



Looking Beyond the Georgian Crisis: The EU in Search of an Enhanced Role in the Black Sea Region

By Dimitrios Triantaphyllou and Yannis Tsantoulis*

Abstract

Forming part of a 'new neighbourhood' and at the same time caught in a *proximity/distance paradox*, the Black Sea region is one of the very few regions where greater EU involvement in conflict resolution has been both sought and opposed. Overall, the EU involvement in the region so far typifies a *capability-expectations gap* case. However, the current significance of the region for the EU outweighs any considerations of geography or its institutional timetable since the region presents a number of significant security challenges that characterise the post-Cold War period and constitute a threat for the stability and prosperity of Europe, including, among others, the conundrum of energy security and separatist movements. If the question that arose before the Georgian crisis of August 2008 was whether the EU could play a significant role, the crucial question now is how to play that enhanced role. Strengthening the Union's position is of vital importance and it requires a coherent strategy entailing a number of key characteristics such as: a single voice, an enhanced Black Sea Synergy, physical presence, creation of a Contact Group, working with Russia ('soft power' diplomacy), drafting a strategy with the US and last but not least strengthening the 'Europeanisation' project in the region.

Keywords: European Union, Black Sea region, Caucasus, Russia, Black Sea Synergy, Europeanisation, Energy Security.

Introduction

Given the accumulation of both internal and external issues that had to be tackled by the European Union (EU) in the previous years, the Black Sea region¹ and its protracted conflicts as one of the EU's security concerns might have seemed to be in the recent past

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*Dimitrios Triantaphyllou is Director General of the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) and Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of the Aegean and Yannis Tsantoulis is Research Fellow at the ICBSS.

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of only marginal interest.

Historically, the region has been prone to various types of conflicts (internal and external) whereby new realities and old tensions have co-existed.² Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the region looked like a very tangled puzzle. The Black Sea region was surrounded by western oriented states (Greece as member of the EU and NATO and Turkey as a member of NATO), post-Soviet states and the main Soviet successor state, Russia. At the same time, it continued to be a mosaic in terms of cultural and societal aspects with the presence of different religions (Orthodox, Islam) and of different languages making the Black Sea look like a miniature 'Tower of Babel'. Overall, the region has been the meeting place of states that have chosen the path of integration with the West and societies that continue to pay the price of post-socialist political and economic restructuring.

At the same time though, the wider Black Sea region has emerged as one of the key areas in a new spiral of geopolitical competition characterised by intensifying competition and confrontation among the great powers. It has turned into a playing ground where the ever-increasing competition between the Russia, the United States and to a certain degree the European Union (EU) has been intensifying. All these major international players did employ in the post-Cold War period different means, from accession negotiations to the construction of pipelines, in order to strategically position themselves in the area while sharing the same goal of expanding their influence and securing an economic and political presence in the region.

Indeed, in geopolitical terms, the Black Sea has become fashionable.³ Situated at the point of convergence of the latest phase of European integration and the US-led 'global war on terror', the Black Sea region has acquired a new significance in the post-Cold War geopolitical thinking- especially after 9/11- since it considered to be a

¹ This study uses the term "Black Sea region" which according to the European Commission "...includes Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova in the west, Ukraine and Russia in the north, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the east and Turkey in the south. Though Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Greece are not littoral states, history, proximity and close ties make them natural regional actors." See: 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, April 11, 2007.

² Elkhan Nuriyev, "Geopolitical Breakthrough and Emerging Challenges: The case of the South Caucasus," *Journal of International Affairs* VI, no.2 (June-July 2002):1-2.

³ When it comes to the terminology and the meaning of the term 'Geopolitics', the following definitions are useful: "Geopolitics is the study of the influence of geographical factors on political action" Jean Gottmann, "The Background of Geopolitics," *Military Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1942): 197-206. A more detailed definition is: "In the abstract, geopolitics traditionally indicates the links and causal relationships between political power and geographic space; in concrete terms it is often seen as a body of thought assaying specific strategic prescriptions based on the relative importance of land power and sea power in world history...The geopolitical tradition had some consistent concerns, like the geopolitical correlates of power in world politics, the identification of international core areas, and the relationships between naval and terrestrial capabilities". Oyvind Osterud, "The Uses and Abuses of Geopolitics," *Journal of Peace Research* 25, no.2 (1988):191.



security asset in the sense that it serves as “a platform for power projection to the Middle East and Asia and as a buffer zone against asymmetric risks to European security”.⁴ Overall, the Black Sea in the post-Cold War period has been gradually evolving as a ‘natural geopolitical centre’⁵ and a new ‘geopolitical pivot’. In this sense, it would be useful to remark from the beginning that, at least in terms of geopolitics, the Black Sea region takes its existence and geographical coherence for granted.

