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## Editors' Introduction

# The Black Sea Region: The Neighbourhood too Close to, yet still Far from the European Union

Sinem Akgul Acikmese and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou

### Introduction

The idea for this special issue derived from the acknowledgement of a scantiness of academic references on the European Union's (EU) policies towards the Black Sea, when compared to the significance of this region for the Union as reflected in the voluminous EU official documents. The Black Sea region has been of crucial importance for the EU because of the opportunities and challenges that the region encompasses for EU politics and the Union's socio-economic features. Since the 2004–2007 enlargements brought the EU to the shores of the Black Sea, mostly to the remaining former Soviet space, the EU has actively engaged in developing its vision towards the region through a number of tools, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Black Sea Synergy (BSS), the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and a few other foreign policy instruments. On the one hand, the EU is not seen as a consistent actor with clear and credible objectives from the introverted lenses of the regional actors. On the other, most of the Black Sea countries desire more EU involvement in the region, perceiving the EU route as the most viable for regional prosperity, development, security and cooperation.

Even though the EU plays a vital role in Black Sea political agendas, EU–Black Sea cooperation is not extensively covered by academic discussions and literature. This is mostly due to the fact that the EU's focus on foreign affairs is mainly associated with the Balkans as part of the current and potential widening perspective and the Middle East as a direct consequence of the Arab upheavals. In addition, the region is mostly studied through a particular focus on the intra-regional cooperation dynamics and its chronic problems in political, societal and economic realms.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the EU is not a fully fledged studied actor; and its prospects for the region are an under-developed research area. The most recent comprehensive volume on the EU and the Black Sea is *The Black Sea Region and EU Policy: The Challenge of Divergent Agendas*, a volume edited by Karen Henderson and Carol Weaver which was published in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

This special issue differs since the contributions to this issue mostly focus on *specific issues* of EU–Black Sea cooperation diverging from the conflicts to the environment and democracy, and how these particular relationships of the EU and the Black Sea are perceived within the region as well as through the lenses of stakeholders such as Russia, the USA and Turkey.

### **The Regional Tumult**

The Black Sea region continues to be a grey zone of instability. Finding expression as a region in the immediate post-Cold War context, its disparate regional actors have not necessarily been able to provide it with a clear codified identity whether its own or part of another (such as European identity, for example).<sup>3</sup> It is in constant flux and home to competitive political, ideological and geographic narratives. It finds itself in regular redefinition as to what it is and whether it is actually a region, a bridge, a buffer zone, a pivot, a transit zone or a corridor, *inter alia*. There is also debate as to which countries actually comprise it. As Tedo Japaridze and Bruce Lawlor suggest, this debate produces ‘adherence to old fashioned, political, and bureaucratic Manichean precepts’ that ‘interfere with positive and productive regional discourse’.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Black Sea region is home to competing notions of the concept of neighbourhood in particular between the EU and the Russian Federation. Finally, the Black Sea region has undergone and is experiencing various forms of institutional regionalism since the end of the Cold War; the most notable example being the Organization for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC).<sup>5</sup> The assessment is that the regionalism experiment has not really worked over the last two decades or could be interpreted as ‘regionalism light’.<sup>6</sup> Barry Buzan’s definition of the region as ‘a group of states whose primary concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another’ is one that aptly describes the Black Sea region for the purposes of this paper.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the region remains ‘a complicated geopolitical jigsaw puzzle’.<sup>8</sup>

Whether the region is perceived through the lenses of what John Agnew refers to as ‘the territoriality trap’ with ‘the merging of the state with a clearly bounded territory in the geographical essence of the field of international relations’ or Walter Russell Mead’s eloquent ‘revenge of the revisionist powers’ with ‘the return of geopolitics’, the Black Sea region is a space where international relations are being reconsidered within the realm of tangible radical transformation.<sup>9</sup> One of the international actors that aims at exerting its transformative power on the Black Sea region has been the EU since the early 1990s.

### **The Saga of the EU’s Black Sea Policies**

The EU’s engagement with the Black Sea region in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War began with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) which are the key documents supporting signatory countries in their transition to democracy, market economies and good governance. These early EU initiatives can be evaluated as very primitive steps due to the lack of a coherent and a holistic vision towards the

region, when compared to the strategy designed for the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) in the early 1900s. However, the situation began to change after the 2004 and 2007 big bang enlargements bringing the EU closer to a neighbourhood encircled with deeply rooted and intertwined threats which were clearly mentioned in the European Security Strategy of 2003 as the main concerns for the EU varying from transnational threats to terrorism, and from regional conflicts to failed states.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Lynch, this new neighbourhood brought ‘new immediacy to EU thinking about these states on its periphery and the policies that should be adopted in response to potential and actual threats emerging from these regions’.<sup>11</sup>

