



European Ideas Network

Five challenges facing the European Union within the Black Sea region

Summary

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"Transports, telecommunications and open up Black Sea"

The panel discussion took place against the following backdrop: a trans-Atlantic community beleaguered by the war in Afghanistan, potential threats in Iran, the financial crisis, de-leveraging of national budgets, and an increasing sense that the European Union and the Black Sea region are drifting apart. If the EU is to reinvigorate Black Sea engagement and its leadership within this area, its leaders will have to accomplish five interrelated objectives.

Firstly, the European Union must demonstrate unambiguous determination to engage within the Black Sea region and fill in the strategic vacuum demonstrated by the August 2008 crisis. What has been a momentum of increasing EU engagement via multiple policies (European Neighbourhood Policy, Black Sea Synergy, Eastern Partnership, Enlargement Policy, and Cohesion Policy) is instead regarded as a momentum of European withdrawals and media accounts of the return of oligarchic elites and "unfrozen" conflict instability. However, without a clear commitment from the Black Sea countries to support their social, economic and political reforms, one cannot expect Europe to sustain or increase its contribution to this important region.

Europe's emphasis on "transformation", intended to convey progress through the upgrading of contractual relations with the Black Sea countries and shared responsibility, does not convey a clear commitment to enlargement. Following the second enlargement wave and integration of Romania and Bulgaria, there is an inescapable odour of geopolitical withdrawal, if not retreat. This reinforces the nationalist position of the post-Soviet and post-Ottoman political elites, and makes allies and partners question not only their transformation sacrifices, but also the value of EU leadership. A clearly articulated resolve to integrate the Black Sea area in a more inclusive policy is needed, to complement to the EU's long-term commitment to the political and economic development of the area.

Secondly, the EU must reaffirm Black Sea centrality and its pivotal role in Europe's global strategy. The drifting apart of the two communities has many historic causes, but they include the EU's failure to present a clear Black Sea agenda that goes beyond traditional discourse and its vaguely defined "reset" of relations with Russia. Black Sea leaders have been left with the impression that the European Union views it as increasingly irrelevant to EU interests in the world at large. Yet, the European Union and the Russian Federation are each stronger global players when they act together. Globalisation has increased the need to jointly develop political, economic and technological capabilities. On this last point, under its Strategic Partnership with the Russian Federation, as well as the EU 2020 strategy proposing a single digital market, the EU could explore new forms of results-oriented cooperation in the area of infrastructure deployment with the Russian Federation and other Black Sea countries. Some in the EU, particularly those eager to turn back to Clausewitzian concepts, are pointing out the security threat of such cooperation.

However, such cooperation would be a powerful demonstration of the EU's commitment to the Black Sea community where "history is still over-represented and technology under-represented" (Ungureanu). The capability to exercise power *with others* will require, as it was stressed by Joseph S. Nye, a deeper understanding of power, how it is changing, and how to construct efficient "smart power" strategies that combine hard- and soft-power resources in an information age.

Thirdly, the EU needs to re-establish the spatial vision of the Black Sea area as a whole, democratic and secure, as was achieved for the Mediterranean area, a "neighbourhood spatial representation" (Beckouche) or "regional spatial model" (Bakalov). Few in Europe envisage defining a clear spatial representation of the Black Sea region. The voluntary relinquishment of this vision has strategic consequences. It undermines the implementation of a more efficient cohesion policy, as well as more coordinated deployment of transport and telecommunication infrastructures. Nevertheless, in a global context, the growing interdependence of regions prompts the need for its comprehensive spatial representation. For better policy making we need better data and their spacial representation.

As for the fourth objective, the Black Sea leaders must mitigate exaggerated expectations about the new infrastructure projects. Following the financial and economic crisis, the EU could not have sufficient resources for co-financing the transport and telecommunication infrastructure needed within the Black Sea. Because it is a political statement requiring consensus by the 27 Member States, the language of future financial perspectives is unlikely to be sufficiently optimistic to generate greater public appreciation and support. However, such appreciation has never been determined by official strategies and plans but by concrete commitments and visible actions. As stressed by the Minister Boagiu, transport infrastructure projects provide concrete examples of the European Union's solidarity. We need efficient infrastructure solutions, in particular the development of intermodal transport and maritime terminals. With EU support, Constanta harbour could become the second biggest in Europe, after Amsterdam, and these developments would benefit the whole EU. Innovative financing models as well as special investment vehicles open to third countries could also be explored.

And fifthly, the EU must chart the Black Sea area's way forward in an era of financial austerity. The financial crisis has precipitated infrastructure budget cuts across the region. This promises to be a prolonged era, which could unleash divisive, competitive dynamics that could undermine the EU's economic and trade capability in particular with Eastern Europe and emerging Asian countries. Future comprehensive transport and telecom infrastructure development should provide an economic and trade capability blueprint that leverages austerity to drive long overdue strategic pan-European prioritisation, innovation and cooperation. The absence of such a blueprint is sure to hamper both the EU's and the Black

Sea countries' economic, social and cultural development that are crucial to a truly viable long-term "broadband appetite" and the opening-up of the Black Sea.

Finally, better use of passive infrastructure would significantly reduce telecom infrastructure financing, as around 80% of the costs of deploying new infrastructure are civil engineering costs.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the panel presented an urgent and complex set of challenges. How they are managed in the near future will define not only the EU's leadership in the area but also the EU's relevance as a global geopolitical player in the 21st century.