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5th International Black Sea Symposium (IBSS)

Decentralised cooperation in the Black Sea area – discovering the potential of the regions

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this important event. As this Symposium brings together stakeholders with an interest in the Black Sea area, I feel am at the right place. I am coming from Istanbul region, but my family history is quite closely linked to this part of the world. As my grandfather originally comes from Batumi and my grandmother came from Odysse, and being born in Black Sea Region of Turkey, I am purely a part of Black Sea.

The name of Black Sea mainly comes from its dark sea waters..The early Romans called the Black Sea the Friendly Sea because of its calm fertile waters. The Black Sea, though called as ‘Inhospitable Sea’ by the Ponthus, has been home to many civilizations, and historical and natural events. However, it is our Black Sea now, which is facing significant ecology pollution because of the rapid industrial expansion since the 1960s.

Black Sea Region brings together a variety of cultures, civilizations and traditions so that this area faces a number of opportunities and challenges for its citizens.

The EU has initiated major efforts to stimulate economic and political reform through wide-ranging cooperation programmes, including a new cross-border cooperation programme.

And, so far we have discussed all the important issues such as security, economic development, environmental impact, political barriers, and cultural exchange in the meeting. We have heard of NATO and EU policies and listened to interventions on the role of European programmes and their relevant projects.

I want to bring in another aspect to the discussion about the Black Sea: this is the decentralized regional dimension of cooperation. In my position as regional councilor of Istanbul province, I am also representing, the Assembly of European Regions, in short AER, of which I am a vice-president.

Thus I would like to have the opportunity to give you some brief information about what AER is and what it does:

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Main figures about the AER:

- Foundation date: 1985
- 253 regions, 35 countries and 16 interregional organisations
- Political assembly (Presidents, Marshalls, elected representatives, executives)
- 60% EU regions, 40% from outside the EU
- Secretariat in Strasbourg; Liaison offices in Brussels (B) and Alba (RO)
- According to the AER statutes, in principle the term "region" refers to a territorial authority existing at the level immediately below that of the central government, with its own political representation in the form of an elected regional assembly.

Main goal of AER is:

- Promote the principle of subsidiarity and regional democracy
- Increase the regions' political influence within the European institutions
- Support the regions in the process of European enlargement and globalisation
- Facilitate interregional cooperation across wider Europe and beyond
- Developing democracy through diversity, and promoting diversity in culture, media and education

Main vocation of AER is:

- AER's activities are based on the belief that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to the citizen.
- This principle is called the principle of subsidiarity refers to the idea that matters ought to be dealt with by the smallest or least centralized competent unit responsible.
- It is one of the key missions of the AER to promote the principle of subsidiarity and regional democracy in the wider Europe and beyond.

Istanbul Provincial Council is also an active member in this organization.

DECENTRALISATION IN THE BLACK SEA AREA:

If applied to the Black Sea area I would like to define following challenges and potentials concerning the role of regions and decentralization:

A) Challenges:

Whereas regional democracy is already an established institutional structure in most of the Western European countries, states around the Black Sea region, eg. states belonging to the former Communist block, are still quite centralized:

- Countries in the Black Sea area are more central than decentralised
- Regions do not have a lot of competences (they are not as strong) as their counterparts



in the other European countries and thus have less manouvre to act independently

- Restricted regional budget/finances
- Limited competences when it comes to cooperating on international level with other regions from the world

B) Potential:

However, if the principle of subsidiarity and regional democracy is applied, I see following potential for development:

Solving conflicts:

- There are many territorial conflicts in the Black Sea area (see for example the conflict in Abchasia between Georgia and Russia or the conflict in Transnistria involving Moldova and Russia.
- Starting to cooperate on regional level can be more easy than to negotiate on national level. It is thus a first step to overcoming political barriers.

Creating ownership and initiative:

- Regions are closer to the citizens than national politicians.
- If citizens feel that their concerns are taken into account and that they can contribute through their political choice to a development in their region they understand and support, it will create a sense of ownership and citizen's participation to politics.
- This is an important aspect to foster an entrepreneurship spirit, to make citizens act on behalf of the region, to get them engaged and to make them proud of their heritage and local environment.

Learning from each other:

- Strong independent regions can be more active in terms of finding cooperation partners and in exchanging best practices from all fields of governance.

Let me focus on this last part a bit longer. I believe that there are many lessons we can learn from interregional cooperation in the older European member states.

C) Lessons learned from European cooperation:

European interregional cooperation has come a long way and was not always the routine in Europe. Crossborder cooperation programmes have only gradually been developed on European level trying to foster the cross-border exchange. However, to make sure that this cooperation on regional level takes place following aspects have to be taken into consideration:

- There was a strong political will behind it to make the cooperation work



- Passing of time – which means that interregional cooperation is a long term objective and not a quick fix
- The development of a supranational European Union which supported interregional cooperation beyond the national level

Let me now give you a short insight into what I see Turkey can contribute to the decentralization process in the Black Sea area.

TURKEY AND THE BLACK SEA:

Turkey has the longest coastline of Black Sea, having all the mixed characteristics of Black Sea..Black Sea, being located at the heartland of Eurasia, the region throughout its history has witnessed numerous cooperation initiatives as well as confrontations. And most cooperations, so far, have been at central governmental level like in other Black Sea countries.. Turkey has always been one of the major actors in these initiatives.

Turkey's strategy in Black Sea cooperations are as below:

Energy: Security of energy supplies, including protection of energy routes that run across the region;

Transport: The cooperation between the major ports of the Black Sea will deepen, to preserve the momentum of cooperation achieved in this field.

Trade and Investment: Turkey believes in the huge potential for trade between the Black Sea countries. Therefore, it is a priority to facilitate trade and investments among the Black Sea countries

Combatting against terrorism and organized crime: Thus, Turkey focuses on due implementation of existing legal documents and more effective functioning of the Networks.

Raising awareness of a common Black Sea identity: Despite their own diversities, the Black Sea people have historical, social and cultural ties. Underlining these common values will help to create an environment of understanding in a region where the search for stability, peace and prosperity has always been a priority.

Establishing closer links between public institutions such as universities, broadcasting agencies, sports federations that may contribute to building a consciousness of a regional identity. Facilitating student Exchange programmes at the higher education level will also contribute to this goal.

Environment:

Problems such as water and air pollution, generation of solid and hazardous waste, oil degradation, deforestation, climate change and loss of biodiversity can not be contained within political borders.



At present, in Turkey the cooperation in the area of energy and water is mostly at national level as in other Black Sea Countries. There are various agencies, NGO's, private companies supporting transborder cooperations and collaborations in Black Sea Region. So, smaller regional organizations have also started to implement projects as do the bigger organizations specially to emphasize the importance of environmental threats and also counteract the environmental damage perpetrated by the industrial and energy sectors. Turkey initiated some regional cooperation mechanisms and actively participated in others. Cooperation among civil society organizations and municipalities between Greece and Turkey, Georgia and Armenia, and Romania and Turkey demonstrate that environmental cooperation and implementation of the agreements are possible.

But, it seems to be a long way to achieve real success at local and regional levels around Black Sea.

