

## Nations, Nation-States, Trade and Politics in the Black Sea

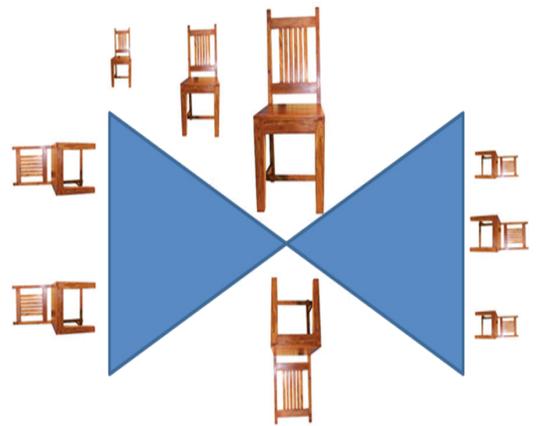
### NATIONS AND NATION-STATES IN THE DIVIDED BLACK SEA AREA

Recent political and military developments in Ukraine have nourished an unprecedented international awareness regarding the significance of the Black Sea area in the economic and political relations between Russia and the West. Specialists in international relations and socio-humanities researchers are analysing the implications of this new collision in the post-Soviet bloc, and in trying to understand the deep roots of these contemporary events the appeal to history is compulsory. The Black Sea area has thus turned into a veritable laboratory for also analysing contemporary nationalism.

The national boom of the 19th century favoured the creation of the Balkan nations and nation-states, but it also planted on the eastern coast of the Euxine seeds that slowly germinated into the vigorous nations of the Caucasian area. The First World War unleashed new national energies with the implosion of the Russian Empire and the explosion of Ottoman Turkey. With its pretended internationalist ideology, the Soviet Union tried to close Pandora's Box and keep inside the national evils that could have threatened the stability of the new empire. On the opposite shore of the Black Sea, the Turkish nation state was being forged with ample use of nationalism in order to crush the power of tribal or religious leaders. The Cold War revived national mutants in the area, with for instance the re-birth of Romanian nationalism during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, a national phoenix that lived more in spirit than in form. Finally, the fall of communism freed the national genie from Aladdin's lamp. Frozen nationalism rose from under the Soviet icecap and the national map of the Black Sea area was completely re-

shaped, with several national continents and islands emerging after this last glaciation.

If we imagine the Black Sea as a table, and all riparian nation-states as guests invited to a feast, the seating plan would look like in the picture below. These merged triangles would suggest that the nations around the Euxine have been rather ignorant of and distant from their messmates across the table, and generally interacted only with their direct table neighbours. Regarded from within, the Black Sea area seems to have no geographical or cultural unity. The plains, steppes, highlands or deserts around it are as various as the peoples, cultures or religions bordering the Euxine. Imperial powers, coming from the mainland, managed to gather all these territories and peoples under a single political umbrella, but they all remained extremely distinct and difficult to homogenise.



Source: Constantin Ardeleanu

### MARITIME HISTORY AND THE BLACK SEA

In trying to explain this reality, the appeal to maritime economic history can be useful. The Black Sea has always been part of a larger economic system, being the pivot of a complimentary mechanism and a contact

area between the maritime civilisations of the Mediterranean world and the terrestrial nations of the Eastern steppe lands. It served as a prolongation of the Mediterranean towards the rich Eastern regions and vice versa, as a straightforward corridor towards European and global commercial routes. Apparently, the Black Sea had little existence in itself and mainly acted as a bridge between two different economic worlds.

The communities living on its coasts have generally flourished in connection with the merchants coming from beyond the Straits: the same in the ancient world, when a string of Greek trading emporia connected all corners of this sea into a single commercial network linked with the Mediterranean world, or in the Middle Ages, when the Black Sea was revived by the entrepreneurial spirit of Genoese and Venetian merchants. During the modern period, the binding agent of the Black Sea was represented by Greek, Italian, French or English seafarers, who discovered or rediscovered the agro-pastoral resources of the Eastern plains.

Fernand Braudel insisted in his influential works that the sea unites, not divides. This is a theory which he masterfully demonstrated for the Mediterranean Sea, but it still remains only a theorem, not an axiom, being only valid for those seas navigated by maritime peoples. The Black Sea coasts are inhabited by what can be termed "seasick peoples", lacking seafaring skills and a mercantile calling. The nations around the Black Sea do not chant, cherish or worship the sea, they have few sea gods (if at all), no great maritime ballads, no Ulysses and no Captain Ahab. We have a sea, but we lack the skills to tame it. Without such binding agents as the merchants and ship owners, it is only a geographical sea, not a functional economic one. It becomes a futile expanse of water, separating those territories along its

coasts more profoundly than the highest and steepest of mountains. When analysing the relations between different peoples and the sea, I distinguish between thalasso-phile and thalasso-phobic nations. Black Sea farmers and animal breeders have no time for embarking on maritime enterprises when dealing with their time-consuming agricultural and pastoral obligations. A Polish author wrote what can be valid for most Black Sea peoples: "A Pole does not need the sea when busy with his plough"<sup>1</sup>. In a hopefully clearer comparison, there are peoples who for their prosperity rely on a ship and those who rely on sheep.

