

# Region-building and its Failures: Writing Space, Producing Insecurity

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## Abstract

*This paper examines how region-builders (politicians, think-tank elites, academics, etc.) 'wrote' the Black Sea space and what implications this geopolitical exercise had for the region, paying particular attention to the underlying security logics/dimensions of this endeavour and the envisaged solutions to the perceived challenges. The focus is on the loosely coherent set of 'myths' surrounding the Black Sea, both as a policy project and a field of academic and policy oriented inquiry, and the objective is to showcase, even indirectly, the interplay between conceptual logic and political practise as well as to highlight the silences and overlooked assumptions omnipresent in the literature.*

## INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND KEY QUESTIONS

The Black Sea represents a remarkable case for understanding the evolution of security in the post-Cold War period; an evolution that can be distilled into two significant trends. The first is the expansion of the concept of security from the *war paradigm*, based on the narrow realist logic of security, to the *threat plus risk paradigm*.<sup>1</sup> The second trend is the rethinking of the 'regional' model, due in part to the removal of the Cold War

1 The end of the Cold War brought about the broadening of the security agenda with the adoption of the sectoral approach (i.e., security, political, military, economic, societal and environmental) and securitisation among others. New questions have been introduced (e.g. what is a security issue, who gets to decide, etc.) and security has become itself "a site or focal point for disputes between various power/knowledge interests". See Steve Smith, "The increasing insecurity of security studies: Conceptualizing security in the last twenty years," *Contemporary Security Policy* 20, no.3 (1999): 74. For an overview of security, see: Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Barry Buzan, "Rethinking Security after the Cold War," *Cooperation and Conflict* 32 (1997): 5-28.

overlay as well as a belief that both territorial and symbolical borders could be transcended and political space could be reconstructed.<sup>2</sup>

For better or for worse, the area surrounding the Black Sea was heavily affected by the momentous events of the late 1980s. The region began to acquire new and often conflicting meanings among the various foreign policy elites as it became the point of convergence for many powerful interests and major transformative policies.<sup>3</sup> Specific policy issues such

2 Challenging the dominant systemic-level orientations and globalist/neoliberal explanations for politics, a new – somehow diverse – regionalist scholarship arose that referred to an emerging regional architecture of world politics. Although many perceived the focus on the regional level as a reflection of the post-Cold War systemic confusion, it is no exaggeration to say that the resurrection and redefinition of the region as both a policy and conceptual framework has since given a distinctly 'regional flavour' to the fragmented discipline of IR. For an overview of regions in IR see, Rick Fawn "'Regions' and their study: wherefrom, what for and whereto?" *Review of International Studies* 35(2009): 5-34.

3 These policies primarily included but were not limited to the latest phase of the EU's enlargement and its foreign policy formulation, the US strategy of combating international terrorism, NATO's new agenda and priorities, Russia's

as frozen conflicts, energy security, integration with/into the West, democratisation, enlargement, and the Global War on Terror (GWOT) were given many different interpretations in the elite debates.

Essentially, the region-building discourse evolved around the following four sets of questions:

- i. *Is there a Black Sea region and why?*
- ii. *What geography does the Black Sea region encompass, and why does its spatial identity matter?*
- iii. *Is the Black Sea a security asset or a security burden?*
- iv. *What are the envisaged solutions for the region's security?*

In light of these questions and the results of the envisaged solutions (i.e. institutionalisation, integration), it becomes clear that the region-building process failed. Moreover, this failure can be explained by a fifth question, *Whose region?*, that highlights an under-examined dimension: how the various region-builders themselves sabotaged the process. To this end, this paper examines how these region-builders 'wrote' the Black Sea space and what implications this geopolitical exercise had for the region, paying particular attention to the underlying security logics/dimensions of the project and the envisaged solutions to the perceived challenges. The focus is on the loosely coherent set of 'myths' surrounding the Black Sea both as a policy project and a field of academic and policy oriented inquiry, and the objective is to showcase, even indirectly, the interplay between conceptual logic and political practise as well as to highlight the silences and overlooked assumptions omnipresent in the literature.

economic and political revival and its shifting stance towards its so-called 'near abroad', and Turkey's resurgent foreign policy activism, termed by many as Neo-Ottomanism.

