

A Ring of Friends?
Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation between the EU and the Wider
Black Sea Region
(Draft)

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Introduction

With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the European Union the EU finally realized that the entire Black Sea region is of great importance for Europe in terms of economics, energy and security questions. Thus, the EU's geopolitical focus had to be reconsidered. Up until then, the approaches were multi-dimensional: EU initiatives ran parallel to enhanced bilateral co-operation between single EU states and countries in the Black Sea region. A consistent European strategy, especially in terms of security issues, is still missing.

To feel secure, the EU needs to be surrounded by states which feel committed to democratic norms and values. However, this calls for a stronger, political engagement in the Wider Black Sea region (WBSR).¹ Since the so-called frozen conflict of the region are considered to be the basic security threats of the region, the EU would also need to become more involved in the respective conflict resolution processes. Up till now, this has not been the case. Within the EU the perception of the Black Sea region to be the periphery of Europe still dominates. This leads to several questions: What are the roots of the EU's reserved position towards the Black Sea region. What changes may be observed with the adhering borders between the EU and the Black Sea region? What role play the interests of other external actors for the establishing of future EU-Black Sea co-operation? This analysis aims at giving some possible answers to these relevant questions.

An Outline of Past Euro-Atlantic-Black Sea Relations

Discussing the Black Sea region from a Western European point of view demands, for a start, a glance at the world map. Six countries – Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, and

¹ Zacchary Ritter introduces the abbreviation "WBSR" for the wider Black Sea region: Ritter, Zacchary, EU Engagement in the Black Sea Region: Challenges and Opportunities for the EU SWP-Working Paper, Berlin, December 2006, 17 pp.

Turkey – directly border on the sea. However, there are additional states, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Greece and Moldova, which closely identify themselves with the Black Sea region. Further nearby states would be: Albania, Belarus, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

A focus on the Black Sea basin could even include Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and finally Slovenia.² And indeed, the interest of most of the aforementioned countries in the Black Sea region is increasing, as it becomes obvious by, for instance, looking at the expanding Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). On 12 April 2004, Serbia and Montenegro became the twelfth member of BSEC. Austria, Egypt, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and, as of September 2005, the United States, have demonstrated their interest in the region by having "observer" status in BSEC.³

Thus, a wider definition of the Black Sea region, including more than those states directly bordering the sea seems appropriate. However, as a result of recent history, regional identity and the wish for co-operation have only just begun developing. BSEC member states belong to different cultural groups, countries with Islamic majorities border Roman Catholic or Christian Orthodox countries, some with democratic, some with communist traditions. This has led to various interethnic conflicts and wars, whose outcomes still affect relations between neighbour states, nation states and seceding entities, or ethnic groups within the same state borders.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea, apart from the Turkish coast, was part of and in the sphere of Soviet influence. Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, this perception changed very little. The region was considered to be part of the Russian periphery, where the Euro-Atlantic Alliance was reluctant to interfere. Building a new co-operative relationship with Moscow had top priority then.⁴ Apart from that, in Western eyes, the Black Sea was not considered to be part of Europe (at least not its Eastern edges). Inadequate knowledge about the region, its people, culture, and its problems helped maintain this view. Rather than looking so far abroad, the European Union focused on its proximate backyard. The wars on the Balkan brought war back to the European continent. To stop them, the EU was dependent on NATO's support. When NATO opened its ranks for Eastern European member states, the EU did the same. The Eastern enlargement captured the EU's entire attention for the next few years.

² Aydin, Mustafa, Europe's next shore: The Black Sea region after EU enlargement. EU-ISS Occasional Paper 53, June 2004, p. 5. For further information about memberships in various sub-regional organizations see: *ibid*, p. 28.

³ The EU being present at least as an observer is not yet the case, but needs to be considered in the near future. However, the European Commission has already become an observer in the Black Sea Commission. See also: Vahl, Marius, The EU and Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Some Challenges for BSEC, CEPS Commentaries, April 2005, p. 2.

⁴ Bocutoğlu, Ersan/Koçer, Goekher, Politico-Economic Conflicts in the Black Sea Region in the Post-Cold War Era, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), OSCE-Yearbook 2006, No. 12, Baden-Baden 2007, pp. 113.

