



# Policy Brief #10

December 2008

## The Black Sea and the Georgian Crisis\*

By Yasar Yakis\*\*

### Abstract

For a long time the situation in the Black Sea was a reminder of the Cold War in the region as it was on the border between the two Blocs. Nevertheless, following the end of the Cold War there has been a “sea change” in the Black Sea region by providing an opportunity for enhanced cooperation. At the same time, the peace and stability of the Black Sea region has become – for a number of reasons – a matter of concern with impact beyond the region. What the Georgian crisis has clearly shown is that the main actors capable of achieving and maintaining peace and stability in the region are basically the regional stakeholders. The Georgian crisis has sharpened the focus on the many challenges and risks which abound in the region.

**Keywords:** Black Sea region, Turkey, Georgia, Russian Federation, BSEC, Montreux Convention, BLACKSEAFOR, Black Sea Harmony, EU, NATO.

### “Sea Change” in the Black Sea Region

#### Cold War Era

For a long time the situation in the Black Sea was a reminder of the Cold War in the region. It was on the border between the two Blocs. The interaction between the two sides was quite limited. If there was any contact, it comprised only the coastal states. For the Black Sea countries their coast meant a borderline or the edge of the earth. The other side was quite distant. Even direct communication and transportation was limited. Tourism was almost non-existent. As a matter of fact, many people from Russia were almost unaware of the existence of a country called Turkey south of the Black Sea.

---

*The views expressed in the Policy Brief are personal and do not necessarily represent those of the ICBSS.*

\* This is an adapted/revised version of the speech delivered by H.E. Yasar Yakis at the Third ICBSS Annual Lecture on “The Black Sea and the Georgian Crisis”, Athens, 13 November 2008.

\*\* Yasar Yakis is Chairman of the European Union Commission of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and former Minister for Foreign Affairs of the 58<sup>th</sup> Turkish Government (2002-2003).



## After the Fall of Communism

Nevertheless, following the end of the Cold War there has been a “sea change” in the Black Sea region, that was accompanied by the establishment of the first and the most significant international organisation of the region, namely the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that brought together the coastal countries, as well as many other regional countries.

Nowadays, the Black Sea is not the same sea as it was during the second half of the last century. It is not a borderline anymore. Unlike the previous generations, currently the political borders are considered to be windows of opportunity. The contacts between the countries of region are abundant in many areas. The Black Sea is the gate opening to many new opportunities for the coastal countries. Depending on the point of view the Sea can serve today not only as an access point to the other coastal countries, but also an entry point to the European Union, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia and even the Middle East.

## The Peace and Stability in the Black Sea Region

The peace and stability in the Black Sea region is not only a matter of concern for the coastal or regional countries. If the stability collapses in the region, its impact is to be felt beyond the region, as the Georgian crisis has clearly shown. However, the main actors to achieve peace and stability are the coastal and regional states. Primarily these states are in the position to cooperate for their own region. Of course, other interested countries can contribute to this process, but the main driving force should be the common consent of the regional countries and the contributions of the other interested parties should be involved in conformity with this consent. Regional cooperation to maintain security and stability in the region is in for the interest of all parties, either regional or non-regional.

All countries in the region seek economic development and better conditions. It is difficult to achieve economic growth in an unstable environment. Nobody can gain in such a situation. So, efforts aiming at achieving more stability and predictability in the region will indeed contribute to the wealth of the peoples of the region.

## The BSEC Experience

The BSEC experience provides important lessons regarding the regional cooperation in the Black Sea area. Some of these lessons may be useful in the future as well. The BSEC was initiated as a forum to facilitate economic relations and private sector in the region. The existing commitments of the members were respected. The BSEC was not an alternative to other regional integration frameworks; but it was a complementary scheme. So, the agreement was easily reached on the basics. As a result of emerging needs, the scope of the cooperation was extended at later stages. Now the organisation is the most inclusive and the only full-fledged economic cooperation organisation in the region. It has a unique potential to develop cooperation among its members in a whole range of areas from energy, environment, transport to the fight against organised crime.



Turkey did not want to make the BSEC an "exclusive club" composed only of the coastal countries of the Black Sea. However it could not expand indefinitely to distant countries either. Therefore, the middle way was to make it an organisation composed of countries that are the BSEC member countries at present.

