
A REGION AT A CROSSROAD: NEW REALITIES AND POLICIES FOR THE BLACK SEA REGION

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INTRODUCTION

Situated at the crossroad between Europe and Asia the Black Sea region has always been an intersection of civilizations, competing interests and struggle for influence and is therefore characterized by ongoing fragmentation, historical rivalries and heterogeneity. In the last twenty years the region has witnessed major transformations leading to changes in its context and dynamics, to increasing geo-strategic importance and shifts in the balance between regional and external actors. Today, the Black Sea is the newest neighbour of the European Union, a border to major security threats, a transition corridor of important transport and energy routes and a scene of pressing environmental and economic problems. It is the interplay between regional and international factors and the increasing influence of the policies and objectives of external actors that determine the current complex context in the Black Sea area and that call for increasing cooperation between the Black Sea states for the achievement of stability, sustainable development and integration in the region. Viewed against this background, the current paper intends to provide an overview of the state and dynamics in the Black Sea region with reference to the development of its cooperation process.

OVERVIEW AND DELINIATION OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

Placed on the margins of historically important regions like the Danube region to the West and the Caspian Basin and Central Asia to the East the Black Sea has for years served both as a bridge and a division between them. In the Black Sea area converge the major regional players Turkey and Russia and Ukraine, the Eastern Balkans and the Caucasus (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *The Black Sea region at a crossroad. Source: Author's visualization*



It is an intersection of civilizations where the Orthodox, Muslim and recently also the Western cultures meet each other. (Tassinari, 2006: 1) The long-standing political fragmentation of the area, together with its territorial variety and cultural diversity are often reasons for its description as a divided land or a series of territories. Presently, there still exists an ambiguity about its definition as a regional entity. (Manoli, 2012: 3; Manoli, 2010: 7) While some authors argue that historically the Black Sea has not represented an integral region in cultural, economic and political terms (Minchev, 2006: 18), other state it has not been coherent economic and political entity, but has still been a distinct region with own dynamics defined by the attempts to build bridges to neighbouring countries and to develop mutually beneficial relations with them (King, 2004: 7f).

Currently, there are several definitions of the region depending on who defines it or drafts a relevant policy. The main distinctions are between the six Black Sea littoral states Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey

and Ukraine and the wider Black Sea area, consisting of the 12 BSEC (Black Sea Economic Cooperation) member countries Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. (Manoli, 2012: 2) The term 'wider' Black Sea first appeared in the BSEC programme for 2004 as an attempt to reflect the BSEC's position regarding possible membership in the organization of non-littoral countries. According to this notion, the region should "extend beyond the littoral territories to include adjacent areas that are culturally, politically or economically linked" (Manoli, 2010: 8). Since 2007 the EU has also adopted the definition of a wider Black Sea region excluding Albania and Serbia and placing them in the Western Balkans sub-region (Manoli, 2012: 2). For the purposes of its security policy NATO in turn considers the wider Black Sea area as a part of an even broader region including the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia (Bocutoğlu and Koçer, n.d.: 1).

In the further course of this paper the term Black Sea region (used interchangeably with the term Black Sea area) will include the six littoral states Bulgaria, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine, as well as Moldova. This delineation of the region reflects the interconnectivity of the included countries in terms of their geostrategic, socio-cultural, political and economic situation. In the paper the connections of the Black Sea region with the Balkans and Central Asia will be put in the background.

Under the current definition of the Black Sea region its composition proves to be highly diversified. The different size and power of its countries, their systems of governance (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010: 38) and the discrepancies among them in economic, social and cultural aspects (Aydin, 2005: 3) add to its historical and geographical heterogeneity. In addition, the region is structurally heterogeneous due to the diverse relations of each country with the rest of the countries in the region, with the EU and other international organizations (Manoli, 2010: 9).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Throughout history the Black Sea has constantly been a subject of interest for major powers, which struggled to dominate it and to impose their influence in its area. Since antiquity, the Black Sea faced the dominance

of the Byzantine, Ottoman, and finally Russian Empires (Aydin, 2004: 6) and was first perceived as an Ottoman-Turkish lake (Balcer, 2011: 21) and later as a backyard to the Russian Empire. In the context of the Cold War, the Black Sea found itself again on the frontline of the global struggle for dominance (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010: 22). For 40 years the Black Sea was largely influenced by the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Its politics was subordinated to superpower rivalries (Canli, 2006: 3) due to which significant barriers were introduced in the area. As a result two division axes could be recognized in the Black Sea area—an East-West axis illustrating the Communist-Capitalist division and a North-South one representing the Byzantine and Ottoman authorities in the South and Russian and Soviet authority in the North. For many years the balance between these axes has determined the regional political economy in the Black Sea area. (Manoli, 2012: 5)