By using the vocabulary of traditional geopolitics, the political visions of the Black Sea not only establish its location in the grand scheme of global politics, but also determine its enduring significance among the ‘natural seats of power’.⁶ As Ciută remarks, geopolitical vocabulary permeates many of the descriptions of the Black Sea as ‘bridge or buffer zone’,⁷ a ‘pivot’ that lies at the centre of a Mackinder-type ‘geopolitical heartland’,⁸ or ‘on the frontier between the Heartland and the Rimlands’.^{9,10} By paraphrasing Mackinder, O’Hara remarked that: “Who controls the export routes, controls the oil and gas; who controls the oil and gas, controls the Heartland”¹¹.

Divided by conflicts, blockades and trade restrictions and with no ‘strong’ institutional set up the region has been also poor in dialogue.¹² The insecurity dynamics have been sustained by a lack of trust and the region, at least for the time being, seems not to be inspired/influenced by the spirit of regional cooperation that has been in place since at least June 1992 as expressed by the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). In fact, due to the differences among them, the attention of the states of the region has been so far directed more outside the region rather than on the region itself or on integration with their neighbours, with the exception of Russia that perceives its neighbouring countries as part of its sphere of influence.¹³

⁴ George C. Maior and Mihaela Matei, “The Black Sea Region in an Enlarged Europe: Changing Patterns, Changing Politics,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 16, no.1 (Winter 2005): 50.

⁵ Oleksandr Pavliuk, “Introduction,” in *The Black Sea region. Cooperation and Security Building*, ed. Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivann Klymush-Tsintsadze (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe and East-West Institute, 2004), 3-13.

⁶ Halford Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* 23, no 4, (April 1904): 421-437; Nicholas. J. Spykman and Abbie A. Robins, “Geographic Objectives in Foreign Policy,” *American Political Science Review* 33, no.4 (August 1939):591-614.

⁷ Maior and Matei, “The Black Sea Region in an Enlarged Europe,” 34.

⁸ Mustafa Aydin, “Europe’s Next Shore: The Black Sea Region after EU Enlargement,” *Occasional Paper* 53 (Paris: EUISS, 2004), 5.

⁹ Alexander Goncharenko, “The Wider Black Sea Area: New Geopolitical Realities, Regional Security Structures and Democratic Control: A Ukrainian View,” *NATO Defence College Occasional Paper* 11, no.2 (2005): 23-32.

¹⁰ Felix Ciută, “Region? Why Region? Security, Hermeneutics, and the Making of the Black Sea Region,” *Geopolitics* 13, no.1 (2008): 125-127.

¹¹ Sara L. O’Hara, “Great Game or Rugby Game? The Struggle for Control of the Caspian,” *Geopolitics* 9, no. 1 (2004): 138-160.

¹² So far EU has a preference, for a number of reasons, to dialogue with regions instead of states. In one degree, this lack of regional formations and initiatives in the region explains the problematic attitude of EU towards the South Caucasus.

¹³ Dov Lynch, “A Regional Insecurity Dynamic,” in *The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, 9-10.



The truth is that overall the Black Sea region has been caught during the post-Cold War period in a *proximity/distance paradox*. On the one hand, it gradually started to form part of the ‘new neighbourhood’, a part of the common neighbourhood of both the EU and Russia, and on the other hand the fact that most of the states of the region were/are not candidates for accession into the EU, amplified the distance of the region from Brussels. In fact, the first visit to the ‘hot spot’ of the region, the South Caucasus, by the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana since 2004, conveyed the interest of the EU to step up its engagement in Georgia and overall in the South Caucasus. The visit only took place in June 2008 almost exactly two months before the Georgia crisis erupted.¹⁴

Furthermore, the whole region seems to be characterised by complex causal relationships, correlations and interesting intervening variables and thus the EU’s position cannot be easily explained. Therefore, assessing the EU’s policy in this context is not an easy task, albeit a really challenging one. To date, the EU’s presence has been limited and somehow ambivalent. More specifically, EU policies towards the protracted conflicts have been marked by a ‘*Russia-first*’ approach¹⁵ and actually, many support the argument that the case of the secessionist conflicts in the region typifies an example of *capability-expectations gap* in terms of a successful EU involvement since the EU as a divided, as it will be elaborated later, ‘soft power’ does not have the wherewithal to resolve the ramifications stemming from every independence movement in its neighbourhood.¹⁶

¹⁴ As Solana explicitly stated: “for us the region is very important, we are neighbours and we want to construct a deeper relationship.” See: Council of the European Union, “Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, calls for direct and intense contacts between Sukhumi and Tbilisi during his visit to Abkhazia,” Press Release, S198/08, Brussels, June 6, 2008; Council of the European Union, “Summary of remarks by Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, on his trip to Georgia,” Press Release, S197/08, Brussels, June 6, 2008.