#### WRITING SPACE

The process of 'writing space' and the deeply geopolitical exercise of region-building in the Black Sea reflected the divergent security logics of the actors involved, who were connected to contradictory interests and visions. This demonstrates the need to foreground "the politics of the geographical specification of politics"<sup>4</sup> instead of analysing spaces within pre-given, common-sense designations. The dominant views in the literature on the Black Sea, stemming from the legacy of traditional geopolitics, were based on certain meanings attached to spatial location and geopolitical imperatives. Thus various spatial representations of the Black Sea have thoroughly pervaded the literature on the region. Vigorous debates over the Black Sea were repeatedly contained in simplistic, unexamined, yet (geo)politically loaded assumptions about geography and territoriality.

It became a fad to characterise the Black Sea using ambivalent and somewhat catchy epithets such as 'frontiers of freedom'<sup>5</sup>, 'heartland'<sup>6</sup>,

4 Simon Dalby, "Critical Geopolitics: Discourse, Difference, and Dissent," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, no.3 (1991):274.

5 Ron D. Asmus and Bruce P. Jackson, "The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom," *Policy Review* 125 (June-July 2004): 17-26.

6 Heartland is a fashionable term in the realm of traditional/classical geopolitics, and in the case of the Black Sea it actually triggered a debate regarding its exact position. See for instance, Mustafa Aydin, "Europe's Next Shore: The Black Sea region after EU Enlargement," *EU Institute for Security Studies Occasional Paper* 53 (2004):5; Liviu Bogdan Vlad, Gheorghe Hurduzeu and Andrei Josan, "Geopolitical reconfigurations in the Black Sea Area at the beginning of the 21st century,"

'barrier'<sup>7</sup>, 'bridge'<sup>8</sup>, 'hub'<sup>9</sup>, 'major crossroads',<sup>10</sup> an area that lies at the centre of a Mackinder-type 'geopolitical heartland'<sup>11</sup> or "the frontier between the Heartland and the Rimlands"<sup>12,13</sup>. The main question, however, is how these various spatial constructions and representations were connected to security. The key argument is that what appeared to be 'just' a geographical matter had significant political implications. The various geographical locations and roles proposed for the region by foreign policy elites had an

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*Romanian Review on Political Geography* XI, no.1 (2009): 65-76.

7 Jeffrey Simon, "The Black Sea: Building Bridges and Barriers," in Ronald Asmus (ed.), *Next steps in forging a euroatlantic strategy for the Wider Black Sea Area* (Washington, D.C.: GMFUS, 2006): 83-100.

8 Ian Lesser "Global Trends, Regional Consequences: Wider Strategic Influences on the Black Sea," *Xenophon Paper 4* (Athens: ICBSS, 2007): 9.

9 Svante Cornell, Anna Jonsson, Niklas Nilsson and Per Häggström, "The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security," *Silk Road Paper* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program – A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, December 2006).

10 Eugene B. Rumer and Jeffrey Simon, "Toward a Euro-Atlantic Strategy for the Black Sea Region," *Institute for National Strategic Studies Occasional Paper 3* (2006): 2.

11 Aydin, "Europe's Next Shore," 5.

12 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.

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

impact on their understanding of the region's security. Spatial attributions ceased to be simple empirical or conceptual referents; as discussed below, it was the representation of space that defined the region in political and security terms. Geopolitics became a discursive and performative apparatus of policy making and region building in the post-Cold War period. Knowledge, in the form of geopolitics and as a technology of power, did not reflect a certain reality; it shaped it.

