

FROM “DUBLIN TO BAKU”: FUTURE SCENARIOS ON EU’S POLICIES TOWARDS BLACK SEA REGION

The Black Sea region (BS) — geographically defined as the land and seascape between the Balkans and the Caucasus and current politically located within the Wider Europe strategy from “Dublin to Baku” — has attained new significance in the wake of the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007. The Black Sea is now in part an internal sea of the EU. What is remarkable about the Black Sea region¹ at present is that despite the numerous territorial disputes and historical mutual distrust, despite the ongoing armed conflict among the regional states, the region has managed to sustain a limbo of war and peace. While the regions surrounding the Black Sea were rapidly integrated into the EU, improvements made within the BS states have lead policy makers to say that it is now time for the EU to engage more deeply with the affairs of the BS area. In less than two decades, the European Union has pushed its eastern frontier from Berlin to the Black

Sea, and this geopolitical shift opens up new opportunities, as well as new challenges. However, from a current standpoint, it is easy to locate the weak elements of the EU’s policy towards the BS area.

The Black Sea countries’ regional cooperation and further engagement was not high on their agenda due to the conflicts between states, especially within and beyond the South Caucasus countries. Interestingly, post-Soviet era transformation of the European Union and the conflicts in the Black Sea countries happened at more or less the same time; however the institutionally weak EU failed to respond to the challenges. During the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU was confronted with very high expectations with regard to its capacities; there was a gap between what these countries were hoping for and what the EU or its member countries were providing. The EU strategy towards the region and the regional states was not based on a unified ap- ▶

proach agreed amongst member states. One important factor here was the naming of the region. At this point, the countries of the South Caucasus – Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia – saw the “strategic Black Sea region” as the gateway to Europe, but did not consider themselves to be part of it. During this time, despite heightened interest in the area, the region’s real priorities and needs were in fact largely ignored by the EU, owing to its lack of institutional capacity. Thus the region’s security issues and the attendant conflict resolution processes were mainly handled by the OSCE (in the case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and the United Nation (for the South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts). Until 2005, there was no attempt by the EU to address Moldova’s Transnistria conflict.²

The accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 led to the EU’s increased involvement in the area. This was based on the ENP, the EU’s basic blueprint for its activity in the region, and the Black Sea Synergy document, which in 2007 became the most concrete indicator of the EU’s interest in the area. Slow development by partner states and the failure on the part of some countries to achieve ENP objectives frustrated the EU, and this situation promoted the mistaken notion that EU membership was not something to which the Black Sea states tended to aspire.



The deep frustration with past EU policies was brought to the fore by the August 2008 war, which also raised exponentially the perceived urgency of the EU’s contribution to conflict resolution in the Eastern Neighborhood. Thus the EU launched the Eastern Partnership in May 2009, and held the Prague Summit. From the outset, several political as well as technical challenges have bedeviled the EaP. The Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit is silent on the specifics of conflict resolution. It emphasizes only “the need for their earliest peaceful settlement on the basis of principles and norms of international law”.³ Two years have passed since the Prague Summit, but little tangible progress that has been observed. One area in which it is both possible and plausible to achieve concrete practical result in the short-term is visa facilitation between partner countries.

In light of the aforementioned summary of what EU has done in the region, it is possible to imagine both a “pessimistic” and an “optimistic” scenario for near future.

A pessimistic or worst -case scenario of the BS region’s political development

The worst-case scenario can be defined as “the status quo” scenario, where existing conflicts remain in stasis, and countries are motivated by the logic of zero-sum games. This “no war no peace” situation represents additional elements for the transformation of the Eastern borders of the Black Sea area- the South Caucasus in a volatile and unstable region; the 2008 August War, showed once more how the intractable and fragile “status quo” has many friends, in contradiction to sociological “friend-enemy” discourse. In this case, only enemies of the “status quo” situation can be winners of a game which is still being played on the basis of zero-sum principles. This worst case scenario sees external actors increasing their stake in the control of the region. In this scenario, the EU and NATO are losing their appeal for regional countries, especially for young independent countries like Georgia, for whom the post-2008 “not stopping Russia” seriously damaged the standing of EU. As a result,

the Black Sea area is becoming a playground for Russia; with its illegal recognition of Abkhazia's independence and the Sevastopol agreement in Ukraine, Moscow sees the BS region as, a post-Soviet, new-Russia area. Indeed, in this case the real losers are the societies and countries in the region, which are unable to reap the economic and political benefits that the region holds. At this point, it is important to mention the power dynamic that has developed through regional conflicts. The 2008 Russian-Georgian war showed that "frozen conflicts" have become a clash or power struggle between Moscow and the West, rather than a regional conflict between the countries directly involved. Thus, the struggle to gain control of this strategically important region paved the way the war in South Ossetia by improving Western influence in Georgia, and attempting to counter balance the resurgence of the Russian power.

