

EXPANDING NATO'S FOOTPRINT: THE NEW MIHAIL KOGĂLNICEANU BASE IN ROMANIA - 24.06.2024

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Uep Rapor No: 2
24.06.2024

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Abstract: The Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base in Romania is expanding significantly to become the most extensive NATO base in Europe. With a planned investment of approximately 2.5 billion euros, the base is strategically located near Constanța on the Black Sea coast. Operational since 1999 and extensively used by US forces before Romania acceded to NATO, the base is crucial for logistics and surveillance in the Black Sea region. Its proximity to critical countries, including Russia and Serbia, and its capacity to monitor maritime activities make it particularly significant for NATO's strategic operations. The expanded facilities, expected to be fully operational by 2040, will further enhance NATO's defensive and operational capabilities in Eastern Europe.

INTRODUCTION

The Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, also known as 'MK,' is situated near Constanța in southeast Romania, close to the Black Sea. The base hosts the Romanian Air Force's 863rd Helicopter Squadron, which operates IAR-330L helicopters and concurrently serves as a NATO Air Policing Base.[1] Initially used by American troops as a transit base during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, MK gained further strategic significance following the U.S.'s initial deployment for NATO Enhanced Air Policing. [2] Notably, after Türkiye opted

out of the Iraq war, U.S. forces used the MK Air Base extensively to deploy supply and combat troops during the early stages of the 2003 Iraq invasion.[3] It was one of four Romanian military facilities utilized by the U.S. military as a staging area for counter-insurgency efforts. Subsequently, MK became NATOs easternmost location, with troops flying in from almost all NATO countries. (24 February 2022)[4]

Russias full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exposed the Black Sea Region as a substantial fault line to NATO.[5] The region has three NATO member countries (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) and several NATO partner countries. Russias actions toward Ukraine were mentioned at the NATO Summit in Warsaw in July 2016, when Allied leaders noted that Russias policies have enhanced the unpredictability while changing the security environment of the region.[6] Notably, the Black Sea Region needs NATO as a stabilizing force, and the most direct way that NATO contributes to security is by maintaining a solid defensive stance.[7] In response to Russias annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO established the Enhanced Air Policing, which is included in Mihail Kogalnicenaus functions. [8] According to policymakers in NATO, Russias assault on Ukraine also highlights Türkiyes importance in the Black Sea region.[9] Beyond Türkiyes proximity to the Black Sea coast, its continued enforcement of the Montreaux Convention significantly contributes to NATOs efforts to maintain regional security, particularly after Russia invades Crimea. Additionally, Türkiye deployed F-16 fighter jets to Borcea Air Base in Romania (30 November 2023) that will fly alongside Romania and German jets from Mihail Kogalnicenau to safeguard NATO airspace on the Black Sea shores.[10]

NATO is fortifying its eastern flank by significantly expanding the MK airbase. Considering that Romania has a space of 30 thousand square kilometers in the Black Sea, the expansion will increase security in the Black Sea area. This expansion project, costing approximately 2.5 billion euros, will transform the base to cover an area of 2800 hectares. The upgraded base will feature comprehensive town-like facilities, including schools and hospitals, and is expected to accommodate around ten thousand NATO soldiers and their families permanently. Projected to be fully operational by 2040, the expanded MK base will become the most extensive NATO base in Europe.[11] [12]

Strategic Significance

The Black Sea region, lying between Europe and the Middle East and stretching from the eastern Balkans to the South Caucasus, often becomes a point of friction due to its strategic location. This is the case in the current increasing tensions between Russia and the West. Considering that three NATO member states border the Black Sea and several other NATO partners are in the region, any friction there will likely involve Alliances interests. [13]

On the other hand, in the geopolitical security environment of the Black Sea region, alongside Russias increasing willingness to confront the West, Russia has expanded its air, sea, and land forces operations and capabilities in the area.[14] Particularly after Russias full invasion of Crimea, these aspects became visible in the

region. In the NATOs Warsaw summit (2016), leaders said We condemn Russias ongoing and wide-ranging military build-up in Crimea and are concerned by Russias efforts and stated plans for further military build-up in the Black Sea region.[15] NATO is fundamentally committed to the sovereignty and defense of its member states in the region. This is the core purpose of the Alliance and can be factored into the development of defense and security for the region.[16] Obviously, the region's security situation has deteriorated in recent years. NATO noted that there will be maintaining support, as appropriate, for regional efforts by the Black Sea littoral states to ensure stability and security. The Black Sea region is strategically important to the Alliance. Russias war of aggression against Ukraine once again indicated this. In the Vilnius summit (2023), it was stated by NATO that Alliance do not and will never acknlowledge Russias illegal annexations, including Crimea. NATO will continue to monitor and evaluate developments in the region, focusing on security threats and potential opportunities for closer cooperation with regional partners, as appropriate. Additionally, tailored to the Black Sea region, the Romanian initiative to establish a framework brigade will contribute to the Alliances strengthened deterrence and defense posture.[17]

The expansion of the Mihail Kogalnicenau base can be given as an example of the matter. The Mihail Kogalniceanu (MK) Air Base is situated in Dobrogea, a region in Romania bordered by the Danube River to the west and the Black Sea to the east. It lies about 15 miles from the center of Constanta, which is Romanias largest port and second-largest city. [18] The base has been used by U.S. military as a transit location during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. After Russia invaded Crimea, it has been hosting NATO and American troops and has been used for NATO air police missions in the region.[19] Due to its strategic location and capability to host air-policing missions, MK has substantial utilization for Black Sea security.