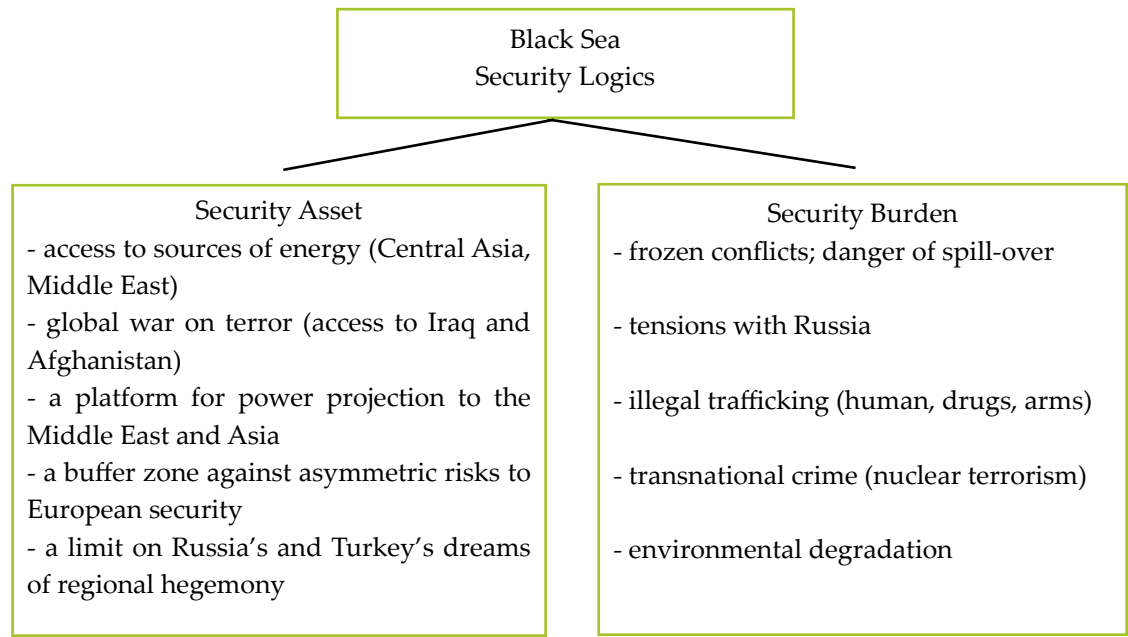
#### SECURITY LOGICS AND BINARIES

'Security', a term both ubiquitous and elastic, was a product of certain elites and their practices. Re-examining the spatial representations, it is clear that the region came to be considered by (and for) the extra-regional actors as both a *security asset* and a *security burden* based on competitive security logics.<sup>14</sup> To position the region 'on the margins' was to connect it to the long belt of conflicts stretching from North Africa to Southeast Asia; in this way, by highlighting its various crises, the region was presented as a burden, a problem that needs to be resolved. At the same time, however, by concentrating on energy or on the Global War on Terror, the Black Sea was also framed as a security asset which could act 'as a bridge' or even become a component of the core (i.e. the West).

Overall, such dual framings and understandings of security were expressed by different actors in various policy documents and other publications which formed part of the Black Sea region's diverse discursive origins, its *raison d'être*. These opposing perceptions also led to different region-building strategies, culminating in an enduring

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14 Ciută, "Region? Why Region?" 125-127.

Graph I: The Black Sea as a Security Asset vs. Security Burden<sup>16</sup>

confusion and uncertainty over the future of the region; the end result was the region's 'elite securitisation'<sup>15</sup>. As illustrated in Graph

15 The study of securitisation encompasses "who securitizes, on what issues (threats), for whom (referent object), why, with what results, and not least, under what conditions." Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998): 32. In contrast to mainstream/neorealist literature that focuses on material elements (distribution of power, military capabilities), securitisation investigates the process of how an issue is transformed into a security issue. In the case of the Black Sea one could discern several cases of elite-securitisation in the sense that this process was primarily limited to elite networks and did not draw the attention of the public, in contrast to classical securitisation which deals with larger audiences. For an introduction on securitisation, see: Ole Waæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization," in Ronnie D. Lipschutz ed. *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press,

II, based on the policy flow, it was the political representations of space ('margin', 'frontier', etc.) that led to securitisation by elites and thus the nomenclature became linked both to security problems and security solutions.

#### POLICY SOLUTIONS, DERIVED PARADOXES

The spatial representations discussed above had security implications that in turn led to certain policy prescriptions, primarily in one of two forms: institutionalisation and integration with the West. Both occupied high-level positions in the debates as the various elites perceived them as the solutions to the problems

1995): 46-86.

16 Ciută, "Region? Why Region?" and Felix Ciută, "Parting the Black Sea (Region): Geopolitics, Institutionalisation and the Reconfiguration of European Security," *European Security* 16, no.1 (2007): 51-78.

