharing benefits of multilateral embedding with the advantages of strategic autonomy and mediation capacity (EIR, 2025; Wódka, 2023; Balta & Bal, 2025). Developing such designs—whether through more flexible EU and NATO instruments, regionally owned cooperation formats, or more robust integration of ad hoc mediation initiatives into broader multilateral frameworks—represents an important challenge for regional conflict management in the Black Sea and beyond (Atlantic Council, 2024; Khyloko, 2023; UNU, 2025).

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