

The Uncertain Times of Black Sea Regional Security

by Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, Kadir Has University, Istanbul

Abstract

The flux that can be discerned in the Black Sea Region is a cause for concern as it finds itself without a commonly agreed framework as to its future. There are numerous factors which define and reflect the current state of affairs, including the disappointment with regionalism or at least in its inability to redefine itself, the lacking attractiveness of the European Union despite its transformative powers, and the prevalent status quo preferences of some of the region's key stakeholders in spite of the prospect of divergent foreign policy agendas. This troubling situation is compounded by the evolving nature of politics of energy, the gridlock in the negotiations of the protracted conflicts and its linkage to the further militarization of some of the interested parties, and the region's growing democratic deficit.

THE CONTEXT

The Black Sea Region is in flux and therefore in trouble for a number of reasons. With a number of parallel processes of integration, regional cooperation, or lack thereof, and political alignment taking place simultaneously coupled with the existence and development of a number of competing narratives, the Black Sea Region increasingly finds itself without a singular point of reference. As a result, there is no clear trend as to the direction the Black Sea Region is going towards today. The verdict is still out as to whether, in geopolitical terms, it is border region or a "bridge or buffer zone", a 'pivot' that lies at the centre of a Mackinder-type 'geopolitical heartland'.¹ Similarly, the delimitation of the region remains a bone of contention with some arguing for a narrow context defined by the geography of the Black Sea's six littoral states. This applies, in particular, to the military elite of Russia and Turkey that want to ensure that they have the first word in terms of maritime security.² The European Union defines the region

1 Felix Ciută, "Region? Why Region? Security, Hermeneutics, and the Making of the Black Sea Region," *Geopolitics* 13, no.1 (2008): 128-144.

2 The littoral states are Bulgaria, Georgia,

as one comprised of ten countries³, while for the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) it consists of twelve member states.⁴ For the United States, especially during the eight years of the Bush administration, the emphasis was on a much wider region, including parts of the Middle East and North Africa.⁵ Except for the narrow definition of the region on the basis of its six littoral states, all other interpretations have transregional dimensions (for example, Southeastern Europe and the Middle East) and/or subregional ones (the South Caucasus) within them thereby reflecting the multiple geographic identities of the region's state actors. The same applies to political identities, given the membership of some regional states in the European Union and/or NATO or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), inter alia.

Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine.

3 The six littoral states as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and Moldova.

4 The ten states comprised in the European Union's definition of the region plus Albania and Serbia.

5 Ronald D. Asmus, "Next Steps in Forging a Euroatlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea," in Ronald D. Asmus ed. *Next Steps in Forging a Euroatlantic Strategy for the Wider Black Sea* (Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2006): 15-33.

One could also make the case that it is not a region at all as it might have been in the recent past; therefore, its value as a unit of analysis can be doubted or questioned. Consequently, the aforementioned parallel processes are left up to interpretation by the various stakeholders as to which processes are actually on track and which ones are not. It could also be argued that the course of regional integration finds itself in a period of inactivity where some sort of moratorium exists today between the key stakeholders.⁶

All of the above reflect a number of paradoxes in that the Black Sea Region is a point of reference or an area of study and analysis today, but not necessarily because it is regarded as a holistic region or concept; rather the mention refers to either some of its geographic components or to some of the issues (energy, frozen conflicts, environmental concerns, militarization, democratisation, etc..) at play in parts of the region or within and/between some of the countries that encompass it.

REGIONALISM ON HOLD

In the immediate post-Cold War era, the region was one marked by regionalism (the organisation of the world in terms of regions both as a tendency and a political commitment) and the establishment of “a specific regional project”,⁷ over time the value of regionalism has come to be severely tested in the Black Sea Region. On

6 Mustafa Aydin, “Uniting Efforts in the Region,” in Valeriya Klymenko ed. *Enhancing Security in the Black Sea Region and Prospects for the Turkish-Ukrainian Cooperation* (Kyiv: Razumkov Centre and Zapovit Publishing House, 2011): 101-103.

7 Björn Hettne, “Beyond the ‘New’ Regionalism,” *New Political Economy* 10, no. 4: 543-571.

the one hand, the one institutionalized form of regionalism in place in the region since June 1992 (the Organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation – BSEC) has not necessarily been able to reach its full potential; on the other hand, the relationship between the key stakeholders has also evolved to one which makes cooperation more complex.

