

SEMINAR
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 European foreign policy
 and the Black Sea Region

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The EUISS organised a seminar on European Foreign Policy and the Black Sea Region as part of the Harvard Black Sea Security Programme 2010. Every year this programme brings together representatives of the political and security elites of the Black Sea countries in order to discuss political and security relations in the region, as well as the role of external actors such as the EU, NATO and the US. The EUISS seminar aimed at giving participants from the region an opportunity to familiarise themselves with European perspectives and to foster an exchange of views and opinions with experts from Paris and Brussels before they moved on to the US.

still in the process of defining their roles. Several unresolved conflicts block the smooth and constructive development of regional relations, and many political, economic, environmental and security challenges remain unresolved. It was stressed that for regional cooperation to develop, thus allowing for these problems to be tackled efficiently, a stronger sense of regional identity needs to emerge in the Black Sea region. However, this is not an easy process since the countries in the region diverge greatly in terms of the current stages of their respective economic and political development, as well as in terms of their foreign policy postures.

It was pointed out during the discussions that, from a historical perspective, the Black Sea region is relatively young. After several decades during which the region existed as a 'Soviet lake', the breakdown of the Soviet Union opened it up to external influences. The large littoral states, notably Russia, Turkey and also the Ukraine, are



EU policy towards the region was an important focus of the debate. The EU has made significant advances regarding its engagement in and with the countries around the Black Sea. It has developed a variety of instruments with which it aims to meet the various challenges that its partner countries face. The EU is confronted with very high expectations as

to its capacities both for quick *rapprochement* with individual countries and to help resolve the problems of the region. Several participants pointed out a significant gap between those expectations and the EU's ability to deliver.

The ENP and the Eastern Partnership, it was argued, suffer from a lack of incentive, particularly regarding the absence of a concrete membership perspective for countries in the Eastern neighbourhood. The EU has become an important actor in conflict resolution processes in the region, but its policy remains rather ineffective due to a lack of resolve and common understanding of the conflict situations.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the EU is engaged in a constant process of fine-tuning and developing its policy instruments and that the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty will bring more coherence and clarity to EU foreign policy. At the same time, however, the implementation phase of the treaty plunges the EU into a complicated period of transition with the result that for the moment there is little evidence of such coherence or clarity. Proactive public diplomacy initiatives to explain ongoing changes to external partners would be of great help here so as to reduce fears and concerns in the EU's neighbourhood. However, the emerging European External Action Service (EEAS) lacks the means and resources to pursue such a policy.

Cooperation between the EU and significant countries in the region, as well as with other external actors, was an important issue discussed at the seminar.

There was broad agreement that Russia continues to play a predominant – and not always constructive – role in the development of regional relations. Most participants perceived a recent change in Russia's policy and attitude towards the region. In the aftermath of the elections in Ukraine, Moscow seems to be taking a more relaxed stance on many regional issues, among them EU engagement via the Eastern Partnership and other policies. At the same time, however, participants saw this more as a tactical adaptation than a strategic *volte-face*. It was stressed that Russia will keep striv-

ing for the expansion of its influence in the region by means of both hard and soft power.

Many participants saw Turkey as an important actor still in search of a clear definition of its role. Ankara's recent initiatives in the South Caucasus - and Russia's supportive attitude - gave some participants the impression that the South Caucasus could become a Turkish-Russian condominium with little room for manoeuvre for either the EU or the US. It was emphasised that Turkey's insistence on an independent policy in the region was closely linked to the stalling of the EU accession process. In general, participants from the region found that the EU underestimated Turkey's importance for international relations in the Black Sea region.

NATO too has become increasingly involved in the Black Sea region in the past two decades. Cooperation with the regional partner countries varies according to their own interest and capacities. It was pointed out that NATO remains committed to the region and that it plays a role in current debates on the new strategic concept. NATO and the EU both pursue similar goals in terms of the democratisation and stabilisation of the region. At the same time, however, cooperation between the two in the Black Sea region remains limited.

Participants agreed that more cooperation between the EU and the US in the Black Sea region would be desirable. During the Bush Administration, day-to-day coordination and interaction between the EU and the US on the ground was rather intense, while both sides' policies differed in terms of their strategic orientation. The advent of the Obama Administration seems to have reversed this state of affairs: while there is greater overlap now between Washington and Brussels regarding regional relations and relations with Russia, the level of interaction on the ground has diminished considerably. It was pointed out that this could be a window of opportunity for the EU to take the lead and shape EU-US cooperation in the Black Sea region and the Eastern neighbourhood. It remains unclear however if the EU will be able to do so, given the distractions generated by the transition phase that it is currently undergoing.