It should be borne in mind that the BSEC was an economic cooperation initiative and it has been active in this field, therefore political cooperation has not been within the scope of this organisation. Nevertheless, as an organisation aiming at economic cooperation and facilitation of trade and investments, it also contributes to political cooperation. One should also take into account the economic growth and increasing wealth in the regions that will also contribute, to a certain extent, to the resolution of conflicts. The basis of stability and peace is confidence. Better economic relations and interdependence is, in most cases, one of the main ingredients of better relations between countries. Similarly, mutually beneficial economic ties diminish the potential threats to security.

### **Did the BSEC Fulfil the Expectations?**

It cannot be claimed that the BSEC has met all the expectations in its 16 years of existence. However, a new spirit of cooperation has started to emerge between the member states. Several reasons might explain why the BSEC could not achieve the desired level of effectiveness in its initial phase:

- i) the conflicts that were regarded as "frozen" until recently are perhaps the most important reason;
- ii) lack of concrete, project-based achievements, which would have made the BSEC more meaningful to all concerned;
- iii) failure to draw up attainable short-term strategies, which might have given the Organisation more visibility and credibility;
- iv) lack of sufficient involvement of the private sector.

These shortcomings could be attributed to the fact that the BSEC was the first example of an institutionalised and widely inclusive multilateral cooperation platform in the Black Sea region consisting of member countries with divergent economic and social experiences, as well as different visions and agendas for their future. Furthermore, these countries had very little tradition of cordial cooperation. Consequently, a total consensus on the side of the members could not easily be reached with regard to their expectations from the Organisation.

However, the Organisation has recently achieved a visible degree of progress with the common efforts of all its members. This is due to a growing understanding among the members on the essentiality of the BSEC, as a regional cooperation platform and a common determination towards shifting to a project-oriented and result-based approach within the Organisation. These facts demonstrate that in its sixteen-year evolution process, the BSEC has been able to gather its members around common ideas, goals and policies which in itself is sufficient proof of the success of the Organisation.

The growing local and international interest in the Black Sea region imposes on the BSEC the obligation to play a more active role and the re-emerging spirit of cooperation between the members gives the BSEC the chance to respond positively to new opportunities and challenges.



The BSEC area includes a population of 330 million inhabitants and an area of 20 million square kilometers with dynamic human potential and rich natural resources including oil and natural gas.

The BSEC needs to be restructured to ensure a more effective decision-making mechanism as well as due and rapid implementation of the decisions taken at the top level. This restructuring cannot be achieved by amending the regulations or by adopting a number of decisions. Instead, the BSEC should be transformed into an organisation with a certain degree of flexibility to be able to respond quickly to new challenges in an ever-changing global environment.

The deepening of existing cooperation with other organisations, such as OECD and UNDP, and effective implementation of ongoing partnership projects should also be regarded as a priority.

Another main pillar is the endorsement of a sector-by-sector approach, which will also correspond to the project-oriented vision that the BSEC has recently adopted. At the level of a given sector, priority should be given to making further progress in the fields of trade and investment, transport, energy, environment and combating organised crime.

### **Other Cooperation Initiatives**

#### **Naval Cooperation**

After two of the riparian countries of the Black Sea have become members of NATO and EU, the security and stability of the region has become a Euro-Atlantic issue at the same time. Other developments such as 9/11, the Iraqi war and the uranium enrichment programme of Iran have made the region all the more important.

As far as security is concerned, one should focus on risks rather than threats in the Black Sea region. It is not beyond the capacity of the riparian countries to cope with these risks. There are two indigenous initiatives to address such risks: BLACKSEAFOR and Operation Black Sea Harmony. These initiatives are based on two pillars:

- i) the ultimate goal of the initiatives is to attain all littoral countries of the Black Sea;
- ii) the maritime security of the region should be complementary to the Euro-Atlantic security system, because the maritime security is indivisible.

These two initiatives are recognised at present as major security providers in the Black Sea maritime area.

#### **BLACKSEAFOR**

Originating from a Turkish initiative, BLACKSEAFOR (Black Sea Naval Cooperation Task Group) was created in 2001 with the participation of all the littoral states. It aims at contributing to friendship, good relations and mutual understanding in the region through enhancement of cooperation and interoperability among the naval forces of the littoral states. Operations and tasks of BLACKSEAFOR range from counter-terrorism to search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, environmental protection, mine-counter measures, goodwill visits and any other task to be agreed by all parties.