#### PHASES OF BLACK SEA HISTORY

This destiny as a bridge between two complementary worlds has completely shaped the history of the Black Sea. It fulfilled, during the past centuries, several functions, which shall be briefly explained in terms of space layout. All powers that controlled the Straits encircling the Sea of Marmara, the antechamber of the Black Sea (such as the Byzantine and the Ottoman Empires), aimed to keep the Euxine closed and used it as a pantry or cellar, so as to have exclusive control of its resources. For the terrestrial powers of Central and Eastern Europe, it served as a mere vestibule towards the veritable dining room represented by the Mediterranean. During the 19th century, the Black Sea became a dining room or rather a mess hall in itself, in which the opposing forces carefully scrutinised the table manners of their dinner companions.

The most careful guards of the Straits were the Ottoman Turks, who, since late 15th

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Henryk Klimesz, Poland's Trade through the Black Sea in the Eighteenth Century, in *The Polish Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1970, p. 55.

century, conquered the entire Black Sea area and closed the sea to foreign trade and shipping. For two and a half centuries the access of foreigners into this sea was limited, to the effect that its peoples stopped being part of the historical changes that rapidly transformed Mediterranean and Western Europe. Waterways have been accessible means of conveying not only physical commodities, but also ideas, ideologies, cultural values, and as an "Ottoman Lake" Karadeniz was not only deprived of its earlier economic connections with the Mediterranean, but it was also completely peripheral to the cultural or political values that were shaping and reshaping Europe at the beginning of the modern age.

Starting with late 18th century, the Black Sea gradually reconnected its trunk to the Mediterranean economic body and re-linked its nerves to the European cultural brain. It shortly became a bridge not only between two different geographical realms, but also between two historically opposing worlds. As it opened its resources to western traders, the Black Sea grew into the battlefield of the mythical combat between maritime and continental powers, the elemental opposition between sea and land. In Britain, the tensions between Russia and England were given the popular image of a scuffle between a bear and a whale, translated by several researchers into the biblical fight between the behemoth and the leviathan. Stepping down from celestial spheres, it should be mentioned that the area has remained ever since in a continuous cold war. It has been not only a dispute between two political systems, western democracy and Russian autocracy or totalitarianism, but also the battle between pure capitalism and a prohibitive and state controlled economic market.

Since the 19th century, the Black Sea area has been in a constant change. There are many

variables, but except for a short interstice in early 20th century the region has been on the frontline of this battle between Russia and the West. During its initial phase, in the context of the complicated Eastern Question, the Black Sea turned from a thermometer into a thermostat of European diplomacy. In the genesis of this great interest for the area, economic and political factors intermingle closely and inseparably. In economic terms, the Black Sea area is famous for three products it generously supplied to international markets. Firstly, it provided men, large amounts of slaves fished in the demographic basins of the Euro-Asian steppe lands or of the Caucasus. Secondly, when the population in Mediterranean and Western Europe increased, it supplied grain from the rich plains of the western and northern Black Sea coasts. From a closed lake, peripheral to the emerging global market, the Black Sea became the largest supplier of grain in the world. Thirdly, oil, gas and energy have fuelled the new phases of technological development, just as grain fed the transition that followed the first industrial revolution. Men, grain and energy are the terms of the historical equation that kept alive the mercantile interest for the Black Sea area.

During this perennial opposition against Russia's natural expansionism, the Western Powers tried to win to their side the smaller Black Sea nations, which commonly shared the same anti-Russian views. During the 19th century, British statesmen greatly encouraged the rise of Black Sea nations as long as they kept an anti-Russian character and did not contest the lawful Ottoman subjection. Promoting free trade and investing in mutual joined ventures were convenient solutions to checking Russia's advance towards the Straits. British economic involvement in the Romanian Principalities or in Circassia in the 1830s

was directly intended to increase the internal political and economic stability of these territories, an extremely able modality to create and strengthen the anti-Russian national opposition in areas bordering the Ottoman Empire.

During the 20th century, the significance of the maritime factor decreased substantially following the development of land and airborne communications, but these long established historical divisions in the Black Sea area have been well preserved. The region remained on the frontline of the political conflict separating the Soviet Union and democratic Europe after World War One. A couple of decades later, the outcome of World War Two gave Russia the upper hand in the area, but with Turkey on the side of NATO, the Straits could not be used to export totalitarianism to the Mediterranean Sea. The Black Sea was sacrificed once more, allowing me to use the same sentence as before: as a Russian lake, the Chornoye Morye was not only deprived of its earlier economic connections with the Mediterranean, but it was also completely peripheral to all the cultural or political values that we coin as democratic and European.