Since then, the EU has been in the region with a number of tools, such as CFSP, ENP, BSS, EaP and the other instruments deployed under its economic and diplomatic policies.<sup>12</sup> By using such instruments, the EU aims to export its relatively successful model to its immediate periphery in order to provide security in and around its borders. However, for the EU, the Black Sea is comprised of different groupings of countries that require differentiated strategies and relations. In this context, the EU launched a genuine regional approach designed for the Black Sea by adopting the Communication on Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Region in 1997. Acknowledging the ‘growing strategic importance to the EU of the Black Sea region’, the Commission expressed ‘its intention to develop a new regional cooperation strategy’ and further listed transport, energy and telecommunications networks, trade, ecologically sustainable development, and justice and home affairs to be promoted as the areas of cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

The EU further reinforced its existing relations with neighbouring countries through the design of the ENP framework.<sup>14</sup> The Commission’s proposal of ‘forming a ring of well-governed friends with whom the Union enjoys close, peaceful and cooperative relations’ targeted the Union’s Southern neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya) and the Eastern neighbourhood (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). The Council accepted the Commission’s proposal on the ENP Strategy Paper in June 2004 and the Commission started to work on Action Plans devised for implementing the ENP on a bilateral basis.<sup>15</sup> According to the ENP mechanism, the Action Plans have been designed for each country to strengthen their socio-economic and political structures through the conditionality mechanism for advancing rule of law, democracy and respect for human rights as well as the levels of economic well-being. Currently, 12 of these countries are already fully participating in the ENP and have agreed on their Action Plans, while Syria, Libya and Belarus remain out of many of its structures. Russia preferred a different strategy and established its relations with the EU with the EU–Russia strategic partnership, which was signed in St Petersburg in May 2003.

As a complementary policy to the ENP, the EU also devised the BSS in 2008, as a mechanism for increasing cooperation in a number of sectors ranging from energy to maritime management, from democracy promotion to cultural relations among the countries surrounding the Black Sea (Turkey, Russia, Moldova, Ukraine and those of the South Caucasus).<sup>16</sup> The EaP was an offshoot initiative launched by the EU in 2009 as a separable-but-not-separate part of the ENP for deepening bilateral relations with

Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine alongside the South Caucasus countries through the promises of constructing political dialogue, advancing economic integration and providing visa liberalization.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside its comprehensive socio-economic and political tools mostly embedded in the BSS and EaP, the EU has also been reacting to the region's conflicts with its CFSP and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) instruments, mainly by sending special envoys to the region, implementing humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation projects, assuming a role in mediation efforts and conducting civilian missions through border management, rule of law and monitoring type of operations.

All in all, the EU has undoubtedly created a paper trail of strategies towards the Black Sea region in the form of communications, common positions, joint actions, working documents, political statements, declarations, *inter alia*, issued by various EU institutions. The questions of whether these voluminous EU documents have lived up to their expectations in the Black Sea region, transformed words into deeds and, accordingly, have made the EU as a matter of fact come closer to the region have been the point of departure for all the contributions to this issue, all of which share almost the same general query: is the EU really committed to the region?

### **Questioning the EU's Commitments**

The contributions aim at explaining why the EU approach towards the Black Sea is what it is today with its multitude of strategies in a general perspective as offered by Triantaphyllou; in thematic sub-sections of conflict-resolution tactics by Simão, operational role by Acikmese and Dizdaroglu, democratization initiatives by Solonenko and environmental policies by Coutto and Devlen; and finally through the lenses of Russia by Freire, the USA by Konoplyov and Delanoë, and Turkey by Aydin as regional stakeholders. All the papers in the issue stress the lack of a decisive and effective Black Sea strategy with the underlying dynamics for such a policy shortage, as well as with the focus on the definite need for such a vision by the EU with proposals on how the Union could develop an overall strategic blueprint for the region.

For example, while explaining the EU's role in resolving the conflicts in the volatile territories of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria, Simão attests to the shared conclusion of this issue by referring that 'EU engagement is reactive and void of strategic vision vis-à-vis issues of status as well as regional and political security relations'. More specifically, in their paper on analysing the operative role of the EU in dealing with the regional conflicts through its civilian missions, Acikmese and Dizdaroglu argue that the EU has not been able to address 'decisive solutions to the ever-lasting conflicts of the Black Sea region through its "three-and-a-half" operations in the eastern neighbourhood'. Similarly, in their review of the environmental realm, Coutto and Devlen suggest that the EU's policy 'is an extension of the "external governance" framework rather than part of a cohesive, coherent and unified regional approach to the Black Sea'. On the democratization front, Solonenko further expands on the inefficacy of the EU in the region with links to the non-offer of membership status, by suggesting that 'while the EU had the leverage with respect to

accession countries, as their democratization dynamics (at least before their accession) indicate, this does not apply to the EaP countries'. The EU's poor track record in the region has also been testified by Konoplyov and Delanoë in their contribution on assessing the US perceptions on the role of the EU in the Black Sea, with reference to the 'Eastern Partnership which has failed to meet expectations as demonstrated by both the Armenian and Ukrainian episodes'. Looked from within the region, the papers on Russian and Turkish insights on the EU's policies also affirm the lack of the EU's commitments to the Black Sea, as evidenced by Freire in her argument on the ENP's limits being 'read in Russia as having a limited reach' and by Aydin on the implementation of the EU's policies which are 'mostly piecemeal and differentiated between the regional countries, which in fact weakens the dynamics of regionalism in the Black Sea'. In this context, all the authors attest to the observation raised by Triantaphyllou in his background paper: 'The EU seems to lack a strategy—a strategic vision even though it possesses more instruments, initiatives and policies than ever before.'

The EU's own limitations in its integrative efforts and its foreign policy, the role of external influencers and regional powers as well as the internal resistance from the actors within the EaP beneficiaries explain in part the inefficacy cited in the contributions of this issue. However, overall, the recommendations of the papers on projecting a more efficient role and a holistic strategy for the Union in its approach towards the Black Sea region testify to the need for a strong EU presence. For this reason, the Black Sea region remains 'the neighbourhood too close to, yet still far from the European Union'.

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### Notes

- [1] On Black Sea regionalism and European identity, see Panagiota Manoli, *The Dynamics of Black Sea Subregionalism*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2012; Ruxandra Ivan (ed.), *New Regionalism or No Regionalism? Emerging Regionalism in the Black Sea Area*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2012.
- [2] Karen Henderson and Carol Weaver (eds), *The Black Sea Region and EU Policy: The Challenge of Divergent Agendas*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2010.
- [3] This applies both in the geographic and conceptual senses. See, for example, Anssi Paasi, 'The institutionalization of regions: a theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of

- regions and the constitution of regional identity', *Fennia—International Journal of Geography*, 164(1), 1986, pp. 105–146; Alexander Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state', *The American Political Science Review*, 88(2), 1994, pp. 384–396.
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- [5] For a brief assessment of the key challenges of the Black Sea region, see Dimitrios Triantaphyllou, 'The uncertain times of Black Sea regional security', *Euxeinos—Online Journal of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe*, 6, 2012, pp. 4–10.
- [6] For an assessment on regionalism in the Black Sea and the BSEC's role, see Tedo Japaridze, Panagiota Manoli, Dimitrios Triantaphyllou and Yannis Tsantoulis, 'The EU's ambivalent relationship with the BSEC: reflecting on the past, mapping out the future', *ICBSS Policy Brief*, 20, ICBSS, Athens, January 2010, <[http://icbss.org/media/133\\_original.pdf](http://icbss.org/media/133_original.pdf)> (accessed 12 April 2014).
- [7] Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd edn, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1991, p. 190.
- [8] Yannis Tsantoulis, 'Geopolitics, (sub)regionalism, discourse and a troubled "power triangle" in the Black Sea', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 9(3), 2009, pp. 243–258.
- [9] John Agnew, 'The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of International Relations theory', *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(1), 1994, p. 56; Walter Russell Mead, 'The return of geopolitics', *Foreign Affairs*, 93(3), 2014, <[http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141211/walter-russell-mead/the-return-of-geopolitics?sp\\_mid=45770395&sp\\_rid=ZC50cmlhbnRhcGh5bGxvdUBnbWFpbC5jb20S1](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141211/walter-russell-mead/the-return-of-geopolitics?sp_mid=45770395&sp_rid=ZC50cmlhbnRhcGh5bGxvdUBnbWFpbC5jb20S1)> (accessed 4 May 2014).
- [10] *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, Brussels, 12 December 2003, <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>> (accessed 25 April 2014).
- [11] Dov Lynch, 'The new Eastern dimension of the enlarged EU', in Judy Batt *et al.* (eds), *Partners and Neighbors: A CFSP for a Wider Europe*, EU–ISS, Paris, 2003, p. 173.
- [12] For a detailed account on the evolution of the EU's policies towards the Black Sea, see Sinem Akgul Acikmese, 'The EU's Black Sea policies: any hopes for success', *Euxeinos—Online Journal of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe*, 6, 2012, pp. 17–22; Mustafa Aydin and Sinem Akgul Acikmese, 'EU engagement in the Black Sea: a view from the region', in Adam Balcer (ed.), *The Eastern Partnership in the Black Sea Region: Towards a New Synergy*, Demos, Warsaw, 2011, pp. 7–29; Dimitrios Triantaphyllou and Yannis Tsantoulis, 'The EU's policies towards its new Eastern neighbours: a new Ostpolitik in the making or a mélange of different concepts and priorities', *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 5, 2009, pp. 6–18.
- [13] *Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Area: State of Play, Perspectives for EU Action Encouraging its Development*, Communication from the Commission to the Council, COM (97) 597 final, Brussels, 14 November 1997.
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- [15] *European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper*, Communication from the Commission to the Council, COM (2004) 373 final, Brussels, 12 May 2004.
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- [17] *Eastern Partnership*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, COM (2008) 823 final, 3 December 2008.

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