



The European Union and the Black Sea Region: The New Eastern Frontiers and Europeanisation

By Alexandros Yannis*

'If there is an overarching story to the history of this sea, it is not about conflict and violence...rather, it is about the belated advent of the central organising ideas of nineteenth and twentieth century Europe. It is a place to which the modern state came rather late...'¹

The European Union (EU) and its new Eastern Frontiers

The world is in flux and the Black Sea region is becoming more attractive. It is coming out of its recent relative obscurity seeking to restore its past glory as a major geopolitical intersection. A vast part of the region is strategically located between Western Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East; a historic hub of diverse cultures, political and economic interactions; an important part of today's energy geopolitics, the new 'near abroad' of Russia and an area of considerable Euroatlantic focus. Today it is also the new Eastern frontier of the enlarged EU whose borders since 2007 have reached the shores of the Black Sea, turning the Union itself into a Black Sea actor. From the EU perspective, the Black Sea region comprises three EU member states (Greece, Romania and Bulgaria), three large neighbours (Russia, Ukraine and Turkey), and three South Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) as well as Moldova.² While Greece, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not littoral states, history, geography and politics bind them together with the rest of the region as it is illustrated by their membership in the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) which is the major and most inclusive Black Sea regional platform of cooperation and an important partner of the EU in the region. The EU is already a Black Sea actor but at the same time the region has also become its natural new Eastern neighbourhood. The EU's increased interest in the region is therefore not surprising. Moreover EU's aspirations reflect the same underlying objectives of the post-Cold War transitions in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, i.e. to extend the European space of peace, stability and prosperity based on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In short, the EU's objective is to pursue the Europeanisation of its new Eastern frontiers through state-building.

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¹ Charles King. *The Black Sea: A History*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 6.

² This geographic definition is based on the EU Black Sea Synergy approach regarding the countries involved in this initiative.



This vision is an integral part of the European Security Strategy which was adopted already before the EU had reached the shores of Black Sea. It states that ‘even in the era of globalisation, geography is still important. It is in the European interest that countries on our borders are well governed...It is not in our interest that enlargement should create new dividing lines in Europe. We need to extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to our neighbours in the East while tackling political problems there.’³

Europeanisation of the new Eastern frontiers is a major driving force for the EU, but it is also emerging today as one of the defining forces for the region. Historical ties and geographical proximity are accentuating the influence of the EU in the Black Sea region. But for the EU, Europeanisation of its new Eastern frontiers also means globalisation. Intensified economic and political interdependence between the EU and the region emerges as an increasingly inevitable choice. Furthermore this increasing EU influence is occurring at the same time with the EU strengthening its role and enhancing its instruments in Common Foreign Security and Defence policies, a process which should be further boosted by the ratification and implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. The declared European orientation, and in many cases an open EU membership aspiration, of the countries in the region aptly reflects the dynamic relationship between Europeanisation and the region. However, the interaction with the Black Sea region is a much more challenging for the EU than its recent experience with Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe.

First, the region presents a much more competitive geopolitical challenge, primarily because of the existence of a resurgent Russia. Ian Lesser argues that ‘...the Black Sea is watched as the bell-weather of future relations between Russia and the West.’⁴ And issues such as further expansion of NATO in the region are only likely to heighten controversy and complicate relations between Russia and Europe. Furthermore, global and regional geopolitical issues have greater gravity in the Black Sea region than in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. China and energy politics are involved as well as other powerful direct influences of other important Black Sea neighbours such as Iran, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Second, there is the absence, at least in the foreseeable future, of a magnetic power of the EU membership perspective, with the notable exception of Turkey. This situation naturally brings up the question of whether the EU can be equally effective in pursuing its Europeanisation objectives without the enlargement perspective, at least with regard to those countries in the region which are aspiring to EU membership. This is certainly to be one of the most complicated and challenging foreign policy issues for the EU over the next few years.

³ The Council of the European Union. ‘A Secure Europe in a Better World - European Security Strategy’, 12 December 2003, pp. 7-8. Text available on

<<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>>

⁴ Ian O. Lesser. ‘Global Trends, Regional Consequences: Wider Strategic Influences on the Black Sea’, *ICBSS Xenophon Paper*, No. 4, November 2007, p. 11. Text available on <http://www.icbss.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=45>



Third, the remarkable heterogeneity of Black Sea region sets it apart from Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe. If geography alone is not telling, the highly diverse geopolitical weight of the countries in the region underscores its particularity. For the EU, the challenges of this diverse political landscape are reflected in the presence of three different strategies towards the region, i.e. membership perspective for Turkey, Strategic Partnership with Russia and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) for the rest.

Finally, history has also conspired to keep the Black Sea region a particularly volatile area. In many parts of the region state-building is still a real challenge and democratic consolidation has not yet been achieved. Unresolved conflicts, historical grievances, controversial geopolitical re-alignments and mutual suspicions continue to hamper the development of a comprehensive regional cooperation, let alone the formation of common identities and of genuinely shared values and interests.

Europeanisation and the Black Sea Synergy

In this complex and fluid geopolitical environment, it is obvious that the Europeanisation of the Black Sea region is not a process with pre-determined policies and instruments and well-defined targets and timetables. It is a dynamic process and, even more, the outcome is uncertain. What looks to be certain for the foreseeable future is that the EU will continue pursuing its objectives based on different strategies of engagement with the different countries in the region. And this pluralism only heightens further the uncertainty about the future direction of the relations between the EU and the Black Sea region.

