

# The Black Sea Region: Strategic Balance and Policy Agenda

## Introduction

In policy strategic terms the Black Sea region shaped up in the 1990s as a consequence of two major international developments. The **first one** is the collapse of the Soviet empire and the powerful wave of democratization, which restored independence and sovereignty of Central and South-Eastern European nations, included in the Soviet domain after 1945. For the post-Soviet republics of Eastern Europe the demise of communism has opened an even deeper process of transformation than simply democratization of political systems. Post-Soviet societies experienced a revived impetus of modern nation building, which has put them on the way to full membership in the community of free European nations.

In general terms, nation building has been taking place in the Old Continent until 1919, when the last European empires collapsed and gave way to a Europe of modern nations. The Bolsheviks' takeover of power in 1917 terminated the inclusion of Russian imperial provinces in this nation-state building process and postponed their development into modern nations for seven decades.

After 1990, a powerful process of national emancipation resumed on the territories of the former Soviet Union. The realm of the Black Sea became a dynamic scene of newly emerging national interests, searching for a legitimate integration into the new international *status quo*.

The **second** major development, influencing regional environment of the Black Sea was the powerful international demand for diversification of energy supplies to Europe from the East. After the energy crisis of 1973, European dependence on energy imports from the Middle East has risen sharply, with all strategic and demographic consequences that Europe and the West in general had to bear. The only alternative route for energy supplies from the East was located on Russian–Soviet territory and it has been fully controlled by Moscow. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 has opened a unique opportunity for the industrial developed nations to build the infrastructure and utilize the energy resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, where new nation states have emerged from centuries-long imperial domination of Moscow. The Black Sea – Caspian route has quickly turned into a vital strategic corridor, capable to host infrastructure projects of energy transfer from East to West.

Both developments, described above have framed an environment of very intense manifestation of strategic interests and power competition among international actors within and around the Black Sea. The sea, which was historically dominated by two major powers – Russia and Turkey, served as a dividing line between Russian and Ottoman imperial interests in the past. It was transformed into a significant part of the Iron Curtain between East and West after 1945. The period of the 1990s marked its transformations to a dynamic new region with a growing potential of economic cooperation and diversity of strategic ambitions.

## Europe's and the US Involvement in Black Sea Region of the 1990s

In the 1990s the interest both of Europe and the US towards the Black Sea region has been more general and longer term, rather than pragmatic and active. Europe and the West in general were overwhelmed with democratic transformation of Central and South-Eastern

Europe, with the violent post-Yugoslav wars, and with the diverse portfolio of security challenges in a new global world. The region of the Black Sea itself did not offer highly attractive environment for successful cooperation: the post-Soviet societies were in a state of chaotic restructuring and interethnic strife. Russia was on the defensive in search for its new identity. Painful transformations took place in both Bulgaria and Romania, where democratization had to battle not only with the remnants of the old regime, but also with unfinished modernization in significant sectors of society. In this context, the planning of strategic energy projects took place in major international companies and governments of the West, but the implementation of those projects was detained. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium was established and the Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan project was endorsed with the key support of the US government. Yet no major steps of strategic or economic transformation of the Black Sea – Caspian region have been made until the end of the 1990s.

### **Motivations to Launch BSEC as the First Regional Cooperation Scheme**

As a strategic concept and a subject of strategy the Black Sea region emerged first in the proposal of Turkey to create the organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in 1992. The Turks were tempted by the opportunity to extend their influence – economic, cultural and strategic – over the newly emancipated ex-Soviet republics. However, there was the danger that the painful sensitivity of Russia on that issue could involve Turkey into too big risks.

The vulnerability of Russia and the surprising new opportunities for common interests between two old time foes in the Region – Moscow and Ankara, moved Turkish government to embark upon a careful and balanced strategy of developing multilateral cooperation in the region of the Black Sea. The project included Russia as an equal second partner, and was in effect aimed at restoring bilateral Turkish – Russian hegemony over the Black Sea, yet hegemony utilized in cooperation and consent, rather than in rivalry and competition. That was a win – win strategy. For Turkey – because it provided Ankara with an instrument to operate without controversy in the Turkic republics in Central Asia,. For Russia – because it was in need of significant economic and strategic partners as Turkey. The offer of the BSEC was more controversial for Bulgaria and Romania, both aiming at full membership in the EU and harboring some fears about full-fledged sinking into this Turkish – Russian dominated economic and political pattern of regional cooperation. In effect the BSEC remained largely façade, demonstrative format of regional cooperation, hardly addressing or influencing any serious part of the region’s economic or political agenda. The institutional capacity of the post-Soviet states in the 1990s was very limited to allow efficient schemes of regional cooperation. Ethnic conflicts among constituent members additionally worsened the scarce chances for common projects of partnership. The BSEC was and remains highly nominal format of regional cooperation in the Black Sea.