Another key point is that its proximity to Türkiye. Although Türkiye officially has not deployed troops to the Mihail Kogalniceanu yet, the nation has participated NATOs enhanced Air Policing mission with four Turkish F-16 jets arrived at 86th Borcea Air Base in Romania (November 30, 2023). Projected to be operated alongside German Eurofighhters that arrived in Mihail Kogalniceanu (24 November 2023), the Turkish detachment strengthens Romanian surface-based air defenses and Air Force jets. [20] Besides Türkiye, fighter detachments from various NATO member states such as the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Italy and Germany have also rotated to assist the Romanian Air Force safeguarding NATOs southeastern flank, including the airspace over the Black Sea from Mihail Kogalniceanu.[21] It should be noted that the strategic significance of MK, particularly its proximity to the Black Sea, has became even more crucial following Russias full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. The War Zone has extensively covered the conflict zone in the Black Sea since the war began. NATO member states aircraft have been essential in aerial surveillance of Russian activities in the region. [22]

Infrastructure Enhancements

Plans to expand Mihail Kogalniceanu have been in progress for some time. Initially,

the NATO Investment Committee approved the enlargement of the base through the NATO Security Investment Program in July 2015. In 2019, the Romanian government approved the project, and Romanias Ministry of National Defense launched a tender for Stage 1 of the project in 2021. The expansion will cost 2.5 billion Euros, financed by the Romanian government with work spread out over the next 20 years. Once completed, it will encompass an area around 2,800 hectares and total perimeter of 30 kilometers, resembling a size of a small city. According to the Romanian government, the expansion of the base is required to establish new basic operational facilities and to develop and integrate the existing ones. According to Nicolae Cretu, the current commander of MK, this is aimed at supporting the National Armed Forces and strategic partners, ensuring the safe and efficient operation of a squadron of multi-role aircraft for defensive or offensive interventions. The enlargement project will also enable the stationing of ground force units at the base, therefore improving Mihail Kogalniceanus capacity to support a range of operations. Cretu also noted that the required infrastructure is also being planned to accommodate and support ground capabilities for special operations or any other military capability required to respond to the evolving security environment. Initially built in 1955 at the start of the Cold War, Mihail Kogalniceanu is situated near Constanta in southeast Romania and the Black Sea. It is a host for the Romanian Air Force 863rd Helicopter Squadron, that operates IAR-330L helicopters. Currently, it also functions as a NATO Air Policing base. [23]

It is reported that the enlargement on the bases infrastructure, for instance new power grid and access roads, has begun. Several runways are projected to be built to support the various operations of military aircrafts. Nicolae Cretu asserted that there will be facilites like maintenance hangars, fuel stores; items like simulators, aviation technical materials for enabling everything that is necessary to accomplish missions of this upgraded base. He also added that constructions of a new runway, parallel to the current one, will soon begin and two runways will be connected while in the eastern region, the airport infrastructure will be upgraded with new taxi ways, parking lots and capacity for different types of aircraft. Project also compries accommodation facilites for families of NATO personnel, including nurseries, kindergartens, schools, shops, and hospital. [24] When the enlargement will be completed Mihail Kogalniceanu airbase will double the size in terms of surface area the the U.S. Air Forces Ramstein Air Base in Germany which covers an area about 1,400 hectares.[25] MK currently is home to approximately 5,000 Romanian and US personnel, however; once expansion will be completed, it will be able to host up to 10,000 NATO soldiers and their families. [26] The base is projected to be fully ready for operations by the year 2040.[27] Once completed, it will be largest NATO base in Europe.

Operational Scope

It should be acknowledged that the U.S. military has had a long-standing association with Mihail Kogălniceanu, having maintained a presence at the base since 1999. It has served as main hub for U.S. military in Romania thereafter. The U.S. army 21st Theater Sustainment Command and Air Force 780th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron oversee U.S

operations in the base. [28] From 2010 to 2018, the United States Marine Corps Black Sea Rotational Force was based there, until it was relocated to Norway. In 2016, two F-22 Raptors landed at the base for a Rapid Response program training exercise, staying for a few hours before flying back to Great Britain.[29][30] In March 2016, four CF-188 Hornets from the Royal Canadian Air Forces 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron were stationed at the base for approximately a month to take part in the Resilient Resolve 2016 exercise.[31] In June 2022, units of the 101st Airborne Division were deployed to the base. On July 30, 2022, they officially marked their arrival and conducted an air assault exercise with the Romanian 9th Mechanized Brigade. By October, approximately 4,700 soldiers from Fort Campbell had been positioned on NATOs eastern flank, with 2,400 of them stationed at Mihail Kogălniceanu. From 2022 onwards, a U.S. Army ARTEMIS special mission aircraft has been deployed here for Eastern European reconnaissance. In 2022 UK military also deployed to the base with Four Royal Air Force (RAF) Typhoon fighters for supporting NATOs enhanced Air Policing. Additionally, since February 2023, an Italian Air Force G550 CAEW has been stationed at the base.