The outcome of the EU-Turkey membership negotiations stands out as a major factor affecting the overall future relations of the EU with the region, while also the direction of the EU's relations with Russia will have consequences on the future EU role and engagement with the rest of the region. The future of the ENP is not static either as the EU continues to look for ways to strengthen its effectiveness. At the same time other developments, such as the debate on the Mediterranean Union, are likely to fuel new disputes over the future of the Eastern dimension of the ENP and EU's strategies towards its new Eastern frontiers.

In the foreseeable future, a diversified approach is bound to remain a pervasive feature in the EU's strategies towards the Black Sea region. Yet, a recent development has, for the first time, put the Black Sea region on the agenda of the EU as a single distinct policy area. Based on a Communication from the European Commission to the EU Council and the European Parliament on 11 April 2007,⁵ the EU Council, in May 2007, welcomed the 'Black Sea Synergy – A new Regional Cooperation Initiative' and

⁵ European Commission. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. 'Black Sea Synergy - A New Regional Cooperation Initiative', COM(2007) 160 Final, Brussels, 2007. Text available on <http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com07_160_en.pdf>



invited continuation of the EU work ‘...on an enhanced and coherent EU engagement in and with the Black Sea area...’⁶

The Black Sea Synergy’s main objectives are to stimulate democratic and economic reforms, support stability and promote development, focus on practical projects in the areas of common concern, respond to opportunities and challenges through coordinated action in a regional framework and develop a climate more conducive to the solution of conflicts in the region. To achieve these objectives, the EU aims to intensify regional cooperation in a wide number of sectors of cross-border activity such as transport, energy, environment, fisheries, migration, science and technology as well as promoting the rule of law and the fight against organised crime, security, democracy, human rights and civil society cooperation. The scope of action is wide but the means are modest based on prioritisation and complementarity with regional initiatives. The implementation of the Black Sea Synergy is already underway with the first steps in support of civil society cooperation and local level cooperation in Black Sea coastal areas.⁷

But the more direct political importance of the Black Sea Synergy should not be underestimated either. An event of considerable symbolic significance which took place on 14 February 2008 in Kiev is telling for the future potential of this initiative. The first Black Sea Synergy Ministerial meeting brought together, for the first time, all the major political actors involved in shaping the future of the region. In the Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the countries of the EU and of the wider Black Sea area, ‘the participants agreed that the primary task of the Black Sea Synergy is the development of cooperation within the Black Sea region and also between the region as a whole and the EU...the Black Sea Synergy will benefit from the ENP and other EU policies applied in the relationship with countries of the region’.⁸

The Black Sea Synergy is a concrete initiative aiming to reinforce the Europeanisation process in the region. Its first major element is the emergence of a new distinct EU policy area. While not an independent Black Sea strategy, as the broad EU policy towards the region is driven by its three different strategies, the Black Sea Synergy nevertheless raises the policy profile of the region and paves the way for a more coherent EU approach towards the region as a whole. It underscores the linkages and common challenges between different important neighbours and introduces complementary means for pursuing the Europeanisation process more effectively. It does not create new institutions but encourages closer links and cooperation between the EU and existing actors in the region.

⁶ The Council of the European Union. ‘Press Release - General Affairs and External Relations’, Brussels, 14-15 May 2007, p. 8. Text available on <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/94116.pdf>

⁷ For documents and updates on the EU Black Sea Synergy, see also the relevant webpage of the European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/blacksea/index_en.htm>

⁸ European Commission. ‘Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Countries of the European Union and of the Wider Black Sea Area’, Kiev, 14 February 2008, p. 1. <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/blacksea/doc/joint_statement_blacksea_en.pdf>



A second major element of the Black Sea Synergy is the insertion of a regional cooperation approach in the EU's strategies towards the region, not only cooperation between the EU and the region but also and equally importantly within the region. The underlying logic is that many of the challenges of our times cannot be addressed by any country alone and that reinforcing regional cooperation and initiatives is therefore a goal in itself. Yet, regional cooperation is not a substitute for Europeanisation but a complementary approach.

Environment, transport and trade are promising examples of regional cooperation. Yet, more complicated issues such as energy could also be useful areas for EU support for regional initiatives. As John Roberts argues '...perhaps the best role for the BSEC itself lies not so much in seeking to orchestrate specific programmes for energy cooperation as in serving as a forum wherein such issues can be debated in a calm, rational fashion, thus helping to create the atmosphere of entente required to promote energy cooperation not only within the BSEC region itself, but throughout Eurasia'.⁹ A similar logic could also be useful regarding security, particularly with inclusive regional initiatives such as BSEC.

The Black Sea Synergy has the potential to become an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the Black Sea geopolitical landscape. It can complement the Europeanisation process by enhancing the interdependence between the EU and the region and by helping to more effectively address common challenges in the state-building process. It can play a useful role in facilitating good neighbourly relations and improving the climate in the region via the implementation of its various cross-border cooperation programmes and initiatives. It could also provide additional opportunities for concrete cooperation and improved relations between the EU and certain key actors in the region such as Russia.

The problems in the region and in relations between the EU and certain countries in the region will obviously not go away with the Black Sea Synergy alone. Yet, the potential for a positive role is available. A major added value in the long run could simply turn out to be that the Black Sea Synergy will introduce new opportunities for promoting inclusiveness over divisions in the region and between the EU and the region. Given that overcoming renewed divisions on the Eastern frontiers of the EU is a major challenge for the current generation in Europe, the contribution of the Black Sea Synergy to progress in the region could end up being the first step of a more far-reaching initiative than its modest original ambitions.

⁹ John Roberts. 'Energy Cooperation among the BSEC member states - Towards an energy strategy for the BSEC', *ICBSS Xenophon Paper* No. 3, October 2007, p. 56. Text available on <http://www.icbss.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=45>



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