As a result of the successive dominance of major powers, the Black Sea was closed to the outside world for decades. After the end of the Cold War and the fundamental geopolitical changes that followed it (formation of new sovereign states after the collapse of the Soviet Union and emergence of new political, economic, and social realities), it got, for the first time in its history, the opportunity to open to the international scene (Aydin, 2004: 6). Yet, it has taken years till the West recognizes the importance of the region, a fact that could be explained by a number of reasons:

- the Black Sea is located at the edge of the European, Eurasian and Middle Eastern security spaces and has thus not been at the center of attention of any of them;
- after the collapse of the communist regime the efforts of the West were predominantly oriented towards integration of Central and Eastern Europe and towards managing the Balkan wars, so that the Black Sea region was placed again at the periphery of the political interest and concerns;
- the countries in the region were largely preoccupied with their own problems; engaged in civil wars and armed conflicts they showed little interest for a closer relation with the West, which on its turn saw limited perspectives for successful involvement in the region;

- the Black Sea has always suffered from lack of recognition from the West, which proves to be still largely unfamiliar with the region, its folks, problems and potentials. (Asmus, n.d.: 1)

It was just in recent years that the Black Sea region has been permanently placed in the international policy agenda. Three main reasons have played a major role in this regard:

- the geo-strategic importance of the region as a crossroad of major oil, gas, transport and trade routes, due to which the region has turned into a key area in the competition between major powers like Russia, US and the EU (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010: 12,23);
- the instability and the security problems in the region raised after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, the Black Sea region functioned as a buffer between the Western and the Soviet Block (Bocutoğlu and Koçer, n.d.: 6) and the political and military presence of the superpowers provided stability in it (Aydin, 2005: 1). With the demise of the Soviet Union, ancient sources of tension and grievances have been liberated (Aydin, 2005: 1). As a result, the Black Sea region has faced a number of security questions (energy supply, ‘frozen conflicts’, trafficking of weapons and drugs, etc.) and has turned into a scene of instability, considered by the EU and NATO as a facilitator of terrorist activities and illegal trafficking and thus as a threat to their own national interests (Bocutoğlu and Koçer, n.d.: 7);
- the EU enlargement, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, which turned the Black Sea region into a direct neighbour of the EU and brought the later closer to an area with energy security issues, domestic and inter-state conflicts, non-recognized entities and weak state systems as well as illegal trafficking of various kinds (Balcer, 2011: 8).

MAIN ACTORS AND POLICIES IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

In the context of transformation and increasing significance, the Black Sea region has turned into a scene of interaction of various actors. A diverse set of internal and external stakeholders are currently demonstrating “a

growing interest in or concern for the region's role in matters relating to security, energy supplies, trade routes and economic exchange" (Manoli, 2010: 9). As Balcer summarizes the Black Sea region today "stands at the intersection where Turkey claims its status as a regional power, Russia considers it as a zone of Russian influence, and the EU has been formulating its own policies of transformation for creating a secure ring around its borders" (Balcer, 2011: 21).

As a result of the diverse actors' constellation in the region there currently exist various interests and the Black Sea area is clearly divided between different strategic domains. On the one side it is a sphere of influence of the regional power Russia, whose policy still has an enormous impact on the domestic and foreign policies of the ex-Soviet states in the region (Institute for regional and international studies, n.d.: 3), as well as of Turkey, which perceives itself as a key player in the Black Sea cooperation process. On the other side, external powers are gaining increasing importance in shaping the strategic environment of the Black Sea, among them being the EU, "the newest member of the Black Sea regional complex" (Manoli, 2012: 16), and the US having "strong interests in safeguarding the movement of some goods, preventing the movement of others, and maintaining a presence in the Black Sea region" (Cohen and Irwin, 2006: 1). Following the line of this discussion it could be assumed that the current Black Sea regional agenda is predominantly determined by the search for a balance between the interests and policies of Moscow, Ankara and Brussels—a search, in which the smaller Black Sea states also try to find their place, but are currently playing a rather secondary role. In the following, the EU policies and interests in the Black Sea area and the course of their recent development will be studied in more details.

The EU is getting actively involved in the Black Sea region just in recent years, although its official engagement in the area dates back as early as the beginning of 1990s. The first signs of EU engagement in the Black Sea region could be found out in the post-Cold War period, when the EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) strategy was launched. The PCAs had the characteristics of a framework and were signed with individual countries (among which the Black Sea countries Georgia,

Ukraine, Moldova and Russia) in order to support their efforts towards market transition and democratization and were meant to serve as a basis for cooperation in the fields of trade, culture, science, etc. According to Pop the EU's main driving interests behind approaching the post-Soviet space at this time have been security, energy and democratization (Pop 2009, in Rusu 2011: 55).