With the end of the Cold War, the constellation of the Black Sea changed beyond recognition. The fall of communism brought about the collapse of a superpower, the birth of six new sovereign states and several secessionist movements. We have seen, only in the past six–seven years, quick developments that prove that historical tensions are still ripe. We have witnessed the war between Russia and Georgia, the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, developments regarding the conflict in Transnistria, the changing nature of Russian-Turkish relations, Russia's annexation of the Crimea and the complicated situation of

Ukraine during the strained months of political turmoil in the spring and summer of 2014.

Strategically located between the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian basin and energy hungry Europe, the Black Sea seems to be in a profitable economic position. But while the opportunity to supply these resources to European markets raises hopes for economic development, competition to control pipelines, shipping lanes and transport routes raises the risks of confrontation. We thus again witness the same interest to invest economically in the new Black Sea nation states, although the crisis of these past years have hindered these plans. The Black Sea remains in the same situation as in the 19th century, a border between the major global powers: Russia, on the one side, the United States and the EU, on the other.

#### **THE RECOURSE TO MARITIME ECONOMIC HISTORY**

If seen from its coasts the Black Sea seems to be a story of fragmentation and discontinuity, it gains a more unitary character when regarded from a ship anchored beyond the Straits, somewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Euxine has always been part of this larger economic system, the relay of a complimentary mechanism and a contact area between the maritime civilisations of the Mediterranean world and the terrestrial nations of the Eastern steppe lands. Romanian historians, from Vasile Pârvan and Nicolae Iorga to Gheorghe Brătianu and Andrei Oțetea, were among the first to insist upon this reality, which is so important for the historical destiny of the area. This issue of "Euxeinos" is a continuation of such an approach, with three papers written by Romanian historians, covering three of the most important phases in which the Black Sea

was open and in close economic relations with the Mediterranean world.

The first essay, by Professor Octavian Bounegru, depicts the Black Sea in the trading system of the Roman Empire as seen from the western coast of the Pontos Euxeinos. A string of Greek-Roman emporia scattered throughout its coasts were the centres of a profitable trade between themselves and with their hinterland, making the Black Sea a well integrated component part of the Roman civilisation. The second chapter, by two reputed medievalists, Șerban Papacostea and Virgil Ciocîltan, is a beautifully written presentation of the history of the Black Sea between 1204 and 1453, when the area served, according to the famous phrase of Romanian historian Gheorghe Brătianu, as the “*plaque tournante*” of the Euro-Asian trade, a commerce controlled by the two large Italian maritime republics, Venice and Genoa. The third part, by myself, shows how the Black Sea was re-opened to international trade and shipping after centuries of Ottoman closure and how trade transformed everything in an area that became the

main supplier of grain to the world markets.

Read together, the three essays contain the common features of trade and politics in the Black Sea, the four veritable historical constants of this region (actors and factors, goods and routes): in terms of actors, the same competition between the maritime powers coming from the Mediterranean, the empire that controlled the Straits and the terrestrial hegemony of the vast lands stretching along the Black Sea coasts; similar factors related to the relation between trading outlets and their hinterland, economic privileges granted by the central governments in order to encourage commerce, etc.; the same abundant offer of raw materials, mainly agro-pastoral goods, and the same commercial routes that connected the sea to the Balkans and South-Eastern Europe, to the Ukrainian and Russian steppe lands, to the Caucasus, Anatolia and the Middle East. Regarded as such, not only geographically, but also historically the Black Sea takes on a surprising unity.

#### ABOUT THE EDITOR

Constantin Ardeleanu is associate professor of modern Romanian history at “The Lower Danube” University of Galați, where he teaches courses on the economic development of the Danubian and Black Sea areas during the 19th and 20th centuries. He defended his PhD at the “Nicolae Iorga” History Institute of the Romanian Academy (2006), and has been a postdoctoral fellow of the same institution (2010–2012) and the New Europe College, Institute of Advanced Study, Bucharest (2012–2013). In the past years he has been involved in several international research projects, most notably “The Black Sea and its port-cities, 1774–1914. Development, convergence and linkages with the global economy”, coordinated by Professor Gelina Harlaftis from the Ionian University in Greece. Professor Ardeleanu’s most relevant publications include the books *Evoluția intereselor economice și politice britanice la gurile Dunării, 1829–1914*, Brăila, 2008 and *International Trade and Diplomacy at the Lower Danube: the Sulina Question and the Economic Premises of the Crimean War (1829–1853)*, Brăila, 2014.

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