¹⁵ Many EU member states, including some heavyweights like Germany, France and Italy, share with Russia common interests of vital importance (in terms of trade, energy and FDI *inter alia*) and thus are not willing to sacrifice any of their national interests *vis-à-vis* Russia even in the case of the conflicts in the South Caucasus. The position of Germany and France at the 20th NATO Summit (2-4 April 2008, Bucharest) when they clearly backed Russia’s position for not granting a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine is a clear signal that the EU member states, no matter how postmodern they might be, remain realists when it comes to their national interests. Within this context, energy is the key issue. As Pursiainen suggests, although Russia has adopted a clear realist self-help worldview whereas the EU’s policy is also shaped by the idea of international institutions and interdependence, “both Russia and the EU surely follow the intergovernmentalist (traditional realist or neorealist) logic in their cooperation, defending their autonomy and sovereignty wherever they can”. The challenge for the EU and its member states is to design and promote policies which simultaneously cater to the national interests of individual states while promoting the Europeanisation project to their neighbourhood. Regarding a theoretical analysis of the EU-Russia relationship, see Chister Pursiainen, “Theories of Integration and the Limits of EU-Russian Relations” (paper presented at the International Studies Association Convention, 1st of March 2007, Chicago, USA).

¹⁶ Christopher Hill, “The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31, no. 3 (September 1993):305 – 328.



However, the significance of the region for the EU far outweighs considerations of geography or its institutional timetable since the region presents a number of significant security challenges that typify the post-Cold War period. These include regional conflicts and separatist movements; the security of vital oil and gas pipelines; the difficult process of democratisation in weak states; flourishing organised crime; illegal migration; ecological risks; and massive economic underdevelopment.¹⁷

Especially since the admission of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in January 2007, every stakeholder in the Union can understand the proximity of the region. All the secessionist conflicts in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood are also important tests for the whole web of the EU's bilateral and multilateral relations with all of its Eastern partners. To be more concrete, the conflict in Transnistria is a test for the EU's relations with Moldova, Ukraine and Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is at the heart of the Union's relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan, but is also a factor in the EU-Turkey and the EU-Russia relations. Last but not least, the recent conflicts in Abkhazia¹⁸ and South Ossetia¹⁹ proved to be a 'baptism of fire' for the EU, Russia and Georgia. The question that arose before the Georgian crisis of August 2008 was whether the EU could play a significant role in the region without stumbling on these secessionist conflicts.²⁰ With the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence by Russia on 26 August 2008, the EU finds itself seeking a substantive role in conflict prevention and management and eventually conflict resolution in a part of Europe where the crisis seems to be defined by Washington's and Moscow's simultaneous but opposing quests for regional hegemony.

The EU's Constraints and...the Motivation

The EU Constraints

First, the Black Sea is one of the very few regions where greater EU involvement in conflict resolution is both sought and opposed. It is opposed by one of the EU's most important partners and new neighbour – Russia. The analysis that follows by Arkady Moshes could not be more telling:

¹⁷ Nicole Gnessoto, "Preface," in *The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, ed. David Lynch, Chaillot Paper, no.65 (Paris: EUISS, December 2003), 7-8.

¹⁸ Abkhazia, or historically called the Abkhazian-Georgian Kingdom, is more like a mini-state, with a population of over 300,000 and a long history of autonomy. It is located on the north-east coast of the Black Sea and during the Soviet era it was a tourist destination. In spite of their claim for independence, the ethnic Abkhaz make up less than a third of the population of Abkhazia – they are outnumbered both by Georgians (those who have returned since the war) and Armenians.

¹⁹ South Ossetia, or as it was historically called Samachablo, is a tiny enclave 45 minutes from Georgia's capital Tbilisi, with a population of less than 60,000 (two-thirds Ossetian and one-third Georgian). The Georgian and Ossetian villages are intermingled in a way that recalls Bosnia before its civil war.

²⁰ Nicu Popescu, "Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours – The EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia," *CEPS Working Document*, no. 260 (March 2007): 1.



Brussels cannot ignore a consolidated push of EU new member states to be more active on the eastern periphery. As long as it denies membership perspective for its neighbours, the policy of Wider Europe that it pursues, (however palliative it may look) nevertheless stimulates their search for alternatives to staying within the same geopolitical and geoeconomic space as Russia. Moscow, in this situation, starts viewing the EU not so much as a partner, but rather as a systematic rival to its foreign policy goals in the Western NIS and the Caucasus; a revisionist power; and is instinctively inclined to get involved in a 'zero sum' game type of relationship with the EU.²¹

This situation poses significant problems for the EU, as it cannot become involved in a meaningful way in the Black Sea region without the consent of all conflicting parties. In addition, the South Caucasus and Ukraine are more important for Russia than for the EU. Russia's higher 'intensity of preferences' in the region makes it readier to commit more political and economic resources to achieve its foreign policy goals in the South Caucasus.²²

Furthermore, a contingent circumstance was of course 9/11. Since 11 September 2001, the previous priority of ensuring the development and transportation of Caspian Sea hydrocarbon resources had been marginalised, with the global war on terrorism taking precedence. NATO stepped up its role in the region following its 2002 Prague Summit and Russia also maintains a strategic military presence in the South Caucasus. The presence of important regional and extra-regional actors has complicated the EU's thinking about a reinforced political role in the region by – apparently at least – leaving little room for the Union to claim as its own. The activities of Russia and the United States, not to mention the policies of other regional stakeholders such as Turkey and Iran, muddle rather than clarify the strategic shape of the region.