In the early 1990s, along with the former Soviet republics, there were a number of other groups of states in the Black Sea, to which the EU needed an individual approach—Greece, an EU member state since 1981, Turkey, an applicant state at this time, as well as Bulgaria and Romania, both of which had already signed association agreements towards EU accession. Not surprisingly, the different types of statuses resulted in EU approaching the countries differentiated and mainly on the basis of bilateral agreements. It was not before 1997 when the EU launched a genuine regional approach to the Black Sea by adopting Communication on Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Region.

The EU Commission defined then the Black Sea region as Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey and expressed intentions to develop a new regional cooperation strategy. (Aydın and Açıkmeşe in Balcer, 2011: 11f) Yet, the regional approach for the Black Sea could not get a high priority in the EU agenda, since most of the EU efforts at this time were directed to facilitating the enlargement process.

In the beginning of the new century, the ever-increasing concerns about the external borders of the Union found their expression in the launching of a new policy towards the EU neighbouring countries—the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Officially launched in 2004 it is seemingly located somewhere between the EU foreign policy and the EU accession policy (CoR, 2007: 23f). A main objective of the ENP is the improvement of cross-border cooperation with countries along the EU's external land and maritime borders in order to avoid new dividing lines and to strengthen the prosperity, stability and security of all (EC, 2012). The ENP did not target the Black Sea region as a whole, but included initially only Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus (Eralp and Üstün, 2009: 126) and was later on

extended to cover also the South Caucasus countries Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Rusu, 2011: 55) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Coverage of the EU Neighbourhood Policy. Author's visualization



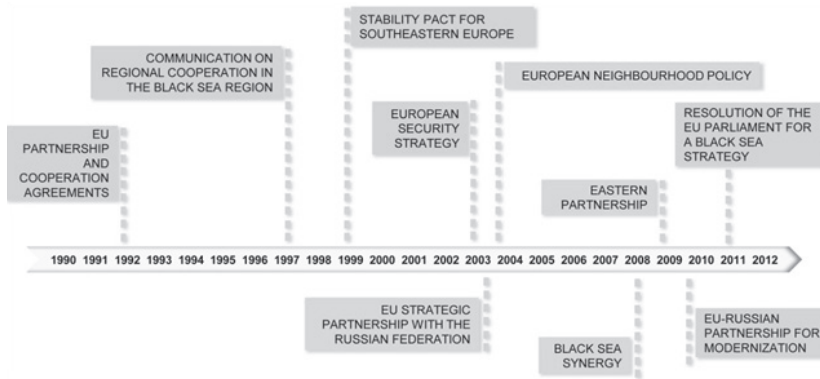
The ENP was based again on bilateral agreements between the EU and each of the states. Its effects were limited by the fact, that contrary to the Southeastern European countries, which were included in the EU enlargement policy, the ENP countries lacked membership incentive (Rusu, 2011: 55). Since Russia refused to be covered by the Neighborhood Policy, the EU adopted a Strategic Partnership with it, within which the four common spaces economy; freedom, security and justice; external security; research and education were created. The cooperation between Russia and the EU has been enriched by a recently launched Partnership for Modernization (2010). This covers cooperation on issues such as fight against corruption, socio-economic development, investment in key sectors, etc. (Aydın and Açıkmeşe in Balcer, 2011: 19).

In 2007, with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in the Union, the EU became a direct neighbour of a region, characterized by domestic and inter-state conflicts, non-recognized entities, illegal trafficking and energy security issues (Aydın and Açıkmeşe in Balcer, 2011: 8), which imposed the necessity for launching of new initiatives aimed at the region. Thus the EU enlargement happened to be a turning point in perceiving the Black Sea region as such and in permanently establishing it in the EU policies. Since then, contrary to the 1990s when the EU has mainly encouraged sectoral based networks on transport, energy and environmental issues in the Black Sea, an emphasize has been put on the necessity of a more synergetic approach for promotion of regional cooperation in the area (Manoli, 2010: 11f). As a result, two new regional initiatives have been launched in the Black Sea region:

- the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) in 2008 being a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy, addressing the region as a whole and not each single country separately, and aiming at reinvigorating cooperation among the Black Sea countries, and
- the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, being a new EU's foreign policy instrument targeting only the post-Soviet republics Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia (see Fig. 2), with the aim to bring them closer to the EU through intense bilateral cooperation. (Rusu, 2011: 55, Manoli, 2010: 11f)

The existence of groupings of countries that require different types of EU approach has resulted in the implementation of a complexity of policy instruments, the signing of a huge number of multilateral agreements and the launching of wide-ranging bilateral and sectoral activities in the region (see Figure 3). The focus on bilateral mechanisms and the application of a differentiated approach towards Russia, Turkey and the ENP partner countries are considered main challenges in the future EU's involvement in the Black Sea region. The multitude of EU policies and initiatives creates the impression of a lack of coherence, overlapping of agendas and a fragmented approach towards the area. In this regard it could be argued that the EU still lacks a coherent perspective and a holistic vision towards the Black Sea (Aydın and Açıkmüşe in Balcer, 2011: 7f). Being aware of this situation the EU Parliament passed a resolution on an EU Strategy for the Black Sea in January 2011 (EP, 2010). Up to date, however, no concrete actions have been taken by the European Commission for the preparation of the proposed Black Sea Strategy.