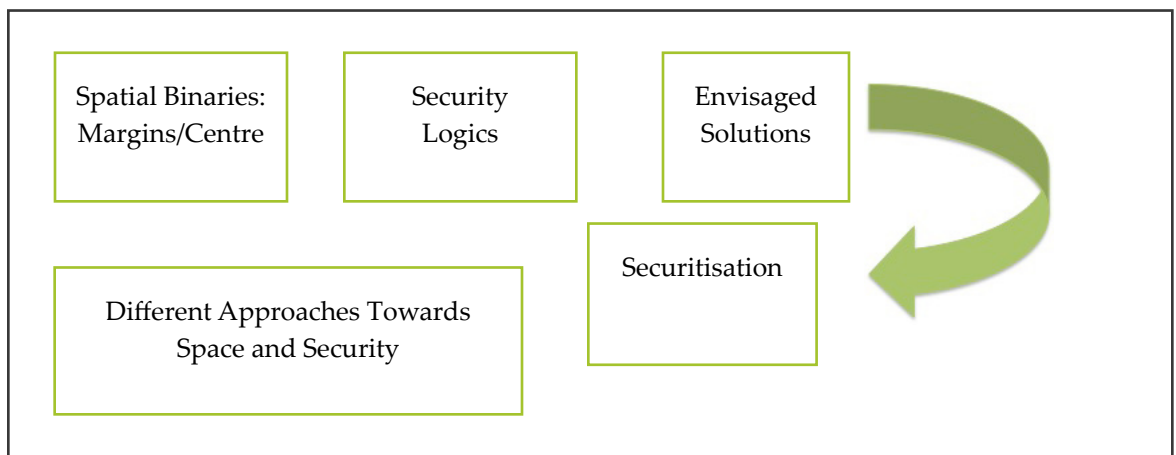
they had identified (lack of democratisation, absence of regional cooperation, ‘frozen conflicts’, etc.). Institutionalisation referred to the formation of regional organisations and the launching of policy initiatives with a regional scope, and was presented both as a way of strengthening links with the West and as an opportunity to demonstrate that the countries of the region had overcome their past. By and large, institutionalisation was presented as a recipe for success from the early 1990s onwards.

Integration in mainstream western organisations (NATO, EU) also acquired an important –if not privileged– position in the various discourses as a different kind of solution. Many actors started talking about a new Euro-Atlantic strategy towards the region, prompting many states of the region to redefine their foreign policy priorities. Most of the elites devoted their energies toward developing new narratives based on a shift of gravity towards the West, primarily based on

a perceived momentum of enlargement within the EU and NATO. However, this soon led to the securitisation of the integration agenda, this time primarily by certain regional actors (e.g. Russia) instead of foreign policy elites. Any EU or NATO policies towards the region through bilateral (e.g. ENP, PfP) or multilateral agreements were perceived to be ‘Trojan horse’ policies whose primary objective was the expansion of the West’s influence. Any reference to the West as a new centre of gravity soon hindered the process of region-building. The two strategies of institutionalisation and integration became mutually exclusive instead of mutually reinforcing. For most states of the region, institutionalisation was seen not as a vehicle towards integration, but rather as an alternative solution.

The irony is that those who considered institutionalisation to be a prerequisite to integration chose integration in place of institutionalisation, while at the same time states favouring institutionalisation perceived

Graph II: The process of securitisation



integration as a threat. In this way, two strategies with strong similarities ended up being mutually exclusive in this place and time. Finally, the European and Russian logics of region-building were also conflicting. Even the use of phrases such as “Black Sea regionalism” or simply “the Black Sea region” led to securitisation, as there were key actors who defended the boundaries of the state and favoured the centre of political power over the margins, thus leaving little space for ‘regions’ or ‘regionality’.

CONCLUSIONS: LOGICS, PRACTISE,  
FRAGMENTATION

In a challenge to the inter-subjective understandings of the Cold War era, region-builders (politicians, think-tank elites, academics, etc.) approached this geographic space in the post-Cold War period with different tools and analytical criteria for different purposes. The region became both the subject and the product of geopolitical engineering. The indisputable diffusion of the aforementioned conceptual categories into political practise, as well as the hermeneutical and political implications of the geopolitical

framings of the region, were significant as they presupposed different logics of security. Overall, this conceptual plasticity and richness has produced political fragmentation. While a Black Sea region has indeed begun to emerge, it has simultaneously begun to break apart under the pressure of competing security logics and visions.

*About the author*

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