...and the Motivation

What has changed recently and the EU is seemingly more engaged in the region? First of all, to put it in a chronological order, the internal EU trends played an important role. By 2007, the two enlargement rounds, with the inclusion of neighbouring states

²¹ Arkady Moshes, "Prospects for EU-Russia Foreign and Security Policy Cooperation," *The EU-Russia Review* 2 (Brussels: EU-Russia Centre, November 2006).

²² Andrew Moravcsik's theory of liberal intergovernmentalism argues that when it comes to international bargaining it is not only the relative influence of states, but also the intensity of their preferences that shapes the final outcome of bargaining, and the behaviour of states. Transposing this idea to the EU and Russian behaviour in the South Caucasus, one could argue that even though the EU has more foreign policy resources at its disposal, the EU's intensity of preferences in the South Caucasus is much lower; thus, it is not prepared to devote more resources to achieve its foreign policy goals than Russia is. See Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).



to Russia, were almost accomplished, the institutional set-up for CFSP had been developed and the EU had acquired the minimum toolbox of capabilities for security policy action under European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). Second, the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the adoption of a European Security Strategy served the role of focusing the EU's attention on the South Caucasus. Third, the EU realised that it has vital energy interests in the region.²³ The launch of the Programme for Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) was an early indication of that interest, and the developments in the winter of 2005 between Russia and Ukraine made the 'hands-off' approach of the 1990s unsustainable.²⁴ Overall, energy security in the European context encompasses many parameters such as the security of supply, the security of demand, the reliability of contractual arrangements on energy and its ambivalent relationship with Russia among others.²⁵ This is why the EU in order to ensure its energy security decided to support a policy of diversification of transport routes for oil and gas. But it has no declared interest in containing the influence in the South Caucasus of neighbouring countries – including Iran, although the energy question and the complex web of relations with Russia have led the EU to upgrade its relations with the Central Asia states.²⁶ The EU sees the strength of its foreign policy instruments for its eastern neighbourhood in their capacity to transfer its own norms and values beyond its boundaries as will be analysed later.

The capacity for using these incentives is only to a limited extent available to the EU in the region. It is available insofar as the political *élite* of the states in the region – besides the member states – view some form of closer association with the EU, or even EU membership, in the long term, as a strategic objective, and are keen to enhance their political status through their membership in the European framework organisa-

²³ According to Javier Solana: "Energy security has shot to the top of the European and wider international agenda. It is easy to see why. Europe will be importing a growing amount of its energy needs from abroad. We already rely on external sources for 50 per cent. Most estimates suggest this will rise to 90 per cent for oil and 70 per cent for gas by 2030. Russia's recent disputes with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova over the terms of gas supplies have concentrated our minds." Javier Solana, "Europeans must act collectively on energy strategy," *Financial Times*, March 9, 2006.

²⁴ Popescu, "Europe's Unrecognised Neighbours," 4.

²⁵ Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "Energy Security and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP): The Wider Black Sea Area Context," *Journal for Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 7, no.2 (June 2007): 289-302.

²⁶ During the German Presidency in the EU, the European Council (Brussels, 21/22 June 2007) adopted for the first time an *EU Strategy for a new partnership with Central Asia*. One year later, in June 2008, a *Joint Progress Report by the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy* followed and in Paris on 18 September the first *EU-Central Asia Forum* on security issues took place. All these constitute an apt proof of the EU's upgraded interest towards the region. See: Council of the European Union (General Secretariat), *European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (European Communities: Brussels, 2007); European Commission and the Council of the European Union, *A Joint Progress Report by the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy*, 24 June 2008, Brussels and French Presidency of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Participants in the EU-Central Asia Forum on Security Issues in Paris*, 18 September, Paris.



tions, the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Co-operation and Security in Europe (OSCE). In this context, not only is interstate bargaining crucial, but governments as key players also represent certain *élite* interests. The EU may thus make use of these 'aspirations'.

The EU's Policy towards the Region: A Policy Oriented Approach

The First Initiatives

During the 1990s the Black Sea was too far away and too complex for the EU, and too close and important for Russia and Turkey. In any case, it is relatively difficult to talk of an EU policy towards the conflicts in the 1990s. There was virtually none although the Commission had issued a Communication stressing the need to support cooperation in the Black Sea back in 1997.²⁷

Actually, the EU's presence on the scene of the conflicts -from the early 1990s- was limited to providing economic assistance to the three states of the South Caucasus, distributed through a range of programmes.²⁸ During the 1990s, EU member states coordinated their national foreign policies on a case by case basis, without collective coherence and within a framework of diverse structures.²⁹ With regard to conflict prevention and conflict management, the EU preferred to provide its support to the OSCE and United Nations in their efforts to solve the region's conflicts. The European Union played only a secondary role in the region, since the enlargement to the East and the Balkan crises modified the external priorities of the Union. Prior to 1999, the EU retained a low political and strategic profile in the region. In other words, the EU had decided not to intervene directly in the negotiation mechanism of the conflicts in order to leave this to the UN and OSCE. But, over time this policy was abandoned.³⁰

Since 1999, events have demonstrated that the EU has changed its stance. The signature of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with the three Caucasian states on 22 June 1999 in Luxembourg officially represented a qualitative breakthrough in EU-Caucasus relations. For the first time, with this agreement, issues

²⁷ European Commission, *Communication on Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Area*, COM(97) 597 final, Brussels, November 14, 1997.