Even today, the EU is focused largely on its own backyard: the Balkans. Since February 2006, the EU has been heavily involved in the negotiations on Kosovo's final status. The next EU enlargement round will concentrate on the Balkan region.⁵

It was only with the US focus on direct access to bases and operational routes in Central Asia and the Middle East, and with the consideration of alternative pipeline routes, bypassing the Russian Federation, that the importance of the Black Sea was finally recognized. In times of growing scarcity of raw materials, the Euro-Atlantic interests in the oil fields of the Caspian Sea seemed to herald a new great game in the late 1990s. Projects focused primarily on the economy were launched, among them, TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), established in 1993 to link the Caucasus with Central Asia and Europe, those focused on transport infrastructure projects to attract international investment, or INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe), established in 1995 to promote technical assistance and some investment for hydrocarbon infrastructure in the Wider Black Sea region.

TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), a programme for the support of economic and political transition in the post-Soviet region, concluded in December 2006 and was replaced by the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). New National Action Plans have been agreed upon with each of the South Caucasian states. They are to lay out the strategic objectives of co-operation within the region and with the EU for the upcoming years until 2011, and to encourage and support further integration into European economic and social structures.⁶ Due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which prevents direct co-operation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, these ambitions can only be met in the most superficial way. Apart from that, the joint slogan of the EU has recently become to encourage participation rather than to give a perspective for a potential EU membership. However, this course of action might turn out tricky, because *a priori* lacking the perspective of a future admission into the EU could cause frustration and increasing unwillingness to further co-operate with the EU and to further support single EU activities in the region.⁷

The EU and Regional Conflict Resolution Processes

⁵ Kempe, Iris/Klotzle, Kurt, The Balkans and the Black Sea Region: Problems, Potentials, and Policy Options, CAP Policy Analysis No. 2, April 2006, p. 8. For the disappointment of several states, such as Moldova or Ukraine, at having no membership prospects see also: Aydin, Mustafa, Europe's next shore: The Black Sea region after EU enlargement. EU-ISS Occasional Paper 53, June 2004, p. 11 and 13.

⁶ For documents on the National Action Plans see the web page of the European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/documents_en.htm>.

⁷ This is already the case in Georgia. Since summer 2006, the Georgian government demands to put EU rehabilitation and democratisation programmes under Georgian control. See: Kaufmann, Walter, Politischer Jahresbericht. Suedlicher Kaukasus 2006/2007, Regionalbuero der Heinrich-Boell-Stiftung, Tbilisi, July 2007, pp. 6ff. For more information on this aspect, see: Marchetti, Andreas, Widening without Enlarging. The European Neighbourhood Policy and the South Caucasus, in: Turkish Policy Quarterly, 5,2 (2006), S. 65-77, at: <http://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_turkey_tpq_id_63.pdf>.

Up till now missing is most notably a security component within the present EU-Black Sea cooperation. However, a variety of security issues, both old and new, that pose a threat to Europe may be found in the wider Black Sea region. To feel secure, the EU needs to be surrounded by states which feel committed to democratic norms and values. This in turn calls for a stronger political engagement in the Wider Black Sea region. The EU, though, has only started to engage in co-operative projects with the Black Sea states which may contribute to solve regional security problems. Those in turn may lead to trans-national threats, such as ongoing ethno-political conflicts, organized crime, terrorist activity, weapons' proliferation and state fragility.

A first step here would be to introduce an efficient visa policy and energy security programmes. Furthermore, the EU needs to become more involved in conflict resolution processes. Many analysts share the opinion that the still unresolved ethno-political conflicts are the source of instability in the region.⁸ However, the EU has shirked any responsibility for the ethno-political conflicts – the key problem of the region. "Europeanization" may play a crucial role here.⁹ Although the EU traditionally regards the work of conflict prevention to be more efficient than post-conflict management, it only engages in the conflict resolution process if a member state is already actively involved, such as, for example, Great Britain is said to be in Abkhazia.¹⁰