All littoral states of the Black Sea have the common understanding that the security in the Black Sea is of vital importance for the littoral states and that, therefore, they should take primary responsibility for the maintenance of peace and stability in the area through engagement of their common assets and capabilities. BLACKSEAFOR is an instrument in place that can be used for the achievement of this objective.

Currently, with a view to better responding to new risks to security, BLACKSEAFOR is undergoing a transformation process.

### Operation Black Sea Harmony

This initiative was launched by Turkey initially as a national operation to deter, disrupt and prevent the threat of terrorism and illicit trafficking in weapons of mass destruction, their means of delivery and related materials in the Black Sea. The operation is now open to all Black Sea countries. The Russian Federation and Ukraine have already joined the operations of the *Black Sea Harmony*. The aims of these operations are to:

- i) demonstrate naval presence;
- ii) exchange of information on suspected merchant vessels;
- iii) conduct reconnaissance operations;
- iv) trail or shadow suspected merchant vessels.

The Operation consists of regular patrols with frigates and patrol boats in pre-defined surveillance areas in the Black Sea. Helicopters, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft and coast guard vessels assist in this activity.

Operation Black Sea Harmony is conducted in cooperation with the ongoing NATO *Operation Active Endeavor* in the Mediterranean.

In addition to these initiatives, a meeting was held in Istanbul in 2006 with the participation of the coast guards commanders of the littoral countries where an “*Agreement on Black Sea Coast and Border Guards Cooperation Forum*” was signed.

There is also an initiative launched by Bulgaria. It is the creation of an institution called *Black Sea Border Coordination and Information Centre*. This *Centre* was established in Burgas in 2003 and is aimed at the maritime security of the littoral coastguards.

In addition, a new initiative of “Black Sea Defense Ministerial Process” has also been launched by Turkey recently.

These initiatives involving mainly the coastal countries have so far given positive results in the field of naval cooperation. Their continuation depends on the continuous support of the involved countries.

The Georgian crisis has also shown the importance of transparent dialogue mechanisms. If mechanisms of regular dialogue are maintained, the potential conflicts can be prevented. Some may argue the duplication of the initiatives; nevertheless the duplication may be better than the absence of dialogue mechanisms when the need arises.



## Political Cooperation

In this context, Turkey has always been in favor of cooperation of the coastal states in the field of security. In a similar manner and with the same considerations, after the Georgian crisis, Turkey also proposed its “Platform for Stability and Cooperation in the Caucasus”. Needless to say, the support of the all concerned states is vital for a successful outcome. Additionally, the support of the other regional countries in the Black Sea basin, will also contribute to success of these processes. Turkey, as regional power, is keen to fulfil its responsibility to ensure peace and security in its region and expects the cooperation of other countries of the region.

## The EU and the Black Sea

An analysis on the Black Sea will not be complete without touching upon the EU policies towards the Black Sea. After the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the Black Sea has entered the field of the legitimate interest of the EU. As a result of it, the EU launched an initiative called *Black Sea Synergy*. This initiative was aimed at closer interaction among the countries of the Black Sea basin. The European Parliament adopted on 10 July 2008 a *Resolution on the EU Commission’s 2007 Enlargement Strategy Paper*. In this Resolution there is a specific reference to the Black Sea region and more specifically to the BSEC. It reiterates the

importance of devising a more sophisticated and comprehensive EU Strategy for the Black Sea region that goes beyond the current synergy initiative and envisages the establishment of a Black Sea Cooperation Agreement, which should include the EU, Turkey, all Black Sea littoral States as equal partners, while seeking the full involvement of Russia, and which could, at a later stage, develop into a Union of the Black Sea.<sup>1</sup>

The EU believes that such a multilateral framework would offer the countries involved the possibility of strengthening their cooperation with the EU across a wide variety of policy fields.

These initiatives should not be received with a negative prejudice. However, the major players of the Black Sea basin are the Russian Federation and Turkey. A project that is drawn up without full cooperation since the outset with these two countries carries the risk of less cooperation by them. Presumably, the EU may have thought that the presence in the EU of three BSEC countries, namely Greece, Bulgaria and Romania was sufficient. Whether it was sufficient will depend on how both the Black Sea Synergy and the Union for the Black Sea will take shape. Because the Russian Federation does not like to be served a food that is cooked elsewhere and Turkey has a long history of disillusionment with the EU.