### **9/11 and the Change of Strategic Environment**

The Black Sea strategic environment changed quite rapidly after 9/11. As Ronald D. Asmus , Bruce P. Jackson argued in their 2004 article *The Black Sea and the Frontiers of Freedom*: “These events have begun to push the Black Sea from the periphery to the center of Western attention. At the same time, they have underscored the fact that the West today lacks a coherent and meaningful strategy *vis-a-vis* this region...”

The uncertainty of relationships between the Islamic world and the West made energy supplies from the Caspian – Central Asia regions much more desirable and even urgent. This

priority coincided with the changing environment of Eastern Europe. For the decade of the 1990s, democratization has more or less successfully transformed the countries of the former Soviet block in Europe. In two consecutive waves of enlargement the NATO has reached the shores of the Black Sea, encompassing all former Soviet satellites and creating an integral security system for all Europe under the shield of the Euro-Atlantic defense community. The EU was on the threshold of a Big Bang encompassing CEE countries as full members.

After a decade of painful nation building and controversial emancipation from their former imperial master, the ex-Soviet states around the Black Sea concentrated their efforts for independent democratic development. The ‘colored revolutions’ in Georgia of 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 have set the stage for further expanding of democratic nation building into the realm of the former Soviet Union. This is the way in which a powerful historical process and the strategic interest of the West coincided to create and promote a strategy for anchoring and further integration of the Black Sea region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream.

Between 2002-2005 study groups and brain-storming sessions, organized by the GMFUS coordinated the efforts of think tanks, NATO and EU representatives, State Department officials in developing a strategic outline for integrating the Black Sea countries into the Euro-Atlantic community. The democratic process in Georgia and Ukraine reinforced international policy actions of assisting institutional and societal transformations in ex-Soviet countries of the Black Sea region. The organization of GUAM strengthened political cooperation among post-Soviet states in defending their independence and freedom of choice *vis-à-vis* resurgent imperial practices of Moscow. New NATO and EU members from CEE initiated organizations of support and integration of new democracies in the post-Soviet space – the Commonwealth of Democratic Choice, the Black Sea Forum in Bucharest, etc. A new wave of democratic nation building in the East was gaining momentum, motivated by the successful democratic transformation and integration of post-communist societies of CEE into the European and the Atlantic mainstream.

### **The Russia Factor**

Yet the democratization process of post-Soviet Black Sea countries had to face much stronger controversies and opposition, compared to the Central and South-Eastern European experience of the 1990s. First, post-Soviet societies were much less prepared for democratization than their counterparts from the CEE. Insufficient levels of modern development, fragile institutional background of newly emerging independent states, high levels of ethnic strife constituted only part of those powerful obstacles, deterring successful democratic change. Yet the key obstacle was – and still is the resurgent strategy of Russia.

Russia emerged from the collapse of Soviet empire with a key identity dilemma. Would Russia develop as a modern nation state, would it reconstitute itself as a democratic federation of modern nations, or it would slide back to an imperial formula of state identity – those were the three principle choices in front of Russian elites to utilize after the collapse of communism. The 1990s have seen quite hectic, controversial process of democratic and market transformation of Russia, which led to a system of oligarchic control over government and economy, rising dangers of separatism and institutional inefficiency. Russian territorial proximity and ethnic - communal diversity proved too powerful obstacles to developing unitary Russian nation state. Chechen separatism and ill-contained autonomist ambitions of other communities (like Tatars) made the alternative of a democratic multi-national federation indefensible or at least difficult to promote. With the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin, the option of imperial revival regained momentum.

