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THE EU AND THE BLACK SEA

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Summary

The EU has never had a policy towards the Black Sea region as such. What are the main trends in the region that affect the EU and its member states? Should the EU develop a region-wide strategy? If so, how and in which areas?

These questions were explored at a high level conference held at the EU Institute for Security Studies. The conference brought together EU and member state officials, as well as officials from countries around the Black Sea and experts on the region. In addition, the conference hosted Salome Zourabishvili, the former Georgian foreign minister, who spoke during the lunch on her views of regional developments. The Secretary General of BSEC, Tedo Japaridze (also a former Georgian foreign minister) also participated.

There is a strong consensus that the Black Sea region is of increasing importance for the EU. However, views remain divergent on how the EU should move forward – through a strategic region-wide approach or more targeted sectoral policies (neither of which are mutually exclusive).

EU Interest and Policies

Rising EU interest in the Black Sea region is driven by a combination of factors:

- Greece, as a member state of the EU and the Organisation of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), has an interest in the EU developing a more coherent regional approach.
- The impending accession of Bulgaria and Romania will make the Union a de facto Black Sea power. Enlargement will alter the political geography of Union and also place the interests and policies of these two new member states onto the agenda of CFSP.

- Linked with this, the opening of accession talks with Turkey, a traditional Black Sea power, also places the region firmly onto the EU agenda.
- Since 2003, the EU has developed a higher profile with the states to the north and east of the Black Sea. *European Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP) Action Plans have been agreed with Moldova and Ukraine and are being negotiated with the three South Caucasus states.
- In parallel, the Council has appointed two EU Special Representatives (EUSR) to the region, in 2003 to the South Caucasus and in 2005 to Moldova. The EUSRs signal an interest in raising the EU profile in the region, and specifically in terms of settling its unresolved conflicts.
- In 2005, the EU and Russia agreed to work towards building four 'Common Spaces,' which include policy areas that are linked to the region.
- The Black Sea region is important for EU energy security; especially given its increasing role as a transit zone for energy from around the Caspian Sea.

For now, the EU does not have a single policy towards the Black Sea region, but multiple policies. These range from the strategic partnership with Russia, the *European Neighbourhood Policy* with Ukraine, Moldova and the three South Caucasus, enlargement to Romania and Bulgaria and accession talks with Turkey. As such, the EU has multiple financial instruments at work. In so doing, the EU has developed a rich array of policies towards the Black Sea region, but these have not been integrated into a single framework.

With the EU soon to be not simply a neighbour but a Black Sea power, the question raised is how the EU should take forward its policies?

Black Sea Uncertainties

While increasing relevance of the region for the EU is clear, other trends in and around the Black Sea are far more uncertain. These uncertainties are a vital part of the policy context facing the EU.

- *A Black Sea Region?*

Most fundamentally, does the Black Sea region exist as a region? Despite areas of active cooperation between the riparian states, most notably witnessed in the institutional development of BSEC, significant regional cooperation has remained more rhetorical than actual. The choices made by the countries in the region will impact on EU policy, either by constraining options or by opening them.

- *A Region or Transit Zone?*

Linked to this, the EU must distinguish between the Black Sea as a region in itself and as a transit zone that is functional to other policy areas. The difficulty of distinguishing the two is especially true for the question of energy security.

- *A New Fulda Gap for the US*

The Black Sea region has acquired new importance in US strategic thinking as a key junction point between Europe, Eurasia and the wider Middle East. Given existing tensions in US relations with Russia and Turkey, the implications of the rising US strategic presence is difficult to ascertain.

- *NATO Policy*

Linked to this, there are questions over future NATO policy towards the region. On the one hand, key NATO member states, Turkey especially, have been reluctant to allow for a greater Alliance profile (viz. the non-extension of *Operation Active Endeavour*). At the same time, influential circles in the US have raised the question of future membership for Ukraine and Georgia. The evolution of NATO policy will impact on the context for EU approaches.

- *Turkey and Russia*

What are the interests of Turkey and Russia in the Black Sea region? These two countries are traditionally the region's great powers, in military terms, in terms of perceived interest, and in legal terms for Turkey given the Montreux Convention. For now, both have pursued quite conservative, if not defensive, policies in the region that seek to enshrine their regional dominance. Both Moscow and Ankara are key variables for EU thinking about its role in this region.

Questions for EU Thinking

Given this context, the EU faces the following questions in thinking about policy towards the Black Sea.

1. What is the scope and depth of EU interest in the Black Sea region? Given the crowded nature of the region, where does EU value added lie?
2. What is the best way for the EU to raise its profile? Should the EU craft an overarching regional framework, on the lines of the Northern Dimension? Or, in contrast, can the EU afford to limit itself to better and more targeted sectoral policies?
3. With which interlocutors should the EU seek to interact in the Black Sea region? Should the most institutionalised organisation, BSEC, become the privileged partner?
4. What should be the immediate objectives leading EU policy in 2006?

Thoughts for Moving Forward

A consensus emerged in the discussion on two thoughts for taking EU policy forward in the region.

1. A New Black Sea Communication

The EU must take stock of developments in the Black Sea region, establish an inventory of relevant EU policies, and define more clearly EU interests and concerns, as well as areas where the EU can do more. A first step in this direction would be, as Greece has proposed, for the Council to request that the Commission draft a new Communication on the Black Sea. This Communication could address all of these concerns and set the agenda for discussion about a more coordinated and joined-up EU approach.

2. Integrate into CFSP

Given the relative weakness of the EU in the Black Sea, it is crucial that questions relevant to the Black Sea are raised by the EU in its interaction with important Black Sea powers, especially Russia and Turkey, as well as into in CFSP as a whole.

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