²⁸ Namely, TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) and INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe) that were initiated under the TACIS programme. For further information see: <http://www.traceca.org> and <http://www.inogate.org>

²⁹ For instance; France co-presided the Minsk Group, Germany was involved in solving the conflict in Abkhazia. Britain appointed a special representative for Georgia in 2002 and then for the South-Caucasus.

³⁰ In fact, this followed the same pattern of the EC/EU's involvement in the Balkans during the 1990s. See Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "The Balkans between Stabilization and Membership," in *Partners and Neighbours: A CFSP for a Wider Europe*, Chaillot Papers, no. 64 (Paris: EUISS, 2003), 60-74 and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "The Interplay between the EU and the United States in the Balkans," in *Shift or Rift: Assessing US-EU Relations after Iraq*, ed. Gustav Lindstrom (Paris: EUISS, 2003), 191-204.



such as political dialogue and cultural cooperation were emphasised in addition to those related to trade and economy.³¹

Indeed, in 2003, the three South Caucasian states –Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan– were rescued from obscurity in the EU Security Strategy approved in December 2003. The strategy, entitled *A Secure Europe in a Better World*³², outlined the Union’s strategic goals but the South Caucasus was not the main focus.³³ Soon, the South Caucasus moved from the footnotes to being included in the same breath as the Balkans and the Congo in discussions regarding ESDP by the High Representative. On 7 July 2003, the Council appointed an EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus and on 15 February 2007 an EU Special Representative for Moldova with the task of contributing to the EU’s policy objectives.³⁴ Furthermore, the European Union (EU) launched on 16 July 2004 an EU Rule of Law Mission to Georgia, the so-called EUJUST THEMIS, which successfully completed its tasks on 14 July 2005.³⁵ Besides Georgia, the EU has also been present since 30 November 2005, within the context of ESDP, in Moldova and Ukraine, through the establishment of a Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) that had the objective to support capacity building for border management, including customs, on the whole Moldova-Ukraine border, including the border between Ukraine and the separatist Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova.

Nevertheless, from the outset, the EU policy towards the South Caucasus has not been the result of calculated decisions taken as part of clear policy-making processes; quite the contrary. Much of the EU thinking and policy stems from diverse forces such as the presence of external actors, contingent circumstances, the pull of events from the region itself, the member state holding the presidency at a particular period, as well as the role of strong individuals within the EU machinery.

The EU’s Institutions and Instruments in the Region

The EU’s attitude towards the region has been the subject of a series of debates. Until now, each of the institutions seems to have its own approach towards the region. To be more specific, the European Commission (EC) has issued various communications

³¹ Yelda Demirag, “EU Policy towards South Caucasus and Turkey,” *Perceptions* IX, no.4 (Winter 2004 – 2005): 92-97.

³² Available for downloading at <http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>

³³ Actually, the only statement in this text concerning South Caucasus region was: “We should take a stronger interest in the problems of the Southern Caucasus, which in due course will also be a neighbouring region”. Ibid.

³⁴ According to the decision taken by Written Procedure in Brussels, 7 July 2003: “assisting the countries of the South Caucasus in carrying out political and economic reforms, preventing and assisting in the resolution of conflicts, promoting the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, engaging constructively with key national actors neighbouring the region, supporting intra-regional co-operation and ensuring co-ordination, consistency and effectiveness of the EU’s actions in the South Caucasus”. Available for downloading at: http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/misc/76560.pdf

³⁵ Council of the European Union, ‘Council Joint Action 2004/523/CFSP of 28 June 2004, on the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Georgia, EUJUST THEMIS’, in *OJL* 228, June 29, 2004.



on how to design an approach to the region.³⁶ Also, the European Parliament has been vocal in many ways in calling for the development of a strategy on the South Caucasus and has issued important Resolutions including a recent one on the Black Sea region as a whole.³⁷ The Council General Secretariat has also been active in its own capacity and during the last couple of years it has enhanced its interest at the bequest of the member states. In every case, regardless of the people in charge, the debate was centered –more or less– on the following questions, namely: How to advance conflict settlement in the region? How to balance a focus on specific states with the desire to foster greater regional cooperation? What is the most appropriate framework for advancing EU aims in the region – the PCAs or a regional strategy? However salient these questions are, one should note that from the outset EU thinking has led to much hand wringing but little action.

The EU's Blocs of Countries as the Key Actors

Unfortunately, after 2001 little progress was made towards conflict settlement.³⁸ In parallel, and as a result, pressures increased within the EU and member states for a review of EU policy mechanisms. Nevertheless, on the other hand a number of member states remained hesitant. Regarding the appointment of a Special Representative that should seek to develop an enhanced role of the EU, many governments were unconvinced. In other words, the value-added of an enhanced EU role was seen to be very limited. In contrast, some member states, along the lines developed within the Council Secretariat, argued that the current EU policy, which seeks to promote the transition towards democracy and market economy in the South Caucasian states through the PCAs, was failing. Having no strategy towards the region was still a policy – even one of neglect.