---

<sup>1</sup>European Parliament, *European Parliament resolution of 10 July 2008 on the Commission’s 2007 enlargement strategy paper*, P6\_TA 2008(0363), Strasbourg, 10 July 2008.



## Montreux Convention

Regarding the Montreux Convention that was signed in 1936, it regulates not only the passage through the Turkish Straits but also the tonnage of the military vessels that non-littoral countries of the Black Sea would be allowed to keep in the Black Sea.

For the purpose of this Policy Brief, the relevant section of the Montreux Convention is the provisions that pertain to this limitation. This should not be perceived as an impediment to cooperation with non-littoral countries. On the contrary, it aimed at providing and preserving a military balance in order to maintain the stability in the Black Sea. The most important provisions that limit the tonnage of the military vessels of the non-littoral countries could be summarised as follows:

- i) the tonnage, which any one Non-Black Sea Power may have in the Black Sea, shall be limited to two-thirds of the aggregate tonnage of the strongest fleet in the Black Sea;
- ii) the aggregate tonnage of the vessels of the non-Black Sea Powers shall not exceed 30,000 tons;
- iii) this upper limit may be increased to 45,000 tons in case the tonnage of the strongest fleet in the Black Sea is increased above this figure;
- iv) non riparian countries are not allowed to keep their military vessels more than 21 days in the Black Sea.

With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, the Black Sea has now become a “NATO Sea” as well. This development may have implications on the naval exercises to be carried out in the Black Sea.

The Montreux Convention has established in the Black Sea a balance that satisfied all parties to the Convention. Despite the fact that the Convention was signed for a period of 20 years and that it was going to expire in 1956 in case one of the parties was to object to its renewal, no country party to the Convention opposed the tacit renewal. This is an indication that the Convention laid just and equitable grounds for the stability in the Black Sea basin.

Most recently, on the occasion of the Georgian crisis, this Convention was highlighted in the media and there were some discussions, but nobody questioned its validity or appropriateness.

Basically, the security concerns of the coastal states are respected and their security in the context of naval forces in the Black Sea is guaranteed, by means of restrictions imposed on non-coastal states. On the other hand, the free circulation of civil vessels is also guaranteed. Turkey has always acted with care and diligence for the implementation of the treaty.

The wisdom underlying the negotiations of the Montreux Convention can shed light for the future dialogue regarding the security and stability in the Black Sea region. Arrangement respecting and fulfilling the expectations of the coastal states, while also involving the non-coastal states and taking into consideration their interests to the possible extent, have greater chance of success.



## The Georgian Crisis in the Context of the Black Sea

The Georgian crisis cannot be dissociated from the Russian interests in the region and Russian foreign policy in general. The Russian move into the South Ossetia and Abkhazia could be explained with the following reasons, among others:

- i) the Russian Federation (RF) wanted to send a strong message to the world that it meant business when it referred to its back yard or to the near abroad;
- ii) the RF was humiliated during the difficult period since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fall of the soviet regime was too sudden. A tumultuous period prevailed after the fall. Russia was able to flesh its muscles only recently, after the iron hand leadership of Putin. The rise of oil prices facilitated the Russian convalescence;
- iii) the US designs to deploy air defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic and its increased activities in the Black Sea disturbed the RF.

Because of all these reasons, Russia was looking for an excuse to demonstrate its presence in the Black Sea and the Caucasus region. The entry of the Georgian forces to South Ossetia gave the RF an easily saleable justification that it was badly looking for. As an immediate reaction the RF consolidated its military presence in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia.

It is doubtful, how the RF could be expelled by military force from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Using soft power against a huge country of the size of the Russian Federation is not realistic. It will not yield any tangible result to force the RF out of these two autonomous regions of Georgia.

On the other hand, one should also question, how the Russian Federation will justify to the international community its military presence on the territory of a country that it recognises as a sovereign state.

The Russian Federation uses the ethnic card both in the South Ossetia and in Abkhazia as a tool to highlight their difference from the Georgian nation. However, most probably the Russian rulers know that a person who lives in a glass tower should not throw stones at others.

