

# THE EMPTY SHELL OF BLACK SEA REGIONALISM

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***At a time when Russia has become more assertive to the point of challenging the mainstay of the international order, it helped establish since 1945, and Turkey seeks to maintain the status quo in the realm of maritime security, the European Union struggles to define its foreign policy objectives and priorities towards the Eastern Neighborhood, and thereby show its gravitas. Consequently, the Black Sea region finds itself more divided, unsteady, and uncertain about its future as regional actors such as Ukraine and Georgia have cast aside their balancing acts towards a turn to the EU and NATO with negative territorial implications. Thus, the fluidity of the international order raises doubts as to whether regionalism is a realistic prospect in this region or it needs to be replaced by another model of regional governance.***

The Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) is about to receive a ton of silver as it will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> year of existence in late June 2017. An example of institutional regionalism, the BSEC, in spite of its membership being stuck at 12 since April 2004 with the accession of Serbia, keeps on ticking with its member states undoubtedly preparing another high profile commemoration, as it seems to do every five years attesting to its longevity and purpose. Yet, this venerable institution with its complex, yet comprehensive decision-making structure has not been meeting its benchmarks. To a large extent, the culprit is not the Organization itself and its people; it is the context, which smacks of a fluid regional and global order that finds the states comprising it increasingly at odds with each other. In other words, the BSEC is emblematic of the state of regionalism in the Black Sea Region or lack thereof.<sup>1</sup>

## **Black Sea Regionalism**

The reasons for the not so steady ride towards the Black Sea regionalism are many. Yet, they are also telling of its complexities as a region. It should not be forgotten that the drivers behind the construct or attempted construct of the Black Sea regionalism were the uncertainties the end of the Cold War brought to fore as the search for stability and security became sacrosanct among all the states of the region. In fact, the littoral states grew from four to six, further adding an element of urgency to the post-Cold War security architecture for the region. From a Turkish and a Russian perspective, the fluidity of the regional and European order also meant addressing the issue of maritime security and preservation of the *acquis* of the Montreux Convention. This kept their relations in a sort of equilibrium, albeit their strategic divide, which allowed for the

<sup>1</sup> T. Japaridze, P. Manoli, D. Triantaphyllou, and Y. Tsantoulis, The EU's Ambivalent Relationship with the BSEC: Reflecting on the Past, Mapping out the Future, "ICBSS Policy Brief", January 2010, pp. 1-34. [[http://icbss.org/media/133\\_original.pdf](http://icbss.org/media/133_original.pdf) access: 15 December 2016]

common quest of some sort of regionalism in the region.

Over time, the region has grown in size to include non-littoral countries with constantly shifting interests, and priorities, while the relations among some of the littoral states have progressively worsened, in particular with regard to those between Russia and Georgia, and Russia and Ukraine, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan given the volatility of the tenuous cease fire in Nagorno-Karabakh. These aforementioned undercurrents project the changing nature of the power dynamics among the states of the region where its hegemons – Russia and, to a lesser extent, Turkey – have become more active in trying to project their dominance, notwithstanding the fact that the reasons might have more to do with regime legitimacy or redefined foreign policy choices.

Linked to the issue of defining the region, anywhere from the narrow one, composed of the six littoral states, to the BSEC's membership of twelve countries, is whether the Black Sea Region can be perceived to be a product of the single region-building project or the encounter or cartographic space of many. These range from the vision of Turkey and Russia leading them to establish the BSEC in the early 1990s to cope somewhat with the exigencies of the changing global order, to the European Union vision of an all-compassing space, that looks towards it as the states and peoples comprising it, are attracted by the magnetic power of the European integration process. It is inevitable to the Euro-Atlantic version of the Black Sea regionalism that emerged in the mid-1990s, first as a German Marshall Fund initiative led by the late Ron Asmus, inspired by the accession of the Baltic states to NATO and the EU, and later adopted by the George W.