Unfortunately, during the August 2008 crisis many countries were happy to point fingers but disagreed on who was to be blamed. For example, the Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico, referring to the August 7th Georgian artillery attack on South

³⁶ Namely, European Commission, *Communication on Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Area*, COM(97) 597 final, Brussels, November 14, 1997; ·European Commission, *Communication on a Wider Europe— Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*, COM(2003) 104 final, Brussels, March 11, 2003; · European Commission, *Communication for a European Neighbourhood Policy – Strategy Paper*, COM(2004) 373 final, Brussels, May 12, 2004; · European Commission, *Communication on a Black Sea Synergy - A New Regional Cooperation Initiative*, COM(2007) 160 final, Brussels, April 11, 2007; · European Commission, *Communication on the Report on the First Year of Implementation of the Black Sea Synergy*, COM(2008) 391 final, Brussels, June 19, 2008.

³⁷ European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 10 July 2008 on the Commission's 2007 Enlargement Strategy Paper*, 2007/2271(INI), July 10, 2008.

³⁸ There seemed to be some positive signs from the Armenian-Azerbaijani talks, but even on supposed 'non-political' questions such as opening a Regional Environmental Centre in Tbilisi, the EU faced difficulties. Also, the attempt to lead discussions on reopening rail links between Armenia and Azerbaijan led nowhere. In all, the EU approach to increasing regional cooperation and settling the conflicts stalled.



Ossetia, said that “we all know very well who provoked the war”. Poland that issued a statement criticising “Putin’s imperialistic and revisionist” intervention, the UK that condemned Russia’s “continued aggression” and Sweden, that according to its foreign minister, Carl Bildt, Russia’s military action was “the gravest breach of the commitments of the Council of Europe” were among the states that decided to finger a culprit blamed Russia.³⁹

The EU’s Policy towards the Conflict: Concluding Thoughts

The EU so far is seen as being a weak player in the South Caucasus having only played a subordinate role in the current geopolitical calculations. Its potential for determining the future of the region, for instance through its relations with Russia or by working with the United States, is as yet merely a matter of conjecture. In the short term, the EU is not perceived by any of the parties –be they recognized or unrecognized governments– as having a decisive impact on the regional balance of power.⁴⁰ In the long term, however, in the balance of power calculations the EU is seen as being able to make a difference: the unrecognized states hope that the EU could normalise its relations with them, gradually paving the way for their political and economic integration into the region.⁴¹ For the recognized governments, EU membership would dramatically raise their status in the eyes of their neighbours, in particular Russia and Turkey, notwithstanding the fact the Turkey itself has began accession negotiations with the EU. In this context, the EU –and all it represents– is the best antidote to counter/curb the forces of resurgent nationalism in the region since nationalism is arguably a –if not the– dominant force in contemporary Turkish and Russian politics and foreign policy.⁴² Even if such full integration within the EU is not foreseeable, it remains a long-term political objective. The key *problématique* has to do whether the EU’s web of contractual relations with the countries of the Black Sea region can progress if the EU has no role in the resolution of the protracted conflicts of the region.

The Georgia crisis in fact has, for a variety of reasons, managed to establish the EU as the principal diplomatic broker in the conflict in spite of the ‘New Cold War’ discourse by both Moscow and Washington. The EU brokered the ceasefire accord and as the ‘war of words’ between Russia and the United States intensifies, the Union, because of its consensus-driven policy-making approach and its policies with the Cau-

³⁹ Tomas Valasek, “What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy?” *Centre for European Reform Briefing Note* (London: CER, August 2008), 1.

⁴⁰ Bruno Coppieters, “EU Policy on the Southern Caucasus” (Policy Paper prepared at the request of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence Policy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2004).

⁴¹ Over the long term, this could eventually imply that the Europeanisation discourse could potentially become influential anew.

⁴² Ian Lesser, *Global Trends, Regional Consequences: Wider Strategic Influences on the Black Sea*, Xenophon Paper, no. 4 (Athens: ICBSS, November 2007), 33-35.



casian states and Russia, stands much to gain as the voice of moderation notwithstanding the danger a protracted conflict could have on achieving consensus.⁴³