In 2010, the Commission on the Black Sea noted that “[a]round the Black Sea, there are two opposing conditions that affect the potential of regionalism. On the one hand, economic difficulties and the need for managing regional public goods such as the environment, trade and financial stability have generated demands for regional cooperation, integration and policy coordination. These need to be strengthened and efficiently channelled into regional policy making. On the other hand, important security issues such as the unresolved secessionist conflicts undermine the drive for regionalism and obstruct collective action and institutions. These adverse security conditions need to be eliminated or their impacts reduced.”⁸ Yet, the very countries that took the lead in shaping the region’s regionalism – Turkey and Russia – are only playing lip service to it today; their aim is to ensure that they control the process which has been unable to escape its rather rigid top-down structural construct. The forthcoming anticlimactic 20th anniversary of the BSEC in late June 2012 and the failure to generate any serious interest or momentum in enhancing Black Sea regionalism is emblematic of the failure of institutional regionalism in the region, regardless of the fact that many proposals have been put forward to regenerate both its institutional

8 Mustafa Aydin and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou. *A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region: A Report by the Commission on the Black Sea* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010): 39.

setup and the process of Black Sea regionalism.⁹ In fact, other attempts at institutional regionalism either at the subregional level such as GUAM or with wider membership such as the Community of Democratic Choice (CDC) have also failed to deliver on their promise. Other factors influencing the weakness of Black Sea regionalism include the interplay and power play between the European Union and the region's traditional hegemons – Russia and Turkey, the prevalence of the evolving nature of energy politics, the disconnect between the process of regionalism and the resolution of the region's protracted conflicts and other security priorities, and the implications of the democratisation of Black Sea states either as a consequence of the post-Cold War exceedingly globalized context and, more recently, the impact of the Arab Awakenings.

WHITHER THE EUROPEAN UNION?

The EU was initially not instrumental in the Black Sea Region in shaping the process of Black Sea regionalism. It only began to show an interest in the region by timidly accepting that a Black Sea Region as such exists November 1997, five years after an indigenous regionalism in the guise of the BSEC had been

9 See, for example, Aydin and Triantaphyllou, *A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region*; Sergiu Celac, "The Role and Potential of the Organisation of the BSEC", *CIES Neighbourhood Policy Paper 01*, (Istanbul: CIES, November 2011); Panagiota Manoli, "Black Sea Regionalism in Perspective," *CIES Neighbourhood Policy Paper 02* (Istanbul: CIES, December 2011); Carol Weaver and Mukhtar Hajizada, "The Democratization of the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly and the Implications for Conflict-Resolution in the Wider Black Sea Region," *CIES Policy Brief 01* (Istanbul: CIES, December 2011).

initiated in June 1992.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the EU's late involvement and role has had a significant impact on the shape and future of Black Sea regionalism. Its potential and pro-active policies and instruments combined with its magnetic appeal to a number of countries of the region with aspirations to eventually join its ranks concerned (and may have even frightened) the region's key stakeholders. As with other EU regional initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Process or Barcelona Process of 1995, and the Northern Dimension of 1999, the Union's approach to regionalism implied both top-down as well as bottom-up approaches; with the latter not necessarily finding all the region's stakeholders in agreement. In fact, the Union's Black Sea Synergy policy of 2007/2008 clearly demonstrates the aforementioned duality. The problem for the Union is that this regionalism was quickly dropped in favour of the Eastern Partnership in 2008/2009 with its value-laden imperatives aimed at the further integration of its targeted eastern neighbours to the detriment both of regionalism and finding a modus vivendi with Russia, in particular, in terms of how to better manage the common neighbourhood. This has been particularly reflected in the tense relationship between the EU and the BSEC in which the former holds the status of observer.¹¹

Confounding the Union's ability to influence

10 European Commission, *Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Area: State of Play, Perspectives for EU Action Encouraging Its Development*, Communication from the Commission to the Council, Brussels, 14 November 1997, COM(97) 597 final.

11 In particular, see Tedo Japaridze, Panagiota Manoli, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou and Yannis Tsantoulis, "The EU's Ambivalent Relationship with the BSEC: Reflecting on the Past, Mapping out the Future," *ICBSS Policy Brief*, no.20 (Athens: ICBSS, January 2010).

the Black Sea Region significantly has been the impact of the economic/financial/sovereign debt crisis since 2008 which has led to a fundamental debate about the limits of further integration, the virtues of a common currency, as well as the slow take off of the new foreign policy apparatus in the guise of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and other such innovations as per the Lisbon Treaty. Consequently, while at the technocratic level (EC officials) the EU implements its relevant policies and programmes, there has been a discernible lack of EU-centred political guidance with regard to the Union's neighbourhood policy. This has meant a noticeable loss of the EU's soft power and the emergence of pro-active foreign policy actors among EU member states (such as Poland and Sweden) influencing the Union's foreign policy process and agenda through the extension of their own national interests, while that role had traditionally been reversed for the Union's Big 3 (Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) in the past. This has never been more evident that in the promotion of the Eastern Partnership whose principal sponsors were Poland and Sweden.¹² Also relevant is the fact that the EU's attempts at regionalism have suffered the same fate in the Mediterranean South as well with the Union for the Mediterranean which was launched in 2008 and became a victim of the Arab Awakenings. Hence, the Union has seen an almost parallel failure of its initiatives across its Eastern and Mediterranean neighbourhoods.