In effect, Russia under Putin has never claimed openly imperial legitimacy. In fact the Putin government has tried to keep a flexible balance between those three identity options, described above. In constitutional terms Russia remains a federation of nations, even if the process of power centralization deprived the regions from key elements of self-government – like the right to elect their governors, for example. As a state ideology, Russia is a ‘sovereign democracy’ (as used first by politician Vladislav Surkov in 2006), searching for legitimacy in the 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> century conservative constitutional theories like those of Francois Guizot and Carl Schmitt (known also as “authoritarian liberalism”). In terms of real politics, Putin’s Russia embarked upon a powerful strategy of restoring its imperial project. This strategy is implemented at two levels – both of them directly affecting the Black Sea region development.

The **first** part of the strategy refers to the post-Soviet space – namely to those ex-Soviet societies that dare to choose their own independent way towards democracy. Moscow angrily defends its ‘rights’ to keep ‘a sphere of influence’ over the post-Soviet space in preventing countries like Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO and aspire for EU membership in the future. It is doubtful, however, that the Kremlin is afraid of NATO enlargement on post-Soviet soil. The real threat to Russian ‘sovereign democracy’ is not NATO enlargement, but the very democratic choice of Kyiv and Tbilisi, which provides ‘negative example’ to Russian citizens – and therefore endangers Russian security. Moscow systematically imposed its influence upon Ukrainian institutions through mass scale bribery, intense intelligence operations and energy crises, jeopardizing the functioning of the fragile Ukrainian state. In Georgia, where those methods face obstacles, Moscow waged a full scale war, crippling Georgian state and tearing apart pieces of Georgian territory. It is not NATO – it is the very independence of Georgia and Ukraine, which is unacceptable for the Kremlin.

The **second** level of Russia’s imperial resurgence strategy applies to its former satellites in CEE. Using the monopoly of energy supplies, Moscow aims at disuniting European energy interest, at spreading huge cash-flows of bribes within the post-communist elites of CEE and at de-stabilizing fragile new democratic systems of Europe’s East. The purpose of all those instruments combined is to deconstruct the new *status quo* of united democratic Europe and to create a large buffer zone of instability and insecurity between Russia and the West of Europe. It is worth defining this pan-European strategy of Russia in this Black Sea region digest, because the Black Sea is the focal point of Russia’s actions, both against post-Soviet states like Georgia and Ukraine, and against post-communist Europe, which most vulnerable parts are in the South-East and on the Balkans.

### **Turkey as a Factor in the Black Sea Region**

The process of stabilization and expansion of democratic transformation in the Black Sea region is very much dependent upon the policies of the second largest country and major regional strategic factor – Turkey. Being a key member of NATO since the 1950s and an applicant for EU membership, Turkey is expected to support and assist the democratic process in the Black Sea region, yet the record of Turkey in helping the Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea is rather controversial. Ankara supported NATO membership for Bulgaria and Romania, yet in most other positions of Turkey in the region, its interests seem closer to Moscow rather than to those of Brussels. The backbone of Turkey’s position is refusal to accept multinational NATO forces in and around the Black Sea. Turkey pursues a classical nationalist strategy of guarding its traditional domains from any outer interference – of the NATO alliance included. Legally based on the Montreux Convention of 1936, Ankara refuses to open the Black Sea for multilateral security operations of NATO like “Active Endeavor” in

the Mediterranean, replacing it with its own initiatives like Black Sea Harmony. In this way Turkey presents an interest much closer to the positions of Russia, rather than the positions of the Euro-Atlantic community. There is a stable consensus between Ankara and Moscow that the Black Sea should remain self-sufficient and contained in terms of security and international cooperation. In other words, this means that the region should remain a realm of shared Russian – Turkish interest, as it has always been for centuries. This position could hardly be shared both by the Euro-Atlantic community, and in particular – by the smaller littoral countries (NATO members Bulgaria and Romania included), which rely upon international Euro-Atlantic system for defending their security.