The International Crisis Group demands a breakdown of existing patterns and recommends increased engagement with the non-recognized entities (e.g. Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh) and in this way "to promote democratization, civil society development and the rule of law, not as recognition of status but as a means to break their isolation, build confidence and avoid exclusion from broad EU integration processes".¹¹ While Georgia's right to territorial integrity and its threat due to the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized a priori by all international actors operating in Georgia, the EU has hesitated to take sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process. As the only interstate conflict in the region, it has severely damaged relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Though confidence-building programmes in and around Nagorno-Karabakh are urgently needed, the EU perceives this conflict region to be a lower priority compared to Abkhazia and South Ossetia due to the large amount of aid being transferred to Nagorno-Karabakh by the Armenian diaspora. At the

⁸ E.g. Author's interview with Dieter Boden, Ambassador (ret.), Head of OSCE Mission to Georgia from 1995-1996, Head of UNOMIG from 1999-2002, Hamburg in September 2007.

⁹ See: Coppieters, Bruno et al., European Institutional Models as Instruments of Conflict Resolution in the Divided States of the European Periphery, CEPS Working Document 195 (Brussels: CEPS, July 2003); Valinakis, Yannis, The Black Sea Region: Challenges and Opportunities for Europe, WEU Chaillot Paper 36, July 1999, p. 17.

¹⁰ Cf. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/cfsp/news/patten_remarks.htm>, 11 March 2003; Helly, Damien (2003), p. 225.

¹¹ ICG Europe Report No. 173, Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus: The EU's Role, Tbilisi/Brussels, 20 March 2006, p. 4. On ICG' appeal for a stronger EU engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict see also: ICG Europe Report No. 187, Nagorno-Karabakh: Risking War, 14 November 2007.

same time, Azerbaijan has always been reluctant to accept projects, which involve a region whose ambition to secede is strongly encouraged by the Armenian state.¹² As a result, the EU concentration on activities in Georgia was the logical consequence.

On the other hand, it is the European Union's function as a significant donor in this region which, in contrast to the OSCE, at least puts at its disposal a set of "carrots and sticks". The EU either grants a remarkable amount of money that significantly helps to improve the situation in the conflict zone, or freezes grants if the expected results are too slow in coming. In this way the EU significantly influences the progress of the conflict management process.

However, due to the now shared sea border, the European Union's broadly focused approach to economic issues in the South Caucasus is slowly changing. In the decision-making framework of the General Affairs Council from 26 February 2001, the EU sought further possibilities for helping prevent and solve conflicts and supporting post-conflict rehabilitation in the South Caucasus.¹³ Moreover, Turkey may join the European Union in the future, which would create a common land border between the EU and the South Caucasus. This is slowly becoming apparent to the EU as well, and in response they have already started to change their focus.¹⁴

On 7 July 2003, the Council, willing to play a slightly more active political role in the South Caucasus, appointed Heikki Talvitie as an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSR). But his mandate was considered to be quite vague.¹⁵ Since February 2006 this position has been held by Peter Semneby. Unlike Talvitie, Semneby is now being encouraged to "contribute" to the regional conflict settlement processes.¹⁶ His engagement has already become visible in various statements in which he for example condemns recent Georgian actions carried out in the Georgian-Abkhaz border region (Kodory valley), and in the promotion of Caucasus-related projects and meetings at his duty station in Brussels. However, unlike his engagement in Georgia, the EUSR is not yet tasked to observe the Minsk process, or even to support direct contacts with all parties. Visits to Nagorno-Karabakh have also not been on his agenda yet, not to ask of assessing conflict-related funding needs.

Geo-Strategic Power Struggles in the WBSR

¹² Azerbaijan's position will strengthen further this year, first, because of its growing military budget which will reach 1 billion US dollars, exceeding Armenia's entire state budget; second, because of Russian-American agreements during the G8 summit in Heiligendamm/Germany in recent days to establish a joint missile defence system in Azerbaijan, FAZ, 8 June 2007.

¹³ Cf. <http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/georgia/csp/02_06_en.pdf>, 25 March 2003, p. 3.

¹⁴ <http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/news/10_99/pres_99_302.htm>, 6 March 2003.

¹⁵ Official Journal of the European Union, L 169/74, 8 July 2003, Council Joint Action 2003/496/CFSP of 7 July 2003 concerning the appointment of an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus; author's interview in Tbilisi.