Figure 3: Overview of the EU policies and initiatives in the Black Sea region. Author's visualization



THE BLACK SEA REGIONAL COOPERATION

Since the early nineties, the Black Sea states, facing a number of common challenges and regional interdependencies, have tried to react to the altered circumstances after the collapse of the Soviet Union and to adapt to the

global trends by means of closer regional cooperation. The evolution of the Black Sea cooperation has been marked by constant changes in the political, economic and security landscape of the area and has faced various, often competing interests and policies of the involved stakeholders. The fact that the individual issues in the region have been approached by the various actors in a different way and within the frameworks of different policies has led to the generation of a variety of regional schemes of cooperation—from informal to highly institutionalized ones. Studying these, Manoli comes to the conclusion that their evolution could be categorized in two phases: first phase in the early nineties, considered as a response to the call for ‘return to Europe’ and focused on asserting the area’s post-Cold War international standing, and a second one, taking place after the EU enlargement in 2004, driven by sectoral issues and characterized by external engagement (Manoli, 2012: 2; Manoli, 2010: 5).

A study of the Black Sea regional and socioeconomic context, the regional dynamics, challenges and needs, the available strategic papers targeting the area (Vision for the Black Sea, Black Sea Synergy) and the existing regional potentials shows that four main sectors of regional interest have served as and are still main pillars of the Black Sea cooperation: environmental protection, transport and energy corridors, economic development and trade, security dialogue. This clearly shows an already existing high level of multifunctionality in the region, which has found its formal expression in the establishment of numerous organisations and cooperation initiatives, primary initiated by one of the regional powers Turkey or Russia. Presently, the Black Sea states are involved in several schemes at the same time, cooperating with different partners on different issues, which explain the often duplication and lack of coordination between the different regional formats. Yet, many of the regional institutions and initiatives prove to have insufficient regulatory and enforcement mechanisms as well as financial capacities while the participation of the private sector and the civil society in partnership initiatives in the region is largely limited.

Throughout the time, the cooperation in the Black Sea area has often been limited by the political realities and a series of geopolitical conditions, which undermine the drive for regionalism, weaken the process and limit

its benefits. Here counts for instance the fact that the largest powers in the Black Sea, Russia, Turkey and recently also EU, often pursue different policies in the region and address regional issues such as security and energy in accordance with their own nation interests and mainly on a bilateral basis. In this regard Manoli argues that “a shared mindset on regional cooperation as a preferred policy remains elusive at the moment” and stresses that it is especially Russia that does not perceive the Black Sea as “a stage for regional policies” (Manoli, 2010: 23).

*Figure 4: Main challenges for the Black Sea cooperation.
Author’s visualization*



Moreover, there exist important security issues in the Black Sea such as the unresolved secessionist conflicts, which negatively affect the process of regional cooperation (Commission on the Black Sea, 2010: 39). As a result, the Black Sea cooperation is still largely characterized by difficulties in the achievement of consensus and identification of common goals. The regional dimension is weakly presented in the national policies, the regional approach is often underestimated in the policy-making and the regional issues are not stressed in the bilateral relations between the Black Sea states. All these along with the need for improvement of the coordination, the finding out of fields of mutual interest and the setting of

common goals (see Figure 4) are main challenges for the future success of the Black Sea cooperation. Success that will lead to the enhancement of the Black Sea region's stability, sustainability and welfare.

CONCLUSION

After decades of isolation, fragmentation and struggle for influence, the Black Sea region, strategically located at the crossroad between Europe and Asia, is increasingly gaining importance for both local and external actors and is today getting a permanent place in their policy agendas. Going through an overview of the Black Sea region's recent development we could find out that the Black Sea states are facing significant challenges and opportunities in key sectors such as environment, transport, energy and security and respond to them with a number of locally driven cooperative actions. These actions are complemented by diverse initiatives and policies, launched by the European Union, directed to support the democratization and the security in the area, but also to improve the cooperation between the Black Sea states and between them and the Union. Up to date, however, the Black Sea cooperation shows rather weak outcomes explained by a variety of factors such as the lack of trust as well as difficulties in the achievement of consensus between the involved parties. As a result, despite the existence of various policies and cooperation schemes in the region the search for comprehensive approach to respond to the new realities still remains a key challenge for the years to come.

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