The importance of the Black Sea surfaced again with the Georgian crisis:

- There are two overland routes for the energy sources that cross Georgia. One is Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline; the other is Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline. Georgia is part of both of them. Georgia is also the land route for the oil shipped from Supsa to overseas destinations.
- The Black Sea is used by the Russian Federation as a sea route for the export of crude oil to the world markets. Therefore, the security of the Black Sea is important for the Russian Federation

## Consequences of the Georgian Crisis

The Georgian crisis may have given the Russian Federation an additional justification to maintain a strong naval force in the Black Sea. This will bring under further focus the agreement signed between Russia and Ukraine to evacuate the Sebastopol naval facilities by 2017.





Time will show if the Georgian crisis and its fallout or the US – Bulgarian and US – Romanian military cooperation or a combination of them will put the Montreux Convention to a test. It is likely that all stakeholders of the Montreux Convention will come, sooner or later, to the conclusion that the balance struck between the interests of various parties by the Montreux Convention is the best that can be established in light of the circumstances that prevail in the region.

### **The Region after the Georgian crisis**

The Black Sea always had strategic importance throughout history. The Georgian crisis and its ramifications constitute the most recent evidence of this strategic importance. The crisis emphasised once more the importance of peace and stability in the region.

Some commentators viewed the Georgian crisis as a return to the power politics of the past and they foresee more pessimistic scenarios. Some others regard it as an exceptional case. Nonetheless, one thing is clearly seen: there are certain elements of instability in the region. If they are not contained or at least addressed, the consequences of such a crisis may affect the entire region. Such conflicts or potentials of instability require more comprehensive diplomatic and political initiatives; nevertheless, economic cooperation is the cornerstone of regional stability and a practical mechanism for reducing political risks and conflicts.

### **Conclusion**

There are challenges and risks in the Black Sea region that existed even before the Georgian crisis. However the Georgian crisis sharpened both the challenges and the risks. It will be primarily up to the countries of the region to transform these challenges into advantages and enjoy the benefits.



The International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) was founded in 1998 as a non-profit organisation under Greek law. It has since fulfilled a dual function: on the one hand, it is an independent research and training institution focusing on the Black Sea region. On the other hand, it is a related body of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and in this capacity serves as its acknowledged think-tank. Thus the ICBSS is a uniquely positioned independent expert on the Black Sea area and its regional cooperation dynamics

The **ICBSS Policy Briefs** are policy oriented essays on topical issues pertaining to the Black Sea region. As part of the ICBSS' independent activities, the ICBSS Policy Briefs are prepared either by members of its own research staff or by externally commissioned experts. While all contributions are peer-reviewed in order to assure consistent high quality, the views expressed therein exclusively represent the authors. The ICBSS Policy Briefs are available for download in electronic version from the ICBSS' webpage under [www.icbss.org](http://www.icbss.org).

© International Centre for Black Sea Studies 2008. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the International Centre for Black Sea Studies. The views expressed exclusively represent the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the ICBSS

---

ISSN 1791-6658

ISBN 978-960-6885-02-0

---

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](mailto:icbss@icbss.org) Website: [www.icbss.org](http://www.icbss.org)  
Director General: Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou



The International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) was founded in 1998 as a non-profit organisation under Greek law. It has since fulfilled a dual function: on the one hand, it is an independent research and training institution focusing on the Black Sea region. On the other hand, it is a related body of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and in this capacity serves as its acknowledged think-tank. Thus the ICBSS is a uniquely positioned independent expert on the Black Sea area and its regional cooperation dynamics

The **ICBSS Policy Briefs** are policy oriented essays on topical issues pertaining to the Black Sea region. As part of the ICBSS' independent activities, the ICBSS Policy Briefs are prepared either by members of its own research staff or by externally commissioned experts. While all contributions are peer-reviewed in order to assure consistent high quality, the views expressed therein exclusively represent the authors. The ICBSS Policy Briefs are available for download in electronic version from the ICBSS' webpage under [www.icbss.org](http://www.icbss.org).

© International Centre for Black Sea Studies 2008. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the International Centre for Black Sea Studies. The views expressed exclusively represent the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the ICBSS

---

ISSN 1791-6658

ISBN 978-960-6885-02-0

---

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](mailto:icbss@icbss.org) Website: [www.icbss.org](http://www.icbss.org)  
Director General: Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou