
Wider Black Sea : Concept And Reality

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As the US and EU promote the concept of a new 'Wider Black Sea' geopolitical region, economics may be the key to common identity and security, Haroutiun Khachatrian reports for ISN Security Watch.

While the concept of the "Wider Black Sea" geopolitical region looks promising given the support of external powers such as the US and the EU, who see the region as an important buffer between Europe and the Middle East, upon initial examination, the concept seems hardly viable, for the states that comprise it have little in common.

The nations included in this geopolitical labeling (Turkey, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Greece and some of the Balkan states) are all in close proximity to the Black Sea, but differ in many respects: language, religion, culture and governmental organization, among other things.

Some share historical problems, and unresolved territorial and ethnic conflicts (mostly inherited from the communist regimes) spoil the relations of many of these countries.

Finally, the region is under the competing influence of the three "geopolitical poles" - Russia, the US and the EU - a fact that seems to make every possibility of a common security approach improbable.

In particular, while many of the mentioned countries are members or aspiring members (Ukraine and Georgia) of NATO, Russia and Armenia are members of another military union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

However, while the nations of the Wider Black Sea region have little in common, the three geopolitical poles do have common interests, rendering the concept of this buffer region more feasible than at first glance.

Black Sea Synergy The EU is probably the most active among the three "geopolitical poles" in pushing the consolidation of these Black Sea nations and creating among them common interests.

While some of the countries in this conceptual region are EU members, and one, Turkey, is in the hopeful process of accession, the EU sees security in the region as a very important element along its southeastern border. This has been illustrated even more emphatically since last April, when the EU adopted the Black Sea Synergy (BSS) initiative.

European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Benita Ferrero-Waldner describes the BSS as a regional initiative aimed at developing cooperation within the Black Sea region itself and between the region and the EU.

"Through increased political attention at the regional level and strengthening of ongoing cooperation, Black Sea Synergy opens additional space for cooperation with Russia, Turkey and all eastern ENP partners," Ferrero-Waldner told ISN Security Watch.

The BSS builds upon ongoing sector-specific programs of the European Community, with energy, transport, environment, trade , research and science, information technology, fishery and maritime management as its priorities.

The commissioner said the initiative was welcomed by the countries in the region.

"There is broad agreement on the need for deeper EU involvement in the region and in defining the cooperation mechanisms, goals and priorities. We also agree on the main cooperation areas and the need for closer contacts with the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) organization, as well as with the other regional structures and initiatives active in the Black Sea area," she said.

This was further confirmed during the BSS' first ministerial meeting in Kiev on 14 February.

The EU is also the only one among the "poles" that is providing material support to the regional integration initiatives. Between 2007 and 2010, Black Sea Synergy is providing assistance to the non-EU countries in the region to the tune of EUR3.7 billion (US\$5.4 billion). In addition, the EU Cross-Border Cooperation Programme for the Black Sea (2007-2013) is doling out EUR17 million, and the region's countries will benefit from other EU funds amounting to some EUR4 billion for the same period.

One key issue that could boost consolidation efforts is the role of the conceptual region in the energy sector. The region is a bridge for transporting crude oil and natural gas to western markets from Russia, the Caspian basin and Central Asia.

Whereas Russia has made no official statement regarding this issue, the US position was voiced recently by US Deputy Undersecretary of State Matthew Bryza. In his speech at a conference in Yerevan ("Wider Black Sea: Perspectives for International and Regional Security," 14-15 January), Bryza said one of Washington's goals was to "find the way we can use the Black Sea truly as a means to move as much oil and natural gas to global markets as reliably as possible."

While expressing support to numerous existing and future regional energy projects, Bryza at the same time stressed that Washington viewed its moves as competition rather than confrontation.

"Our goal is not confrontation with Gazprom or Russia on natural gas, but [...] to increase competition. Our Euro-Atlantic community needs Gazprom and Russian oil producers to remain reliable suppliers of energy to Europe and to global markets," he said.

Security issues Many experts and diplomats have indicated their support for the creation of a special security structure within the conceptual Wider Black Sea region, promoting the idea as a good solution for regional stability.

It is evident, however, that the creation of such a structure is impossible, at least until the existing conflicts in and between the regional states are resolved. But many also agree that regional cooperation, if only in terms of economy, may help to pave the way for the settlement of these ongoing conflicts.. As such, it is a rather circular argument.

For her part, Ferrero-Waldner believes the BSS initiative will help enhance cooperation and resolve conflicts. "Black Sea Synergy is not intended to substitute for the existing negotiation frameworks or to deal directly with these conflicts.

Still, it can be said that the BSS will indeed tackle the underlying causes of these conflicts, which often include lack of economic development and lack of regional cooperation.

Moreover, the Cross-Border Cooperation program focuses on civil society, including people-to-people contacts, "which in my view may be a key element to facilitate solutions for the conflicts, she said.

"Black Sea Synergy is an indirect means to create climates in which current conflicts might be resolved and to prevent new conflicts from arising."

Both Washington and Brussels would prefer the regional security to be based on local structures rather than external forces. "Bolstering security [...] doesn't necessarily mean a larger role for NATO in the Black Sea but it means security cooperation," Bryza said in Yerevan.

With this general optimism, both experts and diplomats share the vision that a true framework of security in the Wider Black Sea region can emerge only once the countries of the region are linked by common economic interests (above and beyond the mere pumping of fuel, which is just a small factor for economies of the transit countries).

Economic cooperation and closed borders In this respect, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, a regional organization founded in 1992, is generally seen as a promising tool.

This 12-member structure (including the 10 nations of the Wider Black Sea region plus Albania and Serbia), has the potential to reorganize the region.

The BSEC has created a number of regional structures, including a Parliamentary Assembly and a Trade and Development Bank, and it enjoys EU and US support, both of whom hold observer status within the organization.

However, the BSEC (which represents a region of some 350 million people - or at least 150 million people in its heartland, excluding the distant regions of Russia) with a foreign trade capacity of over US\$300 billion annually - has realized few common projects, and its recent activities have been very low level.

Underlying regional political problems keep the organization from realizing its goals. A key problem remains sour Turkish-Armenian relations. Turkey does not have diplomatic relations with its eastern neighbor and has maintained a closed land border with Armenia since 1993.

The border closure was an act of solidarity with Azerbaijan, Turkey's ethnic relative which lost some territories in the 1990s in the war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Thereafter, Turkey has repeatedly supported Azerbaijan's policy to exclude Armenia from regional programs, the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline being the most famous example, as it runs through Georgia, bypassing its shortest route via Armenia.

Both the US and the EU have called on Turkey to open its border with Armenia. In particular, a 17 January European Parliament resolution urged "the South Caucasus republics and Turkey to pursue effectively policies of regional economic integration and to refrain from any short-sighted and politically motivated regional energy and transportation projects."

The latter criticism refers specifically to the Kars-Tbilisi railway project between Turkey and Georgia, which, according to the resolution, "bypasses the existing and fully operative rail line in Armenia."

In fact, Turkey prefers to spend some US\$600 million, a sum exceeding the annual BSEC budget, to construct this railroad instead of re-opening the existing Kars-Gyumri (Armenia) link, which would allow rail access with Tbilisi and beyond, with Azerbaijan.

In his speech in Yerevan, Bryza expressed hope that after the recent visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Washington "a new sense of commitment to a common strategic vision with Ankara on energy, but also starting with regard to South Caucasus and maybe even Armenia" may emerge.

Some experts, however, remain skeptical about the viability of these particular efforts.

"My belief is that the current Turkish administration is not inclined to improve its relations with Armenia," Ruben Safrastian, director of the Institute of Oriental Sciences, told ISN Security Watch.

In his opinion, this is more due to internal problems, in particular, the negative attitude of the Turkish elite regarding the recognition of the genocide of Armenians in 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

There is still some optimism, though.

"When what is now the EU was 15 years old, many questioned if it had real perspective? The BSEC is now 15 years old and hopefully it also will have a better future," Professor Mustafa Aydin of the Ankara University of Economics and Technology said in his report during the Yerevan conference.

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