¹⁶ Council Joint Action 2006/121/CFSP of 21 February 2006, Article 3 (d), OJ L49, p. 15.

During the last years international actors have started to regard each other as opponents in the wider Black Sea region. Russia disapproved of US action in this area that was formerly Russia's "near abroad". This view is, at least to some extent, also shared by Turkey, which believes that states without ocean access should have only limited influence on Black Sea security issues.¹⁷ This was a setback for US policy that had wished to deploy Turkey as a balancing factor against the further expansion of Russian, and Iranian, influence.

Meanwhile, the USA has criticized the EU, calling it "the great absentee", for merely declaring actions in the region, without actually becoming involved. NATO actions, which, in the opinion of the US, would be the most effective, are disapproved of by the EU and certainly by Russia.¹⁸ Russia has been very reluctant to accept any NATO actions in the post-Soviet hemisphere. Many of the recent disagreements between Russia and the Black Sea countries busy with coloured revolutions (Georgia and the Ukraine), derive from their strong ambitions to be admitted as full members to NATO.¹⁹ Important to note here is, that already NATO-member Turkey and North American orientated Georgia have interests that vary significantly regarding security political initiatives in the Black Sea region. This leads also to the fact that no consensus has yet been able to be achieved in terms of regional leadership. Several states bordering the sea, such as Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania, are seeking a leading role in the Black Sea region. Greece also wishes to play a decisive role arguing, before Romania's and Bulgaria's admission to the EU, to have been representing the EU at the Black Sea coastline.

In addition to that there is a strong regional scepticism towards Russia and, as already being mentioned, there have also been protests against various Russian-led pipeline projects, particularly by smaller countries.²⁰ This results from Russia's failure to present an attractive policy, which would encourage co-operation in its immediate neighbourhood. Instead, economic

¹⁷ Cf. Petersen, Phillip A, *The Black Sea: Frontier Zone or "European" Sea?*, in: *Review of International Affairs* No. 1122, June 2006, p. 24.

¹⁸ Bocutoğlu, Ersan/Koçer, Goekher, *Politico-Economic Conflicts in the Black Sea Region in the Post-Cold War Era*, in: *Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH* (ed.), *OSCE-Yearbook 2006*, No. 12, Baden-Baden 2007, pp. 118 and 121; Ryabtsev, Vladimir, *Why is there no "Security Complex" in the Black Sea-Caucasus Region?*, in: *Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH* (ed.), *OSCE-Yearbook 2006*, No. 12, Baden-Baden 2007, pp. 106f. For a plea on a stronger US involvement in the Wider Black Sea region see also: Socor, Vladimir, *Advancing Euro-Atlantic Security and Democracy in the Black Sea Region*, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on European Affairs, March 2005, p. 6.

¹⁹ For NATO activities in the Wider Black Sea region see: Cornell, Svante/Jonsson, Anna/Nilsson/Niklas/Haeggstroem, Per, *The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security*, Central Asia Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program. Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center of Johns Hopkins University (Washington, D.C.) and Uppsala University (Uppsala), Dec. 2006, pp. 66ff. Russia's perceived exclusive right to deploy peace-keepers in its "near abroad" is also felt by the United Nations. With Russia being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia succeeded in opposing UN peace-keeping on post-Soviet territory, limiting UN.

²⁰ The crisis in Estonia is certainly connected to "North Stream", the natural gas pipeline currently being built, that runs beneath the Baltic Sea from Russian Vyborg to Greifswald in Germany.

issues favouring those neighbours who are willing to accept and support Russia's post-Soviet leading position dominate Russia's policy. Russia is struggling for a long-term leading position in the area of the former Soviet Union. This became glaringly obvious during the elections in Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus, where Russian officials exploited personal networks and high-level meetings to influence domestic political outcomes in its "near abroad". Especially Georgia reacted harshly to this intervention, and Georgian-Russian relations have been severely damaged, because both sides are no longer able to communicate in a co-operative way. Russia's challenge will be to develop a constructive policy, which also takes democratic values and local interests into consideration. The states in the former "near abroad" seek to be recognized as equal partners of Russia. Given the hardened positions especially in Georgian-Russian relations there is still a lot to be done.

Meanwhile a unique footrace has started in recent years in the wider Black Sea region. Russia, the EU and the USA are competing for supremacy over the pipeline route system leading from the Caspian Sea to Europe.²¹ Europe is especially worried about its increasing energy dependence on Russia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline became one of the first prestigious projects in the Wider Black Sea region. Parallel to the BTC pipeline, the Blue Stream pipeline was officially inaugurated in 2005. This pipeline carries Russian natural gas from Stawropol to the Krasnodar region and beneath the Black Sea to Samsun in Turkey terminating 444 km further in Ankara. In March 2007, Russia attended the signing of a treaty between Bulgaria and Greece for a new "Balkan pipeline", which will connect the Aegean with the Black Sea. Russia has a 51 per cent share in this project. The decisive step followed in May 2007, when Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan agreed on a landmark gas pipeline deal. The Caspian shore gas pipeline with a capacity of 10 billion cubic meters per year and a parallel gas pipeline, yet to be built, will go from Turkmenistan to Russia via Kazakhstan. For the European states this meant a grave reversal. After two consecutive winters that saw Russia briefly disrupt energy supplies to Europe due to Russian-Ukrainian and Russian-Belarus disagreements, the EU had intensified plans to tap directly into Central Asia's natural gas, bypassing Russian involvement. The 3.300 km long Nabucco pipeline would have transported gas from Turkey via Rumania, Bulgaria and Hungary to Austria, starting from 2011. The EU's non-stringent energy policy led to the failure of the Nabucco project. Right now, the EU needs time to digest its failure. Meanwhile, rumours suggest that the Gazprom coup has encouraged the USA to press ahead more eagerly with the Nabucco project, concentrating on Azeri and Iranian gas. One will have to observe what happens in the upcoming months to learn more about this issue.

²¹ Aydin, Mustafa, Europe's next shore: The Black Sea region after EU enlargement. EU-ISS Occasional Paper 53, June 2004, p. 7.

Conclusion

The EU's forthcoming and most challenging task in the wider Black Sea region will be to establish a "ring of friends" which are states that feel committed to democratic norms and values. Effective cooperation, however, can only be of a multilateral shape. As soon as the same partners repeatedly decide on specific issues, a first step towards integration is successfully achieved. This implies a concretion of the ENPI to further promote confidence building and a stronger commitment to contribute to regional conflict resolution processes to include those countries which are presently excluded from a perspective for a potential EU membership (like the South Caucasian states). Georgia's growing reluctance to accept Russian-dominated peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia (and to a certain extent also in South Ossetia) and the national arms races which may be observed right now particularly in Azerbaijan puts continuous pressure on the EU and other external actors to eventually deploy international forces in the South Caucasus. Similar thoughts appeared in relation to the Transdniestrian conflict in 2003, but, once again, competed with Russian interests in the region. Here, the EU has not yet taken advantage of the positive perceptions towards Europe which may be found in the conflict regions themselves. Especially the Abkhazians, referring to their European self perception, are strongly focused on the processes within the European Union. A stronger inclusion into EU-wider Black Sea cooperation would also liberate them from their alliance of convenience with the Russian Federation.

However, the race for domination in the energy sector has shown that in the long term the European Union will strongly depend on good and close relations with the Russian Federation. To become a serious partner, the EU needs to seek constructive dialogue with Russia. This will only be possible when Russia sees the EU not as a competitor in the Black Sea region, but as a co-operative partner. This is also important due to the fact that in the long term, only co-operative actions between the global and the regional players can lead to stability, security and prosperity of the Wider Black Sea region.²² Unlike other external actors, the EU can make itself heard by all regional actors, and it has the potential to become the motor for deepened regional cooperation. Thus, the EU's long-term influence in the region very much depends on its ability to manage the balancing act of harmonizing its own interests in the wider Black Sea with the interests of the regional actors.

²² Kempe, Iris/Klotzle, Kurt, *The Balkans and the Black Sea Region: Problems, Potentials, and Policy Options*, CAP Policy Analysis No. 2, April 2006, p. 10.