Key issues regarding the Worst Case scenario

Threat to democratic political transition process

Ukraine and Georgia, countries that changed their autocratic regimes for democratic ones through revolution, are now experiencing a reversal of democratic reforms, along within the entire Post-Soviet area and Black Sea Region. The combination of the "hard power" dynamic, the failure of democracy, increased militarization of states, and disrespect for human rights have served to create an environment conducive to the rise of new conflicts. In conflict zones, hostilities are resumed and develop into 'hot conflicts'. This also jeopardizes the regional energy infrastructure and the energy security crucial to future EU development plans.

The protection of status quo is against EU interests

In this region, conflict resolution is troubled by unwillingness to engage constructively in a meaningful peace-building process. While there exist official structures for conflict settlement (OSCE Minsk Group, UN, etc), they remain empty promises in these drawn out and futile negotiating processes. However, in the

long run, [if] this "no war, no peace" situation in the region is maintained with neither bilateral/multilateral peace agreements nor a negotiated settlement, [then] the relative stability and the fragile cease-fires between Armenia and Azerbaijan on one hand, and Georgia and Russia on the other, are threatened. These 'empty structures' have operated in the South Caucasus up until now. However, as mentioned, in the long-term this pattern may change, were conflicts to arise between big regional powers that would entrap the South Caucasian states, specifically via the confrontations by external actors, or if the existing conflicts between the South Caucasian states were to escalate.

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Russia develops more leverage in the neighbourhood via political and economic mechanisms that have enable it to consolidate control over the region, namely through diplomatic measures (unilateral recognition of self proclaimed states) and military action (Russian-Georgian conflict). The "Reset" policy with the US and the "special relationship" with Germany have been other determining factors. Additionally, the counter ideology of Islamic fundamentalism present in the North Caucasus has spill-over effects across the entire Black Sea Region, contributing to conditions for increased instability and fundamentalism in the South Caucasus.

Turkey has become an emerging regional power, but as seen in 90's, seems more representative of the EU, less so of NATO. Turkey becomes inward-looking and re-orient its national policies, forging partnerships in the East (Russia, Iran). In this respect, in the short term, Turkish accession to EU seems an important factor. Yet in some ways Turkey remains at the mercy

of other states' foreign policies, with the EU demanding further reforms, only to continually reject Turkish membership, and Turkey's dependence on Russian energy limiting its room to maneuver in the Caucasus/Black Sea region. The reluctance of EU leaders to support Turkish accession and the EU's involvement in regional matters compounds Turkish acrimony toward the West.

At the regional level, the increasingly non-democratic attitudes and geopolitical situation create conducive conditions for the development of this worst case scenario. Moreover, countries are locked in zero-sum logic dynamics, preventing regional cooperation and the establishment of a meaningful conflict resolution process. The increased militarization of states contributes to a security dilemma at the regional level, and external actors drastically limit the possibilities of democratic development. Engaging with the Black Sea as a region – as opposed to engaging only with

specific countries – is nevertheless problematic for the EU, as the soft power tools it favours are ineffective in a region where 'hard security' is what works.

The EU's strategic dilemma: Is the South Caucasus part of the Black Sea area, or separate region?

Under the EU's current policy, the Black Sea region includes the South Caucasus. In the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are uncertain about this geographical dimension of EU policy, in the sense that they are not sure whether they consider themselves to be part of the BS region. After 2008, the EU added the South Caucasus countries to its new "Eastern Partnership" initiative. At the same time, the European Parliament resolution of *May 20th 2010*, "on the need for an EU strategy for the *South Caucasus*", stressed that "frozen conflicts are an impediment to the economic and social development



and hinder the improvement of the standard of living of the South Caucasus region as well as the full development of the Eastern Partnership of the ENP; whereas a peaceful resolution of the conflicts is essential for stability in the EU Neighbourhood".⁴ Unfortunately, the South Caucasus countries are still waiting for a significant step in the direction of the resolution of these conflicts; however, interestingly enough, the EU adopted a new resolution on January 20th of this year, called "EU Strategy in the Black Sea Region"⁵ in terms of strategy, having two resolutions issued by a single body, the EU, creates confusion over the entire Wider Black Sea Region. First of all, is the South Caucasus part of the Black Sea Strategy? If yes, why is the latest resolution limited to cooperation, without looking more deeply into the region's problems. Secondly, the EU's Black Sea Strategy stresses the importance of the resolution of regional conflicts and describes the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a real threat, but there is no discussion of the other and more important conflict, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These disparities create uncertainty and diminish faith in the EU and EU institutions.

An optimistic or best-case scenario of political development in the BS region

The best case scenario is an integrated Black Sea region with strong and effective linkages with the EU. Key regional actors, like Russia and Turkey (as an EU member - important for this scenario) participate fully and constructively in regional cooperation. A sustainable process for the resolution of conflicts is in place, and monitored and guaranteed by international organizations. These national developments facilitate the gradual integration of the area, and at the same time support its stronger inclusion in the common European space. A key external stabilizing factor is the role of the EU and its ability to take decisive leadership in terms of its foreign policy on the Black Sea Region. EU and NATO memberships, or a clear path leading to future memberships, are offered to interested and qualifying ENP countries in the region. The dimension of the Black Sea region within the EU's neighborhood policies fills an obvious gap in the EU's vision for a wider Europe. The EU is moving towards a

degree of commonality in its approaches to each of the three enclosed seas of its periphery — the Baltic, the Mediterranean and now the Black Sea. While the political profiles of these maritime regions are of course very different, they give rise to many of the same policy challenges. In this sense, the Black Sea could fit broadly into the pattern of the EU's regionalism already established in successful cases (Mediterranean, Balkan Stability); however but it still has to be determined whether to play the whole EU initiative through the preexisting BSEC organization, and how agreement might be reached with Russia and Turkey as the major players. In light of the 2011 "Arab Spring", the strategic importance of the Black

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Sea to the U.S. has grown in relation to challenges in the broader Middle East. This could give new impetus to EU-US common policies towards the region. As mentioned before, the reset of US-Russia relations has caused many problems in terms of the US's narrowing strategic vision for the post-Soviet space as a whole. The developments in the Middle East could drive a new and enhanced US foreign policy for the Black Sea and South Caucasus. This scenario is part of the optimistic vision for 2020. It may be that Turkey's role will be important in developing the EU's strategy for the region. Since Turkey is a pivotal actor in the Black Sea region, future relations with Turkey are intimately connected to the region's future. Ankara's views on broader regional cooperation will have a powerful impact on EU perspectives, but EU leaders must explain to their countries just how important Turkey's accession to EU is. Without a clear promise to Ankara, the EU's game-playing will damage and limit its potential role in the Black Sea region. ►

These scenarios leave a lot of room for interpretation and allow for some out-of-the-box thinking.

Conclusion/Findings:

- According to the findings regarding several of these security interests, the EU is faced with a growing dilemma: how to engage with the region and pursue its security interests without simultaneously challenging those of Russia, especially considering the direction Russia's policies toward the region have taken over the last few years.

- Furthermore, the Eastern Partnership does not promise to alter EU-Russia relations. The EaP was met with relative indifference by Russia, which has been excluded from the initiative, even though the proposal emphasized the potential need for third party involvement, supposedly meaning Russia. However, it is not clear how the EU would envision Russian involvement.

- The EU's engagement in the Black Sea region with regard to boosting energy security cannot be detached from the resolution of the region's conflicts, which constitutes a key precondition for the consolidation of stability and sound state building processes in the area. These processes are in turn linked to a further challenge to Russian interests, namely the integration of the Black Sea states within European and Transatlantic institutions.

- The long-term strategy within the European Union's Black Sea policy is most significant, in the light of the expected expansion of this great northern power towards the south and the east. If the EU is able to tempt Ukraine and neighboring Moldova into its ever-widening maw, then, added to Romania's and Bulgaria's existing EU memberships, this would give the EU possession of the whole of the western and much of the northern shores of the Black Sea. This would pave the way for further eastward progression into Georgia and Azerbaijan, and from there to the strategic Caspian Sea, bordering oil-rich Iran.

- One of the undeniable facts is that the EU's leverage is limited by the fact that there is no common political view within the organization regarding the South Caucasus and entire Black Sea region's security problems. Peace processes in the South Caucasus need more active EU engagement. For example, in the Balkans, the peace process and implementation of peace agreements was significantly enhanced by the prospect of EU membership perspective. It is therefore important to develop a similar strategic vision for the Black Sea countries, especially toward the South Caucasus. This would make it easier for their leaders to persuade the public of the need to compromise. These are undoubtedly the key obstacles to the successful implementation of any EU strategy to "assist the transformation of the Black Sea into a region of sustainable peace, stability and prosperity and to fully use its potential to contribute to the peaceful solution of the conflicts in the region by combining its soft power with a firm approach."

Notes:

* **Zaur Shiryev** is foreign policy analyst at the Center for Strategic Studies in Baku, Azerbaijan.

1. The Black Sea region is defined as the area covered by the eleven states participating in the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Project (BSEC) – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, the Russian Federation, Turkey and Ukraine.
2. Since October 2005 - talks in the so-called 5+2 format (Moldova, Transnistria, OSCE, Russia, Ukraine plus the EU and the USA as observers) were launched
3. European Council. *Joint Declarations of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*,
4. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2011:161E:0136:0147:EN:PDF>
5. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=REPORT&reference=A7-2010-0378&language=EN>