### **The US Involvement in the Region**

It is obvious that the integration of the Black Sea region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream could not be achieved in reliance solely on the efforts of smaller countries of the region. Much bigger strategic concentration is needed to counter Russia's open hostility towards democracy and independence of post-Soviet and post-communist countries of the region, as well as to compensate for the controversial positions of Turkey. The strategies of both major international players in the region – the US and the EU – are of crucial importance in promoting the interests of Euro-Atlantic community and the reformist ambitions of the newly independent states in the Black Sea region. The US government has always been the main warrant for the opening of the Black Sea – Caspian corridor for free international trade and for collective security planning. Russia aims to block, to cork the Black Sea region, in particular – the South Caucasus, in order to prevent international trade and security penetration to the Caspian and to Central Asia – both key elements of its ex-Soviet strategic domains. The US advocates just the opposite – free access, free trade, free energy flows to Europe and the West. Russia aims at systemic destabilization of newly independent societies as Georgia, instigating ethnic conflicts and full fledged wars when needed, in order to seal the entire Black Sea – Caspian – Central Asia region for its own strategic use. The US aims at opening, at assisting newly independent states on their road to democracy and prosperity as part of integrating the larger Black Sea – Caspian region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream. That's why the US is the key ally for the countries in the region in their ambition for independent democratic development, and those countries themselves are the most devoted partners and allies for America in its pursuit of the Euro-Atlantic strategic agenda for the Black Sea – Caspian region.

It's a pity that the implementation of this strategy of the US developed rather unevenly in the last decade. Following the initial dynamic start of early 2000s, the Euro-Atlantic strategy for the Black Sea suffered significant setbacks in the context of the 'war on terror' and the campaign in Iraq after 2003, consuming the entire strategic potential of the US super-power. The powerful resurgence of Russia under Putin and the silent alienation of Turkey from the West in its Black Sea policies were successful because of the relative weakness in US strategic presence in the region in the last 5-6 years. In this way, the strategic purpose of anchoring the Black Sea region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream was not achieved and at best will be postponed for the future. Today we have an environment of strategic competition and growing tensions in the Black Sea, caused at the first place by revisionist policies of Russia. Georgia is crippled and defeated at war with Moscow. Ukraine is drained of its nation building potential, weakened by systematic conflict instigation within its institutions. The impulse of Romania to serve as European and Euro-Atlantic advocate for the Black Sea integration is moderated. The post-communist government of Bulgaria has completely given up independent pro-Western positions, aligning de facto with the Russian – Turkish axis in the Black Sea region policy agenda. Where in this context could we find Europe?

## **The EU Policies and Role in the Region**

The EU did not have Black Sea policy agenda almost until 2007. In the 1990s and in early 2000 major European countries were overwhelmed with the transformation process of Europe's East and the slow setting up of the CSFP of the EU prevented Europe from efficient management and resolution of post-Yugoslav crises. Europe was present in the Black Sea area mostly in its efforts to assist reforms in Bulgaria and Romania, as well as with the EU policies towards Russia. The post-Soviet space was granted some financial assistance – through funding lines like TACIS, and European policies were largely outsourced to organizations like the OSCE and the Council of Europe. After 2005 the Black Sea region was included in the newly formulated European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) without any special emphasis on the policy agenda of the region. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in the EU in 2007 the EU could not resist formulating Black Sea policy agenda anymore. In April 2007 the Black Sea Synergy document was communicated in Brussels, opening the process of specific policy planning of the EU for the Black Sea region. The Synergy was an important step forward, yet it represented quite cautious approach of the EU towards the region. The Synergy focused on particular policies – transport, environment, energy, trade and good governance – in avoiding general strategic and policy framework definition for the region. The document has also presumed the BSEC as almost the sole institutional instrument of implementing the EU Black Sea policies. The pressure, exerted upon Brussels from Moscow and Ankara was quite evidently manifested in the Synergy – especially if we bear in mind the fact that the EU did not have even the status of observer with the BSEC at that time.