Bush administration as it sought to contain Russian aggression during the Putin era.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, the changing nature of the Black Sea regional framework reflects the limits of the European integration project, which has always been perceived as the optimal model of regionalism to be replicated elsewhere, in particular, around its borders. The proximity of the European Union to the Black Sea Region, and the osmosis between the two in terms of the multiple identities of some countries, as they belong both to the Union and the Black Sea Region, have a powerful effect on Black Sea regionalism. In other words, if the experiment falters in Europe, why should it succeed around the Black Sea? The exclusionist, national identity based, and in some cases, segregationist vision of those rejecting integration within many EU member states is mirrored by the rise both of exceptionalist agendas among the Black Sea states as well as those that seek solace or protection in the arms of other integrationist projects such as NATO.

Nevertheless, as a unit of analysis, the Black Sea Region remains in play in spite of its variable, accordion-like membership. Though, interests among the regional state actors may diverge, leading to potential conflicts. The frozen or protracted nature of these conflicts imply a certain regional security regime of the type Robert Jervis writes about: "Security regimes are thus both especially valuable and especially difficult to achieve - valuable, because individualistic actions are not only costly but dangerous; difficult to achieve, because the fear that the other is violating or will violate the common understanding is a potent incentive for each state to strike out on its own even if it would prefer the regime to prosper."<sup>3</sup> This, of course, implies a region-building process out of necessity. Thus,

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Y. Tsantoulis, *Towards a geneology of regions in International Relations: an autopsy of the Black Sea (region)*, "unpublished PhD Dissertation, University College London", 2016, p. 289.

<sup>3</sup> R. Jervis, *Security Regimes*, "International Organization", Spring 1982, p. 358.

according to Anssi Paasi, “[r]egional identities and affiliations with region are not always rosy visions of solidarity or unity but may coexist with internal oppositions based on cultural,



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economic and political conflict and processes of Othering, i.e. in making distinctions with other groups of people.”<sup>4</sup> There is a valid argument to be made that we are living in an era of enhanced competition among and between state actors, or in other words, in a world of pronounced realism. This return of the state coupled with “the emergence of autocratic or semi-autocratic regimes that have high levels of legitimacy, whether real or perceived, among the population, based on the primacy of a mix of national security and identity concerns” has, undoubtedly, an impact on the Black Sea Region.<sup>5</sup>

### **Individual Actors’ Factor**

The **Russia** factor in particular is crucial here due to a number of reasons. The first has to do with its attempt to maintain its

rank as a first-tier power both at global level via the promotion of what some refer to as a “Eurasian pole” and a regional revisionist heavyweight in the Black Sea region. According to Janusz Bugajski and Peter Doran, “[f]or the first time since the Cold War, it is no longer unthinkable to consider the possibility of Moscow extending its future control along the northern coast of the Black Sea. This would position Russia to exert greater pressure on NATO members Romania and Bulgaria, including the mouth of the Danube and, among other targets, the maritime energy fields of Romania’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ).”<sup>6</sup> The same pressures apply to Turkey, whose interests are directly challenged in particular with regard to the delicate equilibrium fostered by the Montreux Convention that has allowed it give a heads up in a domain of maritime security. The Russian actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its annexation of Crimea, and its fuelling of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine coupled with Turkey’s own troubles along its borders with Syria and Iraq have led it to acquiesce in part to “Russia’s gradual re-imperialization” of the Black Sea and its neutralization of its southern littoral.<sup>7</sup> Pavel Baev puts it best when he writes that Russia plays on “the unpredictability of the New Cold War”,<sup>8</sup> where with fundamentally no allies even in the post-Soviet space, Moscow has been making use of “hybrid” methods in its quest to compete globally.

<sup>4</sup> A. Paasi, The region, identity, and power, “Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences”, 2011, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the return of the state, see D. Triantaphyllou, Reflections on the fluidity of the international order, “CIES Commentary”, 21 December 2016, pp. 1-3.

[<http://www.khas.edu.tr/cms/cies/dosyalar/files/CIES%20Commentary%20-%20Dimitrios%20Triantaphyllou.pdf> access: 23 December 2016]

<sup>6</sup> J. Bugajski and P. B. Doran, Black Sea Rising: Russia’s Strategy in Southeast Europe, “CEPA Black Sea Strategic Report”, February 2016, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bugajski and P. B. Doran, Black Sea Rising: Russia’s Strategy in Southeast Europe, “CEPA Black Sea Strategic Report”, February 2016, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Baev, Russia plays of the unpredictability of the New Cold War, “CIES Commentary”, 31 October 2016,

[<http://www.khas.edu.tr/cms/cies/dosyalar/files/CIES%20Commentary%20-%20Pavel%20Baev.pdf> access: 23 December 2016]

In the meantime, the region's other big power, **Turkey**, has also misread the tell-tale signs of a regionalism in need of repair. In its attempt to ensure that it plays a pivotal role in what happens in its northern backyard, it has seen its relations with the European Union and NATO worsen considerably. Part of the reason for the aforementioned development is that it considers the Black Sea as a privileged sphere of influence over which its share of control has historically shrank and, as a result, it tries to maintain its hold. The loss from exclusive control over the sea during early Ottoman times to sharing it with Russia's historical expansion to the south in the quest of Peter the Great's vision of a warm sea port strengthened both Ottoman, and later, Turkish resolve, to keep the Black Sea away from big power politics. Eventually, the signing of the Montreux Convention in 1936, which gave Turkey the right to control access to and from the Black Sea, shaped its perception of its role in the region. As a result, as Mustafa Aydin notes, "[m]aritime security in the Black Sea as Turkey's sine qua non" became the order of the day with the evolving post-war regional context threatening Turkey's hold over the region.<sup>9</sup>

For Turkey, thus, regionalism has been a means to an end; i.e., ensuring its leadership in maritime security related issues via the proliferation of initiatives such as BLACKSEAFOR and the Black Sea

Harmony while Black Sea regionalism was limited to the economic agenda of the BSEC. Consequently, this has meant limiting the aspiration of other security actors such as NATO and, transformative entities, such as the EU, from having a significant role in region.<sup>10</sup> By seeking to minimize the role of the European Union in particular by not accepting it as a key stakeholder in the region and playing only lip service to EU-led initiatives such as the Black Sea Synergy, which aim to enhance regional cooperation, Turkey has contributed to the region's vulnerability in these times of Russian revisionism.

The inability of the Atlantic Alliance to have a Black Sea policy in light of Ankara's objections imply a weak role for NATO in the region. A cursory look at the July 2016 Warsaw Summit Communique reflects the presence of the term "Black Sea" eight times mainly in terms of recognizing the emerging challenges by Russia to the regional security order. It offers no concrete proposals for action other than developing a "tailored forward presence" and assessing "options for a strengthened NATO air and maritime presence."<sup>11</sup> This "Turkey First"<sup>12</sup> approach has weakened regionalism, the aspirations of countries like Ukraine and Georgia to come closer to the West, and the ability of the EU to contribute positively to a more comprehensive sort of regionalism than the one the BSEC is currently able to implement.

<sup>9</sup> M. Aydin, Geographical blessing versus geopolitical curse: great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", September 2009, p. 280.

<sup>10</sup> See S. Petriashvili, Where is the Black Sea Region in Turkey's Foreign Policy?, "Turkish Policy Quarterly", 13 December 2015, [[http://turkishpolicy.com/article/777/where-is-the-black-sea-region-in-turkeys-foreign-policy#\\_ftnref1](http://turkishpolicy.com/article/777/where-is-the-black-sea-region-in-turkeys-foreign-policy#_ftnref1) access: 31 December 2016]. See also, H. Shelest, What is the Future for Navy Cooperation in the Black Sea?, "UA: Ukraine Analytica", Issue 3 (5), 2016, pp. 56-61.

<sup>11</sup> See Article 41 of NATO Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016, [[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm) access: 30 December 2016]

<sup>12</sup> This approach is clearly elucidated in M. Aydin, Geographical blessing versus geopolitical curse: great power security agendas for the Black Sea region and a Turkish alternative, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", September 2009, pp. 271-285. See also, O. Ozdamar, The Black Sea Region in the New Turkish Foreign Policy, "EDAM, Black Sea Discussion Paper Series", 2011/2, pp. 1-14,

[[http://edam.org.tr/document/BSPaper\\_Series2.pdf](http://edam.org.tr/document/BSPaper_Series2.pdf) access: 30 December 2016]

## The European Union Approach

The European Union is the other key component in the quest for regionalism in the Black Sea Region. One cannot deny that it has produced a great number of initiatives, policies, and instruments that propound the virtues of regional cooperation as well as its interests.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, their effectiveness is in doubt for a number of reasons. First, the EU has failed to convince both Russia and Turkey that it is a regional stakeholder in its own right. Second, as a corollary to the aforementioned, the continued insistence of Turkey of decoupling its membership perspective from its “Turkey First” approach in the Black Sea Region has weakened the Union’s hand in prioritizing regional cooperation.

Third, the EU simultaneously invariably projects contradictory policies. On the one hand, it promotes the Black Sea Synergy as a new regional cooperation initiative very much modelled after its own model of regionalism within the EU space, while on the other, it promotes deeper integration for the regional countries via the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Though fundamentally, this has been the model of integration the EU has been pursuing elsewhere such as Southeastern Europe, it has faced major stumbling blocks in its Eastern Neighbourhood due to the overweening presence of the Russian Federation, as has projected a competing historical and “manifest destiny” narrative towards its near abroad. The dissonant perspectives

between countries within the EU proper, many of which considers the Eastern Partnership and its value laden approach as the primary instrument of curbing Russian influence, exacerbate the dividing lines among regional actors. The EU’s ambitious approach suffered a significant reversal with the EaP Vilnius Summit of Late November 2013, which led to a political volte-face within Ukraine with negative territorial implications.

Fourth, this EU overreach represents its underperformance as a foreign policy actor as its “capability-expectations gap” has not necessarily narrowed albeit its many efforts to reform its foreign policymaking capacity.<sup>14</sup> Invariably, this deficit implies, as has been stated repeatedly by this author, the Union’s lack of a strategy towards its Eastern Neighbourhood, or even in terms of its general foreign policy making priorities, as Robert Cooper suggests.<sup>15</sup> The mix between values and principles, a sense of unity and purpose, and realism has lacked the potency to deal with the evolving and fluid global order where revisionism and realpolitik have never really been absent. At the same time, the European project finds itself under attack from within with growing differences between its member states on the economic front, the handling of the refugee crisis, the reality of BREXIT and the lingering omen of GREXIT, and populism threat to undo the elitist politics of integration, the EU’s foreign policy challenge in the Black Sea is plainly evident.

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive list of EU initiatives towards its eastern neighbourhood, see D. Triantaphyllou, *The European Union and the Black Sea Region in Search of a Narrative or a New Paradigm*, “Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies”, June 2014, p. 289.

<sup>14</sup> The term is borrowed from Christopher Hill’s seminal article on explaining the EU’s foreign policy role. See C. Hill, *The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe’s International Role*, “Journal of Common Market Studies”, September 1993, pp. 305-328.

<sup>15</sup> See D. Triantaphyllou, *The European Union and the Black Sea Region in Search of a Narrative or a New Paradigm*, “Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies”, June 2014, pp. 286-299; R. Cooper, *The EU’s global strategy: Three quotations*, “ECFR Commentary”, 15 July 2016,

[[http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_the\\_eus\\_global\\_strategy\\_three\\_quotations\\_7077](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_eus_global_strategy_three_quotations_7077) access: 15 December 2016]

The new Global Strategy announced by its foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini on 28 June 2016 does suggest some effort on the part of the EU to be more coherent and emphatic with its “principled pragmatism” approach and its emphasis on supporting “cooperative regional orders”.<sup>16</sup> In other words, “Mogherini aims for a more realist approach without abandoning the EU’s transformational agenda”.<sup>17</sup> However, the EU’s capacity to deliver is already fundamentally challenged with the advent of BREXIT and the loss of the UK’s military capabilities. Thus, how it can work in the Black Sea Region at the time when Ukraine and Georgia, for example, have invested heavily in their ties with the

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West in the face of Russian revisionism, remains to be seen. In other words, although regionalism still commands a high place in the EU’s foreign policy, in practice its reach in the Black Sea region is very limited.