Recommendations for an Enhanced and Coherent EU Strategy

The policies of the European Union in this region are thus neither sufficiently 'common' nor sufficiently clear to be perceived in the region as a 'policy'. Changing this situation would have to entail a coherent strategy that has the following key characteristics:

i) Single Voice

The motto is quite simple: "Strong if we stay united, weak if we stay divided". In a few words, EU should be realistic. A *synthesis* of national positions and interests is the only way forward.⁴⁴ The EU has traditionally spoken with several voices and it still continues to do so with its constantly rotating presidencies and the various Special Representatives. The appointment of a Special Representative with a higher political profile for the South Caucasus, or for Georgia and the other conflicts, could address this lack of coherence, but even in that case what is really needed is political will, strong and steadfast commitment and last but certainly not least the 'unfreezing' of the Lisbon Treaty. However, it should be borne in mind that single voice does not mean a lowest common denominator approach nor a purely declaratory one.⁴⁵

ii) Enhanced Black Sea Synergy

Overall, there should be a formulation of a cohesive EU regional policy on the Black Sea. In this context, an enhanced Black Sea Synergy with clear objectives and Europeanising features and instruments, which also takes into account specific elements of the Eastern Partnership proposal by Poland and Sweden, is a good start.⁴⁶ As Yannis points out, the Black Sea Synergy had from the very beginning the objective to reinforce the Europeanisation process in the region by enhancing the state-building one and the interdependence between the EU and the region.⁴⁷ Last, the potential significance of a regional Stability Pact, with the lessons learned from the Balkan experience, could be discussed in this context.⁴⁸ A coherent and cohesive policy approach based on the existing Black Sea Synergy is a far better policy choice

⁴³ Nevertheless, in the absence of the Lisbon Treaty which enhances the EU's foreign policy-making capacities, the Union has also been helped by the fact that France led by a skilful Nicolas Sarkozy has been at its helm.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucher and Jean-Dominique Giuliani, "The European Union and the Russo-Georgian War," *European Issues*, no. 108 (Paris: Fondation Robert Schuman, September 1, 2008), 4.

⁴⁵ Antonio Missiroli, "The Guns of August," *Commentary* (Brussels: EPC, September 4, 2008).

⁴⁶ Joint Polish-Swedish proposal Draft Paper, *Eastern Partnership*, May 23, 2008.

⁴⁷ Furthermore, one of positive elements of the Black Sea Synergy is that it has already raised the political identity of the region and has thus paved the way for a more coherent EU approach towards the region as a whole. See: Alexandros Yannis, "The European Union and the Black Sea Region: The New Eastern Frontiers and Europeanisation," *ICBSS Policy Brief*, no. 7 (Athens: ICBSS, May 2008), 4.

⁴⁸ Bruno Coppieters, "EU Policy on the Southern Caucasus."



than the confusing formulation and implementation of a number of diverse and sometimes conflicting strategies.

iii) Maintaining Equidistance while Strengthening the 'Europeanisation' Project

Up to now, the EU, i.e. the French Presidency and the Institutions, and not the single member states as mentioned earlier, has correctly managed not to blame either side in the Russo-Georgian conflict. In the short run, the EU should focus on mediating between Georgia and Russia, and this requires it to remain neutral.⁴⁹ Furthermore, now is the right time to persuade the Georgian political *élite* that "More EU – Less NATO aspirations" might be a way out of the crisis. The EU should acknowledge Georgia's European identity, and keep open the prospect of membership in the long term. This entails the formulation of an ENP+ that does not necessarily close the door to those countries that aspire to join the EU but it would allow for a further upgrade of their relations with the Union.⁵⁰ Such a 'European dream' would help to reinforce the reform process in Georgia for example.⁵¹

iv) Working with Russia ('Soft Power' Diplomacy)

Since the summer of 2008 –before and after the Georgia crisis– Moscow received a rather bitter message from investors who decided to withdraw their funds to their home base as a reaction to the political instability in the country. As a result, the financial situation in Russia deteriorated and the consequences have been quite severe: a capital outflow of about \$40 billion, falling oil prices, a credit squeeze of the banking sector, falling of stock prices and plummeting of the exchange rate.⁵² Within this context, Moscow's desire for recognition as a member of the 'civilized' international community is faced with scepticism by many important states such as the United States. These two factors, the negative investment climate globally and the role of other stakeholders give the EU the comparative advantage to make use of the situation and draw on the Russian sensitivities about Russia's role and status in the world and thus try to exert some influence. This ability stems from the very nature of Europe as a respected, wealthy and status quo community of states rather than what it is capable of doing in terms of coherent policy actions. Thus, the key question here is what the EU should do. The answer is that the EU should clearly push for 'Integration' rather than 'Isolation'.

Besides the common interests, it should also be borne in mind that Russia's membership into international organisations is another way of influencing behaviour and foreign policy actions. The inclusion of Russia in international institutions such as the WTO and the OECD is more probable to influence more its behaviour than its ex-

⁴⁹ Tomas Valasek, "What Does the War in Georgia Mean for EU Foreign Policy?" 2.

⁵⁰ Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, "The European Union Looks to the East," Dimitrios' World Blog, posted March 30, 2007, <http://dimitriosworld.blogspot.com/>

⁵¹ Mark Leonard and Charles Grant, "Georgia and the EU: Can Europe's Neighbourhood Policy Deliver?" *CER Policy Brief* (London: CER, September 2005), 8.

⁵² Anders Aslund, "A Frightful Wake-Up Call," *Moscow Times*, September 24, 2008.



clusion would. The US financial crisis acted as a wake-up call for the global economy in which Russia is all the more integrated.⁵³

Furthermore, when it comes to the EU-Russia relationship, it is of crucial importance for the European Union to rid itself of the inferiority complex it feels *vis-à-vis* Russia.