Another important element is the impact of the evolving security agenda with issues such as energy having a fundamental effect on the

¹² See, for example, Radoslaw Sikorski, "The EU's 'Eastern Partnership' with former Soviet states holds the key to relations with Russia," *Europe's World*, Summer 2009.

limits of projecting the Union's soft power in the Black Sea Region. As a result, 'securitization' is taking precedence over the process of 'Europeanisation' with geopolitics and geoeconomics gaining ground as the motivation behind the policies of the key stakeholders in the region. In other words, the loss of steam in the EU's activities in the region impacts the future of regionalism, the security context, and the maturing and evolution of both institutions and human resources in the countries of the region.¹³ Hence, the recent score of 'C+' by the European Council on Foreign Relations in its European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2012 for the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood policies well reflects its troubled policies.¹⁴

The problem of the EU is that, as long as it does not have a strategic blueprint and it does not become more assertive in pursuing its own interests, it leaves the region open to geopolitical rivalry between Russia, Turkey, China, and probably others. Consequently, the EU is perceived as being unable to achieve what it is trying to promote: its values and norms, its soft power, good governance, etc. As a result many 'soft power' cooperative approaches cannot be supported or are difficult to implement.

RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS

In this context, the Russian Federation and Turkey (both among the most prominent initiators of Black Sea regionalism) by virtue of

¹³ For a comprehensive list regarding the need for greater EU involvement see, Aydin and Triantaphyllou, *A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region*.

¹⁴ See Justin Vaisse et al., *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2012* (London: ECFR, 2012), http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_SCORECARD_2012_WEB.pdf.

their size, economies, and potential are considered to prefer the status quo in the region by stressing in particular the maritime security dimension by considering any revision of the Montreux Convention of 1936 as taboo and by enhancing cooperation through the BLACK-SEAFOR and Black Sea Harmony initiatives.¹⁵ This conundrum between Russia and Turkey seems to be more powerful than whatever Alliance obligations each country might have. The non-revision of the terms of the Montreux Treaty could put Turkey at odds with some of its NATO allies as was evidenced during the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 and the terms of engagement of US warships in the Black Sea. Also, to date NATO has no Black Sea policy to speak of even though three of the six littoral states of the Black Sea are NATO member states (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey). Also, the poor state of relations among the six littoral states complicates the emergence of a viable maritime security framework necessary to meet common challenges such as fighting organised crime and nuclear smuggling.¹⁶ While bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to some 30 Billion USD in 2011, it is set to reach some 100 Billion USD within the next ten years. Russia's recent membership in the World Trade Organisation also contributes to the growth in bilateral economic relations as it makes it more receptive to Turkish investments among others. The mutual elimination of visa requirements for stays of fewer than 30 days by both countries has led to record numbers of Russian tourists to Turkey with

15 See Yasar Yakis, "The Black Sea and the Georgian Crisis," *ICBSS Policy Brief* 10 (Athens: ICBSS, December 2008).

16 See, for example, Deborah Sanders, "Maritime security in the Black Sea: can regional solutions work?" *European Security* 18, no. 2 (2009): 101-124

the number expected to top 4 million in 2012. Questions remain though as to whether growing economic interaction will prevent political tension as foreign policy and energy imperatives differ.

More recently, Russo-Turkish cooperation has also been motivated by the energy security dimension, its storied competing pipelines context and the ability of both countries (Russia as both an energy producer and transit state and Turkey as a key transit state) to maintain a principal role in the energy security game in the form of a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the United States, the European Union, each other, and other relevant neighbouring states such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkmenistan.¹⁷ At times, there seems to be collusion of interests; at other times, their energy policies clash. On foreign policy, issues such as the NATO missile shield to which Turkey is a party and divergent policies on Syria and the handling of the Arab Awakenings may negatively affect bilateral relations.¹⁸ Nevertheless, though relations between the two countries are wider than their shared Black Sea neighbourhood, there is a commonality of interests in maintaining their joint influence over the region.