### **Future Perspectives**

The Black Sea Region is thus in flux as is the nature of its regionalism. Sergii

Glebov correctly asserts that “[m]ore or less stable before 2014, the Black Sea security system has been rapidly moving from the multilateral cooperative military mechanisms to the bipolar balance of power format.”<sup>18</sup> In this context, the foreign policy priorities of Ukraine and Georgia reflect foreign policies visions or approaches that present “no alternatives” in terms of what their directions should be. As indicated by the latest findings of the Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” regarding Ukrainian foreign policy, “the engagement and political interest of most domestic policy actors in foreign policy issues was defined by the armed conflict in the East and the need to contain the Russian aggression.”<sup>19</sup> In the Georgian case, the 29 December 2016 parliamentary resolution on foreign policy clearly states that the country’s main foreign policy priorities are EU and NATO membership as well as the pursuit of a “rational policy” with Russia in order to minimize threats and restore “territorial integrity.”<sup>20</sup>

As Russia challenges the postwar order to which it has been a privileged stakeholder by seeking to rewrite its terms, for the Black Sea, this implies one of two possible trends. The first is a continuation of the current regional order that favours cooperation among the region’s countries while fundamentally maintaining the status quo and, hence, the primacy of Turkey and Russia. The second is a regional order that a sort of bipolar (Russia and the West) or even trilateral (Russia,

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<sup>16</sup> Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, “European External Action Service”, June 2016, [[https://eeas.europa.eu/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf) access: 24 December 2016]

<sup>17</sup> S. Lehne, The EU Global Strategy, a Triumph of Hope Over Experience, “Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe”, 4 July 2016, [<http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=64003> access: 16 December 2016]

<sup>18</sup> S. Glebov, The Black Sea Security Architecture in Times of Collapse: The Case of Annexed Crimea and Military Challenges for the US, NATO, EU, Turkey, and Ukraine, “UA: Ukraine Analytica”, Issue 3 (5), 2016, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> “Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2015”: Overall Assessment of Ukraine’s Foreign Policy, “UA: Ukraine Analytica”, Issue 2 (4), 2016, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Parliament Adopts Resolution on Foreign Policy, “Civil Georgia”, 30 December 2016, [<http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29737> access: 2 January 2017]

Turkey, and the West) balance of power whereby minimal cooperation at regional level is ensured while its parts enhance their cooperation with the others that share the same aspirations and objectives.<sup>21</sup> The question in this case is whether the key stakeholders are ready to work toward such a security order or regime where all sides balance the others out in order to ensure regional stability.

Undoubtedly, as the BSEC prepares to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> year in existence in late June 2017, none of the issues presented here will be at central stage as the longevity of the Organization and the usefulness of its work will be highlighted. Yet, the end of utopianism is here as is the need for a strategy to counter Russian revisionism and aggression. Regionalism will undoubtedly survive for some time to come in the Black Sea Region but its current shape and form is not sustainable as it risks collapse from within as its dominant actor risks subverting it completely. Also, one should not discount the risk of an accidental conflict.<sup>22</sup> Yet again, much will depend on whether the incoming

Trump administration will strike a Faustian bargain with Vladimir Putin's Russia that will have implications in the Black Sea Region and pretty much everywhere else.

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<sup>21</sup> For a two scenario variant regarding the future evolution of relations between Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea Region, see M. Celikpala and D. Triantaphyllou, The Changing Face of Black Sea Security, "PONARS Eurasia Commentary", 31 May 2016, [<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/article/changing-face-black-sea-security> access: 2 January 2017]

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, R.N. Burns and J.L. Jones, Restoring the Power and Purpose of the NATO Alliance, "Atlantic Council Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security" June 2016, p. 8, [[http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Restoring\\_the\\_Power\\_and\\_Purpose\\_of\\_the\\_NATO\\_Alliance\\_web\\_0624.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Restoring_the_Power_and_Purpose_of_the_NATO_Alliance_web_0624.pdf) access: 20 December 2016]