Last November, the European Pilot Training Center for F-16s opened in Romania at the 86th Air Base in Fetești. Romania is providing the air base and training facilities, while the Royal Netherlands Air Force is supplying the F-16 aircraft. The trainees consist of former MIG-21 Lancer pilots from the Romanian military, with former F-16 pilots serving as instructors. The center also trains soldiers from other NATO countries and Ukraine.[32]

Diplomatic Perspectives

It should be noted that Romania and U.S. have strong relations regarding safety and defence. These defence relationship advances U.S. foreign policy and national security by enhancing Romanias military capabilities as NATO Ally while promoting the defense base of the U.S. Romania and The United States cooperate in areas like defense and deterrence, security and NATO missile operations. U.S. offers safety aid to Romania to help with its military modernization efforts, enhance its ability to work with U.S. and Allied forces, and boost its capacity for deploying troops in support of NATOs collective defense. [33] Deployment to Mihail Kogalniceanu can be shown as an example of the matter. Furthermore, American authorities have recently worked to upgrade other Romanian air bases beyond MK. Campia Turzii bases work was completed last September, costing 34 million dollars which was funded by the U.S. European Commands European Deterrence initiative. [34]

For NATO, increasing its presence at Mihail Kogălniceanu could also reduce its dependence on Hungary for basing support in the future. Presently, Pápa Air Base in Western Hungary is crucial to the alliance, as it hosts a joint C-17 cargo aircraft fleet that supports 12 member nations. Nevertheless, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbans positions on several issues, including his pro-Russian stance and delays in ratifying Swedens NATO membership, have strained relations between Budapest and many other NATO member states. Additionally, Hungary has notably declined to provide military aid to Ukraine. It is clear that Russias annexation of Crime and Ukraine have highlighted the

significance of plans to expand Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base. [35] Geopolitical expert Dorin Popescu remarked on Television Romania that the NATO military base at Mihail Kogălniceanu will be "the most important permanent NATO military structure in the immediate vicinity of the conflict in Ukraine".

Russian politicians and other key figures have reacted negatively to the news of the air base development. Russian Senator and Vice President of the Foreign Affairs Committee Andrei Klimov stated that the base poses a threat to Bucharest. According to him this act is not gonna be beneficial for Romania, in fact, there will be more threats. "Closer it is to Russia's borders, the more likely it is to be among the first targets for retaliatory strikes. He said in discussion stated by Russian local media. [36]

The importance of Türkiye in the situation can not be overlooked. Being the second-largest military power in NATO, Türkiye has a strong-armed forces presence in the region, providing access to the Black Sea via the Bosporus and Dardanelles.[37] NATO gains advantage from having a member with control over Turkish Straits which can directly influence Russias campaign against Ukraine. Türkiye-Romania relations also hold significant part. Türkiyes vice president Cevdet Yılmaz emphasized the notable advancements in defense industry collaboration between Türkiye and Romania in recent years. He pointed out the successful visit of Türkiyes defense minister to Romania and the ongoing efforts within NATO, such as the air policing duties of Turkish F-16 fighter jets in Romanian airspace.[38] With the enlargement of Mihail Kogalniceanu there is possibility that there can be more Türkiye included air policing operations in the future.

CONCLUSION

NATO is strengthening its eastern flank by expanding the 57th Air Base of Romanian Air Force, Mihail Kogalniceanu. Expansion project also aims to contribute the security of the Black Sea region that was threatened by Russias invasion of Crime in 2014 and its annexation of Ukraine in 2022. Although the enlargement project was planned before Russias recent action towards Ukraine, the base could be pivotal in providing a range of military and logistical assistance to Ukrainian forces involved in combat operations against the Russian army. With Romania as the host, the development of the base is expected to contribute to Alliance collective Air Policing missions, presenting a notable challenge to Russian installations in Crimea and other recently annexed regions of the Russian Federation. [39] [40] This expansion project shows Moscow the significance of Romania to NATO for decades to come. [41]

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To cite this article: Seda Akkaya. 2026. "EXPANDING NATO'S FOOTPRINT: THE NEW MIHAIL KOGĂLNICEANU BASE IN ROMANIA - 24.06.2024." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Uep Rapor No.2024 / 2. June 24. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://www.avimbulten.org/UEPRapor/EXPANDING-NATO-S-FOOTPRINT-THE-NEW-MIHAIL-KOGĂLNICEANU-BASE-IN-ROMANIA-24-06-2024

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