THE DEMOCRATISATION DEBATE

The EU's inability to 'impose' its agenda is also reflected in the growing debate about the future of democracy and democratisation in

17 Mitat Çelikpala, "The New Energy Politics of the Black Sea Region," in this volume.

18 See, for example, Vladimir Putin, "Russia and the Changing World," Valdai Discussion Club, 27 February 2012, <http://valdaiclub.com/politics/39300.html>; Faruk Akkan, "Bilateral ties between Turkey, Russia likely to improve under Putin's presidency," *Today's Zaman*, 11 March 2012.

the region. While both the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine respectively came to be regarded as a renaissance of democracy in the wider Black Sea Region, they have failed to stand the test of time to date. In fact, they can be characterized as representative of what the political scientist Dmitri Furman refers to as 'imitation democracies' - "characterized by a huge disparity between formal constitutional principles and the reality of authoritarian rule."¹⁹ In Russia's Presidential elections of February 2012, Vladimir Putin, the winner, may have received 64% of the nationwide vote but his victory has been tarnished by widespread charges of fraud at the polls and the fact that less than half of Muscovites voted for him. According to the Bertelsmann's Foundation Transformation Index 2010, there is a widespread process of 'eroding democracy' in the post-Soviet space across the region as the "potency of the color revolutions has dissipated, and the region's autocratic regimes are increasingly consolidating their grip on power".²⁰ Turkey's institutions also find themselves in a period of flux with increasing examples of the curbing of the right of expression. While it is unclear whether a 'Black Sea Spring' is a possibility, the Arab Awakenings may over time impact the region's states and their governments as they have demonstrated the potential of 'people power' despite their mixed post-revolution settings. The European Union's perceived absence could imply that should the process of political transformation

19 Dmitri Furman, "Imitation Democracies – The Post-Soviet Penumbra," *New Left Review* 54 (Nov-Dec 2008): 29-47.

20 Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Transformation Index 2010 – Political Management in International Comparison* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009), <http://www.bertelsmann-transformation-index.de/en/bti/>.

begin to take shape in Russia and elsewhere in the region, it could become chaotic if not properly channeled.

The democratic deficit implies a lack of accountability and the common interest of regional states to have top-down structures and decision-making processes in place that limit the influence of civil society and non-regional actors in the affairs of the region. The continued inability to find viable solutions to the many protracted conflicts in the region and the implications of inaction such as the growing militarization of countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan are a cause of growing concern.²¹ In fact, the danger of a "regional war with global complications" over Nagorno-Karabakh is a very real possibility.²²

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

The uncertainty regarding the future direction of the Black Sea Region is a cause for concern. There are numerous factors which define and reflect the current state of affairs, including the disappointment with regionalism or at least in its inability to redefine itself, the lacking attractiveness of the European Union despite its transformative powers, and the prevalent status quo preferences of some of the region's key stakeholders in spite of the prospect of divergent foreign policy agendas. This troubling situation is compounded by the evolving nature of politics of energy, the gridlock in the negotiations of the protracted conflicts and its linkage to the further militarization of some of

21 See, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2011. Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

22 Lawrence Scott Sheets, "A 'frozen conflict' that could boil over," *International Herald Tribune*, 9 March 2012.

the interested parties, and the region's growing democratic deficit. Some have argued that though the region lacks a security community, there is nevertheless the possibility for it to develop over the longer term predicated upon a system of 'balanced multipolarity' and the willingness of the stakeholders to ensure regional peace and stability.²³ In the current state of European security with the European Union having put on hold its ambitions and responsibilities and the United States becoming increasingly a Pacific power, the 'balanced multipolarity' model might make sense given that this is the best material the region's stakeholders have to work with. However, the increasingly unpredictability of the energy security dimension combined with the inability of the EU member states to develop a credible external energy policy, the volatility of the democratisation processes in the region in part because of the lack of a common referent point (which the EU could provide), and the precariousness of the protracted conflicts imply there is a fundamental need to ensure that the various centrifugal forces at play in the Black Sea Region do not tear it apart due to the inertia of the process of regionalism.

23 Carol Weaver, "Black Sea regional security: present multipolarity and future possibilities," *European Security* 20, no. 1(2011): 1-19.

About the author

Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou is the Director of the Center for International and European Studies at Kadir Has University in Istanbul where he also teaches international relations. He holds a BA in Political Science and History from the University of California, Berkeley and an MA and Ph.D. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. He was previously Director General of the International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) in Athens. He has also worked, inter alia, at the Greek Ministry for Foreign Affairs; the London School of Economics; the Institute for Security Studies of the European Union, Paris; and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Athens. He has written and edited a number of books and articles pertaining to European security, developments in the Black Sea and South-Eastern Europe and Greek Foreign Policy. He is also Associate Editor of the *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, a member of the Greek-Turkish Forum, a member of the Governing Board of the European Studies Institute (ESI) at MGIMO University, Moscow and co-convener of the Commission on the Black Sea.
e-mail: dimitriost@khas.edu.tr