Obviously, this low self confidence rhetoric about energy dependency ignores the real power of the EU. 'Interdependence' is a more apt description of the relationship since Russia desperately needs EU 'know how' and investments.⁵⁴ Last but not least, Sarkozy's proposal for the creation of a joint "EU-Russia Economic Community" along with Medvedev's offer, during his visit in Berlin in 5 June 2005, for a legally binding "European Security Treaty" to replace the existing Cold War treaties is a tell tale sign of a willingness on both sides to improve the relationship.⁵⁵ The forthcoming negotiations for a new PCA provide for a good point of reference as well as the ongoing efforts to reinforce the Four Common Spaces.

v) Physical Presence

The EU should as soon as possible put people (i.e. observers + flexible military missions) on the ground and its humanitarian action must be of consequence and involve the entire region. The mission, to which the EU's contribution should be bigger than the two hundred observers on the ground today, should monitor the buffer zone, deter the parties from military action, and provide peaceful conditions for a longer-term reconciliation process.⁵⁶ At the same time, the EU should increase its security presence in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is time now to seriously consider the internationalisation of the peace keeping efforts in the region, and the EU should be involved in this.⁵⁷ Within this context, the European Union could also increase its civilian and financial presence in the Ukraine and all of the country's regions.⁵⁸ After all, CFSP and ESDP mechanisms can only be strengthened through the physical presence of the EU in the region.

vi) Direct Contact with the Breakaway Regions

The EU should find ways to cooperate directly with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. The EU has to find ways to deal with both regions in order to help them to overcome their isolation and one-sided dependence on Russia. This does not imply political recognition nor an end of Russian engagement, but a more neutral and proactive role

⁵³ Brook Horowitz, "Russia: Integration, not Isolation," *International Herald Tribune*, September 8, 2008.

⁵⁴ Foucher and Giuliani, "The European Union," 4-5.

⁵⁵ Nicolas Sarkozy, (Speech, Sixty-third session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 23, 2008). He explicitly said: "Europe wants to be Russia's partner. Why not build a continent-wide common economic area which would unite Russia and Europe?"

⁵⁶ Popescu, "Can the EU Win the Peace in Georgia?" 5-6.

⁵⁷ Sabine Fischer, "Worst Case: Escalation of the Conflicts in Georgia", *EUISS Analysis*, (Paris: EUISS, August 2008).

⁵⁸ Foucher and Giuliani, "The European Union and the Russo-Georgian War," 5.



of the EU which could be accepted more easily by Sukhumi and Tskhinvali.⁵⁹

Although the context is markedly different, a precedent exists with Kosovo with which the Union has direct contact within the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP).⁶⁰

vii) [Creation of a Contact Group](#)

The EU should devote political energy in order to achieve better policy coordination with all the other international organisations involved in the region such as the UN, the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Within this context, the EU should set up a Contact Group which includes the EU, UN, CoE,

OSCE, Russia, the US, Russia (and possibly Turkey) designed to enhance coordination, cooperation and efficiency.

viii) [Special Focus on Ukraine](#)

The next focal point for enhanced tensions might be Ukraine and especially the Crimea. As a signal both to Kiev and Moscow, EU member states and institutions need to develop a broad 'Europeanisation' strategy in order not to find themselves before a *fait accomplis*.

ix) [Defining a Common Strategy with the United States](#)

Whereby, when it comes to Russia the motto should be "Integration, not Isolation", with regard to the United States, the European Union has no choice but to assure that it works hand in hand with its principal ally. Though the transatlantic relationship has been frayed in recent years, the presidential elections of November 2008 provide for a sound basis to establish a reliable relationship with the next US administration. The timing of the election could not be a better one. A common approach for working with Russia and other regional stakeholders (states and regional organisations) should be a common objective.

Although, the abovementioned thoughts should be regarded as the key steps towards the establishment of a successful EU strategy towards the region, what is of utmost importance now is the need for the Union to acquire a substantial physical presence in the region (both military and civilian) which would act as a deterrent to future unilateral actions and contribute both to post-conflict rehabilitation and a future settlement and the strengthening of CFSP, something that the Union has failed to do to date.

⁵⁹ Fischer, "Worst Case: Escalation of the Conflicts in Georgia," 3-4.

⁶⁰ European Commission, *Communication for a European Future for Kosovo*, COM(2005), 156 final, Brussels, April 20, 2005.



Annex

Map I: The Conflicts in the Wider Black Sea Region



Source: Stefani Weiss, "Frozen Conflicts - Kant reloaded," *Spotlight Europe*, no. 10 (September 2008).



Map II: Map of Georgia – The August 2008 Crisis



Source: *BBC*, Monday, August 11, 2008.



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International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)

4 Xenophontos Str., 10557 Athens, Greece

Tel: +30 210 322321

Fax: +30 210 324 2244

Email: icbss@icbss.org

Website: www.icbss.org

Director General: Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou