

Plamen Dimitrov
Bulgarian Geopolitical Society

Wider Black Sea and the New Frontiers of European Geopolitical Space

I. Introduction – does the Wider Black Sea Region really exist?

Historically the Black Sea Region has always been a border zone. In the 18th century and the bigger part of the 19th century the Ottoman Empire and Russia were rivals in the struggle for dominance of this inland sea. The present day Black Sea states appeared in the 19th and 20th centuries as a result of the dissolution of the Ottoman and Soviet empires. In the period of the Cold War the Black Sea zone was frozen in the framework of the world's bi-polar confrontation but in the 1990s a process of intensive geopolitical fragmentation began there. At this moment the so-called Wider Black Sea Region is characterized by substantive discrepancies between littoral countries in terms of economic development levels, domestic social and political systems, strategic policy choices and geopolitical orientation. The region is a non-homogenous zone in which several geopolitical spaces meet and overlap, i.e. – European, Russian, post-Soviet and Middle Eastern. The region is subjected to several forces of gravity: of the two global geopolitical poles – the EU and Russia, and, indirectly - of the USA, playing the part of a long-distance local power. Turkey is also situated in this area. In geopolitical aspect it holds an interim position between the Great powers and the small states of the Black Sea region. In the Wider Black Sea area competing visions and strategies of global and regional powers confront each other. There is no such thing as a Black Sea political and cultural identity. The people living at and around the coasts of the Black Sea identify themselves as Balkanians, Caucasians, Turks and even as ex-Soviet people, but never as the people of the Black Sea zone. Therefore, any attempts to create regional organization based on geographical principle are *a priori* doomed to fail. Having that in mind, it is reasonable to ask: does the Wider Black Sea region really exist? Or, it is a term, artificially created by politicians and political analysts, looking for justification to meet each other at conferences similar to the one we are holding now? According to the Turkish researcher, Mustafa Aydin, the Black Sea area is an “intellectually constructed region”. The present report is based on the conception that the thing which can really turn the Wider Black Sea zone into an actual geopolitical entity is the EU's policy aimed at expanding the European geopolitical space. Some of the Black Sea zone countries are already members of the EU, others are in the process of negotiation for full membership, third ones are under the ENP, and a fourth group are potential strategic partners of the EU. What unites them all is the fact that in the future they will be more and more often obliged to synchronize their geopolitical course with that of Brussels. This analysis is based on the presumption that the European geopolitical frontiers do not coincide with administrative borders of the EU.

II. EU and Russia – Rivals or Partners

There are two main geopolitical poles on the old Continent today – the European Union and Russia. The relations of attraction and repulsion between these two centres of gravity are the main factor contributing to the changes in the geopolitical border-lines of the zone situated between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains. The drastic increase in the prices of oil and natural gas was the gift that fate gave Russia to help it to redefine its claims for membership in the club of the major geopolitical players. Putin's new philosophy proposes that Russia is a state of importance because it is in a position to supply strategic raw materials

in large quantities. The biggest and most reliable market for Russian oil and natural gas are the countries-members of the European Union. The EU's share in the commercial turn-over of Russia is over 50%. The relations between Moscow and Brussels are complicated to a certain extent by the fact that the EU's foreign policy is two-tier. The first tier is the individual political course taken by each one of the countries-members of the EU, and the second one is the still not completely formulated EU's common foreign policy. Moscow is trying to deal not with the yet uncompleted second floor of the European foreign policy building but with its first one, i.e. – with the individual national states. This tendency is particularly visible in Russia's energy supply policy. In present days the Russian economy is based on the export of energy supplies to countries –members of the EU. Accordingly, the EU has become very much dependent on the Russian petrol and natural gas deliveries and there is a tendency for this dependence to be increased. Of course, Moscow and the European countries will argue endlessly for prices and routes, quantities and access to sources and anti-monopoly regulations for the energy supplies trade. However, it is not an expression of hostility but a normal business practice though strongly influenced by the geopolitics.

Russia is never going to be a member of the EU and turn into a part of the European geopolitical space. Nevertheless the relations between Moscow and Brussels will be dominated by the spirit of partnership and not of confrontation. The Black Sea peripheral zone of the EU has an important place in Russian plans for the extension of its pipelines network. At this moment the final details related to the construction of the Bourgas-Alexandroupolis oil pipeline, which will pass through the territories of two EU member countries – Bulgaria and Greece, have just being agreed. In process of consideration is also the project of Bougas-Vlore and Constanta-Trieste oil pipelines which will run from EU Black Sea coast inward. It has already been decided that a natural gas pipeline from Russia to Bulgaria, passing through the bottom of the Black Sea, is to be built. That pipeline will run further toward Central Europe and Italy.

An important tendency in Moscow's policy concerning the ex-Soviet republics situated in the Wider Black Sea region is the gradual increase in the prices of Russian natural gas delivered to them. After the Revolution of the Roses in Georgia and especially after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine Moscow was bitterly disappointed with its ex-satellites. Today the degree of proximity of the ex-Soviet republics of the Wider Black Sea region to Moscow can be measured by the price they pay for Russian natural gas. Therefore, it is obvious that the closest to the Russian foreign policy orbit is Armenia, followed by Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Azerbaidjan is not in this group since from the beginning of 2007 Baku ceased to buy Russian natural gas.

It is rather improbable that Moscow would put strong resistance against Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia and even Azerbaidjan being drawn within EU's geopolitical orbit. An exception in this respect is Armenia as sandwiched between Azerbaidjan and Turkey, it has no other choice but to rely on Russia. The most realistic plan in regard of Russia is that it would keep its influence over the separatist enclaves in Moldova and Georgia and the russified east part of Ukraine. In this context a Moscow-Brussels conflict might only be expected if the EU tries to change the status quo in Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Within the foreseeable future the main cause of discord between Russia and the EU will be the routes for transportation of Caspian oil and gas to Europe, passing through the Wider Black Sea region.

III. EU and Turkey – the fate of a political engagement of convenience

Turkey is the country with the longest Black sea coast line. That is why, whether the EU will dominate the Wider Black Sea region or not depends to an important degree on the relations between Brussels and Ankara. In 2005 event of utmost importance for the future of Europe

took place – the negotiations with Turkey for its full membership in the EU were opened. Thus, 42 years after Turkey had signed the association agreement with the EU and 17 years after that country had entered its application for a full membership, Turkey at last stepped on track of the Euro-integration.

The three main arguments against the eventual Turkish membership can be expressed through these three adjectives: big, poor and Muslim. However, none of the arguments against Turkey's membership in the EU is undefeatable. Turkey is a really big country but there is no ground for fears that its population will keep on growing with rates typical for the Third World. Following a most realistically sounding forecast, made by the Institute of Population Researches at the Hadjeppe University, the population of Turkey shall never reach 100 million people, its number will grow till 2030-2035 by which time it will reach a stable 93-94 million people, and then it will begin to decrease. Taking into consideration the already established labour ethics and rational model of individual economic behavior, the Turkish economy can be expected to develop faster. As all forecasts show in the next 2-3 decades the annual economic growth of Turkey will be at least twice that of the EU.

If Turkey would like to become an integrated member of the EU, it must undertake a lot of changes. However, this is a big and strong country with a high degree of self-confidence and the pre-accession negotiations are viewed there as a process of bringing each other's positions closer and not as a set schedule of meeting Brussels's requirements presented in form of ultimatum. Negative feelings toward the Turkish membership in the EU are being clearly expressed by the societies in the bigger part of the European countries. Many influential politicians there, among whom is the French President, Nicola Sarkozy share these feelings too. Also, recent sociological polls have shown that the popularity of Turkey's EU membership is going down in the country itself. But the history of the EU enlargement shows that till now whenever pre-accession negotiations have been opened, they have always reached the one-way road leading toward Brussels. In the course of the pre-accession negotiations Turkey will gradually and nearly imperceptibly find itself caught in the net of Copenhagen criteria, revision chapters, directives, programs, projects and resolutions and a range of other products of the Brussels-Strasbourg bureaucracy. In the case with Turkey more important will be the direction and speed of motion rather than the reaching of the final destination.

If the main vector of the Turkish geopolitics will become pro-European, then Turkey will turn into a support instead of a hindrance to the penetration of the EU into the region. However, for the time being Ankara has other possible choices of action, too. The least probable one is Turkey's remaining an exponent of the USA's interests in the Wider Black Sea, the position it has been in till now. If Ankara grows disappointed with the EU, it will be in a position to follow its own political line in the Black Sea zone, including even seeking Russia for an ally. The most realistic expectation is that within the foreseeable future Turkey will remain an independent player on the Black Sea geopolitical stage, more and more often taking into consideration Brussels's political approach. As far as its policy in the Wider Black Sea is concerned, Turkey will keep its close relations with Azerbaidjan which are pre-determined by cultural, historical and economic factors.

IV. EU's Black Sea Neighbours – Allies or Patients

The enlargement of the EU with 12 new member-countries within the period 2004-2007 has actually resulted in the termination of the geopolitical unit which we used to call "Eastern Europe". It has been absorbed within the European Union. Even if we choose to take into consideration the geographical position of these countries, it is quite obvious that the new EU members are actually in Central and not in Eastern Europe as they are nearer to the Atlantic coast than to the Ural Mountains. The "coloured" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and

Moldova's change of its foreign policy orientation gave birth to the new Eastern Europe – a buffer zone in which the Russian influence is getting weaker but the influence of the West has not yet become predominant.

Three countries of the Wider Black Sea region – Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia can be definitely included in the new Eastern Europe. With certain reserves, Armenia and Azerbaijan could also be added to this group. The EU is not in a position to offer these countries the prospect of full membership to the EU. But it cannot neglect them either since being its immediate neighbours they might turn into a source of potential threat. Same is the position with the countries of North Africa and the Middle East which are EU's neighbours bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, in 2004 the EU created the so-called ENP – a political instrument meant as a substitute to full EU membership and an incentive for reforms in the countries bordering the EU. ENP is based on the well known principle of the stick and carrot. The “carrot” in this case includes direct financial aid, agreements of free trade as well as steps for reducing the non-tariff barriers by means of regulatory convergence, easier admission of workers from the ENP partner countries to the EU labour market and relaxation of the visa regime. The ENP budget for 2007 was 1,4 billion Euros. This amount is about 1% of the total EU budget and is distributed among the 17 countries-partners. Through the ENP the EU will support a variety of reforms in each one of the countries-partners. Energy sector reform will be supported for example in Ukraine or Azerbaijan, with particular attention to energy efficiency and sustainability. Poverty reduction is the focus of EC support to Moldova, concentrating on the reform of the social assistance sector. Fighting unemployment is the principal concern for assistance to Armenia, where the EC contributes to develop vocational education and training. In Georgia, an example for EC support is a rehabilitation programme in the Georgian/Abkhazian conflict zone, and assistance to public finance management reforms to enhance good governance.

Brussels has been advertising ENP as a “partnership for reform”. As a matter of fact, the EU has a good record as a transformative power. In its substance the strict requirement for political liberty and liberal democracy may be also viewed as “europeanization” of the countries-partners. However, the political traditions of the new Eastern Europe differ very much from those in the ‘old’ Eastern Europe. That is why the ‘europeanization’ of the ex-Soviet republics will be neither a quick, nor easy, nor predictable process. EU's “carrot” will most easily work in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. For the time being Armenia is obliged to follow with much consideration Moscow's point of view and attitude, while Azerbaijan has rich oil reserves of its own which render the country comparatively independent of external economic aid.

The EU's main misgiving in this respect is that internal crises might turn one or more of the Wider Black Sea region countries into patients for their rich European neighbours. In that respect the main threats that the EU has to fight against are the illegal immigration and the export of organized crime.

Besides the general approach relations with each one of the the ENP countries – EU members follow their own policy in regard of the ex-Soviet republics in the Wider Black Sea region. Owing to cultural and historical reasons Romania is very much interested in the incorporation of the Republic of Moldova within the European geopolitical zone. Poland, on the other hand, stands behind its neighbour Ukraine, and some seven EU countries have united into a group called “Friends of Georgia”. Armenia can rely on its lobbies in certain countries, among which are France and Bulgaria, while Azerbaijan is being courted by nearly all EU members of South-East and Central Europe, because of its key position as a supplier of energy raw materials.

V. Prospects of the Extending the European Geopolitical Space into the Wider Black Sea region

Till the beginning of the 21st century the Wider Black Sea region was not in the focus of the EU attention. Four important events, however, changed the image of the region and caused Brussels from being apathetic toward the region to start showing a strong interest, which grew into concern toward it. First, at Rumania and Bulgaria joining the EU in 2007 it obtained a direct exit to the Black Sea. Second, in 2005 the pre-accession negotiations with Turkey were opened. Third, in Georgia and Ukraine the color revolutions took place and subsequently the geopolitical vectors of Tbilisi and Kiev turned to the West. Fourth, the plans for transporting Caspian natural gas and oil to Europe reached an advanced stage.

After the Orange Revolution Ukraine's ever getting back within the Russian scope of influence seems rather improbable. Even if the bigger part of the ex-elite survives, the important geopolitical change is the way in which the state authority defines its identity and legitimacy. Though Ukraine will not soon (or maybe never) be granted the statute of a country in accession negotiations with the EU, it is already on its way to move from the post-Soviet into the European geo-political space. As a matter of fact, not the formal procedures required for the accession of Turkey and Ukraine to the EU, but the change of their political systems, interpreted as Europeanization of the same, is the factor, contributing to the extension of the European geo-political space. Through Turkey which from geographical point of view is a country-bridge, connecting two continents, EU will have a direct access to the Middle-East political scene. Through Ukraine, on the other hand, a deep penetration into the mainland will be achieved.

EU has turned into an ambitious geopolitical player with possibilities for its direct intervention in many more zones in Euroasia. For the EU the Wider Black Sea region is important not for its own merits only but because it is also a bridge leading towards Central Asia and the Middle East. As a matter of fact now we have enough reason to talk not only of the Wider Black Sea region, but also of the Wider Black Sea-Caspian region. In the last decade Russia had lost the control of the oil and natural gas export from the West Caspian coast. Now the EU is trying to supplant Russia and take control over a part of the East Caspian natural gas and oil. The „Nabucco” gas pipeline project is already one of the EU's top-priorities in the energy supply field. However, if Russia succeeds to keep present domination of the vertical routes for transportation of Caspian gas (northward ones), it will be in a position to safe its political influence in the eastern part of the Wider Black Sea-Caspian region.

The incorporation of Moldova and the Caucasian republics into the EU geopolitical zone cannot solve the problem of the separatists movements existing in those countries. The probability that Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia will change their pro-Russian orientation for the sake of the economic benefits to be obtained from closer relations with the EU, is rather slim. Brussels has no instrument for direct intervention in the separatist enclaves. Even the EU Border Assistance Mission to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, now in existence, has only been possible through the goodwill of the new authorities in Kiev. The expected independence of Kosovo which the EU is going to recognize will turn into an additional reason for rejection any European interference in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The EU is well aware that its relations with each group of the Wider Black Sea countries widely vary. That was why in 2007 r. the Black Sea Synergy was launched. It aims to complement the EU's mainly bilateral policies in the region: the ENP, the Strategic Partnership with Russian Federation and the accession negotiations with Turkey. Finally, in the territories bordering it the EU can create something called by the Bulgarian analyser, Ognyan Minchev, the European Commonwealth of Nations – a belt of friendly

countries politically and institutionally bound to the EU. All the countries of the Wider Black Sea region can be included in it, with the exception of Russia which is too big and too influential to be drawn into a somebody else's geopolitical orbit. The reverse scenario would mean for Turkey to move closer to the Islamic world, and for Moldova, Ukraine and the Caucasian republics, well - back to Russia. In such a case Bulgaria and Rumania will stay as the only European "islands" in a zone of strong geopolitical confrontations.