The Black Sea Synergy was followed by a number of EU initiatives, with the most important among them the ENP+ Program of 2007, proposed by Germany, and the Eastern Partnership proposal of December 2008. The ENP+ was an important step in diversifying EU strategy towards European neighbors from the South and in the East (in the Black Sea region). While the Mediterranean partners of the EU did not hold the perspective of full integration into the EU at any point of the future, the Eastern partners were recognized as potential members of the EU and part of the European economic and strategic space. Provided the obstructionist resurgent policies of Russia in the post-Soviet space, and the special status of Turkey as a negotiating applicant for EU membership, Sweden and Poland initiated in early 2008 a proposal for the EU policy agenda towards the countries of the post-Soviet space (without Russia). This initiative has laid the foundation of the Eastern Partnership project of the EU, which holds the capacity to be upgraded into a full-fledged European strategy for development of the Eastern EU neighbors. The Eastern Partnership opens the European economic space for the post-Soviet neighbors, promises a stronger political bonds, mutual energy security, enhanced mobility and presumes multilateral approach, which is essential for the implementation of a truly regional strategy (MEMO/08/762, Brussels, 3 December 2008).. From all countries, involved into the Eastern Partnership project, only Belarus is not a Black Sea country (apart from littoral Ukraine and Georgia, the Partnership involves countries of the broader Black Sea region as Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan.)

In assessing the EU approach towards the Black Sea region we have to admit several principle limitations of European strategy. First, the EU could offer a successful strategy for regional development. Provided the present state of cohesion in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, we could expect only indirect benefits from EU strategic programs upon the security agenda of the region. Second, the efficiency of EU policies will be deterred by mounting pressure from Moscow. The EU approach might be milder and willing to

compromise, yet the basic purpose of EU partnership programs is to strengthen and stabilize the development of post-Soviet states – something Moscow views as a major threat to itself. What the EU constructs, Moscow will seek to dismantle. Third, the success of the EU Eastern Partnership will be subject to the internal developments of the EU itself, which faces strong pressures from within in its efforts to integrate member states interests in one common position of the EU in fields like energy security, trade, allocation of funds, etc.

## **Conclusion**

The Black Sea region of today is a center ground for an intense strategic competition among several major interests.

**First**, we have the interest of the Euro-Atlantic community to open the region for free trade, energy exports, democratization and common security – that is to integrate the region into the Euro-Atlantic mainstream.

**Second**, within the Euro-Atlantic space, we have a more moderate and indecisive (because of its dependence upon Russia) interest of the EU. There is a substantial disagreement among EU member states how far the Union could go to overcome Russia's obstructionism towards security and development of post-Soviet societies as part of a larger European project for the future.

**Third**, the Black Sea region faces resurgent strategy of Russia, aiming to restore its regional hegemony on the grounds of its 'legitimate' interest as a major international power. The strategy of Moscow is painful and destructive, because it prevents the countries of the region from their legitimate right to develop as independent, decent and sovereign democratic societies, exercising their freedom of choice. Russia instigates ethnic strife, armed conflicts and subversive operations to dislodge post-Soviet societies from their way to the European and Euro-Atlantic mainstream as sovereign democratic nations. It is hard to foresee an orchestrated international effort to impose on Russia the duty to behave as a responsible member of civilized international community.

**Fourth**, an interest of key importance for the Black Sea region is the position of Turkey. Ankara tries to combine two approaches in its strategy for the region, which are in a way self-exclusive. On the one hand side Turkey claims integral belonging to the European – Euro-Atlantic community and its strategic interests. On the other, the policies of Ankara for the Black Sea are motivated by an identity of national exclusivity and illegitimate claim 'to represent' solely the Euro-Atlantic community in the Black Sea. The European paradigm of mutual dependence as a prerequisite of common security and development is accepted by Turkey only in case Turkey is granted a dominant say (sometimes a veto) in the decision making concerning other regions and their problems. When it comes to the Black Sea region, Turkey manifests the uniqueness of its national interests, which makes it a closer ally of Russia than to the Western world.

**Last but not least**, in the Black Sea region we see the interests of the smaller post-communist and post-Soviet countries rising and claiming legitimacy. Those countries wish to see the region as an integral part of Europe and the Euro-Atlantic world. Bulgaria and Romania have already achieved membership in the NATO and the EU, even if their domestic development provides enough evidence for the need of much longer efforts of both societies to fully integrate into the European mainstream. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova struggle for their right to self-determine as sovereign democratic countries. They need to perform institutional and societal transformations, bringing them to the threshold of Europe. Armenia and Azerbaijan maintain more distant approach, motivated by the specific agenda of their national

development, while declaring their basic ambition one day to join the institutions of the Euro-Atlantic world.

The Black Sea remains a division line, where the agents of imperial past and modern democratic present compete for their right to shape the future of the region.